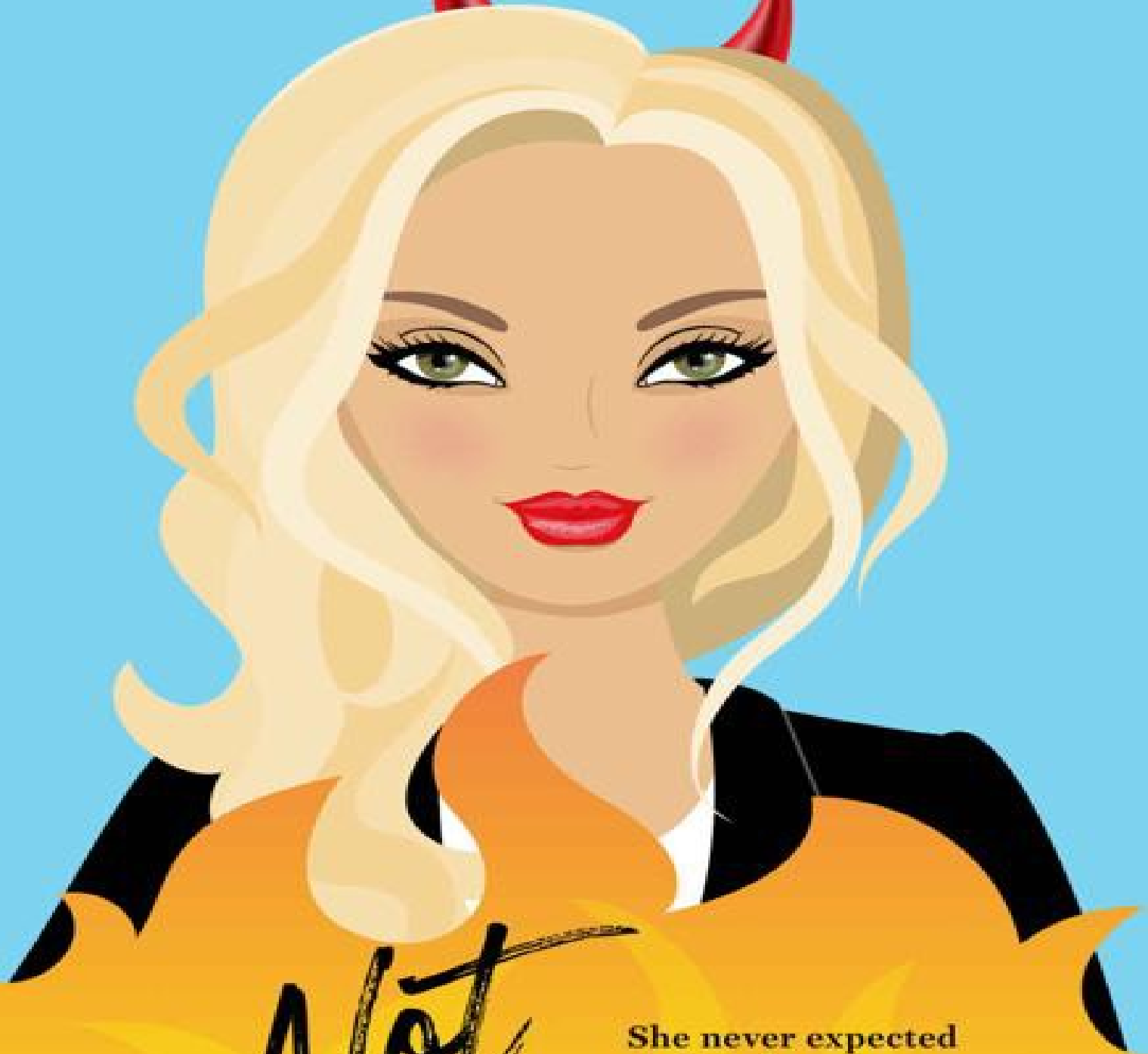


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
a.m. madden



Not

She never expected
hell to freeze over

**A CHANCE
IN HELL**

Not
**A CHANCE
IN HELL**

USA Today Bestselling Author

A.M. MADDEN

Not a Chance in Hell, A Navarro Triplets Novel
Copyright ©2022 by A. M. Madden

First Edition

All rights reserved worldwide. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the author, except where permitted by law.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

The use of locations and products throughout this book is done for storytelling purposes and should in no way be seen as advertisement. Trademark names are used in an editorial fashion, with no intention of infringement of the respective owner's trademark.

This e-book is licensed for your personal enjoyment. This e-book may not be resold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, please purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

FBI Anti-Piracy Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to five years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.



A. M. Madden

Email: am.madden@aol.com

Twitter: [@ammadden1](https://twitter.com/ammadden1)

Facebook: facebook.com/ammadden

Website: ammadden.com

Table of **CONTENTS**

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Epilogue

One last short Epilogue

Acknowledgments

More from A.M. Madden

About A.M. Madden

To my three kings, you rule my world.



Chapter I

Brad

“Okay... next up is...” I glanced down at the clipboard and read, “Jeff and Sandy, who have chosen the song ‘Endless Love.’” Hearing another couple butcher yet another sickly-sweet duet forced me to suppress an eye roll. Would it hurt any of them to choose Marvin Gaye’s “Let’s Get It On”?

The giddy pearl-wearing redhead came center stage with a tall skinny blond dude who looked as though he’d parked his retro Volkswagen van outside. They exchanged dumbfounded looks while no doubt sizing the other up.

I gave them a 20 percent shot at connecting.

This real-time dating game called Kismet Karaoke may have been my idea, but it wasn’t because I was a romantic at heart. Nope. As the karaoke couple that I’d randomly paired began to sing their hearts out, I stared at the mass of bodies celebrating Valentine’s Day in my bar and saw one thing beyond all the red and pink articles of clothing.

Profits.

Some encouraged with smiles, others ridiculed good-naturedly... and while they all drank and ate, I made money.

Yes, Valentine’s was a day I made serious bank, but it needed to be said

that I also did well every other day of the year. Normally, Brad's Tavern—I'm Brad—was the place young professionals came to de-stress after a long day, watch a game, or hook up. Whichever way, whether on a holiday or a Tuesday night, owning this hot spot in Manhattan afforded me a very comfortable lifestyle.

But it all came with hard work. From the hours I put into the marketing plans to get people through my doors to the decision to offer three different cheese options for their burgers, these were all calculated measures toward success.

Tonight, however, it was the calendar date that had the single people coming in, hoping to make a connection. And if they already had a significant other, then they were there to validate the day.

What a crock of shit.

It pained me to say that my own brothers had fallen for the ruse. We may have been identical in looks—yes, we're triplets—however, personality-wise, we were on completely different points of a triangle. Aside from our mirrored images, in my opinion, Max was the sensitive one, Nate the brain, and me the stud. Although those two would contradict my assessment.

Still, combining strengths and adding our "model-worthy looks" (a label many have used regarding our faces) meant the Navarro brothers did really well with the opposite sex.

Out of the three of us, Max was the first to have found love on this very stage while singing karaoke with a stranger. That night, he had come to help me out when one of my bartenders called out sick. As a thank-you, I rigged the contest and paired him with the brunette beauty he'd kept staring at from across the room. My mission was to get him laid after a breakup. Long story short, those two had a one-night stand that turned into forever and were now pregnant with their second child.

Then there was my other brother, Nate, the divorce attorney... a damn good one, in fact. The man spent most of his professional career helping to end marriages and making a fortune doing so. And then the ass forgot all about his convictions by jumping off the single man's ship headfirst into love-infested waters... without a life preserver.

Shit, he'd fallen hard, belly flop-style. In just four months' time, he'd gone from being a serial bachelor to a sap in love. And about an hour ago, there he was dropping on one knee, in front of all these people, to propose to his girl, on Valentine's Day!

Who did that?

Idiots did.

Me, I preferred enjoying the bevy of beauties this city had to offer. It was the constant stream of women who came and went that frosted my red velvet cake.

Speaking of... my focus landed on a stunning blonde standing alone at the bar. Big green eyes that I could see from clear across the room, hair that looked like spun gold, and from what I could tell, a rockin' body. She wasn't wearing red or pink or a variation thereof. Maybe the sheer turquoise blouse was what had caught my attention to begin with, and I loved how wearing it was a symbolic *fuck you* to the holiday.

I'd never seen her here before; I would've remembered. Delicate fingers gripped the stem of a martini glass, the lemon peel curled over the rim giving away her drink choice. She watched the singing on stage, unaware most of the men nearby were staring at her. Meanwhile, I observed for a while to see if her date was in the restroom or getting himself a fresh drink. But when minutes went by and she remained alone, hope bloomed in my gut.

Her eyes cut to mine, and it took a few seconds for me to realize that everyone else's had as well. I twisted to look at the couple a few feet away, and it only then occurred to me their song was done. Stepping toward the microphone, I gave a tight smile and said, "Well... okay, thank you Bill and Julie."

"Jeff and Sandy," the woman corrected.

"Oh, sorry." To the crowd, I grinned. "Didn't Jeff and Sandy kill it, everyone?" *In the true sense of kill*. Polite clapping ensued, and I waved impatiently to stop them. "Okay, folks. That was the last of our couples tonight. It's time to vote. Be sure to use the ballots on your table to choose your favorite duo. If they win, they'll share a thousand-dollar prize... and you all know the rest." I lifted a palm as the entire room yelled, "Free drinks

for a year!”

“Correct... provided they prove they are still dating thirty days from now, and every month after!” While the room erupted in chatter, I cut my eyes toward the bar, only to find that the gorgeous blonde was gone. Trying to hide my disappointment, I wrapped things up, saying, “The winners will be announced on our website tomorrow. Good luck to all those who participated in Kismet Karaoke.”

I jumped off the stage, still bummed the blonde was gone, and headed to the bar. After greeting some of the regulars that I knew well and dodging some of the women I’d had a short thing with who wanted more, I announced to my main bartender, Bobby, “I’m taking my break.” He gave me a salute as I grabbed a bottle of champagne and a nonalcoholic seltzer with lime.

More interruptions came from customers while I backtracked toward the stage to where my brothers sat with their girls. Jade, the preggo, and Amy, who was newly engaged, happened to have been best friends. That now made the quartet thick as thieves and me the outsider.

“Time to celebrate,” I said, placing the bottle of bubbly and seltzer down before snatching a chair from a nearby table. I filled my brothers’ and Amy’s glasses and poured Jade her drink.

“The attendance is unbelievable, Brad,” Jade said in her sweet way.

“Yeah... give away some money and free booze, and all hell breaks loose.” I had expected the crowd based on the success the first time we held this contest.

“Speaking of, you owe me and Jade many cocktails for winning this thing two years ago.”

I glanced at his beer, the champagne beside it. “Have you ever paid when you come here?”

“This is true.”

“These people aren’t here for the prize alone. Love is definitely in the air,” Nate said, putting his two cents in. When seeing the exaggerated roll of my eyes, the fucker leaned over to kiss his girl for my benefit.

Once they separated, Amy gave me a toothless smile while Nate full on

grinned. Asshole.

There was a time I'd had a thing for my future sister-in-law. She was a brunette, and I preferred blondes. She did have a smoking-hot body, though. In my defense, it had to have been her profession as an erotic-romance author that intrigued me. If she could write filthy shit, then I suspected she could do filthy shit.

Regardless, it had never gone anywhere. It couldn't have been my looks, because she'd ended up with a duplicate. It had to have been my winning personality that she saw as a threat. In any case, my brother put a move on her, probably to spite me, and I had to train myself to stop envisioning her naked... which was hard as hell. Again, in my defense, I had been doing that for two years before they even hooked up.

"Well, better you all than me," I said, grabbing the bottle and lifting it. "Congratulations on the many more sleepless nights coming your way," I directed to Max and Jade. "And here's hoping you two don't become a statistic," I then said to Nate and Amy. While four pairs of eyes stared at me, I took a long swig of the champagne. But when the rest of them didn't follow through, I said, "It only brings luck if you actually drink."

Max frowned. "You call that a toast, jackass?"

"Just keeping it real."



My brothers and the girls were long gone, but the party kept on going. I'd been so busy at the bar I'd barely had time to take a piss. The kitchen was also overwhelmed with orders now that the munchies had kicked in for most of my customers. And with a few hours left before closing, the crowd showed no signs of calling it a night.

That didn't matter. I had off the next day and could sleep in. When a small lull hit, I walked down to Bobby's end of the bar, smacked his shoulder, and said, "I'll be back."

"While you're back there, I need more grenadine."

"You got it."

But before I could beeline for the bathroom and then the stockroom, a sexy, raspy voice asked, “Can I please get a lemon drop martini?”

I twisted around, prepared to delegate her order to Bobby until I saw it was the blonde wearing turquoise. As I stared at her like a creep, full, pouty lips pressed together just as a line creased between her brows and she followed up with, “Hello?”

“Oh yeah... coming right up.”

Bobby came beside me and said, “I got this, boss.”

“No, it’s fine.” My gaze flipped between the task at hand and her, while she looked everywhere but at me. Once I topped her cocktail with a lemon peel, I placed it on a napkin but kept it on my side of the bar. “I haven’t seen you here before. New in town?”

Those damn lips quirking up into a smirk held my attention before she said, “You know everyone who comes in?”

“Yep. It’s a talent, and my job as owner. I’m Brad.” As our eyes remained tethered, I swear she had magical powers. Usually it took a touch, a kiss, an invite to catch my libido’s attention. This chick accomplished that with her eyes. Fucking mesmerizing. Unlike mine that were just bottle green, there had to have been six different shades of green in her irises. Using that as an opportunity, I said, “You know, we’re meant to be.”

“Excuse me?”

“Our eyes. Only two percent of the population has green eyes.”

The longer she pinned me with those magnetic orbs, the more turned on I became. And when she licked her lips seductively, I leaned on the bar in anticipation of what she’d say.

“Um... can I have my drink?” was her response, and in my mind, I heard the sound bite used in video games when you lost a life.

“Sure.” I slowly slid the glass toward her and then shamelessly watched as she perched her perfect pink lips on the rim and sipped.

Fuck. Me.

Having forgotten the need to pee, and even Bobby’s request for

grenadine, I leaned my forearms on the polished wood and stared. The more I did, the rosier her cheeks got. This was a good girl, shy even... a challenge and major turn-on for me.

“What’s your name?”

“Sheena.”

“Do you have a last name, Sheena?”

“Yes.” But that was all I got as she drank more of her martini.

“Can I get your number?”

She graced me with a demure smile, and when she began to dig through her purse, I assumed it was to retrieve a card or something to write her contact info on. Instead, her pink-tinted fingertips pulled out a twenty-dollar bill and dropped it on the bar.

“Thank you,” she said, swiveling on her stool, prepared to leave.

“Wait. Did you not like the drink?”

“It’s a bit too strong for my liking.” The narrowed gaze I received gave her admission a double meaning. And while I fumbled with something a bit more clever than my last line, I watched her slip off the barstool and stroll away. Long legs in painted-on denim, carried by high heels that would look amazing wrapped around my back, along with a spectacular ass, all put me into a trance. The farther away she got, the harder my internal devil tapped my shoulder to chase her.

“Bobby, take over,” I said hastily, pushing my way past those who refused to call it a night. I ignored my name being called and caught the heavy wooden door before it slammed shut behind her. There she stood at the curb, poised and ready to hail a cab, when I came to stand beside her. “Why the quick exit?”

“It’s late.”

“Nah... the night is young. Come back in. I’ll make you a new lemon drop.”

She seemed to be having an internal debate as her green eyes held mine. “I don’t sleep around.” That statement was as hot as if she had palmed my

hardened cock, and it made me determined to see her again.

“It’s just a drink... at the bar. I promise not to trick you into my bed.” Her eyes widened enough for me to amend: “I’m kidding. Although...” I glanced up at the building’s facade and pointed to the corner windows. “It is right up there if you get tired.” I licked my lips nervously and caught her attention in the process.

She stared at the apartment I referenced before stepping closer to place a hand on my chest. “I have to go...”

She left the tiny word hanging enough for me to insert, “Brad Navarro... of Brad’s Tavern,” while trying not to appear insulted she had forgotten already.

“Right... Brad.” And then, shockingly, she slid her hand around the back of my neck, pressed her mouth to mine, and kissed me. At first, I froze, caught completely off guard. But it took mere seconds for my body to take the wheel from my logic, and I hastily wrapped an arm around her slim waist, pulling her closer. Her intoxicating scent, one I wouldn’t soon forget, added to the mix of intrigue. And when I licked at the seam of her mouth, and she opened up for me... well, damn.

The more I stroked my tongue against hers, the more it stoked a flame within me. It was all so confusing, and thrilling, and a fucking tease.

Especially when she broke away, smiled, and said, “Good night, Brad.” With those devastating words, she raised a hand and a yellow sedan swerved to the curb. My eyes fixated on the curve of her ass as she climbed in. And while she slammed the door shut and spoke to the driver, I debated ditching my business and taking off with her. At that moment, after that kiss, I’d probably follow her into hell.

But as the cab slowly pulled away, and she stared into my eyes through the window, a part of me knew it was best to let her go... because Sheena was trouble for a guy like me.

Chapter 2

Sheena

I stared out the window, waiting for my bestie. But the pedestrians walking by on a picture-perfect southern California day went unseen as regret monopolized my thoughts.

The trip to Manhattan had one purpose: to see my father and ask him every question that had plagued me my entire life. Why did he care so little? How could he ignore the fact that he had a daughter? Why didn't he love me?

Except for the child support check he religiously sent to my mother, he had not been involved in the person that I became. I had booked and canceled trips to New York four times over the past year. As much as I couldn't seem to come to terms with his absence in my life, I'd lose my nerve each time.

But five times was a charm, and I finally found the nerve to get on that damn plane.

Choosing Valentine's weekend was a way to manifest the ingredient missing from my relationship with him. All that trouble only for the same thing to happen when I got there—I panicked and added another question to my long list:

Why did I care so much?

I knew why... I cared because of my mother. She hadn't deserved the

fate of working hard as a single mother because the man who got her pregnant wasn't around. And she most definitely hadn't deserved her life taking a completely different path because of me.

"Hey, you." I looked up to see Kelly plop herself down with a sigh in the chair facing me. "Sorry, I had a pee-pee incident and ran out of backup panties."

I laughed at one of the many occupational hazards of being a kindergarten teacher.

She continued: "Poor thing had no choice but to wear Superman briefs. My gosh, so many tears! I really do need to stock up."

Her thick black hair pulled up into a ponytail meant she'd had a rough day. Each morning, it always started in a silky curtain of ebony strands falling around her shoulders. Whether it stayed that way depended on the five-year-olds that we taught.

I had met Kelly Chen three years earlier when I'd started teaching kindergarten at the same school, and we'd been friends ever since.

"Sorry I wasn't there for you." Usually I bailed her out, having plenty of panties and briefs in my classroom closet. But my flight back from New York had been delayed because of a snowstorm, forcing me to call out sick from school on a Monday.

"It's fine. I got lax, having gone weeks without an incident." She folded her arms on the table. "More importantly, how did it go?" My eyes cutting away on a frown caused her to moan. "Oh no... what happened?"

"Nothing happened. A big fat nothing. I chickened out, again."

"I really thought this time would be the one."

"Nope." As she stared at me wide eyed, I explained how I couldn't bring myself to contact my father once during the forty-eight hours I was there.

"Like an idiot, I went to the bar, though."

"And?"

"It was jammed for Valentine's Day, some stupid karaoke contest. I felt like an idiot being dateless, lurking and staring."

“And your dad wasn’t there. Did you meet the guy who owns it? Is he good looking or not?”

“Oh, yeah... he’s a hot-as-hell, charming, cocky son of a bitch. And get this, he’s an identical triplet! There are three of him. Picture our favorite quarterback on the Niners times three.”

“Jimmy?” Her eyes bulged comically. On my nod she said, “No way.”

“Yeah... doppelgängers. Those brothers caused a puddle of drool in the bar three inches deep and had no clue women were sloshing around in it.” A hot flash hit just thinking of them. “The other two were with women—one married and pregnant and one newly engaged.”

“So, brother number three, your nemesis, is single?”

“Who knows?” I fiddled with the paper-wrapped utensil roll as Brad Navarro’s handsome face popped into my mind. “He did try to pick me up, though.”

A salacious smile animated Kelly’s pretty face. “Please tell me you went for it.”

“No, I didn’t go for it. He is the enemy, Kelly.”

“All the more reason to have used him, Sheen.”

I refrained from telling her that I had considered it. Especially after he’d chased after me outside. In that moment, a part of me had thought, *what would it hurt?* He’d never see me again, and if the day ever came that we did meet face-to-face, how satisfying would it be to know I’d used him, as Kelly said.

But a bigger part of me did what I always did and chickened out. Instead, I’d kissed him for no logical reason except that I needed to.

“You haven’t had sex in...” She tapped a finger to her rosy lips. “Five months now?”

“Six.” But who was counting?

“And you haven’t even been on a date to provide the prospect of sex,” she threw in, adding more salt to the wound.

Breaking up with my ex had emotionally leveled me. I thought he was it,

the one. I thought we were heading right for the altar. Jeremy had taken the best years of my life before deciding he wasn't cut out for marriage. I felt played, used... and something like that wasn't easy to get over.

"Sheen, it's okay to have fun without bringing emotions into the mix. And yeah, yeah... I know you've been on a man embargo, but maybe it's time to lift it."

"I would if I met anyone that I'd be interested in having fun with."

"If you ask me, New York would've been the perfect place for that."

Except that one kiss had me fixated on a man who had a better relationship with my father than I did. Well, that wasn't saying much when I could argue the person delivering his mail probably had a better relationship with my sperm donor.

I had gone to New York with an address my mom had once given me and a lot of pent-up anger. Years ago, she'd even offered to go with me to see my dad. Each time she did, I refused, and then she stopped offering. Mom had also mentioned a tenant in the building, that I now knew to be Brad, the bar owner who took up the ground floor. Apparently, he and my father were very close. Where Mom thought it was great that my father had someone, I seethed with resentment.

I may have gone into Brad's Tavern hoping to run into my father. Instead, I'd encountered the arrogant, handsome asshole who'd tried to get into my pants first chance he got.

Of course, he had no idea who I was, and the only thing I saw in those magnetic green eyes was desire. Remembering how they'd held mine instantly caused a twinge in my vagina. Brad Navarro was the sexiest man I'd ever met, and I haven't been able to get him out of my mind.

I blamed the lack of sex in my life.

"So now what? Are you going to forget about your father?"

"I don't know."

Kelly narrowed her eyes skeptically. "My money says you can't." She then picked up the laminated menu and shrugged. "I knew I should've gone with you."

I had to agree. If Kelly had been there, I most definitely would've followed through, because she would've made me. Her expression grew serious as she clutched my hand. "Sheen... you need closure. He never married, never had other children—you really don't know much more about him except for what little your mother told you."

Again, she was right. My mother would often defend John Porelli by carefully explaining it wasn't his fault that he wasn't part of our lives. Mom had been born and raised in California, Dad in New York. From what I knew, they'd met while John was taking time to travel before he was due to start a new job. He had rented a room in my mom's building, and they'd immediately hit it off. And then Mom got pregnant at only twenty, which had caused her to become estranged from her own family.

When it was time for John to leave, my mother made the choice to stay. I once asked her if John had wanted her to go with him, but she'd changed the subject, which inadvertently answered my question.

She deflected my pressing with a simple statement: "*We didn't love each other, Sheena.*" Still, no support system and living clear across the country from the father of her child meant my mother didn't have an easy life.

One would never know that, though. The woman always looked at the positive, always lived every day with no regrets. It was just the way she was. She even went as far as justifying the cards, letters, and checks sent by mail on special occasions as an acceptable method for my father to show support.

Bullshit.

A better way would've been for him to have made an effort and develop a relationship with me. That kind of hurt ran deep. Why should I be the one to offer an olive branch?

There was only one solution to this situation, and that was to forget John Porelli ever existed.

A waitress came by with pen and pad in hand. "Are you ladies ready to order?"

"Yes," I said, with more determination than her simple question

should've elicited. But the transfer of resolve came from moving on with my life. Meanwhile, Kelly quirked an amused brow before placing her typical order of a Cobb salad. And after asking for the same, I leaned back and diverted. "So how are things going with Mark?"

Just like that, Kelly's face lit up, and she excitedly told me all about the guy she'd begun dating a few weeks earlier.

"He sounds perfect. Does he have a brother?"

"As a matter of fact..." A devious look sparked in her deep brown eyes. "Mark has a friend, and his name is Adam."



"I really don't want to do this. Why do I let you talk me into these things?" I asked Kelly while attempting to walk without a boob popping out of the black dress that she'd insisted I wear. Not only was it a size too small, but the plunging neckline made the fact even more obvious.

As I tugged, hoping more fabric generated, she waved a dismissive hand before pulling open the restaurant's door. "You look hot... really hot. Stop fidgeting with it, and it's just dinner."

"I'd rather get into my pajamas, watch TV, and have ice cream for dinner."

"Of course you would, but you're not. Besides, I'll be right here with you." Under the ruse of meeting Mark for the first time, my bestie had finagled a double date out of my Saturday evening by inviting Adam along to meet me as well. "I even agreed to forgo having him pick you up so you wouldn't have to deal with the awkward 'Do I let him up or meet him in the lobby?' question you always ponder. So just relax and enjoy the first date that you've had in a long time."

"Fine." I did appreciate it, and dating a great guy was something I was up for, because it had been a while. But I'd rather have met someone organically while lying on the beach or bumping into him in a coffee shop. Blind dates made me twitchy.

Together we walked up to the hostess stand, and as she gave her last name to the woman, I tucked and pulled on my dress one last time. We were

then led to the back of the restaurant to a table for four, where two of the seats were occupied by our dates.

“Hi, girls.” A handsome Asian man stood and, by pulling Kelly into his arms, gave away he was her new boyfriend.

During a kiss on her cheek, she smiled at me and winked. “Sheena, this is Mark.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said, extending my arm. He released Kelly long enough to pump my hand enthusiastically.

“So great to finally meet you, Sheena.” He then motioned toward his not-as-handsome-but-still-cute friend. “This is Adam.” Kind brown eyes and a kind smile graced a kind-looking face.

“Hi, Sheena.” Adam replaced Mark’s hand with his own and then reached for the chair beside him and pulled it out for me in a kind way. “You’re so beautiful.”

He didn’t say it in a gross yucky manner, but it still caused an uncomfortable cringe. “Um... thank you so much.” I ignored Kelly’s brows bobbing up and down suggestively and took the chair he offered, only to see him staring at my cleavage. When his gaze cut away, I thought *kind* but not so subtle.

Once we were all seated, I said, “Um, so how do you two know each other?”

“We met in Sexaholics Anonymous,” Adam offered. I flipped my wide-eyed gaze from him to Mark to Kelly, just as they all simultaneously cracked up. “I’m kidding. We grew up together.”

“Oh, okay... ha ha.”

My soon-to-be ex-friend giggled and said to the guys, “Thanks for going along with my suggestion. The look on her face was priceless.”

I stared at her, and she stuck out her tongue.

“You’re evil,” I said. It was the guys who laughed next, and I had to give her credit for breaking the ice.

For obvious reasons, our conversation didn’t get off smoothly with the

busboy filling glasses, bringing bread, and delivering drinks. But once we got started, it flowed effortlessly and continued during our sushi meals. The bond the men shared went way back, as evidenced in the stories they told. I found I liked Adam's easy personality, but I wasn't attracted to him.

When the waiter cleared our dinner plates, I excused myself to go to the ladies' room.

"I'll come with you." Kelly jumped out of her seat and followed me. "So?" she asked when we'd put distance between us and the table.

"He's nice."

"And?" We stepped into the bathroom, and all stalls being utilized caused us to move toward the sink area to wait.

"And what?" Pulling out my lipstick, I reapplied, ignoring her gazing at my reflection.

"Do you like him?"

"I don't know, Kelly. It's been like two hours."

"Long enough to know if you want to see him again."

Long enough to know he didn't give me any tingly feelings. In all fairness, no man really ever had. Lie... one man recently had. As unfair as it was, maybe I had subconsciously compared Adam to the asshole in New York. It was stupid, and not something that I should waste one brain cell on.

"You know what? He is sweet and funny. Yes, I think I would like to see him again." Why not give the guy the benefit of the doubt?

"Oh yay!" She lunged at me with open arms.

I pushed out of her smothering hug and raised a finger. "But you aren't to mention it tonight. I don't need you putting him on the spot."

Instead of a nod or an agreement, I received an exaggerated eye roll. "Puh-leeze, of course he likes you. He couldn't stop smiling at you. This is going to be great. Your next date needs to be just the two of you, though. Something sexy, like dancing. He's a fantastic dancer."

And while Kelly planned what she considered the perfect evening for a second date, I ignored the feeling of dread it spurred within me.

Chapter 3

Brad

Two Months Later

Propped up against my headboard, I watched Kipper slipping on her jeans. Her long blonde hair skimmed the smooth skin on her back with each motion she made. I most definitely had a thing for blondes. A glimpse of side boob as she reached for her bra, and then her top, before adding them to her naked torso would normally rile me up for more, but it instead worsened my regret.

I used to be Kipper's boss, and although she always had a thing for me, it wouldn't have been right to act on it. She even once tried to get with Max, assigning him as an acceptable substitute. Ironically, Max wouldn't bite because she *worked for me*.

During her employment, we never crossed that line, but flirted a fuck ton. I always knew being my waitress was just a stepping-stone until she found a job in her field. And then, one night about a year ago, as she and I closed the bar together, she gave me her two-week notice. We celebrated her accepting her new career with tequila shots... many of them. One thing led to another, and we found ourselves stumbling upstairs to my apartment.

Since then, we've had an occasional dinner together or even caught a movie. But we had refrained from jumping into bed again... until last night.

To make matters worse, we both fell asleep afterward and were now faced with that awkwardness that came along with a morning walk of shame.

When I saw Kipper chatting with a few of my other employees last night, I assumed she had just stopped in to say hello. That was until she planted her ass on a stool, looking like her dog had just died. It wasn't her dog, but it was her relationship. The ass she'd been seeing was stringing her along. It wasn't her feelings for him that had her so upset. It was the fact she'd ignored all the red flags the prick had waved during the six months they were together and fallen for him anyway.

I should've seen my own red flag when closing came and she made no move to leave, or even worse, when she kissed me, claiming she needed a distraction. So, as a friend, I'd done just that... distracted her... and now I regretted it.

My regret wasn't because I didn't like her... more so because I did. She wasn't a girl you could have, as my brother Nate called it, a fuck-lationship with. Kipper was sweet and kind and deserved more than I could ever give her.

Now fully dressed, she sat with her back toward me for a few moments before twisting her body and pinning her brown eyes to mine. "Brad... don't take this the wrong way, but I think what we did last night was a mistake."

Oh. Thank. Christ.

I purposely kept my voice even-keeled when I responded, "Yeah, me too."

Her sweet smile contradicted the doubt marring her forehead. "I was wrong coming to the bar. I knew where it could lead, but my anger made me come anyway." She reached for my hand, and once our fingers entwined, she said, "I'm sorry."

"We both are responsible for this, Kip." A guilty expression and a shake of her head caused me to add, "Yes."

"This is on me. I may have needed a distraction, but I purposely sought you out because, well, you're you."

"I'm me?" And then it hit. "Ah, gotcha. I'm the easy distraction you can

trust.”

“Are you mad?”

Was I mad that she’d just insinuated I was a man-whore? How could I be? I was. Still, coming from Kipper, it stung a bit. “Nah, don’t sweat it. I hope you forgot fuckface for a few hours.”

“Who?” A grin lifted her lips. “Thank you for being a friend to me.”

I squeezed her hand. “Always.”

We exchanged smiles before she said, “Hey, I have nowhere to be. Wanna grab breakfast?”

Grateful that I had plans, her smile fell when I shook my head. “It’s my day with John.”

“Oh. Wow, you’re still religiously doing that?”

“I am... every first Sunday of the month.” John Porelli was my landlord and my friend... kind of.

John was a little gruff around the edges, and most who met him felt he was a bastard to the core. I knew better. The man was a big mush, for the right people.

From what I could tell, he had no one. Maybe losing my dad at twenty-two was what had me craving John’s presence in my life. That really didn’t make much sense when John was nothing like my dad. I also happened to be very close to my stepdad, Mitch. But there was something about John that called to me.

Besides renting me the ground floor where my bar was located, he’d allowed me to gut the four apartments that took up the second floor and renovate them into one huge unit. In return, and thanks to my bar’s success, I paid him generously for the space.

The little house in Jersey he purchased was John’s version of retiring. My sister-in-law, Jade, had helped me direct John into picking a safe, quiet neighborhood. It was right across the river and had the kind of houses on small patches of land that would serve his needs.

Claiming he was a Manhattan boy to the core, his desire to have a

garden, and peace and quiet, had him crossing that bridge out of the city. I often teased that part of Jersey wasn't exactly the suburbs, but he'd wave a hand and scoff that it was good enough for him.

"Well, tell John I said hi."

"I will." As Kipper stood and walked around my bed to grab her bag, I pulled on a pair of briefs, preparing for the awkward goodbye. Would this cause distance? I had no idea. Time would tell.

At my apartment door, she looked up shyly. "Bye, Brad."

With that, she planted a kiss on my cheek and walked out. My body sagging against the door I closed behind her had nothing to do with her departure and all to do with my stupidity. But needing to get ready, I pushed aside any guilt I had and jumped into the shower.



Normally John and I would meet in the city since I usually had to open the bar right after our lunch. Today he'd insisted I come to Jersey. Even though making the trip meant I had to have someone cover for me until I arrived, there wasn't a chance in hell I would disappoint him.

It was early April, and the ground was still hard and cold from winter, but my impatient friend had already drawn up plans where certain vegetables would go and wanted to show me.

No sooner had I pulled up to his pale-blue house, which had seen better days, than John bolted out the front door. "What, did you walk?" He commandingly stood on the beat-up porch in his typical stance, with hands on hips. "I don't have a car and would've been here quicker."

"Traffic sucked, old man," I said, slamming the door and clicking the alarm on. "You're lucky I like you enough to cross state lines... and you need a car. How do you get around?"

"It's on my to-do list." The man was as stubborn as they came. Who bought a house in the suburbs without first buying a car?

When I reached his steps, he waved a hand. "Go around the back," he barked, the permanent scowl and gray peppered mop of hair making him look

at least ten years older than his age of fifty-four. He was in decent shape, though.

“I’m starving.”

“Yeah... yeah. We’ll eat later.”

“Fine.” Without another word, he stalked back into his house, while I suppressed a grin and followed the unbalanced concrete path to his yard. The entire property needed a lot of work, something John claimed he was more than capable of doing. I’d offered to help, and by help I meant hire someone. Of course, that led to an argument. Somehow, I would have to trick him, because this money pit looked like it would crumble around him at any moment.

Almost tripping on a tree root, I cursed the stubborn man who was impatiently waiting for me in the yard. “Whatcha think?”

“Can I get through the gate first, old man?” The ballbuster that I was slowly unlatched the chain-link opening before strolling around the spikes he had marking the dirt.

My snail’s pace forced an impatient huff. “Well?”

“What am I looking at?”

“Good lord, boy. That there will be the tomatoes. Beside them, green peppers.” He rattled off at least a dozen more produce items before ending with a wave above his head. “And stretched above will be the grapes.”

“Grapes?”

He nodded. “For wine.”

Great, now I had to worry he’d poison himself. “Why not just save yourself the trouble and buy it all at the supermarket?”

“No way. I’ve waited my whole life to finally live off the land.”

“Yes... because that herd of buffalo seen stampeding through town would supply enough meat and pelts for the winter. Got your bayonet ready?”

“Shut it. Just for that, you get none of my vegetables.”

“Oh no!” My chuckle earned me a smack on the back of my head.

This new version of the meat-and-potato-obsessed cop I knew was hard to get used to. The man's diet had never contained so much as a piece of broccoli. For years, I'd watched him eat burgers, pizza, and wings to his heart's content. And then, one day after having bought his house, he'd ordered a salad and told me to fuck off when I questioned his lunch choice.

"Let's eat."

I followed him through the back door that led to a small square kitchen, and the smell of something garlicky instantly made my stomach growl. "What did you make?"

"Eggplant parm." Goddamn it, I hated eggplant. He met my staring, blinking, dumbfounded expression with a smirk. "You'll like it. Trust me."

Spotting a long loaf of crusty bread caused relief that I wouldn't go hungry.

"Sit."

Doing as he asked, I shook my head and grumbled, "You're a nasty prick. You do know that."

"Of course I do. Keeps assholes away."

"Didn't work with me."

He stopped for a moment to consider something. "Believe me, I tried. You're like a lost puppy."

"Gee, thanks. Hey, Kipper says hello."

"The blonde who used to work for you?"

"Yeah."

"Nice girl." I wasn't sure if it was the look on my face, or my penchant for blondes that caused him to smirk and say, "Don't shit where you eat, kid."

"Noted." Once he served us both a heaping pile of mush with sauce and cheese, we sat across from one another and dove in. "Okay, this is camouflaged enough to make it edible."

"I'll make you love vegetables. You'll see." That was something my own mother had never managed, but whatever. Amusing him, I lifted a huge

forkful midair, shoved it in my mouth, and released an exaggerated moan. “Asshole.”

The hiss of a radiator kicked on in the other room, and we continued to eat in silence. It was typical of spending time with John. If he had nothing to say, he didn’t speak. If I wanted to know, I’d have to ask. Sometimes he would respond, sometimes he wouldn’t.

Like the day I learned he was a retired police officer. I guessed I assumed owning real estate was his thing. When I did get the nerve to ask if he did that for a living, and he surprisingly said he used to be a cop, I just about fell over in shock. Like pulling teeth, I learned that fate ended his career when he was forced to retire early. I had no idea why, and no further explanation had come with that flippant comment.

Consumed by curiosity, I’d searched his name online and come upon an article explaining he’d been shot in the line of duty and had lost a kidney and a spleen, forcing him to retire with a medal of valor. That tragedy had also given him a huge monetary settlement. He donated part of it to widows of cops who died on the job, the other he used to buy the building.

Although a pain in the ass, I respected this man tremendously.

As always, I attempted to fill the silence and make conversation by broaching a hot subject with him. “So now that you’re all moved in, have you planned your trip to California?” Two brown marbles glared at me. “Come on, John. Stop making excuses.”

Nothing.

“I can go with you. Make it a guys’ weekend.”

Still nothing.

“You’re so fucking stubborn, and you’re not only hurting yourself, but you’re also hurting her.”

That got me a grunt.

I’d found out by accident that John had a daughter. The man was a loner, but not once had he ever mentioned her or anyone in his life, for that matter. I didn’t even know if the man had any friends besides me.

John used to live in one of the apartments in his building, two floors above mine. One day last fall I'd helped him move. As we'd boxed up what little belongings he had, I found a few old photos of a little girl in various stages of her life tucked inside one of his drawers. They ranged from what I assumed were a few months old to age five or six.

When John walked in on me staring at them, he threw a fit. Hours later, just as I was about to leave his new house, John broke down and said it was his daughter, Bella.

Apparently, he and Bella's mom had a brief thing that resulted in her birth. All I could get out of him was the woman didn't love him, and he wasn't man enough to change his course in life for a loveless relationship. With each year that went by, the guilt he carried worsened to the point he convinced himself Bella was better off without him. And that was all I knew.

Me being me, I would bring it up every month we met for lunch. Sometimes he'd tell me to fuck off. Other times, I'd get every excuse in the book, from he had no time to he didn't like to fly. It was all bullshit, especially when last June he did fly somewhere for a few days. I had no idea where he went, or who he went to see. And I only found out about his trip the day before he left, when he asked me to check his door for packages.

When he returned a few days later, grumpier than ever, I asked how his trip was, and he completely ignored me. It wasn't until John had stopped by the bar one night, and in an atypical fashion had a few too many drinks. It resulted in him rambling about getting his ass out to San Diego again to make things right with Bella. He hinted that was where he went and said something about not having the balls. But next time, it needed to be done, or he'd regret it forever.

That was all before I got him upstairs to my place and he passed out on my couch. The next morning, it was as if none of that happened. Still, I'd taken that night as an opportunity to occasionally nudge him into doing the right thing.

As John continued to throw me a death stare, I pushed harder. "One day, you're going to regret not going, John."

"One day, you'll learn to mind your own fucking business." The scrape

of metal against linoleum echoed as he shoved out of his chair. “I made biscotti for dessert.”

And just like that, I knew our conversation was over, and all the questions that remained would have to be tabled until our next visit.

Chapter 4

Brad

There were a few times a year when Manhattan became a ghost town. Specifically, summer weekends and Christmas... but another was spring break. College kids, who were a big part of my customer base, all left for the kind of beach weather that early spring in the Northeast didn't supply. Working professionals used the time to spend with their families after coming off a hard winter.

My parents, Nate, and Amy all decided to head down to Miami, intent on spending Easter with Max and Jade at their new house. Of course they invited me while still knowing I would refuse.

It was times like these when my business felt more like a burden. Even though they were rare and far between, I hated having to miss family events like my nephew, Michael, navigating an egg hunt. He was just over a year old and at such a fun stage... and I was very close to brainwashing him into liking me more than Nate. Although it wouldn't be the same, Jade did promise to video call me tomorrow morning during it.

Besides suffering from *FOMO*, I didn't mind working at the bar. It gave me enough time to plan new promotions or take stock of inventory that wasn't moving as quickly as it once was. I always had a service come in for a deep clean, and I replaced chairs or tables that had seen better days. In a way,

it forced me to do my own spring cleaning.

During a lull in serving, I scanned the dozen or so customers who had nowhere better to be. Since my staff had the place under control, I grabbed a beer and headed for my office. Ready to attack tedious tasks that I always put off until I had the time, I'd just begun on a pile of invoices needing filing when my cell rang. Usually I would ignore the unknown number, but I answered it anyway, prepared to hear how I could efficiently maximize my car insurance.

“Hello?”

“I’m calling for Mr. Brad Navarro.”

“I’m not interest—”

“This isn’t a solicitation call,” he interrupted. “I’m Samuel Caldwell, Mr. Porelli’s attorney.”

“Okay,” I responded hesitantly. What the hell was that old man up to now? Buying a food truck?

“I’m so sorry to inform you that Mr. Porelli suffered a massive heart attack yesterday.” Déjà vu hit hard from the day the exact same words were used when my father died, and with it came the same sick-to-my-stomach nauseousness.

“What? Is he okay?” *Please be okay, John.*

The pause should’ve tipped me off, but I hung on to hope until he said, “I’m afraid he’s passed.”

My hand began shaking violently enough that I placed my cell on the desk and tapped the speaker button. So many questions ran through my mind. *Who was with him? Who found him? Did he suffer?* I couldn’t bring myself to ask even one of them.

Respecting my silence, the man waited quietly on his end of the call until I pathetically said, “I just saw him last Sunday.” As though that little tidbit would negate this horrific news. I tried to justify my words by adding, “It’s hard to understand this.”

“I know, and I’m so sorry. John was an odd bird, but a good soul.” He

paused before adding, “And a great friend to me. He also spoke very highly of you.”

“He did?”

“Yes. You were very important to him.”

I couldn't have been more stunned if I tried. There was so much I didn't know about the grouch, and now I never would. When words continued to fail me, Caldwell took the opportunity to say, “I have contacted his next of kin. John wanted to be cremated and refused the pomp-and-circumstance type of funeral a hero like him deserved. To respect his wishes, I will be conducting a small memorial service here at my office on Tuesday. Once concluded, I will then be formally reading his will and testament to the parties involved.”

“Okay.” While I wondered how that involved me, he went on to give me the time and address, which I scribbled on the back of a receipt.

With that, he said, “I'll see you Tuesday,” and hung up.

I lost track of how long I sat there as a myriad of emotions roared through me. Besides the obvious grief, anger dominated because that stubborn man hated doctors. I resented that John would try to deny those of us who knew him a day to properly honor him. Regret also played a role, leaving a sick feeling that I hadn't spent enough time with him, pushed him harder to open up, gotten to know him better.

“Fuck you, John,” I said to the empty room. All the things he put off would never happen, and the things he finally got to enjoy, like living a quiet life with his vegetable garden, had been yanked away in the blink of an eye.

After sitting in silence for a full hour, and that was only revealed by checking the time my call with Caldwell had ended, I took my piss-warm beer and dragged my ass back out to the bar. He didn't want a fuss, well, too fucking bad.

Bobby took one look at me and frowned. “What happened?”

My grave expression left him guessing as I stepped onto the small stage. “Can I have your attention, please?” The ten customers, most of whom were regulars, along with my skeleton staff, all looked up at me expectantly. “I just

received some awful news. Some of you know John Porelli, my landlord, and the son of a bitch who used to come in here every so often to bust my chops.” As a few laughed and nodded in agreement, a massive lump formed in my throat, straining my voice as I continued. “I was told John died yesterday from a massive heart attack.” I waited out the gasps and *oh nos*. Lifting my beer, I then said, “To Officer John Porelli. May he be ragging on some unsuspecting soul as we speak, and may he always be remembered, if nowhere else, but in this fine city he served and at Brad’s Tavern.”

I, along with everyone else, lifted our beverages, calling out, “To John.”

Once they all quieted down, the last thing I said was, “Drinks on me for the rest of the day.”



The only thing that had brought a smile in the last three days was watching Michael on my phone aimlessly stumbling around the yard, looking for plastic eggs. Having my mother scold over the obscene engagement gift consisting of a basket of sex toys was also a fun distraction. At least Nate and Amy appreciated my creativity.

Otherwise, the ominous time stretching between Saturday and Tuesday felt a year long. Except for my patrons the day I had gotten the news, and telling my family, there was no one to truly share my grief with. I could attribute it to the holiday week that made those I’d normally vent to absent, but it was more than that. Not even when my own father died had I felt such solitude. Though that day was the worst in my life, my brothers and I consoled each other, forced ourselves to be strong for our mother. Losing John was different.

I leaned against the bar and stared at the framed photos hanging above the register—one of my parents just before Dad died, another with my two brothers, and one of my father in full firefighter gear. After losing him, Mom sat us all down and had us promise we would live our lives to the fullest, without regrets. When Dad died, Nate was already on his way to becoming a lawyer, while Max and I had just graduated with business degrees.

Mom gave us each a portion of the money she and Dad had saved,

wanting us to use it to follow our dreams. For me, owning my own bar was something I had wanted more than anything. And although it probably would have taken much longer for that to happen without my mother's gentle push, it was also John who made it come to fruition when it did.

I lifted the last photo on my wall off its hook and stared at it, remembering the day it was taken. In it, John and I stood side by side in that very spot as I displayed the first twenty-dollar bill I had made. It was during my grand opening seven years ago, and I think it was my brother Max who'd bought the drinks. Still, it metaphorically represented the abundant earnings that would soon come my way.

Memories of feeling so indebted to my landlord for giving a kid with a dream the chance to make it happen engulfed me. That opportunity had come the day I stumbled upon the FOR RENT sign in the window. I'd been managing a sports bar not far from there, gaining experience and saving every damn penny I made.

Seeing that sign felt like a metaphoric *sign* for me to finally go for it. I called the number right from the pavement and finagled myself a meeting for that same day. Once I saw the inside of the space, I knew I had to have it and then shamelessly tried to use my charm to sway the ornery man in my favor.

I talked and talked, promising I had a reliable cosigner in my mom and that I'd work my ass off to do well. The entire time, John stood with his arms folded and blankly stared at me.

"Listen up, kid," he had finally said. "I'm sick and tired of the idiots who responded to my ad thus far, and that's the only reason you win. Congrats. Just don't bother me, pay your rent, and don't make me regret this."

Nate, always the attorney, scoured the lease agreement with a fine-tooth comb. The fact of the matter was, John Porelli wasn't interested in riches... he was interested only in covering living expenses with no hassles attached. He could've easily rented the space to a hoity-toity retail chain or well-known franchise. But he instead gave it to me at a very fair rate.

At that time, John had only recently bought the building he had lived in for years, occupying one of the apartments on the top floor. There were

twelve in total, seven of which were unoccupied. John used the same philosophy in renting out the other units by choosing low-key people who wouldn't bother him.

Talking him into letting me rent out the entire second floor was easy because it meant he had three fewer tenants he'd have to deal with. Convincing him to let me convert it into one big apartment took some time, using the argument anyone who owned a business after me would want their residence above it. I didn't doubt John had finally conceded just to shut me up.

On my second anniversary, because of the bar's success, I had taken it upon myself to raise my monthly rent by a few hundred bucks split between the bar space and my apartment. And even though John bitched and moaned about it, I ignored him and have done so every few months until I finally reached the appropriate market value.

"Hey, boss." Vic, my assistant manager, clapped a hand on my shoulder and pulled me out of my reverie. "Heading out?"

"Yeah. I should be back in a few hours."

"No rush. Take the day. You've been here nonstop since Saturday." He was right. I even slept on the couch in my office the night I had gotten the news. It was easier to handle the insomnia by keeping busy. "We got it covered."

"I know you do. Thanks." My response was a formality, knowing I'd be right back there as soon as I could, searching for the distraction. I then dragged my ass out of the bar, hailed a cab, and recited the address where I needed to be.

The drive took about ten minutes longer than expected. Navigating the lobby bustling with employees coming and going for lunch while having to wait for an elevator made me even later.

A few people stood beside me, one holding a bag that reeked of tuna fish... but it wasn't that strong smell that churned my stomach.

While checking my reflection in the high-polished brass facing me, I ran a hand down the silk tie I'd thrown on at the last minute and waited for floor

sixteen. A few seconds later, the doors parted to reveal a granite reception desk with an older woman operating a constantly ringing phone panel.

“Caldwell, Wilson, and Roan... please hold. Caldwell, Wilson, and Roan... please hold.” She threw me a bland smile. “May I help you?”

“I’m Brad Navarro. I’m here to see Mr. Caldwell... um... for the memorial.”

Sympathy slightly altered her expression. “Yes. Straight down the hall to the double wood doors on the left.”

“Thank you.” No one paid me any attention as I walked the length of the posh office. Cubicles ran down the center of the space, flanked by frosted glass doors boasting the names of one attorney after another. When I arrived at the wood doors as instructed, I rapped my knuckles against one of them before dragging it open.

All eyes landed on me just as a stout, balding man approached. “Mr. Navarro?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Samuel Caldwell. Thank you for coming. Please have a seat.” He waved toward the massive mahogany table while my gaze bounced from person to person. Thankfully, one of the few chairs remaining was closest to the door. The room had more people than I thought it would. A few men in full police uniform sat along one side facing me, a few others in ill-fitted suits filled the chairs to my left.

A female with dark-brown hair sat at the farthest corner, appearing to be about the age of John’s daughter. I hadn’t seen a recent picture, but I guessed it could be Bella. She sat beside an older woman, and I watched with a heavy heart as she dabbed a tissue over her cheeks, wondering if her tears were of regret or loss.

When Mr. Caldwell began speaking, I twisted in the heavy leather chair and gave him my attention.

“Thank you all for coming today to memorialize John Porelli, a man who was hell-bent on not being memorialized. Well, it’s a good thing I never listened to him.” A few chuckled... I didn’t. “John lived his life by his own

rules. Few truly knew the man behind the scowl. I doubt any of you were aware that he shared his earnings with several charities for families of fallen officers. Or that he would religiously volunteer with local youth centers, spending time with children who lacked parental guidance in their lives. I doubt some of you even knew he had a daughter who, despite their distance, he loved *very* much.”

Mr. Caldwell took a moment to let that sink in, all while focusing on someone at the other end of the table... the opposite corner of where the brunette sat. Curiosity had me turning to see who Caldwell was looking at.

And then my gaze landed on the only other woman in the room. Embarrassingly, my surprised gasp echoed even louder because of the silence. A few turned to stare at me, but I couldn't pull my eyes away from her.

Sheena.

What the hell was she doing here?

Impossible. She couldn't be John's daughter, whose name was Bella Porelli... not Sheena whatever.

Meanwhile, the woman stared back at me before those green eyes darted away. And while Mr. Caldwell continued talking about John, every fucking word from then on went unheard.

Chapter 5

Sheena

Even though my eyes remained fixated on Mr. Caldwell, I could feel Brad's lasering gaze searing into my skin. The longer he stared, the more my insides heated, and my stomach roiled.

Of course he'd be here. He probably had more of a right than I did. And as I fidgeted in my chair because of him, I knew coming to New York was a bad idea. Gone would be my anonymity. It wasn't like I'd be able to sneak by him once this thing was over. Like an idiot, I chose a chair in the farthest corner from the door.

More reason this was a mistake came from feeling like the outsider while surrounded by these strangers. With each accolade about John that Mr. Caldwell shared with the group, the more alienated I felt. It was hard to sit through, worse yet to hear even more things about my father that I didn't know. I wasn't concerned the attorney would ask me to speak or share any stories about my dad. Mr. Caldwell had made it clear that he knew of our estrangement when I walked in by saying, "*I truly didn't think you'd come.*"

What *had* I expected to get out of this by coming? Closure? What was the point of that now?

I'd said as much to my best friend, but Kelly had read me the riot act. In a not-so-kind way, she said to get my ass on a plane to say goodbye to my

father. She offered to accompany me, but there was no need for us both to take time off from work.

Since getting the phone call on Saturday, I had prepared myself for all the resentment I'd feel for the man who'd helped give me life but nothing more than that. I also had prepared myself to feel confused over losing the possibility of a relationship, one that I contradictorily wished for and avoided.

What I hadn't properly prepared for was feeling such an all-consuming sadness. It was hard to wrap my head around, and harder to reconcile why my heart had ached so badly since getting the call from Mr. Caldwell.

Another thing I hadn't prepared for was the paralyzing nervousness that came from seeing Brad Navarro again. Watching him enter the room sent a surge of apprehension through me. It hadn't helped that he'd walked in all tall and confident in his black slacks, a gray button-down, and monochromatic tie. His hair was a bit more styled than it had been Valentine's night, and the cocky smirk had been replaced with a somber countenance. Like a coward, when he swept his gaze around the room, I'd scooted my chair back a few inches to hide from him.

Remaining inconspicuous wasn't hard since no one else in the room had paid me much attention. There were fourteen of us in total. Two other women, one older and one about my age, kept sniffing back tears. Based on overhearing her conversation with Mr. Caldwell I knew that was his wife and daughter.

The five police officers lining one side of the table seemed to each be in their own world. As I sat silently, I wondered what their connections were to John.

"Would anyone like to say anything?" Mr. Caldwell asked, skimming his gaze over the room.

"I would." One of the police officers stood, cleared his throat, and waved a hand in greeting. "Hi. I'm Marty Doyle... and I was John's partner on the force. . ." His voice caught on emotions before he added, "For fifteen years."

What?

Another uniformed officer clapped his back encouragingly, while it seemed Marty needed to compose himself for a pause. After he cleared his throat again, he continued: “John wasn’t much of a talker. In fact, there were days he would say five words to my five hundred... trust me, I counted as part of a bet.” The room chuckled. “But what John lacked in social skills, he more than made up for as a cop. There was never a doubt he had my back, as I had his. The day he was shot, that bullet was meant for me. John took it, and after he had, it may as well have pierced my own body anyway.” Tears unexpectedly swelled with each new thing I learned. “I couldn’t help but feel like I failed him, and once John got wind of those thoughts, he set my ass straight.” Marty reached up and swiped a rough finger under his eye. “That asshole—” His eyes moved across the room before he mumbled, “Sorry. *John* didn’t deserve to get shot that day no more than he deserved to die at fifty-four.” He turned to stare at the black granite urn sitting on a small table in the corner. “I’ll miss you; you prick.” That time, he didn’t apologize for his crassness. “Rest easy, my friend.”

Once Marty sat, Mr. Caldwell repeated his question. A few more spoke on John’s behalf, more of the same, more proof I had no idea who my father really was. And then Brad slowly rose at the opposite end of the table.

“I’m Brad Navarro... a friend of John’s.” He graced us all with that cocky smirk of his, adding, “Stupid me thought I was special being his only friend. Clearly, I was wrong.” His green eyes again made their rounds before he continued. “But John was more than just a friend to me. He was my landlord, my confidant... and in some ways family. Having lost my father years ago, John accidentally slipped into being a father figure to me. Much like Marty, I did most of the talking, since John was a man of few words.” Brad’s comment was met with agreeing smiles and nods. “But... if I truly needed him, he was there... and that was enough for me.” Brad released a small huff as he shook his head. “He’d hate this, and I could practically hear him bitching and moaning in my head. But like in life, I’m ignoring his grumbles, because John didn’t always know what was best for John.”

Brad’s gaze landed right on mine, and I wasn’t sure if it was his statement or the intensity of his stare that had my breath catch and hold before it audibly rushed out. The sound echoed around me, causing my

cheeks to heat from embarrassment.

Those intensely green eyes had the same effect on me as they had the night that I saw him in his bar. It resulted with a flurry of nervous butterflies fluttering chaotically in the pit of my stomach. There was nowhere to escape from this emotional whirlwind that I was stuck in.

While the man who could answer all my questions was gone forever, I had a feeling that the man who continued to stare at me held some of those answers.

Whether that was a good thing or not would remain to be seen.



The guests in attendance had helped themselves to a lunch buffet Mr. Caldwell had arranged in a neighboring conference room. Instead, I remained in my chair, sipping from a lukewarm bottle of water, wishing it all to be over. If it weren't for John's lawyer requesting that I stay after the memorial, I would've been the first one gone.

From the looks of bodies loitering in the hall, and the lessening level of chatter, I hoped it wouldn't be much longer.

"Miss Porelli?" John's partner asked, assuming I had my father's surname.

Rather than bothering to correct him, I simply nodded.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small photo before handing it to me. "I thought you might want this." I glanced down at the image of my dad in uniform. "There weren't many pictures of John in the line of duty, and even if he had any, I doubt he shared them with you." Marty gave me a small smile, and I needed to bite my tongue from blurting out, "*Except for guilt payments he sent my mom, my dad shared nothing with me.*" But instead, I again nodded wordlessly. Awkwardness hung between us, and the kind man touched my arm, assuming my silence for grief. "I'm so sorry for your loss. He truly was a great man. I hope memories of him provide you comfort."

Wrong again, Marty.

Forcing myself to respond, I whispered, "Thank you." When he walked

away, I slumped back into my chair.

Having had only a few photos that my mother had given me, I continued to stare at the picture, comparing this man to the smiling one who'd spent a summer with her in Southern California. Although John was older, I could still see the similarities he passed onto me in our smiles and the straight line of our noses.

"Miss Devlin?" I glanced up to see Mr. Caldwell standing in the doorway. "Can you join me in my office now?"

"Of course," I said, relieved this was almost over, and followed him out of the room and through the busy office space. Arriving at a frosted glass door with his name etched on the surface, he opened it and waved me through. There I saw Brad already sitting in one of the leather club chairs facing a heavy wooden desk. We exchanged glances before I resumed my attempt at ignoring him. But that proved difficult when the chair I sat in was inches away from his.

I could feel the heat of his arm as it rested on the smooth leather. I could smell an intoxicating scent that seemed more like soap than cologne. I couldn't imagine what he was thinking at that moment.

Mr. Caldwell took his place across from us and smiled. "Thank you for coming today. I know it's been difficult for you both in different ways. I'm not sure if you have officially been introduced. Brad Navarro, this is Sheena Devlin, John's daughter."

"We've met," Brad said, not too kindly.

Caldwell appeared surprised, but then nodded. "Shall we begin?"

"Before you do, I have a question. Where was John when he... um..."

Brad left his question hanging, and Mr. Caldwell nodded. "He was at home... and managed to call 911, claiming he was experiencing chest pains. Unfortunately, they weren't able to get to him in time."

My eyes welled over the situation. No one should have to die alone like that. And judging from Brad solemnly staring into space, I could assume he struggled with the same thought.

"I'm really sorry," Mr. Caldwell went on to say, giving us a sympathetic

frown. “I was listed as his emergency contact, and the paramedic did assure me based on the magnitude of his heart attack he most likely didn’t suffer long.” I nodded while Brad continued to stare, and we remained silent before Caldwell said, “As sole beneficiaries of John’s estate, I would like to now formally read to you his last will and testament.”

There was no reason any of John’s assets should’ve gone to me, and I wanted to say as much. But my silence, and Brad’s brooding, prompted him to begin reading the document in his hands.

“I, John Francis Porelli, being of full age and sound mind and memory, do make, publish, and declare this to be my last will and testament, hereby revoking and annulling any and all last will and testaments or codicils at any time heretofore made by me.” More legal mumbo jumbo followed before he said, “I bequeath my house, located at 142 Maple Drive, Palisades Park, New Jersey, all its contents, along with all monetary funds, pension compensation, and stocks owned to my daughter Sheena Devlin.” Caldwell paused to say directly to me, “John’s monetary funds, excluding his pension, is just over two hundred thousand dollars. He was quite frugal with his spending habits.”

A sucker punch would’ve been just as effective. I could barely breathe as I stared at the attorney, trying to process what he’d just itemized, all while ignoring Brad staring at me in my peripheral and trying to remain stoic.

“Are you sure there isn’t a mistake?” I asked breathlessly.

What would possess John to leave me everything? Clearly there was someone else in his life more deserving, like the man beside me.

“There’s no mistake, dear. He actually revised his will shortly after buying the house.” Caldwell’s gaze cut to Brad for a moment before he began reading again. “Regarding my rental property at 447 Spring Street, New York, New York, I bequeath residential apartments numbered five through twelve, their contents, and lease obligations to Sheena Devlin. Regarding apartment numbered one, as well as the commercial space located on the ground floor currently established as Brad’s Tavern, I bequeath its contents, property ownership, and current proprietorship or any future variations to Brad Navarro. Property taxes and unexpected expenses for the building in whole are to be split equally between both beneficiaries.”

That time it was even harder to contain my shock as my mouth gaped. I dared to look at the man beside me, who was now just as focused on Caldwell. The attorney went on to mention outstanding debts and/or taxes owed, but all I could fixate on was the reality that Brad and I were now tied together in a very complicated way, all at my father's doing.

"Regarding the tenants currently holding leases...," Caldwell continued, bouncing his gaze between us. "John wanted me to send each a letter with a concise statement that their leases will be honored for their durations, and it would be up to them if they wanted to renew. As long as the building remains in your ownership, and there are no breaches or issues with their existing leases, then their apartments will not be rented from beneath them. The letter also includes Miss Devlin's name as co-owner, with my contact information." He pulled out a piece of paper from the stack he held and handed it to me. "This is the list of tenants currently under lease, and their contact information. I suggest you reach out to them and introduce yourself, maybe even meet with each of them personally. Once a relationship begins, you will then take over as acting manager. At that time, you can also establish how you prefer their rents to be paid. Schedule is standard first of the month." He gently placed the packet of documents on his desktop. "I know it's a lot to take in, but do you have any questions at this time?"

"Yeah... a fucking ton," Brad grumbled. "Let's start with, how is this supposed to work?"

"Well... although a bit unorthodox regarding the way John decided to divide his assets, splitting them among different beneficiaries is very common practice. You need to look at it as being in business with one another. Any and all decisions regarding the building need to be discussed and mutually decided on."

"And if we decide to sell it?" I asked.

"Not a chance in hell," Brad barked, glaring at me.

"Maybe hell will freeze over," I snapped back.

"Over my dead body," he countered.

"With all due respect, Mr. Navarro, I legally have just as much a right to decide on what to do with it as you do." Personally, I had no right. Still, he

didn't know me from Adam and his macho dominance caused every ounce of anger simmering to be revealed through my expression.

Who the hell did he think he was?

Undeterred by my words or demeanor, he shrugged. "Agreed... except we're not selling it." He then folded his arms in challenge.

"Well, we're not keeping it."

"Spoiler alert, sweetheart—"

"Don't call me sweetheart."

He ignored my glare, acting as though I hadn't even spoken. "We're not selling. Unlike you, keeping the building or *selling* the building has no bearing on your life... whatsoever... For me, on the other hand, it not only is my home but my livelihood." He matched my ire while glowering at me, and I didn't dare cower from it.

"If I may?" Mr. Caldwell interrupted the battle of wills between us. We tore away from the other's livid scowl to look at him. Clearly uncomfortable with our bickering, he played mediator. "As I said, this is all a lot to take in, especially while mourning your loss. Allow yourselves time to process it and to consider the best course of action for *both* of you. In the meantime, if you have any questions whatsoever, please don't hesitate to call me. I'm always here for you and can help you arrive to a mutual decision." He waited for us to digest his offer. "Off the record, John was a very good friend of mine, and being his lawyer afforded me information he otherwise kept close to the vest." Caldwell met my gaze. "Sheena, although he wasn't a presence in your life, you were definitely one in his. There wasn't a day that went by where he didn't think of you." Caldwell then stared at Brad. "Brad, you were also very important to him, as was proven today. If I could give you both some advice, it would be to remain open-minded and respectful of the other's feelings, intentions, and even the way they choose to process this chain of events."

Our silent stewing prompted him to stand. "I'll give you some privacy before we sign the necessary documents." With that, he walked out of his office, shutting the door behind him and leaving me to deal with the stranger beside me who would undoubtedly disrupt my life.

The moment we were alone, Brad looked me dead in the eyes and barked, “Why are you referred to as Sheena Devlin?” His green eyes flashed with anger, and for whatever reason, it made him even more attractive to me. When memories of his lips moving against mine assaulted my libido, I shook my head to clear it, but instead came off just as annoyed... which worked to my benefit.

“Because that’s my name,” I said, feigning complete boredom.

“John called you Bella.”

Bella? It took every fiber of my being to school my features. Why would he use an Italian term of endearment instead of my real name? But did I really want to pull on that thread?

Instead, I shook my head and rolled my eyes. “Yeah, well, John did a lot of things I didn’t understand. I’m sure he had the balls to also use his surname as well.”

“No... you were just Bella.”

“And he was just that man who donated his sperm to my mother.”

Chapter 6

Brad

This chick. If I weren't so annoyed, I would've scoffed at her bravado, at the way she rolled those mesmerizing eyes, or how she sat so stiffly beside me. If I weren't so annoyed, I would've better appreciated the way her black fitted business suit molded over her curves, contradicting its prudish style. If I weren't so annoyed, I would be visualizing her in those insanely sexy red heels and nothing else on my bed.

But... again... I was annoyed.

She looked more suited for a congressional debate than a memorial service. The thing is... a man's cock wasn't familiar with the emotion of annoyance. Mine pretty much did its own thing, and that came through just as his accomplice, the mouth, twitched into a salacious smirk.

Calling me out, she practically growled, "What are you smirking at?"

Ignoring her question, I threw her one of my own to deflect. "Answer me this. Did you come to my bar by coincidence?" The moment she looked away I knew I'd hit a nerve.

For a brief moment, her huffy attitude diminished enough for me to see vulnerability. "I came to New York that weekend to see my dad. I knew he owned that building."

“So you also knew who I was then?” When she remained silent, I rolled my hand and prompted, “You see, this is when you open your mouth and allow words to come out as a response. Or you can just nod—that works too.”

A vein pulsing in her neck made me smile. “All I knew was that you rented space in his building. Didn’t know your name or what you looked like. Your grand showmanship that night filled in the blanks.” She annoyingly brushed the hair off her shoulder, sending a wave of that scent I couldn’t place to hit me. *Shit... what is that?* Would it be weird for me to interrupt my interrogation to ask her?

Instead, I leaned a bit to my left and inhaled.

Of course she caught that. “Did you just sniff me?”

“What? No.” Finding my way back to my line of questioning, I countered with, “So that night you came looking for me instead? Thought I could be your mole and enlighten you on John’s whereabouts?”

“No... I came hoping to run into John.”

John could’ve easily seen Sheena then and never mentioned it. He did shit like that all the time, keeping things from me that I sometimes found out by accident. Not wanting to give her the satisfaction that John and I weren’t as close as I had her presuming, I bluffed and said, “But you didn’t.”

“Obviously.”

Ignoring her sass, I asked, “Why not ask me once you figured out who I was?”

“Because I knew being there was a huge mistake.”

“Was kissing me part of that mistake?”

“Yes!” she snapped, and Christ if she wasn’t even more beautiful when livid. As I stared at her, she composed herself, smoothing a hand over the skirt covering her thighs. I watched, wondering if she had prudish granny panties on or a lace thong. My little fantasy was interrupted when, in a much softer tone, she went on to say, “The point is, I made the trip to New York only to chicken out. Maybe I was sick and tired of being the only one to even try to have a relationship at all. He clearly didn’t care.”

That I knew to be a lie. I'd witnessed that man torturing himself about whether to go out and see her, or not to... at least I thought I'd witnessed it. That could've easily have been a misconception of the situation. Did I know for sure that John really wanted to see her? No... I didn't. All I did know was that he'd convinced himself Bella... Sheena... whatever the fuck her name was, was better off without him. And that was all I truly knew.

So how could I prove her foundation to be shaky, at best, if my own information was nothing more than a pile of sand? It was better to pull a John Porelli on her and listen more than talk.

Without anything for me to offer, I could visibly see her frustration coming off her in waves, until she sighed and said, "Look, thank you for all you've done for him. And I know you knew a different man than I did... but you'll never convince me he was anything other than a coward who selfishly took the easy road in avoiding his daughter. Nor will you ever convince me to spend time in a city I despise because I inherited materialistic assets that I have no interest in."

"Well, I have plenty of interest in them. Like I said, you're talking about my livelihood, my home."

"That can easily be solved..." She leveled me with a renewed glare that caused my blood to simmer and my cock to twitch. "Buy me out."

"That's not possible." Offering her what the building was worth would financially wipe *me* out. "Find someone to sell your portion to."

"No one in their right mind would go into such a convoluted arrangement. In fact, John's sanity should be questioned for putting us in this position. He would've been better off leaving the entire building to you or selling it and leaving you the money."

"What are you, a lawyer?"

"No... I'm a kindergarten teacher who doesn't have time for this. I'd much prefer to take my profits and go back to my life."

"Well, *your father*," I pointedly said, "wasn't concerned with profits. And whether you believe me or not, he loved you."

"He sure had a funny way of showing it," she said sarcastically. "Love

doesn't mean sending a monthly check or naming a daughter in a will once you're dead." When I flinched, she mumbled, "Sorry, that was insensitive of me. I don't mean to take away from your mourning. It's just that I'm in a different position than you are."

I accepted her apology for what it was worth, and we both fell silent. This was a mess, and a part of me cursed John for doing this to me. Why would he link me to his daughter? What was his endgame?

Meanwhile, the fact that we were getting nowhere forced me to say, "Look, we can sit here all day arguing over this. Mr. Caldwell was right to say this is a lot to digest, and nothing needs to be decided now."

She met my stare. "Except I do have a life to get back to."

"So get back to it. There are these fantastic inventions called telephones that we can actually communicate with." I talked a great game, but the truth of the matter was I hated that none of this meant squat to her. All the things John loved, like my building, or his new home, were hanging in the balance, subject to her control. If I could, I'd buy her out of all of it. If I could, I'd make it easy for her to erase evidence her father had existed. Clearly, that was what she wanted. "Besides, isn't the school year over in like a month?"

"And in your warped brain, you think I can come back in a month and then what?"

She received a blank stare as a response, because the fuck if I knew. Regardless, I didn't have a chance to answer her before Mr. Caldwell reappeared, holding John's ashes. "Are you kids ready to sign the will?"

"As ready as we'll ever be," I grumbled before nodding toward the marble urn. "What happens to John's remains?"

"John didn't want to burden anyone, and because he didn't want a memorial service as well, he had voiced that the next time I take out my boat to bring him along and sprinkle him where we used to fish together."

John fished?

Part of me wanted to invite myself along, but if John wanted me there, then he would've gotten that message to me. It was all so fucking confusing. At times I felt so privileged to have been in his life. And on the flip side,

there was so much about him I didn't know. As little as my knowledge was, the beauty beside me beat me in that regard. A small part of me felt bad for her, until she asked, "What if I refuse to sign?"

Bitch.

"That would be unfortunate," Mr. Caldwell said. "I would need to know on what grounds you contest."

Her cheeks tinged a rosy hue, and I didn't know if it was because of Mr. Caldwell's statement or the daggers I shot her way via my glare.

"Never mind."

Caldwell searched her expression for a beat and then nodded. For the next painstakingly long twenty minutes, she and I alternated placing our signatures on the appropriate lines. Eventually Mr. Caldwell said, "That'll just about do it." He handed us each our own copy sealed in a legal-size envelope and then gave Sheena a few sets of keys. "These are for his house in New Jersey and the building. Brad, you already have the necessary keys." His gray brows rose a bit as a sympathetic smile spread over his thin lips. "For whatever reason, John wanted you two connected in this manner. Look at it as a blessing, and not a curse."

From the scowls, it wouldn't take a genius to know that would be easier said than done.

After our cordial goodbye to Mr. Caldwell, I tried to be a gentleman, opening the door for her and allowing her to enter the elevator first. However, once we emerged into the lobby following a silent descent, there was no reason for me to continue the act of civility. "We need to exchange numbers."

I watched her dig out her phone from her purse. When she looked up expectantly, I recited mine. But as she went to put her phone back in her bag, I placed a firm hand over hers. The zap that came from feeling her skin beneath my palm caught me off guard, enough so that she snipped, "What?"

I blinked a few times. With all the blinking, this woman must've thought I was a moron. "Um... I need yours too." I wasn't going to depend on her to make contact whenever she chose to.

She tapped the number she had just saved, resulting in my phone

vibrating in my pocket. “There. Is that it?”

“For now.”

Those puffy pink lips parted to say something, but she thought better of it before walking across the lobby, out the doors, and onto the sidewalk. Like a dumbass, I just stood there watching as she moved straight for the curb and raised an arm. And I still hadn’t moved as she folded that hot little body of hers into the back of a cab, my gaze narrowing in on the black skirt fabric stretching over her ass, before she slammed the door and drove away.

Fuck. My. Life.



I had no idea if she’d gone to John’s house or directly to the airport. And I had even less of an idea of what would happen with my inheritance. It hadn’t helped that I kept it all to myself, telling absolutely no one what had transpired after John’s memorial. That was until the next day when Nate was due to return from Miami, and the moment I knew his plane landed at Newark, I texted him.

I know you’re just back, but I need to see you immediately.

Predictably, my text went unanswered for about an hour before he responded:

Why? Did your dick fall off and you want to borrow one of the dildos you sent us as a replacement?

Ha ha. Just come straight to the bar please?

Fine.

And there I was, an hour later, pacing in my office when a knock finally sounded on my door. “Come in.”

My identical brother strolled in without a care in the world, his tan clearly revealing he should’ve been nice and relaxed from his trip.

“This better be good,” he said, plopping in a chair in front of my desk. “Amy and I didn’t get to screw much with all the eyes and ears surrounding us, and thanks to your gift I’m horny as fuck.”

“Ugh... spare me.” Now that the two of them lived together, they were

no better than rabbits. Amy had bitched and moaned when Nate asked her to move in. The compromise: she kept her apartment as a home office space for her writing, and that made her feel better.

My brothers both had it bad for their women, and in hindsight I now worried asking Nate to come over for advice was a bad idea. Needing liquid courage, I gulped a mouthful of whiskey. Nate's eyes focused on the slight tremble of my hand, and he lost the attitude. "Okay, what's wrong?"

"Where do I fucking begin?" I drained my glass and jumped into explaining my fucked-up situation. "After John's memorial, his lawyer asked me to head to his office. Obviously I suspected John must've left me something. So I sat there, waiting. . . and then Caldwell came in with a woman I had seen earlier in the conference room." Nate had no idea I had run into Sheena on Valentine's night. I would fill him in on that little tidbit later. "Turns out, it was his daughter who lives in California."

"John has a daughter?" Nate asked.

"Yeah. No relationship between them, but I knew of her. Anyway, long story short, John left her his house in Jersey, and all his money. But the prick split this building between us." Unsurprisingly, Nate's mouth gaped open. "Yeah." I waited for him to process that for a bit.

"How was it split? Fifty-fifty?"

"That would be easy. He left me the bar and second floor, while the she-devil got the rest of the apartments. She's financially responsible for her units, me for my two floors, and taxes to be split between us."

"She-devil?"

"Her name is Sheena Devlin... a.k.a. She-Devil... and she got the name because she's evil and wants to sell it."

"Ugh," Nate rasped out. "Shit, this is a logistic nightmare."

"Ya think? To make matters worse, she's hot as fuck. So now I have a hard-on for the enemy." I yanked open my desk drawer, snatching the bottle of antacids and popping two in my mouth. Nate's lips quirked up just enough for me to bark, "It's not funny."

"It kinda is."

“Asshole... I need help.”

“Okay... okay.” He dragged a hand through his hair, a sympathetic frown now replacing the smirk. “Well, she can’t sell it without you agreeing. So it’s not like you’ll be kicked out into the street.”

“Can she sue me?”

“Yes.” The quick response caused my stomach to churn harder. “But that would become a dragged-out, expensive endeavor for her to take on. In contrast, you can also sue her... or buy her out.”

“She offered that.”

“Can you swing it?”

“I’m successful but not fucking Rockefeller.” I knew if I needed them, my brothers would help, but my pride made that the last thing I wanted.

“How did you leave things?”

“Hanging. We exchanged numbers, but that’s it. For all I know, she’s already on her way back to California. I know nothing about the woman besides what John told me, and even that was like pulling teeth.” I filled Nate in on how John became a dad, and the years he’d spent riddled with guilt over their situation. “He loved her mother, but it wasn’t reciprocated. I really couldn’t get much out of him except that he wasn’t willing to give up being a cop in the city, uprooting his entire life, for a loveless relationship. I also know he carried a tremendous amount of guilt because and felt Sheena was better off without him.”

“That sucks. The man had a pretty lonely life.”

“Very.”

“As your attorney, I suggest you work toward the buying-her-out option. You know me and Max would help you.”

“I know. Who knows if I can even afford it? But besides that... it’s just...” Owning my bar without a partner meant it was truly mine, and I was proud of that. I guess if it came down to it, I’d rather fuck pride than become homeless.

“Yeah. I get it. You can always try and butter her up a bit. Maybe you

can convince her to keep the building as an investment, put the management upkeep and hassles on you. Accepting monthly rent checks while doing nothing most definitely sweetens the deal. I can draw up papers giving you power of attorney for the day-to-day decisions that would need to be made. If she's in California, it makes sense to let you handle all that anyway."

"I guess. I knew the first time we met—"

"Whoa... you know each other?"

"Not exactly. She came to New York Valentine's weekend attempting to see John, and then to the bar to look for him. I had no idea who she was, and..." My eyes tethered with a pair exactly the same as mine. "Um... I tried to pick her up."

"Of course you did," Nate droned.

"How could I not? She's stunning. Nothing happened, though... except that *she* kissed *me* before leaving." Thinking back, I most definitely didn't misinterpret the desire in her vivid green eyes. Something had spurred her to kiss me, and something deeper had spurred her to walk away. "She was into me, I could tell. After that kiss desire turned into panic, and I could only attribute it to logic tapping her shoulder and whispering that would be a mistake."

"And her logic would be right. There are other ways to convince a woman, Brad, that don't involve sex. Become her friend, a sounding board. Tell her things about her dad she may not know. Bond with her, and I don't mean physically."

"Yeah... I don't know how to do that." When Nate rolled his eyes, I jabbed, "Suddenly you're the maven on relationships?"

"More than you," he countered. "The girl just lost her father. Maybe she could use a friend?"

"Or maybe I'll just use the spark between us, and my Navarro charm, to entice and cajole the she-devil to get what I want. Once she's convinced and sees things my way, I can be on my *merry way*, and she can forget I existed."

The condescending prick stared at me and shook his head. "Good luck with that."

Chapter 7

Sheena

My initial plan was to go back to the hotel and maybe try to catch an earlier flight back home. But that was just me wanting to flee from the situation, and just as the cab stopped beneath the portico, I impulsively asked the driver to take me to the New Jersey address burning a hole in my purse.

Once I made the decision, it only took about thirty minutes before the cab pulled up in front of John's house... or my house as of an hour earlier.

The neighborhood was quiet for midafternoon on a Tuesday. The tree-lined street was actually lovely, and I admired the massive oak standing majestically in front of John's house.

That was where the contrast came. In comparison to the picturesque surroundings, the house was small and old, and nothing like what I expected. Run-down was an understatement. The porch that stretched across the front of the faded blue house was in desperate need of a paint job, the stairs as well. Actually, the entire thing needed to be demolished and redone. From where I stood, it looked like it would crumble if even someone as petite as me climbed it.

Why would a man who, for all intents and purposes, had money, buy a dump?

It felt like I stood on that cement square where the cab deposited me for hours. I just couldn't bring myself to walk to the front door. Irony was being consumed with loneliness while staring at the house of a man who, from what I knew, lived a very lonely life.

Instead of moving forward, I followed the cracked concrete path around the side of the house. A garden hoe and shovel leaned against the washed-out shingles. Fresh patches of dirt that bordered each side of the walkway seemed to be waiting for something exciting to be planted.

Directly in front of me was a creaky gate lending access to the backyard. Again, the small, neat square was fully fenced in and staked out with wooden markers, most of the area containing more fresh-tilled earth that appeared to be prepped and ready for a vegetable garden.

There wasn't much else to the yard besides a beaten-down shed in the back corner and one of those diagonal storm doors protruding from the house that you saw in movies where tornadoes were a threat.

I walked deeper into the yard to read what had been scrawled on the little stakes, cringing as my heels sank into the soil. After opening the shed to see it held some gardening tools and a wooden bench covered with soil and seed bags, hearing a raspy "Hello" had me jumping out of my skin.

"Oh my God," I said, holding my chest.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." On the other side of the rusted chain link was an older gentleman with a pleasant smile. "Are you Bella?" Obviously, the man knew John.

"Sheena... but yes, I'm John's daughter."

"Ah... I can see the resemblance. I'm so sorry for your loss. The wife and I really wanted to come to his memorial but getting into the city isn't easy for us." Without giving me a chance to respond, he rushed on: "It was quite a shock when I saw an ambulance outside. John was strong as a bull." He waved a wrinkled hand behind him. "He was my go-to for help around my place. These old bones can't accomplish much nowadays."

As I nodded and smiled, he offered that same hand, forcing me to walk the distance to shake it. "I'm Fred Murphy, by the way. Wife and I have lived

here sixty years. Took to your father the minute he moved in. We're private people and appreciate the same kind." Leaning a bit closer while still holding my hand, he whispered, "This block is filled with busybodies."

Fred went on to give me a rundown of the neighbors, proving to be a version of what he had just mocked. Meanwhile, I had no idea what to say to the kind man and slowly slipped my hand from his hold.

When he took a breath, I quickly said, "Well, it was nice meeting you, Mr. Murphy."

"Fred. Same... same. If you need anything at all, you come knocking, okay, darlin'?"

"Thank you." If anything, Fred provided the gentle nudge I needed to stop procrastinating and go inside the house. My heart pounded while I fumbled with the key in the old lock before pushing open the old-fashioned half glass door. I immediately stepped into a small kitchen, transporting me back to the seventies. If the drab green appliances and dark worn cabinets weren't enough, the tiny yellow gold ceramic squares tiling the floor did the trick.

One thing was obvious, John was neat as a pin and minimalistic. There wasn't a thing out of place... except for a coffee mug and a dish that remained dirty in the sink. I shivered over the obvious fact he hadn't had a chance to wash them. Along with that observation, the distinctive aroma of something garlicy hung in the stagnant air, making me sick to my stomach. I suspected it wasn't the actual smell, and more so being there that made me nauseous.

I felt like an intruder, and despite the stuffy, stifling temperature, goose bumps pebbled my skin as I slowly ambled out of the kitchen.

A living room connected by a doorway had already put me at the front of the house. The décor was masculine with navy plaid curtains and a corduroy couch. The furniture was a mix of what looked like had been purchased at a mass retailer along with older pieces that could've been handed down. Of course, a massive TV took up one wall, making the room appear even smaller.

On a side table sat a brass lamp, and a picture of me. My blond pigtails

twisted into braids, and a toothless grin aged me at around five or six.

Just before I stepped toward the base of a staircase leading up a flight, an overwhelming sense of being watched crept me out. So much so, I one-handedly dug into my bag to fish out my phone. The time in California meant Kelly was on lunch, and after tapping her contact icon I prayed that she'd answer.

“Hey,” she said, and I literally sighed with relief. Having heard it, she asked “Oh my God, I’ve been so worried about you. Are you okay?”

“Yes... no... I don’t know. I have so much to tell you, but really, I just needed to hear your voice.” I quickly filled her in as to where I was and why, leaving out all the other details for now. Before the third degree began, I asked, “Can you just be with me as I do this? I’m getting freaked out.”

“Absolutely. I’m here for you. Be my eyes... where are you now?”

“Just heading upstairs.”

“Okay, you got this. What do you see?”

“Worn carpet, dingy wallpaper.” I reached the top in no time and looked from right to left. “Two rooms on opposite sides of the hall with a bathroom between them.”

“Head left.” Following her directions, I came upon what seemed like a dump room. Boxes that hadn’t been unpacked with some old workout equipment took up most of the space. “So?”

“A spare room with a ton of crap in it.”

“Keep going. How’s the bathroom?”

I scurried toward it and opened the door. “Ancient. The tiles are turquoise.”

“Lovely. What else?”

“John’s shaving stuff and personal items are giving me the heebie-jeebies.” I quickly closed the door. “Clearly, I’m not ready for that room.”

“Fine. Move on... next.” After dragging in a few deep breaths, she prodded, “Well?”

“Don’t rush me.” In my mind, I could see her rolling those big brown eyes. Once I slowly creaked open the door, it was just as I expected. “Okay... more plaid, more mismatched furniture. A closet, a bed made with military precision corners is in the center of the room, takes up most of it. A nightstand on one side, windows on the other, and a dresser is all there is to see.” It was the faint smell of cologne that had me rushing out and slamming the door behind me. “I just can’t do this,” I whispered. “Coming here was dumb.” Doing it alone was even dumber.

“Decision made. I’m flying out. I have plenty of sick days, and you’re like a sister to me, so really, all they need to know is I’m also grieving for your loss.”

“Kell—”

“Do not argue with me.”

It took that little effort to sway me. I really could use her company, and it was that dependency that had me saying, “Okay, but only if I pay for your ticket.”

“No. I’ve always wanted to go to New York. Selfishly, I’m using your stress to light a fire under my ass to get there. Save your money for the *I Love New York* T-shirt you’re buying me as a souvenir.”

“It’s not my money. It’s John’s money.” With that one comment, I knew she now knew the gravity of my situation.

“Gotcha. Well, in that case, I’ll take you up on your offer. And you, missy, are going back to the hotel to do something for yourself. Spa day with the works... on John. Get out the hell out of that house, and don’t return until I get there.”

“Oh no worries on that front. There is still so much I need to tell you.”

“We’ll talk tonight. Love you.”

“Love you more.” Once the call ended, I did just as she said, and got the hell out of that house. There was just one more thing to do, and I walked next door to ring Fred’s doorbell.

“Hey, darlin.’ Everything okay?”

“Yes. I’m staying in the city and was wondering if I gave you a spare set of keys could you keep an eye on the place?”

“Of course.” I offered the brass ring, but he patted my hand while shaking his head. “But I have a set, darlin.’ No need to give me your spare. Maybe you should give me your number so we can reach you if need be.”

“That’s a great idea,” a sweet voice said behind him before a white-haired woman appeared, nudging him aside. “You must be Bella.”

“Sheena.”

“Oh right.” She glanced at her husband. “I’m Gloria. Fred told me you were here. Come on in, honey. I’ll make you a cup of tea and we can chat.”

“I would love that, but I must get going.” They didn’t need to know the real reason was because since arriving I felt like I’d been suffocating. “I plan to come back to clean out... um... go through the house. In the meantime, if there is anything you’d like, please help yourself.” When they both looked at me as though I grew antlers, I added, “I live in California, and it would be difficult to... well, you know...” My dangling words forced them to nod.

“We don’t feel right doing that before you have a chance to sort through it all. But next time you come by we’d be happy to help you clear some stuff out.”

“I know John had quite a collection of tools,” Mr. Murphy suggested. “I’d be happy to take those off your hands.”

“And the church is always looking for clothing donations,” his wife suggested.

“Sounds like a great plan. Thank you.”

“Take my mobile number, and you call us for whatever you need.” Wordlessly, I pulled out my phone and tapped in the digits Fred recited and then connected the call.

“Now you have mine too. It was nice meeting you both.” They smiled as though we were long lost relatives, and I took that as my *cue* to smile back before turning to leave.



I spent most of Tuesday night, and all of Wednesday, holed up in my hotel. That trip to John's truly did a number on me, and because of that I was in a very strange frame of mind. It felt like my life went from calm and normal to chaotic and in limbo. Too many *what ifs* controlled my thoughts, all of which I had no answers for.

I read and reread that damn will, hoping something would jump out that instantly negated my involvement... or Brad's.

No such luck.

Thankfully, I woke on Thursday to a text from Kelly saying she caught the redevye and was on her way to the hotel. No sooner had she walked into my room when she hit the ground running. In true Kelly fashion, she came equipped with a long list of things she wanted to do. After scanning it there was no way we would get to them all. Undeterred, she prioritized it according to importance, including a scheduled time to revisit John's house.

I tried not to obsess over that yet. For now, I wanted to enjoy my friend's visit and forget anything that had to do with my father. That proved easier said than done, when I just spent two solid days of doing nothing but thinking about him. Finding myself staring at the picture of him in uniform his partner had given me, I imagined him coming through the door after work, scooping me up in his arms, placing his hat on my head. It was a nice visual, one that led to a few other scenarios that could've happened had I been in his life.

"At first, I was mad that you didn't listen to my advice to have a spa day..." Kelly interrupted my melancholy, wiggling her freshly painted toes and sighed. "But now I'm glad you waited for me."

It was only four in the afternoon, but having flown through the night, one would think Kelly would've been exhausted. Not my friend. We had already had breakfast at the Plaza, strolled down Fifth Avenue window shopping, bought Kelly the T-shirt she wanted, and were now enjoying spa treatments at a posh salon.

Running ragged around the city was all par for the course having Kelly there. Truly, I was just happy to have my best friend with me until Sunday and couldn't stop thanking her.

“Yeah, this is nice.” And if I didn’t have a million things running through my mind, I may have been as blissed out as she was. Unfortunately, the eucalyptus-scented air, the champagne mimosa, and even the soothing music failed to relax me, but I played the part and closed my eyes.

That was until Kelly said, “Sheen?”

“Hmm?”

“Are you ready to talk about what happened?”

Really, I wasn’t... but that wouldn’t be fair to Kelly since I’ve strung her along by avoiding reality. I knew she’d been very concerned about me. “Where do I begin?” It wasn’t rhetorical. The chain of events was equally manipulated by things I had discovered during my father’s memorial and Brad’s presence. If I began with how my heart skipped a beat when Brad walked in, or how my body came alive, contradicting the somberness of the room, that would be all Kelly focused on.

She waited for me to organize my thoughts. “So, I was one of the first to arrive, not knowing what to expect. There were about a dozen or so others who came, including Brad.” I skipped right over the effect seeing him created within me and jumped to the things Mr. Caldwell and John’s partner had said in remembrance of my father.

“He was a cop?”

“Yeah. Right here in the city.” I then went on to repeat what Brad had said. “While he was in his seat, he hadn’t noticed me. But once he stood, there was no hiding from him.” I stared off in the distance, remembering his look of shock. “He was most definitely angry once he realized I was John’s daughter.”

“I bet. And then what?”

For the next ten or so minutes, I explained what went down once Brad and I were asked into Mr. Caldwell’s office, including the stipulations of John’s will. Predictably, her big brown eyes grew wider.

“I wasn’t expecting that. I thought you were going to say he got John’s car or maybe some cash.”

“Nope... he and I are now partners, for lack of a better word. Of course,

I suggested to sell the building. That did not go well. I think his exact words were ‘not a chance in hell.’”

“Sheen, can you blame the guy?” When I raised my brows, she shrugged.

Maybe that right there was why I had avoided telling her until then. I knew she’d take his side, and I really couldn’t blame her. Still... this involved my life, and I had the right to resent the sudden intrusion.

“Forget the building, because I could just go back to California and have Brad handle the whole thing. Getting a steady monthly income from the renters does hold some appeal. But that didn’t resolve my father’s house. It can’t be sold without emptying it, which will take a lot more time than the three hours you allotted.”

“So don’t sell it right off the bat. Maybe you can down the road.”

“Kell... to pay utilities on a place that sits empty makes no sense. Selling it in its current condition makes even less sense. No matter how I spin it, I would have to spend some time in New York to accomplish the to-do list I inherited.”

“And that would be so terrible?” she countered.

“Now I know you’ve lost your mind.”

“Hear me out. There’s like six weeks left to the school year... and you have plenty of accrued PTO. Your class will be fine with a substitute for some of that time, and you really have no reason to be back in California until next semester.”

“Except for missing them, and you, and my life.”

“I’ll visit,” she stated matter-of-factly from the comfy recliner beside me. “Stay in New York, take your time emptying the house, maybe slap some paint on the walls and plant some pretty azaleas, then sell it. Regarding the building, you’d be stupid not to sit back and take the checks as they roll in. That sounds like a dream situation.”

It wasn’t a terrible idea. I would only end up stressing at home until I came back. I was one who needed closure. “I’ll think about it.”

“That’s all I’m saying.” She completely changed the subject by then asking, “So where are we having dinner?”

“Wherever you want.”

“I knew you would say that, so I did some researching in Cali and made a reservation just in case.”

“Of course you did. What’s it called?”

“I forget. It’s Thai... your favorite.”

“Sold.” I raised my crystal flute toward her. “To living the Manhattan life on John.”

She tapped her glass to mine. “To John.”

Chapter 8

Brad

The noise level in my bar, the boisterous people filling every inch of space, and the ringing of bells each time my register sounded normally had me loving my happy place.

Tonight, not so much.

The last three days have been the strangest in my life. I felt out of sorts, restless, and my thoughts drifted often. Where my work was always an amazing aphrodisiac, I found myself sluggish. Where meeting a pretty girl and watching a connection spark between us was an elixir for stress, no one seemed to hold my interest long enough to prove that method.

It was more than grief causing my unrest, and there was only one reason I'd been so on edge. It came with mesmerizing green eyes, fabulous tits, and snark that, for whatever reason, was a fucking turn-on.

Nate picked up on it, calling in his support partner, Max. The two of them showed up at the bar last night, I assumed to try to cheer me up. Until they admitted my mood freaked them out. I was the easygoing one, the laid-back bar owner without a care in the world, and me being in a funk disrupted the balance.

Screw that. Maybe I was tired of being the balance keeper. Look where

it got me. Hey, I appreciated inheriting something I always dreamed of owning. But thanks to the grumpy man who checked out way too soon, my dream came with a blonde ball and chain fastened to it. What would possess him to clamp that cold metal cuff around my ankle before tossing the key into the East River? Did he secretly hate me?

With a forced smile, I took what felt like the eight-thousandth beer order of the night. But just as I began filling a frosty pilsner with the golden liquid on tap, I went stone-still at the sight of *her*. So taken aback by her presence, the now-overflowing glass almost slipped right out of my hand, forcing me to slam on the lever to avoid a beer flood.

The unsettled ache in my chest morphed into something more like a galloping. I knew Sheena was the reason for my weird frame of mind the past few days. Being forced to interact with her was what had caused the dissension in my otherwise happy life. And seeing her now further threw my sour mood into a blender, turning it into an unrecognizable pulp.

While the ball and chain herself looked around nervously, I took the opportunity to get a good look at the she-devil. Specifically, the fit of those jeans over her sexy hips and the cling of the delicately cabled sweater over a spectacular pair of tits. During my perusal, I felt the burden John had saddled me with metaphorically tugging on my leg... scratch that... tugging *between* my legs.

A bubbly brunette stood beside her, speaking animatedly. It was no longer than ten seconds before Sheena's cool gaze found me, and another three seconds for it to hold mine before darting away.

The pair remained near the door engaged in an obvious debate—with the she-devil pointing to the opposite corner and the friend shaking her head. After a few more animated words delivered with an exaggerated eye roll, the friend snatched Sheena's hand and dragged her toward the bar.

If I weren't so agitated from her presence—or turned on, or whatever the fuck I was—the look of horror on Sheena's face would've been comical. Even more hilarious was the way she leaned back, practically digging her heeled boots into the hard wood floor, looking for traction to halt their path.

As the girls approached the only empty sliver of barwood, Bobby moved

past me to serve them until I placed a hand on his shoulder. “I got this one, bud.” His nod came quick, distracted by a stunning redhead who gave him a sly smile.

Sheena witnessed the exchange, and I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that seeing the creamy complexion of her cheeks redden gave me immense satisfaction. Something caught her attention over my shoulder, and I turned to see it was the picture of me and her dad that she stared at. I looked back just in time for her to catch her frown before looking away.

Slinging the dish towel over my shoulder, I lasered my line of sight to hers. Surprisingly, she met my gaze, and while still staring at her, I said to the two dudes beside them, “Hey, Ted... how about you and Spud give these ladies your seats?” The girls looked surprised, while the men looked at each other. Even though the knuckleheads should’ve thought of it themselves, I placated them with a bribe. “Next beer is on me.”

Spud hopped off the stool, bowed at the waist as best as his body would allow, and said, “Here you go, ladies.” Yes, he was named after the potato he resembled.

Ted was right behind him before they grabbed their beers and ambled away from their stools.

“Thanks, guys,” I called, receiving a thumbs-up from Spud.

“That was really nice of you, and them,” the brunette said while they both sat. “You’re Brad. I’m Kelly... and you know Sheena.”

“Welcome to Brad’s Tavern.” Ignoring She-Devil, I offered Kelly my hand, which she accepted and shook. “What brings you ladies in tonight?”

“Oh, we had dinner at the Thai place next door.”

I leaned my elbows on the bar, bringing my upper body dangerously close to my nemesis and goaded, “With all the restaurants in the city, it’s quite a coincidence you chose the Thai Palace, no?”

“For your information, Kelly chose the restaurant,” Sheena grumbled.

“It’s true,” Kelly said sheepishly. And then she mimicked my posture to add, “But for the record, I also knew it was next door and did it to get her in here.”

“Well played.” Allowing my gaze to peek at the iconic *I Love New York* logo revealed under her open denim jacket, I wagged a finger. “And for the record, so do I... love New York, that is.”

Kelly looked down, then lifted her eyes as a bright smile spread across her ruby-red lips. “Thanks. My bestie bought it for me.” She nudged Sheena’s shoulder. “It’s so nice to finally meet the man I’ve heard so much about.”

“Have you now?” I asked while staring at the she-devil.

“Oh yes. Sheen is absolutely right... you’re stunning.”

The gasp and quick rebuttal of “I did not say that” all caused a true chuckle to rumble out of me. Fuck, I hadn’t laughed in days.

“Well, thank you. You’re also stunning.” She truly was a beauty. What appeared to be part-Asian ancestry made her coloring polar opposite to the blonde bestie.

“Wow... is it hot in here?” Kelly suddenly removed her jacket, while adding, “Sheen was also right in saying you’re quite the charmer.” She then flipped her thick black hair off a shoulder and winked.

I liked Kelly.

Sheena, however, was not at all amused and scowled at her.

Wanting to have some fun, I leaned my elbows on the bar and stared at Kelly. “Did she also say she was holding my bar and apartment hostage?”

The humor slipping off Kelly’s face had me regretting the change in direction... until she conspiratorially cupped a hand around her lips and countered, “Give it time. It’s complicated.”

“Whose side are you on?” Sheena grumbled.

“Yours... always yours.” Kelly wrapped an arm around her friend, clearly confirming where her allegiances lay. “Which is why I’m here... to support my girl during this difficult time and help her figure things out.” Right then and there, I knew to get to Sheena I had to go through Kelly. And when she added, “I truly believe it would be in her best interest to just let things happen as they may, go with the flow,” I suspected it wouldn’t be too

hard to sway Kelly.

“I happen to wholeheartedly agree.” Straightening, I focused on Sheena for a long pause. “On that note, what are you ladies having?”

Kelly was first to respond. “We’ll have whatever your specialty is.”

“That’s easy. How does vodka, gin, coconut rum, peach schnapps, pineapple, and cranberry juice sound?”

“Oh, that sounds yummy. What’s it called?”

I smiled at Kelly before looking at Sheena with a smirk. “A Wet Pussy.”

The rosy hue returned to her cheeks when she said, “You’re vile.”

Feigning shock, I raised both hands. “I’m offended. That’s exactly what it’s called.” Twisting away, I called for Bobby to join us.

“Yeah, boss?”

“Can you whip up two Wet Pussies, please?”

Bobby’s focus jumped behind me before he smiled. “Coming right up.”

While waiting for him to mix the cocktails, I leaned back against the counter behind me and crossed my arms. Kelly watched with interest as her friend glared at me.

“Two... Wet Pussies,” Bobby said, placing the fruity concoctions on bar logo napkins and sliding them toward the girls.

“Thanks, Bobby.” I slipped back into the space he vacated, adding, “Drink up, ladies. They’re on me.”

I chuckled again when my offer was met with one smile and one scowl. Kelly lifted the drink to take a sip. “Oh my God. These are deadly.”

Meanwhile, Sheena dug into her bag, retrieved her wallet, and slammed a twenty on the bar. “That should cover it.”

Assuming victory, she matched my smirk after I slowly removed the money... and like a magic trick, it vanished when I stuffed the bill into the jar marked “Staff Tips.”



It brought me great joy to shamelessly flirt with my female customers as Sheena watched. Even more satisfying was when some of my regulars sauntered over, kissing me hello before hinting of a hookup.

In all fairness, Kelly and Sheena received their share of attention. In fact, I made my way back to them just as two tools tried to pick them up.

Kelly was quick to stop their advances, claiming she had a boyfriend back home. Sheena, on the other hand, allowed an asshole with more hair gel than a salon to talk her ear off. But when he asked for her number and Sheena recited it, jealousy hit me square in my chest. Part of me wanted to follow the prick out the door and set him straight. That was until Kelly nudged Sheena with her elbow and said, “Good move with the fake number.”

Sheena was graced with my full-blown grin, and I, in turn, got the finger.

The entire evening was entertaining, and I no longer wondered if Kelly was my way to influence Sheena. I knew she was. Because three Wet Pussies later, Kelly became my informant, all while Sheena’s feistiness became my burden to bear. I couldn’t blame the alcohol, because she refused to drink it... so Kelly drank it instead.

Unfortunately for me, the snippier She-Devil got, the harder I got... an inconvenience when bartending a packed bar.

The intel I’d been handed the past few hours between serving others, however, was priceless. There seemed to be a pattern where Kelly would vomit information, Sheena would drag her to the bathroom to presumably ream her out, only for Kelly to be on her best behavior when they returned. Regrettably for Sheena, that best behavior never lasted long before Kelly slipped back into informant mode.

I now knew they both taught kindergarten in the same school, Sheena’s mother had passed away last year, and her trip to New York on Valentine’s Day was the fifth attempt after having canceled each time before.

Out of the blue, Kelly slurred, “We’re going to John’s house in the

morning. I mean, Sheen's house." She looked at her friend and shrugged. "I keep forgetting it's your house now. Anyway... we're going to clean things out." Her hand lifted the almost empty glass toward her mouth, but another thought had it stopping midair. "Hey, why don't you come with us—"

"Kelly!"

"What? John was Brad's friend. Maybe there's a trinket or old flannel shirt he would like. Besides, we could use his brawn."

"I'll be there," I said before Sheena could kibosh the invite. Not that she'd be able to stop me if I showed up. It would involve asking for some favors to cover my shift, but I'd lock the doors and put up the closed sign before missing it.

"Bees with honey," Kelly randomly said. "Right, Brad?"

"Sure... I'm into getting some good honey." I wasn't sure if it was my stare, or my comment, that had Sheena blushing again. Didn't matter, I loved it just the same.

"Exactly. Do you know what I told her to do?" Kelly asked next.

"Sleep with me?"

She gave me an appreciative body scan. "Well, yeah... but that was *after* she had already chickened out and kissed you goodbye instead." *Interesting.*

"Kelly, you need to stop talking."

Ignoring Sheena, I asked, "She chickened out?" So I *hadn't* misread her that night.

"I knew coming here would be a bad idea."

The tone behind Sheena's grumble sobered Kelly up a bit. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that out loud. What I meant to say was that she needed to butter you up a bit, and maybe you both could agree to a compromise."

"Still TMI, Kelly," Sheena griped as I talked over her, saying, "Is that so?"

Butter me up? Ironically, those were the exact words Nate used regarding Sheena.

I leaned on the glossy wood before me and lowered my voice to a raspy whisper. “And now that you’ve met me, how do you suggest she *butter me up*?”

“Hang out in New York for a while.” Something within me jerked. It was a strange sensation, and one I ignored. Meanwhile, yet another exasperated sigh came from Sheena. That had to be her fiftieth, sixtieth? I had lost count. Kelly shrugged innocently. “What? You know how I get when I drink. Besides, you love me for always being honest.”

“Not to him,” Sheena said through gritted teeth. “He’s the enemy.”

“Funny, I said those exact words to my brother about you,” I countered. “That was after referring to you as *She-Devil*.”

Kelly stared over my shoulder for a beat, then snapped her fingers. “Ah, I get it. Sheena Devlin... *She-Devil*.”

Not the reason at all, but I shrugged at her theory. “Sure... if that floats your boat.”

“I have to use the ladies’ room.”

When Sheena snatched her bag and huffed off, Kelly said, “She’s mad at me.”

“I’m sure she’ll get over it.”

“Still...” She thrust her now-empty glass toward the edge. “No more *Wet Pussies* for me.” I took it from her with a smile and replaced it with a tall glass of ice water. “Thank you.”

“No thanks needed. In fact, I need to thank you for asking me to come along tomorrow, though. I really would like to be there. John was a great friend.”

She tilted her head in sympathy. “It must be rough on you. I know Sheen’s been having a hard time. She got spooked when she went to the house Tuesday. That’s why I flew out. I knew she needed me.”

Kelly filled me in on how Sheena had freaked out while exploring John’s house. Part of me couldn’t blame her. For all intents and purposes, John was nothing but a stranger, and it all made me feel bad for the girl.

Kinda.

Seeing Sheena making her way back to her seat, I leaned in conspiratorially and said, “You’re a great friend.” Kelly’s shy smile meant Project Buttering Up was working.

Sheena sat with a huff, glanced at the water, and then at Kelly. “Why do you look guilty?”

“I didn’t do anything.”

Not looking convinced, Sheena, still clutching her bag, asked, “Are you ready to go? I’m tired.”

“It’s early.” A broad smile came before the tipsy brunette clapped her hands excitedly. “I have an idea. How about a tour of the building before we go? My girl does own more than half of it, after all.”

I scanned the thinning crowd. “That can be arranged.”

“Yay. I just have to go pee.” Kelly bounded off the stool and skipped her way to the ladies’ room.

Meanwhile, I told Bobby to hold down the fort before making my way out from behind the bar. Sheena’s eyes tracked me until I came to stand right beside her, and only then did she break the tether to stare straight ahead.

She stiffened when I took the seat Kelly had vacated, allowing my knees to press into the side of her thigh. “This is a great idea your friend had. Maybe showing you the building will soften the she-devil.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Would you prefer witchy woman... hellcat... princess of darkness?” Did goading her make me a dick? Yep... but I didn’t care.

She turned, practically bringing us nose to nose. “My name is Sheena.”

Ignoring her, I leaned closer still and, because it looked like I was about to kiss her, she snapped her head back. Undeterred, I continued until my lips pressed against her ear. “Maybe something more affectionate? How about good old sweetheart or babe?”

“You know, I came hoping we could be civil, but you’ve been an asshole all night.”

“Asshole? That’s a bit harsh.” Her ire fell into an apologetic expression until I added, “But I happen to like riling you up.”

And just like that, she was back to being livid, twisting her head away to stare ahead. The move brought those glossy flaxen locks to practically smack me in the face. Bam... that intoxicating scent of hers assaulted me, and like an addict, I ran my nose over the back of her head.

“You smell incredible, by the way.” Again, she didn’t respond but leaned into me just enough to reveal her bravado was all an act. It only had me salivating for her even more. That fire in her and her looks were a deadly combination for a man like me. Combined, they had the same result as if she’d dropped to her knees and lowered my zipper.

When she remained silent, I changed tactics, pinching her chin between my fingers to force her gaze back to mine. “If given the chance, I can be civil, Sheena. The question is, Can you?”

I got a few blinks as a response, until we heard, “Are we ready?” A bucket of ice water would’ve been less intrusive. Meanwhile, Sheena jumped off her stool while catching the look on her friend’s face.

“What?”

“Do you two want some privacy? I can skip the tour.” Kelly waggled her eyebrows for emphasis, and I was about to take her up on it.

But killjoy scolded, “Don’t be stupid, Kelly. Let’s just get this over with.”

When her brilliant green eyes narrowed on mine, I suppressed a grin and resisted adjusting myself. “After you, ladies,” I said, pressing a hand on the soft, thin knit on Sheena’s back. Feeling her warmth radiating through the sweater made me want to slip that hand beneath it to touch skin.

Who was I kidding? It made me want to do a whole lot worse than that.

Chapter 9

Sheena

Damn it... between my so-called best friend narc-ing me out and my so-called business partner pushing every button I had, I didn't know whom I wanted to smack harder.

Once away from the noise of the bar, I could hear my own heartbeat pounding in my ears. His proximity to my body hadn't helped my situation either.

I had no idea why this man made me so nervous, agitated, or turned on. Who was I kidding? The latter most definitely had to do with that flirty, cocksure thing he had going. Staring at my mouth when I spoke, directly into my eyes when he did... the hand firmly pressed to the center of my back... the way he'd lick his lips... and his looks... his physique... his arrogance.

Ugh... all of it rubbed me the wrong way.

Meanwhile, the warmth of his palm flipped a switch, brought back the yearning I'd carried since the night I kissed him. Made me wonder what it would be like to be with a man like Brad Navarro. Just the thought of him bringing that arrogance into bed made me extremely hot and bothered.

As I suffered an intolerable aroused state, Brad guided us down the hallway where the restrooms were located. First stop was the kitchen, which

bustled with a staff whipping up bar food specialties.

“This is so impressive,” Kelly, the traitor, said to him. “How long have you been in business?”

“Seven years.” Brad paused to stare at me, and then added, “Wouldn’t have happened without John giving me a chance.”

Kelly stared at me for a beat as well before answering, “He must have seen something special in you.”

“Yeah,” was all Brad said as a response. He then keyed open a door marked PRIVATE just as a waitress appeared in the hall.

“Brad, I hate to interrupt, but there’s a slight issue with a customer.”

“I’ll be right there.” The perky girl gave him a coquettish smile as he said, “Ladies, have a seat. I’ll be right back.” We each sat in the leather armchairs facing his desk, and no sooner had he turned to leave than I leaned over and smacked Kelly’s arm.

“Ow.”

“What the hell? I’m so angry at you right now.”

“There’s a method to my madness,” she slurred.

“Yeah, and it’s fueled by vodka, gin, and rum. Seriously... you need to rein it in. I knew we shouldn’t have come tonight.” Except that was just my pride talking. Kelly always had my back, the sister I didn’t have. It wasn’t her fault that for the first time in my life her honesty worked against me.

“Trust me. He responds to flattery. Add in the fact that he likes you, and you can use that to your advantage.” Despite her tipsy state, her comment was surprisingly well articulated. Even more so when she glanced toward the door before continuing in a lower voice. “I think you should take some time and stay in New York.”

“He’s not going to agree to sell, Kelly.”

“Oh, I know that. And don’t be mad...” She paused, waiting for confirmation, which I refused to give after what she had just put me through. When I hadn’t said a word, she admitted, “I don’t think he *should* agree to sell. Look at this place, Sheen. It’s his pride and joy. And it’s profitable.

Maybe start thinking of the benefits that being connected to Brad brings, and not the aggravation.”

“Great.” I knew this but hearing her voice it out loud made me feel worse.

“What you need to do is get to know him, build a friendship, and maybe come to a compromise.”

“And what would that compromise be?”

“Like I had mentioned before, let him run this place, act as manager to the tenants, and *maybe* you can just be a silent partner in it all. How nice would it be to get a check every month without putting in any of the work?” I stared at her long and hard. It did make sense, and I doubted he would have an issue with that plan when it meant he got to keep his bar. The only part of the equation I refused to consider was staying in New York.

No way. Just no.

“Sorry about that,” Brad said, coming in and halting our conversation.

“Is everything okay?”

He nodded at Kelly while taking a seat behind his desk. “One of my regulars forgot his wallet at home. No biggie.” His green eyes landed on mine. “Of the eight apartments you inherited, one was John’s. He hadn’t rented it yet after he bought his place in Jersey, so it remains empty. I can show you that one, and mine. But based on what Caldwell said, the sooner you introduce yourself to the other tenants, the better.”

I wanted to snap that I knew what Caldwell had said, and I didn’t need him to be my babysitter. Knowing he’d retort with something sexual was what stopped me. I was tired, annoyed, and horny. The less I said, the better.

“Are you ready to see upstairs?” When my nod came slow and measured, he laughed. “You can relax. It’s not a torture chamber or sex dungeon.”

“That’s too bad...” Kelly blurted out, shot me a sneaky smile, and added, no doubt for my benefit, “Just kidding.”

Brad grinned, taking a moment to truly scrutinize us. While Kelly

grinned back, I rolled my eyes. But the more he stared, the hotter and stuffier the room got.

I stood so hastily that my chair scraped a bit on the wood floor. “Are we ready to continue?”

“Yeah... soon.” And instead of standing to commence our journey through Brad’s world, he leaned on his elbows. “You two seem like opposites. How did you meet?”

“We *are* very different,” Kelly agreed. “But it works for us. Three years ago, we both started as kindergarten teachers on the same day.”

“You share a class?” Brad asked.

“No, we each have our own. It’s a big school.” Kelly yanked on my arm excitedly, forcing my ass back onto the chair. “By lunch time, we became instant friends.”

“Kindergarten, huh? Sounds like a nightmare,” he said to me.

“Not at all... I’m a pro dealing with immature children, especially boys.”

“That’s funny...” He leaned closer and stared me right in the eye while adding, “I happen to be a pro dealing with hot female teachers.”

And just like that, his jab killed mine.



The building had no elevator, no laundry room, and except for a key to enter the lobby, there were no significant security measures to speak of. Hallways were drab, stairwells were colorless. One thing was sure—a ton of money would need to be put into it if I were ever to convince my *partner* to sell... which with each hour in his presence I knew was highly unlikely.

Once on the fourth floor, Brad led us to the first apartment door and opened it with a key. A shrill beeping forced him to immediately enter a code on a keypad. “Every apartment has an alarm system,” he offered.

“Why not install one at the main entrance instead?”

Green eyes lasered into mine. “He preferred it this way.”

With a wave of his hand, we received an invite for us to come deeper inside the apartment. The look of pride on his face was unmistakable... and unwarranted.

It was empty and bland, and kind of ugly, to be honest. The heavy scent of medicinal pine meant it had been professionally cleaned after John moved out. The stark white walls proved a coat of paint had been slapped on them, as well as on the single row of kitchen cabinets.

It was sterile and humdrum, with no personality whatsoever.

Still, I got that same weird sensation that had hit when I was in John's house in Jersey. I didn't belong there.

The one room we entered served as kitchen, dining room, and living space. Brad kept silent as we walked toward a set of windows, and he remained where he stood while we disappeared down a short hall.

"This place is awful," I whispered after opening the first door to reveal a small bedroom. Kelly merely shrugged, most likely because there was nothing that could be said.

The bathroom, although clean, was ancient. The ho-hum bedroom looked like it could barely fit a bed and a dresser. The only thing the room had going for it was the cute little window seat.

When we reappeared, Brad looked up expectantly. "It's so adorable," Kelly said, obviously trying to be nice.

"It's a nice size for New York." Brad leaned against the kitchen counter and looked at me. "Fridge is new." My eyes slid to the small no-frills appliance he referenced. "You should take this unit for yourself."

"You can't be serious." His smirk meant he was. "Why would I take it for myself?" I snapped. "I live in California."

"For when you visit."

"I'm not visiting all that often."

Kelly nudged me. "Sheen... it would be great to have a place in Manhattan."

Ignoring them both, I folded my arms. "Are they all this size?"

“Except mine.”

“How much does John charge for this?”

“Twenty-five hundred plus utilities.”

My mouth hung open, and my eyes bulged on their own accord. “For this?”

“Yep. The two-bedrooms fetch three grand. There are three of those among the units you own.”

A quick calculation meant, aside from what Brad inherited, my eight units would pull in more than twenty grand a month. Of course, I had no clue what the upkeep was on a place like this. Still.

“Not so easy to walk away from, is it?” Brad goaded.

“It’s run-down and needs a ton of work.”

“For New York standards, this building is a palace.” It was a dump. “John didn’t put much into his place, but he did update the kitchens in the other units. He always had the entire apartment painted between tenants. He even replaced the windows, added the alarm systems, and updated the bathroom shower heads to save on water. All things a good landlord does for his renters. Those reasons alone should have you wanting to be here, to ensure they know you’re available to them.”

“As you said... there are these great inventions called phones. I can be available to them via a phone call.”

He gave me a condescending smile. “Sure, sweetheart... whatever you say.”

“Don’t call me—”

“Oh right,” he rudely cut me off. “My bad. You prefer She-Devil.”

“Sheena.” The tit-for-tat bickering was no different from the day John’s will had been read. I could literally feel my blood boiling, even more so when his smirk remained, and my so-called friend grinned. “What?” I barked at both of them.

“Ready to see my place?” The bastard chuckled at me after I stormed out of the apartment and back into the hall, with Kelly close on my heels.

Brad locked up and walked past where we waited, his intoxicating cologne pissing me off more.

We followed him down two flights, where he unlocked the only door and waved Kelly and me through. “Ladies.”

Undercounter track lights illuminating the space gave a hint of how different his apartment was from the rest of the building. But as Brad flicked on the main switch, it was like we stepped through an alternate universe.

“Oh my God,” Kelly gasped. “This is incredible.”

It was. There was no denying that.

Brad’s apartment was wide open, immaculate, and so very masculine. Not in the ugly way John preferred to decorate. Brad’s furnishings were downright sexy.

The room we stood in was the size of John’s entire apartment. Brad had converted it to a large kitchen with a center island that held four barstools. Modern appliances, sleek cabinets, and incredible dark hardwood floors made me a bit envious.

The other half of the space held a massive living area with two huge leather couches, a few tables scattered around them, and a ridiculously large flat screen mounted to the wall. It screamed man cave but also gave a bachelor vibe that caused a visual of Brad seductively entertaining a woman to pop into my mind. Me... I was the woman.

All the furniture was black and the accessories gray. The only item in contrast was an unusual white-tufted chase lounge that sat to the side.

I had never seen anything like it. The armless piece had a curvaceous silhouette much like the side of a woman’s body: dipping at the waist before curving into a smooth roll simulating a hip. For whatever reason, another visual came of a fully clothed Brad leaning over a very naked me as I sprawled out beneath him.

While Kelly gushed on and on about Brad’s place, I couldn’t look away from that damn sex vessel.

“It’s great for relieving sore muscles,” he said directly into my ear, causing me to jump. “Try it.”

Knowing my face flamed from the imagery playing in my mind, along with his proximity, I remained with my back to him. "I'll take your word for it."

"I'll try." Kelly headed right for the thing and moaned. "Oh wow. This is so comfortable."

Not wanting to give him the satisfaction on where my mind veered kept me from barking, "*Get off that thing. Who knows how many naked asses have sat on it.*"

But the asshole annoyingly read my mind and said, "Great for sex too." Kelly giggled while I sighed. His reaction was to throw me a wink before saying, "Come, I'll show you the rest of the place."

Place? More like castle. Two bedrooms, each with their own bathroom, one he had converted into a gym. A laundry room... not a closet, an actual room. And then came the main bedroom suite. An entire corner of the floor dedicated to the place he slept, and God only knew what else.

If seeing his king-size bed, with bedding that looked like it was a ten-thousand-thread count, wasn't bad enough, being shown his bathroom made me even more flustered. The shower was glass and big enough for two. Opposite walls boasted multiple showerheads and handheld attachments. A tiled bench sat in the center beneath a third rain-type showerhead mounted to the ceiling.

My eyes scanned over the shampoo and soaps he used on his naked body, and their intimate nature made it too much to bear.

"Okay, well, thanks for the tour." I rushed out of the room like an idiot, and right toward his door. Brad seemed amused by my freak-out. Meanwhile, when Kelly appeared, her complexion took on a murky green hue.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yeah." She contradictorily gripped my arm. "I just feel a little dizzy all of a sudden."

Brad took her hand and led her to the island. "Sit. I'll get you some water." His concern made me look inconsiderate, which I was not.

Just as I walked over, Kelly put her head down on bent arms. I

soothingly rubbed her back, hating the way this man had made me act so atypically a couple of seconds ago. “I’m sorry, Kell.”

A muffled, “It’s not your fault,” came from beneath her head.

“It’ll pass.” Brad placed a glass of water and a plate of crackers on the island. “Drink, Kelly... and then eat a few. It’ll soak up some of the alcohol.” She slowly lifted her head and did as he said, chomping through one cracker and taking a large gulp of water before resuming her position. “She may need to sleep it off for an hour or so.”

Sleep it off?

“I agree,” Kelly grumbled before I could suggest I take her home. But maybe he was right and rushing her into a cab when she felt like this would only make her throw up.

We helped her off the stool and supported her weight until she lay down on his couch. I watched as he covered her with a thick chenille throw and dimmed the light near her head. Again, seeing his sensitivity surprised me... even more so when he took my hand and led us back to the island.

“Coffee?”

“Sure.” Really, did I have a choice?

I was stuck there with him, without Kelly as a distraction. As uninhibited as she’d been all night, her being unable to buffer our hostility made me nervous. Things usually didn’t go well for me when I was left alone with Brad.

But based on our forced relationship, it was something I needed to work on. He was just a man... albeit a hot-as-hell arrogant one. Still, this was as good a time as any to find a way to deal with his presence. He wasn’t going anywhere, selling wouldn’t happen, and that meant I needed to come up with a plan.

As Brad popped a pod into his coffee maker, that plan came to me. Clearly, he had done well over the years. Maybe I could get the building appraised, make him an offer that came in lower than market price, and get him to buy me out.

Chapter 10

Brad

“Here you go.” I placed the steaming mug in front of her. “Milk? Sugar?”

“Yes, please.”

I felt her gaze as I pulled out both ingredients, and it was my turn to stare while she prepared her coffee and took a sip. The way she sat so stiffly on the stool made me want to tease her a bit. But although hot when she fought me, I really did need to loosen her up. Otherwise we’d remain in this state of limbo I wasn’t thrilled with.

Needing a distraction, I prepped a cup for myself even though I had no intention of drinking it. Once I stood facing her with my own coffee in hand, we had nothing to say. But Kelly’s soft snores echoing in the room created an opportunity. “She’s out.”

“What if she’s out all night?” Sheena asked.

“Then you can crash in my guest room.” She looked horrified at the suggestion. “I don’t bite.” When she mumbled something that I couldn’t decipher, I asked, “What was that?”

Her stare connected with mine, and along came that spark I felt deep in my core. “I said...” She paused, as if thinking better of admitting anything until something had her going for it by saying, “I beg to differ.”

“Trust me, She-Dev... um... Sheena. If I had bitten, you would’ve felt it.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No... a fact.” I poignantly raised one brow, keeping our gazes tethered. “Why are you so combative?”

She looked affronted by my comment, which made me grin, which in turn made her livid. “Why are you always such an asshole?”

“That’s the second time you called me an asshole. It’s a good thing I’m not sensitive.” I placed the mug down and leaned on bent elbows, bringing our faces closer. “But to answer your question, I’m a straight shooter, say what I think, transparent with my thoughts. There’s no need to pretend our situation isn’t a complicated one, because it is. That means being up front and honest at every turn. Lighten the fuck up. Most of the time I’m kidding.”

“Sometimes things are better off not said.”

“Why?” Her eyes widened as though it was a stupid question. “I’m serious. Why internalize to the point that it causes someone to act like they...” I wanted to say had a stick up their ass, as was proved in the way she sat ramrod straight before me. “Forget it.”

“No... finish. Like they what?” she insisted.

And like her, I said, *Fuck it*, and went for it by admitting, “Have a stick up their ass.”

“I don’t have a stick up my ass,” she said defensively.

“Okay.” She was not amused by my smirk, and the telltale sign that she felt frustrated came with the tingeing of her cheeks and an exaggerated eye roll.

I was no better, because the way she dragged in deep breaths made her fabulous tits rise and fall, causing *my* telltale sign of being turned on to grow. Something had to give. Either we needed to figure out a way to be civil, or I was going to fuck this girl and make things a helluva lot more complicated between us.

“How about we start over?” I offered my hand as an olive branch. “To

being partners and not enemies.”

She stared at it for a pause and then took it to shake. A few pumps later, I felt her trying to retract from my grip, but I held her tighter. “I’m serious, Sheena. It is what it is. Life’s too short, as was proven by your dad dying way too young. I don’t want to waste time fighting with you.”

For whatever reason, my words hit home. The tight expression on her face smoothed a bit, her shoulders relaxed a bit, and the corners of her lips lifted a bit. “I agree.” She squeezed my hand, prompting me to lift them to place a soft kiss on the back of hers. Judging from the way she yanked her hand from my grip, I may as well have branded her skin with a white-hot iron. “No. If we’re going to be civil, then it goes no farther than that. A purely platonic relationship.”

“Jesus Christ... it’s not like I just copped a feel.” I could’ve easily thrown insult after insult, pointing out how goddamn uptight she was, and could probably use a good lay. But I instead folded my arms and nodded. “But... no worries. I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

Despite my conceding, the frown that flashed over her beautiful face before she schooled it into a smile spoke volumes. “Okay, good.”

At that moment, Kelly mumbled something and sat up, looking around disoriented and dazed. “Where am I?”

“My place.”

Her groggy focus landed on us. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Twenty minutes.”

“Wow... it feels like hours.” She scrubbed a hand over her face before adding, “Those Wet Pussies are lethal, Brad. I’ll need the recipe.”



Last night was an interesting evening. After Kelly woke, getting sick in my bathroom sobered her up a bit. Having caught her second wind, she then declared she was starving. I offered to make them something at my place, but Sheena insisted we go back to the bar, and they could eat there.

I saw right through her intentions. Being in my apartment made her uneasy, which was obvious when she first saw my bedroom. The way she stared at the bed, you'd think it had grown teeth and would swallow her whole.

Whatever. In all fairness, I wasn't opposed to having a distraction either.

During burgers, Kelly and I again did most of the talking. It needed to be said: the topics discussed were more of their lives in California and the kids they taught. I easily could see Sheena as a teacher, and hearing stories of how her students adored her meant she couldn't have been one of the tyrant variety.

Once I put them into a cab, I stayed to close the bar, welcoming the distraction. But once I got back to my apartment, all I could think about was Sheena.

After spending the evening with her, three things were absolutely clear. First, we definitely shared a mutual attraction. She could fake it all she wanted, but she wasn't much of an actress. Second, that hostile side that she apparently saved for me still turned me the fuck on. The more snark she threw my way, the more I wanted it. It was baffling.

Which brought me to the last thing that was clear. For the first time in my adult life, I had no idea if anything would come of it. Never had I been in the company of a woman with that unknown hanging between us. It was a strange dynamic, and one I couldn't wrap my brain around. Nor could I get her off my mind.

It had nothing to do with the property we shared, or the fact we were no closer to a solution on how we would make it work. It was her. Something about that damn woman drove my libido insane. That was proved by the sleepless night and jerking off in the shower come morning.

Saturdays were always the same for me. Even though I had my own equipment at home, I'd work out at Max's gym to catch up with my brother and socialize with his female clientele. Most I knew, but chatting with his new members, both male and female, offered free marketing for my bar. Once that was done, I'd shower, head to my office, and meet the admin staff who reconciled my weekly bookkeeping.

Today, none of that occurred. My workout happened at home before I headed to Jersey. I offered to drive them out, but Sheena declined. Whatever floated her boat. Knowing the girls were due to arrive around ten, I purposely got there first with breakfast.

It felt strange using the key John had given me and letting myself in. Stuffy air hit the moment I stepped into his kitchen, and after placing the bag on the worn countertop, I opened the window over his sink to let in the cool morning breeze.

Being in John's house without him there was bizarre. I half expected him to bark at me to wipe my feet or sit my ass down because I was late for lunch. It looked no different from when he was alive. There was even a single dish and coffee mug in the sink. I stared at it, having an internal debate on whether I should wash them out or not touch them.

Instead, I opened the fridge to put the butter, cream cheeses, spreads, and juice away. But seeing that box full of John's favorite foods and condiments served as a proverbial stinging slap of reality. Never again would he push his latest vegetarian concoction at me.

Wilted greens, mushy peppers. What was the point of him doing an about-face in his diet only to drop dead of a heart attack anyway?

Did he know something? Was he trying to get healthy, only for it to be too late?

I lifted a container of mushrooms that had gone moldy and tossed it into the trash. "Fuck you, John." With each item I threw out, I cursed him over and over for being such a prick, keeping to himself to the point of lunacy, spiting karma only to have it spite him worse.

Ten minutes later, all that was left was the stuff I had bought for the girls, an overflowing trash can, and my grief.

The back door opened just as I slammed the fridge door shut.

"Hey," I said, my eyes landing on Sheena's and then on the black exercise outfit that molded over her body.

"Good morning. I'm sorry I'm late." She searched my expression and then saw the loaded-up garbage pail. "You okay?"

“Yep.” Our gazes remained tethered for a long moment before she placed a box down on the table and removed her jacket. That left her in a pink sleeveless tiny little top thing that made it hard not to stare at her tits. Imagining John smacking the back of my head forced me to look away.

When she turned to close the door behind her, there was no sign of Kelly, so I asked, “Is it just you?”

“Yeah, Kelly had a rough morning. She may come by later if she’s up to it and we’re still here.”

“I bought bagels... if you’re hungry.” Her eyes drifted to the bag sitting on the counter. “If not, we can save it for when we take a break.” The rise of her brows and widening of her eyes caused me to say, “What?”

“It’s just... that was sweet of you.”

“Don’t be so surprised. I *can* be nice.”

“You’re right.” She fought a smile and then let it spread. “My apologies.”

Shit, she was gorgeous. “Accepted. Um... where do you want to begin?”

She looked around, the smile falling off her face. “I don’t know.”

“Let’s start upstairs.” I took the box of heavy-duty trash bags she’d brought and motioned toward the steps, only to stare at her ass like a creeper the entire way up.



We ended up starting with his bathroom, which took no time at all because everything got tossed. Next was the spare room, and since it held only off-season clothing and extra sets of towels and linens, that had gone fairly quickly as well.

Sheena helped me carry the bags we filled with trash out to the curb, and soon enough we found ourselves staring at John’s closed bedroom door. She stood in the doorway, stalling.

“Are you up for this?”

“I don’t know. It’s just so weird.”

“I know.” It was for me, too, and I knew the guy. I could only imagine the emotions she was plagued with having had no interaction with him at all.

“This is what freaked me out on Tuesday,” she admitted. “I couldn’t shake the feeling like he was here. Watching me. For whatever reason, it made me angry.”

I kept to myself that I’d had that feeling all morning, the anger. “There is no easy way to do this. I do know, you need to do it, or you’ll carry regret.”

“Yeah.” She bobbed her head up and down, seeming to find the strength. “The sooner we do this, the better.” But when I opened the door, she just stared at the room.

“I’m here with you, Sheena.” I took her hand and led her to the closet, forcing our progress. “I’ll do the dresser and you do this.”

Another nod came. “Please take anything you want.”

“I’ll make a pile.” With each drawer I unpacked, I slowly added things on the bed, including an NYPD T-shirt, sweatshirt, and hat. Each time I found something that would hold sentimental value, I tossed it on the bed.

Sheena, on the other hand, busied herself folding clothes in his closet and shoving them into bags, never once throwing an article onto the pile. Every so often, she’d hold something up and ask if I wanted it. More times than not, it ended up in a bag.

“That’s done,” she said, placing the last empty hanger on the barren rod.

My gaze caught on a zipped black plastic suit bag. “What’s that?”

“His formal uniform. You should take it.” She lifted it and placed it on the bed. It was obvious as she closed the door that there wasn’t one thing that she’d kept for herself.

“His dresser is empty too.” I slammed closed the last drawer and looked around. There was one piece left. “I’ll do the nightstand. You just sit.”

Without argument, she did as I asked. The thing had one drawer and one door. How bad could it be? But the moment I opened the door, a shoebox labeled Sheena answered my question. I slowly extracted it and offered it to

her, and all she did was trace her name and stare at it. Not wanting to force her to lift the lid, I placed it on the bed.

“You’ll handle it later,” I said, returning to the ominous task at hand and pulling out more stuff. A newspaper folded open to the article of when he’d been shot, a plastic tray with random coins and keys. And the last thing was a secured box, the key dangling from the lock. I slowly turned it and lifted the lid to reveal John’s gun.

“What are we supposed to do with that?” she asked, horrified.

“I don’t know. I’ll call Caldwell tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

I ran my hand inside the nightstand to be sure nothing was left before tackling the drawer. Unfortunately, it held a ton of memories, and with each thing I pulled out, my chest grew tighter. Photos of a woman and Sheena as a young girl, a few pictures of John when he served on the force, the cheap watch he wore every day, his wallet. Everything I extracted was a brutal reminder that he was gone.

When the drawer was emptied, I lifted the bedspread to look under his bed, and then sat beside her. “That’s everything.” Pointing to the items I had piled on the bed, I added, “We can just put all that in a bag for now. You can go through it when you’re up to it.”

She shook her head and began picking through the stash. “Take it all.” Except for the box with her name on it and all the photos, the rest she left for me.

Emotions were preventing her from wanting to care, and knowing she’d regret it, I took a small plastic drawstring bag that had been tucked in one of the drawers and shoved one of the sweatshirts, an NYPD baseball cap, the watch, and his wallet inside.

When I passed it to her, I wasn’t sure if she simply had no energy to argue with me, or if she thought it a good idea to have it, but whatever the case, she nodded and whispered, “Thank you.”

The past two hours were grueling enough for me to say, “We don’t have to do any more today. Why don’t I look into finding a professional content-

removal company to do the rest?” Knowing John, the rest of his house held nothing of importance. “They’ll haul away anything left and donate the items to homeless shelters in the area.”

“That’s a great idea.” Her expression brightened as the burden of continuing this torture lifted. “When I was here on Tuesday, Fred and his wife, Gloria, next door said their church also takes donations. Is that your SUV out front?” On my nod, she added, “Maybe we can drop these six bags off today?”

“We can do that.” There was a question I’d been meaning to ask her since last night, and I forced it out now. “When are you planning on returning to California?”

“Um... I’m staying until next Thursday. My principal insisted I take the grievance time I’m entitled to, plus a few days.”

“Okay. Well, if you want to do the downstairs on a different day before you leave, I’d be happy to help with that.”

Her green eyes stared right into mine. “I would like that, Brad. Thank you.”

Chapter II

Sheena

With all the bags separated as trash, donations, or keep, we lugged out the stuff meant for the curb before putting the donations in the trunk.

“Let’s see if we can get the name of that church,” I said. Brad nodded and followed me next door, coming to stand beside me as I rang the bell.

“Well, hello, Bella,” Fred said, obviously having forgotten my real name.

Not bothering to correct him, I ignored Brad’s eyes and smiled. “Hi, Mr. Murphy.”

“Is this handsome man your boyfriend?”

Ignoring Brad’s telltale smirk, I shook my head. “No... um... this is John’s friend, Brad.” After saying that, I could still feel his stare drilling through the side of my head.

Oblivious, Mr. Murphy smiled. “Hello, Brad.”

“Nice to meet you, sir,” Brad said stiffly.

“Please call me Fred...” The two men shook hands.

“We were wondering if you could direct us to your church. Mrs. Murphy had said they take clothing donations, and we have quite a few bags

filled.”

“Of course.” He stepped back, waving us in with a wrinkled hand. “Come in. Gloria will put on a pot of coffee.”

Brad and I exchanged a quick glance. “Actually, we still have a lot to do. Maybe next time?”

“Sure... sure. Saint Veronica’s is just about a mile away. You can ask for Father Grant in the rectory. He’ll help you kids out.”

“Thank you so much. Also, we plan on calling a professional content-removal company to empty out anything we leave behind. I’d like to again offer you to take whatever you’d like. You had mentioned tools?”

“Oh, yes.” He stared at Brad and asked, “Are you sure you don’t want any of that?”

“No, please help yourself.”

“To anything, actually,” I interjected. “Furniture, appliances, the stuff in the shed. As I mentioned, living in California makes it difficult. So if there’s anything you’d like, or know someone who could put it to good use...”

He seemed reluctant to agree, but then nodded with a sympathetic smile. “Okay, dear. We’ll have ourselves a look.”

“Perfect.” We stood staring at each other for a pause. “Well, say hi to Mrs. Murphy for me, and don’t hesitate to call for whatever reason.”

“Will do.”

“It was nice meeting you,” Brad added before we walked back toward John’s. “Hungry?” he asked once through the gate.

“Yeah... a little.” But when he opened the back door, and I remained standing out on the small stoop, he picked up on my issue and added, “We can forget the bagels and find someplace to eat when we take the bags to the church.”

“No, that’s silly,” I said, forcing myself to follow him into the kitchen. It *was* dumb. I’d just spent hours in there. And truth be told, having Brad with me had managed to keep the heebie-jeebies at bay. Somewhat.

Maybe it wasn’t being in John’s place that caused my hesitancy this

time around, but instead, it was Brad's company.

I'd like to say the tension between us was gone, and really it was just replaced with something else... more like confusing anxiety. Not of the nervous, uneasy kind. No, it was more like anticipation of something to come.

Like what the hell was that?

While I found plates and utensils, Brad took the bag of bagels and spreads he had brought to the small table, laying them across the entire surface. In total, there were about a dozen bagels and seven plastic containers that he pulled out of the bag—three types of cream cheeses, butter, tuna, egg salad, and chicken salad. "How many people were you planning to feed?" I teased.

"I didn't know what you ladies liked." And just like that, the weird *thing* I'd been feeling revealed itself with a fluttering deep in the pit of my stomach, and I fooled myself by labeling it hunger pains. "Juice?" he asked, moving over to open the fridge. "There are water bottles too."

"I'll take a water, thanks."

He returned with two and passed me one, remaining silent as he took his seat and started to prep his lunch. I followed suit, spreading some vegetable cream cheese over a plain bagel and taking a small bite. Meanwhile, on his side of the table, he seemed lost in his own thoughts.

Yes, we had made a pact last night to be civil, friends even. But this Brad was nothing like the man I had gotten to know, and I believed it had nothing to do with me. Since I'd walked through the door, he'd been subdued, reflective.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah" was all I got. So caught up in my own emotions, I failed to consider he was probably hurting in his own way. I guessed his always being confident gave me the wrong impression, like he didn't have a heart beneath that sculpted chest. When, with each day that went by, little things he revealed proved he did. Last night with how he'd been so concerned with Kelly, today with the food and drinks he'd bought to ensure we had

sustenance during this awful day. The way he meticulously went through John's stuff, ensuring those things of importance found a new home.

All of it was not in sync with the man who knew how to push all my buttons. There was a strange new dynamic between us, and I almost preferred the arrogant version of him. But having said that, the attraction I couldn't ignore worsened. Sure, jealousy still consumed me regarding his relationship with my father, but something else had managed to break through. Sympathy.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." He looked at me, waiting.

"Did you see him often?"

Brad's green eyes cut away as he stared down at his plate. "Usually, John would come by for a beer if he had something to handle in the building. Otherwise, the only time I saw him was during our monthly lunch dates."

"Every month?" I asked, failing to hide my surprise.

"Yep. First Sunday, like clockwork."

"That was just over a week ago," I whispered.

He didn't respond and instead swept his gaze over the small kitchen. "The last time I saw him was in this very house. He insisted I come by to see the vegetable garden he was getting ready to plant as soon as the temps warmed up a bit."

I looked out the curtained window on the back door. Obviously, the barren dirt meant he never had the chance.

"What was he like?" I asked, and immediately regretted it. What would it matter what Brad's opinion was? Especially at this point, when nothing could be done on John's part to change mine.

As a long pause stretched, I wondered if Brad was as confused by my question as I was asking it. "He was a grumpy bastard," he finally said with a grin. "Kept to himself. Lived a very simple life... as you can see." He stared down at the bagel in his hand and dropped it before folding his arms and shaking his head. "I knew him for years before I found out he was a cop. I only found out he even had a daughter this past fall."

“Lovely.” I pushed my plate away, feeling sick to my stomach. “How did that go? ‘Guess what? I have a kid that I never see.’ Did that come up over a beer at your bar?”

“Actually, I found pictures of you ranging from infancy to about five or six the day I helped him pack up his apartment. They’re the same ones that we found in his room earlier.” He thumbed toward the living room. “Minus the one he framed.”

“What did he say when you asked him?”

“I didn’t get a chance. He caught me staring at them and flipped out. It took hours for him to do more than bark orders about the packing.”

“Remind me why you were friends with him?”

Brad smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “That’s the thing with John—eventually, he always came around.” Except for communicating with his daughter. “That day was no different. It took a while, but after we had loaded up the truck and made the drive to Jersey, he admitted they were of you. He wasn’t angry with me... more so embarrassed.” His eyes held mine for a very long moment before he added, “And regretful.”

Breaking the connection between us, I folded my arms and leaned on them. There was so much I could’ve said to that, but again, what was the point? The man who needed to hear it was no longer here, and the man who was didn’t need to see my vulnerabilities. It was one thing for Brad to assume, another to witness.

“Once he started talking,” Brad went on to say, “he didn’t stop. Called you Bella, said he had a met a gem of a woman in your mom. Fell hard, but she didn’t love him enough to come to New York... and being a cop kept him rooted here.” When my mouth gaped, Brad studied my expression. “I take it you didn’t know that.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“For the record, he carried a tremendous amount of guilt. He convinced himself *his* Bella was better off without him.”

Pfft... *his* Bella.

“That’s all I know. I think he tried to come out and see you once, but

from what little information I pulled out of him, it seemed he chickened out once he got there.”

Again, shock came before I could school it. I guessed we had that in common... the chickening-out thing. “Do you know when that was?”

Brad looked over my shoulder. “Um... I want to say last June. Toward the end of the month?”

My eyes bulged. “My mom died June 28. Could he have been at the funeral?” I wasn’t sure if I’d seen him that it would have even registered who he was.

“I wouldn’t doubt it. To get back to your original question, he was an extremely stubborn, private man.” Brad wiped his hands with a napkin and threw it on the table, and something must have come to him when he shook his head and added, “He lived on meat and potatoes. Suddenly he bought this house and was all about going organic. It’s like he had gotten grim news from his doctor and tried to make a change, only for it to be too late.” His eyes met and held mine. “I’m pissed as hell at him... I know you can relate.”

“I can.”

My phone started ringing from inside my bag. With Brad’s eyes on me, I dug it out and answered. “Hey, Kelly. How are you feeling?”

“Better. I’m so sorry I ditched on you. How’s it going over there?”

“It’s fine.” Brad’s intense stare forced me to look away. “We managed to get the upstairs done.”

“Oh, that’s good. I was getting ready to shower. I can be there in an hour.”

“No, don’t come. We have one stop to make, and then I’ll probably call for a ride.”

“Okay... um... can you talk?”

My gaze briefly slid to Brad. “No.”

“Gotcha. Okay. I’ll see you later. Text me when you’re on your way back.”

“Will do.”

Just as I tapped my phone screen, he asked, “Is there a reason you would assume I wouldn’t drive you back?”

Since I didn’t have a valid reason, besides trepidation because he was growing on me, all I said was, “Okay, thank you. I appreciate it.”



After Brad carried out the last bag of trash that he’d filled after cleaning out John’s fridge, I took one last look around. My gaze caught on the end table and the framed photo of me as a little girl. When I slowly walked over to it and picked it up, I heard Brad coming through the back door.

“Ready?” he asked from the doorway, noticing the picture in my hand as I turned to face him. Just as I went to put it back in its place, he added, “Don’t you want that?”

Without responding, I walked back into the kitchen and shoved the frame inside the box that had my name written on it. My throat tightening with emotion blindsided me. It wasn’t like *one* framed photo proved he loved me... until a little voice in the back of my mind argued, it was *the only* framed photo.

In that moment, I couldn’t help but wonder what would’ve happened had I not lost my nerve the last time I came to New York. Would that have been the pivotal encounter that changed our relationship? Would he have been relieved of stress that may have been the cause of his heart attack? I’d never know and hated the sadness that came with those unknowns.

This moment felt more final than attending John’s funeral had. Turning my back to hide the tremble in my lip, I tucked the shoebox under an arm before hoisting my handbag on my shoulder to head for the door.

“Hold on.” Out of the corner of my eye I watched as Brad went to the fridge, snatched a magnetic Statue of Liberty bottle opener stuck to its side, and shoved it in his pocket. It was an adorable gesture, and I couldn’t help but smile, to which he shrugged. “Bartender to the core.”

He then draped the garment bag over one arm and lifted the huge box with the things he’d decided to take, including John’s gun. With his spare hand, he grabbed the small drawstring bag with the items he pushed on me. I

say pushed, because if Brad weren't there, I probably would've left with nothing more than the box that had my name on it.

As it was, the weight of that box felt like it burned through my flesh as I walked out the door. I had no idea what was in it, and just thinking of going through the contents caused dread to sit in my stomach like a stone.

The cool April air felt therapeutic as Brad locked up. We exchanged a glance and wordlessly carried our stuff to his car before stuffing it in the back seat. He then opened the door for me, and I sat with an audible huff.

Mentally, I was drained. Brad claimed we got a lot done, but I couldn't feel the same. The intense need to flee made it impossible to get over believing that we'd accomplished nothing.

I took a good look at the small run-down house, wondering if or when I'd be back. Any company I hired to clear out the place could do so without my supervision. Even putting it up for sale could be done via a phone call, especially since I planned to sell the place as is. I was sure the Murphys next door wouldn't mind letting in a real estate agent who needed entry.

While Brad moved around the front of his car, it took that blip of time to resign myself that I probably wouldn't be back and whispered, "Bye, Dad."

Brad got in, started the car, dragged in a deep breath, and turned to stare at me. "What?" I asked.

"What is that that I smell on you?"

The question was so random, I laughed and repeated, "What?"

He leaned closer to sniff me. "Your perfume. What is it?"

"I don't wear perfume." My admission didn't cause him to pull away, and if anything, it looked like he wanted to devour me whole. "Um... it might be my hair products." That gave him an open invitation to run his nose along the side of my head, and he moaned. "It's rosemary and mint."

"Christ, that's intoxicating."

He was one to talk, because his SUV smelled like him. And that combined with having him sitting close caused an overwhelmingly seductive environment. So much so, if it wouldn't make me look like I'd lost my mind,

I would've pushed him away, opened the window, and hung my head out like a golden retriever.

But I kept all that to myself. It was hard enough to remember to breathe with our faces a breath apart. His eyes dropped to my lips, causing them to ache for a kiss. Memories of how firm they'd felt against mine, combined with the jolt of white-hot desire that had struck when he'd slipped his tongue into my mouth, made the inside of his car stifling. It had nothing to do with the temperature, and all to do with this man who could always take any resolve I felt and kill it.

Until a hard knock caused us both to jump. There stood Mr. Murphy, smiling while motioning for me to lower the window. Without moving his body, Brad reached behind him and pushed the button.

"Glad I caught you kids," he said, dipping so he could talk to us directly. "Father Grant is out of town. But you can drop the clothes into the donation box at the back of the church parking lot."

"Okay. Thank you for telling us."

"No problem." His jovial expression grew. No doubt Brad's proximity to me, and my claim he wasn't my boyfriend earlier, was why the man continued to grin. "Have a great day," he said with a wave and walked away, leaving an uncomfortable tension hanging between Brad and me.

Chapter 12

Brad

“Now he’ll assume I lied,” she voiced out loud once I raised the window.

“About what?”

“You being my boyfriend.”

My head snapped in her direction, and the implication behind what she said triggered something in me. “Oh no!” I gasped in an exaggerated tone of mock horror. “We wouldn’t want him to think that. Damn... I’m not even your friend. I’m the asshole—a.k.a. *John’s* friend.”

What the serious fuck?

“Calm down,” she said as I pulled away from the house. Yeah, that helped. How could this woman make me go from wanting to devour her to wanting to throw her ass out on the street within minutes? “I just meant it looked like we were about to—”

“Fuck?” I goaded.

“Kiss!” She waved a hand as her cheeks flushed. “Just forget it.”

“You’re right. Thank Christ we escaped that ridicule. What were we thinking? Misleading a nice old man in such a salacious way. We must notify the church elders.”

“You’re hilarious,” she said sarcastically.

Ignoring her, I petulantly added, “For all I care, Murphy can assume whatever the fuck he wants to. We both know the truth. We’re two people forced to interact because your father thought it would be a great idea,” I admitted with a scowl.

What *was* that prick thinking? All day, that question banged around in my head. What possessed him to live as he had, grumpy and alone. Worse than that, what made him think that tying me to his daughter was a good idea?

I could feel her eyes on me when she mumbled, “I think I liked it better when you were preoccupied.”

Slowing to a stop at the red light, I turned to glare at her. “What does that mean?”

Her eyes settled on mine. “All day you’ve been subdued and reflective. I guess that passed, because now you’re back to being said asshole.” Her smile meant she’d tried for levity, until the clench in my jaw had it falling from her face. Regret immediately hit her, and she changed her tune. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

Despite her apology, I needed to say my piece. “You’re right. For most of the day, I walked on eggshells trying to be sensitive to what *you’ve* been going through. Even though I was hurting in my own way, all I worried about was how you were feeling.”

“I’m sorry,” she repeated. “It has been a heavy day, and clearly, I don’t know how to act. It’s all very confusing. Sadness. Anger. I’m not saying either is okay, but I can’t stop from feeling that way. At one point, I even felt spiteful for not wanting to take anything from his house.”

“I thought you’d regret that.” Forcing her to take some of John’s personal items had all to do with assuming one day that decision would haunt her.

“You’re right. I would regret it eventually, and I’m glad you had the foresight to know that. I guess I’m taking it out on you while ignoring your emotions in this mess.” The light turning green pulled my focus away, and

my silence had her further backpedaling. “You were very supportive and patient.” She placed a hand on my arm, adding, “I really appreciate it, Brad.”

Despite her genuine admission, I found myself sulking and grumbled, “You’re welcome.” I wasn’t sure if my sour tone was what had her pulling her hand away. I also wasn’t sure why her initial comment had pissed me off so much. Until today, it wasn’t as though she was so off the mark, although *asshole* was a bit harsh, since I’d been more like a ballbuster. Needing to defend myself, I griped, “And for the record, you mistake my teasing as vindictiveness. Even when I call you She-Devil, it’s with affection.”

“Sure it is,” she scoffed, but a quick glance revealed that stunning smile before she twisted her head to look out the window.

At the next traffic light, I turned on the GPS and typed in Saint Veronica’s. The robotic voice directed me the short distance, and less than five minutes later, she and I were shoving the large trash bags from the trunk into the donation’s receptacle.

Once we were all done, I opened the door for her and said, “See... I can be charming.”

“Yes, you can,” she conceded, surprising me. While sliding her hot little body into the car, she avoided looking at me. Good thing, too... because that crackle between us that could be mistaken as anger or passion or whatever the fuck it was sparked painfully. Arguing with her always made it worse, and now I was teetering on dangerous ground where that kiss Murphy had cockblocked could most definitely happen at my instigating.

But instead I slammed the car door shut, filling my lungs with the crisp air before being forced to endure her scent, her proximity, and her presence for the next thirty or so minutes, as I ignored my libido.



It was actually twenty-two minutes later when I pulled up in front of her hotel.

“Thanks for the ride... and for coming with me today.” It was the first thing she’d said in a very long time. “Again, I really appreciate it.”

“No problem.” Our interactions were confusing as fuck. We had two modes: uncomfortable civility or fiery bantering. Combined with the emotional crap we’d both had to endure today, it caused a splitting headache.

I reached behind her, first grabbing the shoebox, handing it over, and then passing her the small bag. But instead of getting out, she shifted them on her lap and twisted to look at me.

Assuming the items spurred emotions within her again, I asked, “Is something wrong?” She shook her head, yet remained staring at me. “What then?”

“It’s not fair to have so much antipathy toward inheriting John’s building when it means the world to you. More importantly, it isn’t fair for him to have left it to me at all. You deserve to be sole owner.”

“No, I don’t. I got more than I deserved.” I was merely a friend, and she was his flesh and blood. But voicing that would’ve twisted the knife, because no doubt she would’ve preferred a relationship with him and not his possessions.

“Still...” She shook her head stubbornly. “I think I want to talk to Mr. Caldwell and ask how I could sign it over to you.”

“I won’t let you do that, Sheena. You’re very emotional right now, but there will come a day you’ll appreciate the financial security those rent checks will provide.”

“Selling the house will give me that. I’d rather go back to my life and find a way to move on from all this drama.”

Drama?

Was that what she equated to meeting me?

Before I could ask, she added, “If you won’t accept it, and it makes you feel better, then maybe you can buy me out?” Again, an irrational surge of anger came from her comment, and she mistook my gawk as bewilderment. “I would insist you pay below market price.”

It wasn’t her ignorance over real estate prices, or even her suggestion, that flipped a switch in me yet again. It was the insinuation that she wanted nothing to do with being tied to me.

Message received.

With little emotion, I said, “You already suggested that brilliant idea, and I already told you that wasn’t possible. The building was last appraised at seventeen million dollars.” It was her turn to gawk. “Yeah... and that little house you inherited is probably a quarter of a million.” When she continued to stare at me dumbfounded, I asked not so kindly, “Still want to walk away from the *drama*?”

“I... had no idea.”

“Did you know that your father bought that building after he’d been shot in the line of duty? That he gave a chunk of his settlement to widows of cops who died on the job?”

“No,” she said quietly.

“You probably don’t know that he used the rest of the money to buy the building as an investment, and by doing so gave a kid with a dream the chance to make it come true. There is a lot you don’t know.”

“That’s obvious.” But after a few moments, remorse morphed into determination as her eyes sparked to life. “And... that’s my point. I don’t deserve this. You do.” Her eyes bounced between mine when she added, “Regardless, I didn’t mean to sound insensitive.”

“It’s fine.” Her admission did little to placate me. “If I could afford it, I *would* buy you out. And if you want to talk to Caldwell anyway, you can tell him that I’d be willing to act as your building manager. Take the burden off you. You won’t have to worry about anything except collecting rent. Just let me know.”

“Thank you. Kelly and I had already thought of this.” She lifted her chin, meeting my indifferent gaze straight on. “I’m just trying to come up with a solution.”

“Good. Here’s another... I’ll arrange for the rest of the house to be emptied. No need to worry about that. If you would like help in putting it up for sale, let me know. I’ll call the agent John used.” Reaching past her, I tugged on the latch and pushed open her door. “I have to get to the bar.”

She didn’t move right away and instead looked at me to say, “So much

for a truce.” Combined with the sad look on her face, those words stung me something fierce. My silence forced her to say, “Anyway... I’m sorry I pushed your buttons.” It was the first thing she’d said all day that I happened to agree with. “Thank you, again.”

“Bye, Sheena.” It felt final when she got out of the car with her stuff and walked into the hotel without looking back. And part of me wondered if I’d ever see her again.

Maybe she was right in labeling this thing as drama. A few weeks ago, my life had been a helluva lot simpler. We probably were better off going back to our lives and finding a way to make our partnership work with the least bit of disruption. Speaking for myself, I’d be a fuck ton better off.

But when I forced the gearshift into drive and peeled away from the curb, I knew that was a blatant lie... that was right before cursing John again.



The first thing I did when I barged into my bar was call the agent who sold John his house, explain the situation, and pass along Sheena’s contact info. Elise was very sweet and promised to help Sheena each step of the way.

I then tried to distract myself with all the things I loved about my business, but that wasn’t working out too well for me.

In fact, if one more person asked me what was wrong, I was going to snap. And then my brother Nate calling my cell had me doing just that.

“Hey,” he said once I picked up.

One word caused me to erupt. “She wants nothing to do with me!” A few customers turning their heads had me storming toward my office.

“Um... okay... I called because I have a quest—”

“Nothing!” I continued, as if he hadn’t tried to speak. “After trying to be considerate and sympathetic, she may as well have said that she loathed my presence. Buy her out, my ass. How clueless is she? That whole pretending that she isn’t affected by me is an act... an... act! Half the time, I’m the bad guy... or asshole, as she prefers. The other half, it’s all, ‘Oh thank you. I appreciate it.’ Bullshit. What the fuck did I do to that demon woman to have

her—”

“Brad! Calm down.” The pause supplied him with an opportunity to ask, “What the hell are you talking about?”

“She-Devil. I went out of my way to help her clean out John’s place today... or at least some of it. She wanted no part of being there and couldn’t get out soon enough. Still, I patiently helped her, pushing aside my emotions to consider hers. Only for her to casually say, ‘Hey, here’s an idea... buy me out.’”

“It is a logical solution. I already told you that Max and I would help, plus you can take a mortgage out—”

“Fuck you!”

“Dude... what the hell?”

“Shit.” I plopped into my desk chair with an exhausted sigh. “I’m sorry. She just drives me nuts. It’s clear she wants no part of this partnership. So she should go the hell back to California already. That’s fine with me. Who needs her here? I can handle the building myself. And I know you guys would help me, but it’s too much to ask.”

He didn’t respond at first, only to then say casually, “Sounds like this has nothing to do with the financials involved.” I could’ve barked at him to fuck off again, but what would’ve been the point? Even if he was way off the mark, I was acting like an idiot. My rant made me sound like an idiot. Which really did little to support the motive behind my ire.

Changing tactics, I admitted, “I offered to be acting manager, take that burden off her.”

“What did she say?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, maybe she’ll think about that and take you up on it. Besides selling or buying her out, that would really be the best scenario for both of you. You need to stop fighting with her and start convincing her to see things your way... butter her up. I thought I gave you that advice already?”

I was beginning to hate that phrase. “Every time I try, she accuses me of

being an asshole.”

The moment I admitted to that, he jumped on it. “You do realize that means you’re doing the buttering-up wrong?”

“Shut up. The woman loves to fight with me. Like I said, it’s an act. She wants me, and this is all her way to pretend she doesn’t. I see right through her.” I felt like a hypocrite saying that because of the way my body responded to her whenever we fought. It was the head above my shoulders that clearly didn’t handle it all that well... proved when Nate laughed at me. “What?”

“First off, keep convincing yourself that she wants you. Secondly, I think my brother is getting a good dose of indifference from the opposite sex, and he doesn’t like it so much.”

“What do you know? Suddenly you’re engaged to be married, and that makes you a pro with women?”

“More than you.”

Losing my patience, I hung up... and he called right back.

“Knock it off, Nate. I’m busy.”

“Clearly by obsessing over She-Devil.” Predicting my next move, he quickly said, “Don’t hang up. I actually did call for a reason. Amy wanted me to ask you something.”

“Amy?”

“Yeah. She wanted to know if you’d mind her writing a book about your situation with... um... She-Devil. She thinks it’s a great plotline.”

What. The. Serious. Fuck? “How does she even know about She-Devil?”

“I told her.” He disclosed that while not sounding the least bit apologetic. “She wanted to ask you herself, but I said no. You know, since you used to be obsessed with her—”

“I wasn’t obsessed with Amy,” I growled.

“Yes, you were... hey, I get it’s embarrassing for you that she picked me instead.”

Click.

Instantly, a few laughing emoji came via text, along with:

Don't punish Amy because you're annoyed at me... or actually, at the she-devil.

Fuck off.

Nate: She is the real reason you're PMS-ing right now, correct?

Brad: For someone who touts the art of buttering people up, you suck at it.

Nate: Okay... okay. I'm sorry. So does that mean you're okay with Amy writing your story?

I then texted back to my lovestruck dumbass of a brother the exact same thing that I said to the she-devil herself.

Not a chance in hell!

Chapter 13

Sheena

During the path between his car and my hotel room door, I had resigned myself to believing that we just didn't get along... and tried not to analyze too deeply as to why that upset me. It felt like we were water and oil, and nothing could ever have us mixing.

It was no one's fault. Well, maybe my father's. I wasn't sure what his motive was for linking me to Brad. Regardless, it was obviously a mistake. The only thing we had in common was the man's death. Even the emotions revolving around that were completely different between us.

Brad was mourning, and it wasn't fair to invalidate that by letting resentment steer my behavior. Even if unintentionally.

"Hi," Kelly said from the small couch when I entered the room.

"Hey." My focus landed on the take-out Styrofoam container beside her with what looked like remnants of a meal. "You're feeling better?"

"Yes. I picked up a burger and fries. Sorry, I was starving... and bored." She shrugged before pointing to a few bags near the closet. "I also went shopping."

"Oh good! I hated thinking you were stuck in here on such a beautiful day."

As I put the box and bag down, she motioned toward the stuff I carried in. “What’s that?”

“Some of John’s things that Brad thought I should take, including a box we found with my name on it.”

Kelly’s eyes widened. “Your father left that for you?”

“Yeah. Based on the last time I was there, I should’ve known it would be a difficult day.” I plopped down on the chair adjacent to her with a sigh.

She frowned while tipping her head sympathetically. “You look drained. I’m sorry I wasn’t there to help.”

“We really had it covered. I hate to admit this, but I was grateful Brad was with me. I absolutely hated going through John’s stuff, and during it Brad was patient, kind even. He bought bagels and spreads, enough to feed the whole block—” When Kelly’s lips lifted just as her brows did, I veered off course and said, “Don’t get so excited. Once we got in the car to leave, he turned back into being an asshole.”

“On what grounds?” She narrowed her eyes. “Explain, please.”

It was obvious Kelly was a fan of Brad’s, and admitting to why the man frustrated me could backfire. Especially since I acted no better.

So, by keeping it bland, I admitted, “In a nutshell, we just can’t seem to get along.”

“Sheen, you two have this crackle going on between you. Every time you stare at one another, I feel like I’m intruding.”

“First off, you’re delusional. Secondly, if there is a crackling, then it’s hostility. Sure, like I said, today he was different. I even told him that. And it went beyond the kindness. He was reserved and guarded. Understandably so. But then no sooner had we left the house than I could feel him change right back to the cocky man who liked to shove his arrogance down my throat.” I skipped over the part where he’d almost kissed me. That morsel would most definitely fuel her fire.

“This doesn’t make sense.”

“Your loyalty to him is getting on my nerves.”

“My loyalty is to you,” she snapped, truly appearing annoyed and forcing me to mumble an apology. Why Brad Navarro was such a touchy subject for me, I didn’t know. “What I meant was... what made him go from one extreme to the other?”

“Well... I thanked him for coming, and then voiced out loud I wanted to go back to my life and find a way to move on from all the drama... or something like that.” The impatient wave of her hand for me to elaborate already meant she wasn’t seeing things as I had. “For whatever reason, that triggered him. Christ, you would think I insulted his mother.” Kelly blinked at me a few times but said nothing. “Okay, what?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“Say it.”

“After helping you during a difficult time, pushing his own emotions aside to comfort you, you have to know how that comment sounded, right?”

“I didn’t mean to get away from *him*. I meant away from the building and the resentment I carried toward my father. It’s not my fault Brad’s entwined with all that. When I tried to explain myself, I even admitted that I didn’t deserve to be left anything to begin with. Especially now that I know Brad and John had a real relationship, that Brad knew details of his life I didn’t.”

“Like what?” I filled Kelly in with things Brad had shared that shocked the hell out of me.

Kelly’s mouth gaped. “Your dad came to California yet didn’t reach out to you?”

“Yep! For my mother’s funeral. I had no idea he was there.”

“That’s so weird. You basically did the same thing when you finally got to New York a few months ago.”

“I know. Don’t remind me.” I couldn’t help but smirk sarcastically at the irony of it all. “Anyway, Brad had been a very good friend to John. They’d have lunch once a month like clockwork. Brad knew things no one else did. Brad was like a son to him, so much so I said the building should’ve been left to him. I even said I would be fine with signing it over. To that, he adamantly

refused. But then I suggested since he won't sell, and with good reason, that maybe he should buy me out. That didn't go well."

"What did he say?"

"He got very snippy and not so politely schooled me on Manhattan's real estate prices."

How would I know the building was that valuable? John was a cop who appeared to live paycheck to paycheck. If anything, that little tidbit made me want to sell more than ever, but after getting to know Brad, there was absolutely no chance of hell freezing over.

"So now what?"

"I don't know. Bottom line... we can't seem to see eye to eye. We kind of left it where we wouldn't have to interact more than necessary. After Brad offered to arrange to have John's house cleaned out so I could put it up for sale, he then suggested for me to speak with my father's lawyer and make Brad acting building manager. He'd be willing to do that to relieve me from the responsibility, and probably send my ass back to California quicker than he could say *She-Devil*." Kelly rolled her lips over her teeth. "Shut up. It's not funny. I wish I could blink and be back in my adorable apartment in San Diego."

"I guess it makes sense to have him act as building manager." Kelly nodded encouragingly, but the skepticism in her expression negated that.

"Why the doubt then?" Her mouth parted, closed, parted, and closed again. "What?" I prodded.

"After meeting him, I thought maybe you could have some fun with your hot, sexy business partner while you figured things out in New York." Before I could ask, *Then what?* or even remind her that we lived on opposite coasts, she hopped off the couch and said, "Anyway. Let's go out. There's a fun karaoke bar I found a few blocks away. I don't want to spend my last night in New York staring at these walls."

The mention of karaoke reminded me of the night I met Brad, how hot he looked on that stage, commanding his domain, how close I came to doing something stupid, like sleeping with him. When I'd told Kelly she was

delusional, it was me who held that label. Because even that night I'd felt the pull I had toward Brad. And then I got to know him, which created a push/pull situation that already exhausted me.

Nope, sticking around in this city wouldn't end well for me. It was best to take Brad up on his offer and hightail it back to the nice quiet life I preferred.

"So yes?" Kelly nudged.

"Fine. But only if we can watch and judge. I'm not singing."

"Oh, deal, girlfriend."



Kelly was gone, and although she'd continued to argue that Brad could be a sexy consolation prize that came with my inheritance, I missed having her here with me.

Staying inside the quiet, empty hotel room made me antsy. So instead, on Monday and Tuesday, I set out to explore the loud, busy city alone while pretending that Brad wasn't on the same island.

In the evenings, I busied myself with the to-do list that I had thrown together after Kelly left. First on the list was calling Mr. Caldwell. He was sweet on the phone and assured me having Brad act as building manager could be arranged. There would need to be details ironed out and funds deposited into a shared account to cover any repairs that would arise. Otherwise, he agreed the proposal made sense for my living situation.

I also informed him I would be putting the house up for sale soon, to which he offered his help if needed. Brad had followed through, giving my information to the agent John had used. I had already received a kind and accommodating voice mail from Elise, and calling her back was now on my list.

Next was to call every tenant in the building to introduce myself. Some were polite yet impersonal, while others would've kept me on the phone for hours had I let them. I made notes as to how each tenant preferred to pay their rent, and for those who still used paper checks, I supplied my home address for mailing. Each call ended the same way, by informing them nothing would

change regarding rental agreements, and that Brad Navarro, owner of the tavern on the ground floor, would be their point of contact should they need anything.

Come Wednesday, Mother Nature left me no choice but to sit in the hotel room because of a nor'easter that hit the area, and that left me to do a lot of thinking. Specifically about a certain man.

During all the staring and thinking, I received a text from Brad:

Hey. I can arrange for the house to be cleaned out on Saturday. No need for you to be there. Is that okay?

I typed back:

That works. Thank you.

The crickets that came after my response spoke volumes. He wanted me gone, and I really couldn't blame the guy.

With nothing more to do, I stared at the box from where it still sat since I'd placed it there. Except for shoving the frame inside it at John's house, I hadn't opened it. Even after Kelly asked about it, I pretended it didn't exist.

Neither the rain pelting the window nor the sound of the TV playing a cooking show could drown out the pounding in my ears as I sat at the table to face the box. I ran my finger over the sloppy scrawl of my name in black marker before lifting the lid with a shaky hand.

Under the framed photo I had tucked into the box was a stamped and addressed letter to me. Not ready to open it yet, I pinched it between my thumb and pointer finger and placed it on the table.

Besides the letter, I found his badge, name tag, a few service awards, and another copy of the newspaper article when he'd been shot. The more I read, the tighter my throat became.

Apparently John and his partner had been radioed to a car accident that happened nearby. The call seemed routine, with one car rear-ending the other. Thankfully, no one had been seriously hurt, but the damage to each vehicle was extreme. One car's trunk had popped wide open, and its driver began behaving erratically once the police showed up.

The entire situation raised a red flag for the officers. John's partner,

Marty, whom I had met at the memorial, was questioning that driver. Without warning, the man had pulled out a gun, and John jumped into action, wrestling it away from him. I could envision the entire scene in my head. That, combined with unreported details I remembered Marty sharing, caused tears to well over the bravery my father displayed.

While blinking through my blurred vision, and swiping at the few tears that leaked, I pulled out a black velvet box next and pried it open to reveal the medal of valor he'd received for that heroic act. I traced over it with a light touch, surprised by the weight of it when I lifted it out. I tried to imagine John accepting it, what he might've said—or had he humbly declined to make a speech?

After carefully refolding the navy-blue ribbon as it was, I gently placed it back on its satin bed. Also in the box was a corresponding plaque marking the date of the award, and a framed picture of John shaking hands with a man who appeared to be his superior officer.

The last thing I pulled out was a small photo album filled with pictures of me. From the looks of it, and based on the date my mom wrote on the backs, she had sent John one picture marking each of my birthdays. Along with those were photos of milestones such as my First Holy Communion, prom, and graduation... just to name a few. But the photos that truly shocked me were of a much-younger John holding me at various stages of infancy as well as during my toddler years.

It seemed that John had attended my birthdays for the first four years of my life. I skimmed a fingertip over one where I sat on his lap, wearing a paper birthday hat and clapping. In it, John stared at me like I was the moon, stars, and sun all combined. That photo was taken on my fourth birthday, and it was the last of him and me together.

My tears continued to trickle, and the only thing left to do was open that letter. With trembling fingers, I lifted it and tore at the sealed flap. The first thing I saw was the date on top marking that it had been written one week after my mother had died.

To my Bella,

The words you're about to read were meant to be said out loud, in

person, the day you grieved your mother. As you know, I never did or haven't yet.

I came home from that trip hating myself for failing to approach you and wrote them all on this paper instead. I had years to perfect what I would say to my beautiful little girl. But seeing you that day after having lost the one person in your life who meant the world, who was your world, what could I possibly say?

How was I to explain all the regret I held for conceding, for staying away?

It wasn't always like this. When you were an infant, I'd visit as often as I could and never missed a birthday. When I couldn't be there, I would call Rita just to hear you babbling on the other end.

But each year that went by, while the love I held for your mother never wavered, I felt her pulling further and further away. As you grew, developed a personality, began understanding the consequences of life's choices, Rita felt it would be better if I cut ties with you. I'm not sure if you know this or not, and if not, please understand that I'm not trying to mar her memory.

In Rita's defense, her life was there being your mother. My life was here as a cop in a dangerous city, which scared her. There wasn't a way to meld our worlds without completely disrupting yours.

I must be honest, getting that call gutted me. It was right before your fifth birthday. She asked me to no longer visit, or send you presents and cards for the occasions that I missed. She felt it would confuse you, so I instead began sending impersonal checks that your mother would deposit into your account.

Understandably, I was angry and resentful. I could've fought harder for you, fought your mother for paternal rights. After truly thinking that through, I believed with every part of my being that in the process I would've hurt her deeply, and you as well.

It needs to be said that Rita Devlin was an amazing woman, and as cliché as it sounds, I fell in love with her the day we met. I don't fault her for not feeling the same. Love just wasn't in the cards for us.

So, that day, as I watched you crying tears of grief for her, I couldn't bring myself to approach. You would think the years I spent envisioning all the things I would say would've prepared me to unleash that and more. But instead, I hid in the shadows like a coward.

For obvious reasons, my lack of courage has anguished me every day since. Clearly, I'm not good at this... family, loving connections, weren't things I'd had in life. Being alone was all I knew. My parents, your grandparents, died before you were born. Any extended family I have I barely know.

I am blessed with good friends who filled the holes. Samuel Caldwell, my lawyer, is also like a brother to me. His family became my family. One of my tenants, Brad Navarro, is like a son. And, of course, my former colleagues on the force are there through thick and thin.

It isn't all sad. Sure, I had some bad luck, got shot, and lost my career, but in the scheme of things, I can't complain. Most would be lucky to have what I have. The only thing missing is my Bella. That term of endearment fell from my lips the first time I saw a picture of you, and I've been calling you that ever since.

I do plan to mail this letter. I can't promise when. But there will be a day when I finally walk my ass to the nearest mailbox, pull open that damn door, and drop it in.

What I hope to achieve is helping you understand the why behind it all. And maybe we could talk. Or better still, maybe you would want to get to know me. Better late than never, I guess. But if neither occurs, please know this:

Sheena, I'm proud of you. I'm awed by you. I'll forever love you. I have since the day you were born and will until the day I die.

Your father,

John Porelli

By the last line, I could barely see his words through the deluge of tears. A man's life reduced to a shoebox, and with the sobs that came were so

many emotions—sadness, heartbreak, and grief, all obvious reactions. What dominated was the ever-present burden of regret. I wished things were different, that my mother had loved him, told me all this while she was still alive. I wished that I had the nerve to make contact, and even that he had the nerve to do the same.

My phone's ringtone slicing through the silence caused me to jump. And I swiped away tears before hastily reaching for it. Upon seeing Fred's name on the screen, I debated not answering. But something told me to tap that icon.

"Hi, Mr. Murphy," I said, clearing the frog from my throat to then ask, "Is everything okay?"

"No, dear. I'm so sorry to be bothering you. But this storm is a doozy, and the wind sent a huge chunk of that gorgeous tree out front down on your father's roof. I'm afraid it broke through, damaging the front bedroom."

John's bedroom.

Every ounce of emotion I'd been battling formed a storm of its own within me, and combined with hearing this shocking news, I couldn't bring myself to speak besides croaking out a pathetic, "Okay."

Chapter 14

Brad

Two things happened over the past few days. I tried to stop “obsessing” over a certain blonde, as my brother accused me of doing... and I failed.

Every time a woman with flaxen hair came into the bar, I’d hold my breath until I realized it wasn’t the she-devil.

I was merely looking for the opportunity to tell her off since she rudely left me hanging over the offer I had made to serve as building manager. I also had no idea if she’d met with the tenants or spoken to them, if Kelly was still visiting, or if Sheena had spoken to the real estate agent that I called on her behalf. I didn’t even know if she was still in New York or went back to California.

On my end, I had followed through and arranged for anything left in John’s house to be cleared out. The charity organization confirmed they could take anything we were willing to give. All they needed was a date to complete the task. Knowing how being in that house upset her, I planned to head over there myself to oversee it all.

Using that excuse, I texted her:

Hey. I can arrange for the house to be cleaned out on Saturday. No need for you to be there. Is that okay?

A reply came quick.

That works. Thank you.

That was it. No answers to any of the unknowns she'd left me with. No hints as to what her plans were.

Well, screw her, I thought while shoving my phone in my back pocket.

Except, after pouring out a beer for one of my regulars while mumbling how irritating she was under my breath, no sooner had I pushed the draft across the polished wood than I'd yanked my cell out to type back... nothing.

My fingers hovered, yet I typed *nothing*.

How was I supposed to respond to that anyway?

I could start with, you're inconsiderate... you're insensitive... you're a big fat fucking tease...

But none of the above would go over very well, and it would only make me angrier.

I tried to convince myself that I couldn't give a shit if she and I never spoke again... and again I failed.

Because there I was, even after all the self-inflicted game playing, feeling unsettled while still having her on my mind.

Meanwhile, my fingers remained poised and ready for a verbal attack via a cell phone. "Pathetic," I mumbled while shaking my head and shoving my phone right back into its resting place in the denim pocket over my ass.

Instead of fighting with her over text messages, I'd rather find something, or someone, to put her out of my mind altogether. One problem... the bar was eerily quiet due to a bad storm that had hit the area. All day heavy rain and gusting winds had kept New Yorkers off the streets. And now that it was well past nine, I doubted any customers would be busting through the doors.

Seeing my waitstaff chatting in a corner, Bobby bored while staring at his phone, and no food orders coming from the kitchen had me saying, "Okay, guys... I'm closing up shop."

The few patrons who had nothing better to do grumbled a bit. They'd

get over it. In contrast, my employees sprang into action, cleaning up the bar like I'd set their asses on fire.

I probably should've closed hours ago. Could've been relaxing on my couch and watching a ball game on TV rather than standing around with nothing to do but think.

Really, I could use some mindless sex. Why Kipper popped into my mind at that moment I didn't know. I hadn't seen or spoken to her since the day I had lunch with John. I could use the excuse of touching base as a reason for reaching out. Although calling at 10:00 p.m. on a Wednesday meant only one thing.

"Do you need anything else before I take off?" Bobby asked, after wiping down the bar.

"No, bud. Thanks. Get home safely." I followed them all to the door and flipped the lock with a sigh.

Fifteen minutes later, I had just finished counting out the register when my phone rang in my back pocket. That galloping in my chest came again as I anxiously pulled my phone out to see an unknown number trying to call me. Instinct almost had me ignoring the call, but the last time that happened, it had been Caldwell telling me John had died. So thinking better of it, I tapped on the screen and waited.

"Brad?" a female voice asked.

"Yeah."

"It's Kelly."

"Oh, hey. Sorry, wasn't sure who it was. How did you get my number?"

"I stole it from Sheena's phone when I was in New York," she said, not sounding the least bit sorry. That also explained that Kelly had flown back to California.

"Is everything okay?"

"Not really. Sheen has no idea I'm calling you, but the woman is as stubborn as they come." That was an understatement. "And once she finds out, she's going to be really pissed. But I don't care. I'm not there and she

needs help.”

“Help with what?”

“Well, she was supposed to fly out first thing in the morning...” Without a word to me. Unreal. “But now I’m not sure what she’s going to do, and you’re my only option.”

“Why, what happened?” It felt like I was pulling teeth.

“About an hour ago, her father’s neighbor called her because a tree fell on John’s roof and busted through the front of the house.”

Instantly, any resentment I held toward that woman dissipated. “Oh shit.”

“Yeah. Because the weather is bad, there’s really nothing she can do yet. She’s obsessed with getting back to California, and I told her it’s more important that she stay in New York to take care of things. The school year is winding down, and our principal is very supportive. It took me threatening to fly right back to New York and risk my own job for her to finally listen to me. But she’s in her hotel room pacing and freaking out.” She paused on her end, and when I hadn’t said anything, she asked, “So you’ll help her?”

“I’ve been doing nothing but, Kelly. It’s your bestie who—” For obvious reasons, I stopped myself from saying *was pushing me away*. Instead, I said, “Yes. I’m here however she needs me to be.” Surprisingly enough, I meant that.

“Thank you. Like I said, nothing can be done tonight... but she could use some moral support. Also, she wants to extend the hotel, and it’s silly to be paying for a room when she has an empty apartment she can use. Maybe you can call her and convince her to do that? Or even go over there? That would probably be better than calling.”

Apparently, the universe had just given me a purpose other than sitting on my couch and fuming. “I’ll head there now.”

“I really appreciate it. And she will too. Just give her the benefit of the doubt. It’s not you, it’s the situation. She’ll come around eventually.”

“She has no choice,” flew out of my mouth before I could stop it. “She knows I won’t sell, so she can be as difficult as she wants to be. I’m not

budging.”

“I meant come around with you.”

“What do you mean with me?” I questioned.

A pregnant pause came before she said, “Nothing. I’m just rambling.” With that, she added, “You can tell Sheena I called you. I have nothing to hide, but I’m worried about her. With her father dying so suddenly, all the unresolved issues between them, and then inheriting the building, and the house, and now the tree. It’s all too much, and I hate that I’m not there.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll help her. Whether she wants me to or not.”

“Thank you,” she repeated. “You’re a good guy, Brad. And if my friend’s nerves weren’t so frazzled, she’d see it too.”

I wasn’t so sure Sheena’s ire toward me had anything to do with her frazzled nerves. Regardless of what I thought, I simply said, “Yeah, no problem.”



I didn’t even put up a fight. Nope, I locked up the bar, hailed a cab, and walked into the hotel without a second thought. Which, in hindsight, was a bit impulsive. Who knew if she would even want to see me? Unlike what Kelly suggested, support could easily be offered over the phone, and it wouldn’t be so embarrassing if she snubbed my help.

Still, there I was, a bit on edge... and I’d be lying if I pretended the anxiousness I felt was over a fallen tree and not because I’d be seeing her soon.

After having the front desk call her to announce she had a visitor, the dude shrugged when he informed me that she would come down instead. I wasn’t surprised she preferred seeing me in a public place, but I was surprised she didn’t send me away altogether.

When she appeared in the lobby, her silky blonde hair was pulled up in a ponytail, her face was devoid of any makeup, and her casual gray knit sweatsuit was blah. Still, she looked stunning. But as she got closer, it was obvious she had been crying.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, while wrapping her arms around her body.

“Kelly called me.”

“Of course she did,” she grumbled.

“She’s worried about you.”

Her expression softened a bit. “I know... but there is nothing anyone can do as long as the weather is still a mess.” She waved a hand toward the small puddle I had left on the tiled lobby floor. “You shouldn’t have come out in this. Mr. Murphy said he already alerted the town to the incident, and the moment the storm passes, they will secure the damage. Come morning, I’ll go to the house myself and call the insurance company. I found John’s policy in the paperwork Caldwell gave me. Then I’ll have Mr. Murphy direct me to a reputable contractor. I have it handled.”

Kelly was spot-on because, despite the confidence in her words, the quiver in her voice and the shaky motions of her hand gestures said otherwise. Still, I gave her an encouraging nod and said, “Sounds like a plan.” To push the issue, I added, “I’ll come with you.”

“Brad, I don’t need you to. I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine. You’ve been crying.” The intensity of my stare had her turning away. “It’s just a house, Sheena. It’ll be fixed—” I hadn’t even finished that sentence when fresh tears welled in her eyes, proving my point. She looked as though she was on the verge of another meltdown, and instinct had me closing the distance to pull her into my arms despite my rain sodden jacket. “Shh, don’t cry. It’ll be fixed, Sheena,” I repeated.

“That’s not why I’m...” I felt her head moving from side to side against my chest. “It’s not what you think,” she mumbled against the wet fabric.

“Then what is it?” Silence forced me to lean back and grip her chin until her eyes met mine.

A slight quiver of her bottom lip preceded her admitting, “Just before Mr. Murphy called about the tree, I had just finished going through the box John left for me.”

At that moment, it all dawned on me, and I pulled her harder against my

body. But when sobs forced jerky movements, I took her hand and rushed us into a waiting elevator.

Once she punched the button, not a word was spoken between us, and except for her sniffing, the box was silent. At her floor, I followed her to her door and watched as she swiped the room key against the reader before granting us access. That intoxicating scent of hers hit me the moment I walked in.

As I awkwardly stood just inside the room, she tossed the plastic card key on the dresser and admitted unprompted, “I feel so stupid acting like this.”

“It’s understandable for you to be emotional.” I slipped off my jacket and tossed it on the small couch.

“Why?” she asked, resuming the pacing that Kelly had mentioned. “I didn’t know the man from Adam. Why am I so affected by any of that?” She waved her hand toward the table. “I may as well have been reading about a stranger.”

I had no idea what he left for her, and asked, “What did you read?”

“He wrote me a letter,” she said quietly. “It was addressed to me, even had a stamp on it. And now, every opinion I had of him has been blown to bits. Every single emotion laced with hostility and resentment is gone. Just like that—” She snapped her fingers. “Because he loved my mother so much, he literally gave up a life he could’ve had with me. It may not have been the ideal life of a family living under one roof, with love bouncing off the walls... but it would’ve been something. Why she denied him that, I don’t know. I’ll never know. She died never telling me any of this, and now it feels like my resentment has flipped from John to my mother.”

The tears rolled relentlessly, and my heart cracked open for her. What a shit show this was, and probably would remain as such for years to come. This kind of perpetuation of grief would, no doubt, leave scars. Not of the visible variety, but still constant reminders of all the what-ifs.

As a bystander looking in, I knew Sheena would have to undo the wall of bitterness she’d carefully erected between her and John, with no one there to help her through it.

She sat with a huff at that table where the contents of the box were scattered, and I followed, taking the chair across from her.

I wanted to help her through it, comfort her, take her hand in mine. I couldn't imagine what was in that letter to even have changed her opinion of John. But it would have to be up to Sheena to ask that I read it, and without knowing details, I needed to wait for her lead.

That came when she lifted the offending paper and offered it. My eyes remained tethered to hers. Even though I wanted to know what it said, it still felt like an invasion of privacy, and that forced me to ask, "Are you sure?"

"Yes," she said, showing me more resolve than at any point since I had met her.

I looked down at the sloppy script, and the first thing I noticed was the date, confirming this had been written after he returned from that short trip to California.

A lump of unease had lodged in my throat and remained there as I read the words my friend had written for the daughter he barely knew.

I didn't dare look up at her during the parts that shocked me, such as John referring to me as being like a son. Sure, the fact he kept me around spoke volumes. Still, I had no idea he felt that way. Even more shocking, that he'd been there for Sheena... as much as he could've been, at least. He made the effort, loved doing so, only to be cut out of her life.

His words may have defended Sheena's mother, but I couldn't bring myself to see it that way. How could a woman deny a father the right to be a father? I didn't care how difficult it would be raising a daughter with a cop from New York City. You made do. The entire scenario sickened me, more so because it was Sheena who had suffered. In trying to protect her daughter, Rita had hurt her in an even worse way. She'd created a boulder of resentment that Sheena was forced to carry on her shoulders her entire life. All to make life easier?

Inexcusable.

Revealing my disgust would only hurt Sheena more. So I schooled my features and revealed nothing while I finished reading John's honest words.

Once done, I lifted my gaze to meet hers and softly said, “I’m so sorry, Sheena.”

She shook her head dejectedly. “Do you understand what I’m struggling with?”

“Completely. After reading that, you have every right to be confused.”

“I’m more than confused... I’m angry.” When her lip trembled once again, I couldn’t stand it any longer and reached for her hand, tugging until she came around to my side of the table. She allowed me to maneuver her onto my lap.

When I tucked her against my chest before circling her body with both my arms, she willingly melted into me. Holding her that way made me want to flip a switch to remove all her angst. And if I could, I’d do it in a heartbeat.

The bigger question was, would she let me?

Chapter 15

Sheena

The more I clung to him, the worse I felt. And it was only partly because of the revelations I'd learned about my dad and mom. Just as big a part was because I haven't been very kind to Brad. Even though he liked to push my buttons, he *had* shown me signs that deep inside he had a good heart. I couldn't say I'd done the same.

I could blame vulnerability, frustration, or resentment on my acting so atypically. Or the more believable scenario was that my behavior served to mask my attraction toward him. Either way, it didn't matter. He didn't deserve my ire.

Once a few long minutes had passed, I straightened to stare into his eyes. "Thank you... for coming, and for being here."

He shook his head infinitesimally. "No thanks needed." The more we looked at each other, the more I could feel the intensity between us everywhere. From the top of my head to my toes, it felt like I was being electrocuted one stinging zap at a time.

My guess was he felt it, too, especially when he licked his lips while dropping his gaze to my mouth. After his eyes lifted again, he blinked a few times before saying, "Um... are you hungry? Have you eaten?"

“No, I haven’t, but I’m not hungry.”

We continued to stare at one another, and I should’ve gotten off his lap. Yet I didn’t.

Even when he loosened his hold on me and leaned back into the chair to add a few inches between our faces, I couldn’t bring myself to get up. I didn’t want to put distance between us. In contrast, I wanted to curl up against him and have this moment go on forever.

Stupid, I know, with most of the incriminating items that were to blame for my night of sadness sitting within reach. But the last thing on my mind was the box or its contents.

While staring into his mesmerizing green eyes, I got lost in his presence and instinctively leaned closer to kiss him. At first he stiffened, until a small moan that he released had me continuing. It started out slow and sweet. With each second that passed, his lips responded, and his hold tightened.

I couldn’t believe I had once again initiated a kiss between us. Since arriving in Manhattan just over a week ago, I barely recognized myself. What I did know was that while on his lap, in his arms, kissing him made it easy to forget the intense emotions that had consumed me of late.

When I slipped my hands around his neck, he pressed on my back to bring me even closer. In a weird way, it simultaneously felt familiar and foreign. The longer we kissed, the more I wanted from him. The furthest thing from my mind was the revealed truths, or fallen trees, or believing this man who made my body thrum was the enemy. In that moment, an even more terrifying realization washed over me. Brad had somehow become my liberator.

The kiss was perfect... that was until he gently gripped my wrists and broke away. Stuck in a lustful daze, I chased him, searching for more, until he said, “Sheena—”

Mortification slapped me back to reality, replacing any desire that I’d felt a few seconds ago. My cheeks flamed red as I blurted out, “Ugh... I didn’t mean to do that.” Jumping off his lap was even more embarrassing, forcing my pacing to resume. “It was stupid to try and deflect by—”

“Sheena, stop.” He stood and came closer.

“—kissing you,” I went on as if he hadn’t spoken. “You barely can stand being around me. I’m normally not this much of a hot mess. I’ve been so hung up on my life changing, I never stopped to consider how being here is messing up yours.” I finally stopped to regard him standing a few feet away, gripping his hips. “You must think I’m a weirdo, going from bitch mode to emotional mess to practically molesting you when you did nothing but try to console me during a difficult time. I swear, this is not who I am... even when we bicker, I’m not acting like myself. I know it’s pathetic to blame outside influences and the current situation, but I have no other way to explain it.”

Once I finally took a breath and paused, he made one large step, grasped my hands, and asked, “Are you done?” My wordless nod had him continuing: “First of all, I *can* stand being around you. Why do you think I’m here? Secondly, you are entitled to be a hot mess after what you’ve been through.” He paused, seeming to be considering something. I didn’t dare ask or speak, instead waiting for him to drop the rejection bomb. It would serve me right. Anyone could see right through my motive. But when he cupped my face with one hand and skimmed his thumb along my cheek, I stared into his eyes, lost once again. “Sheena, I stopped the kiss because you’re hurting, and I don’t want to use that as an excuse.”

I couldn’t bring myself to look away from him. “An excuse for what?”

He leaned in a touch closer, as though he were telling me a huge secret. “An excuse to console you in a way that makes me want to take things a lot farther than just a kiss.” A smile lifted the corners of his lips when he added, “No differently than the last time you kissed me.” Just as I opened my mouth to speak, he placed a finger over it. “And no, it isn’t just about getting into your pants... if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“It wasn’t, but that’s nice of you to say.”

“It’s the truth,” he admitted proudly, and I smiled for the first time in days. His own smile grew. “Although you do drive me crazy in so many ways, it just makes me want to be around you more. Doesn’t matter if it’s as a sparring partner, a friend... whatever. I didn’t need my arm twisted to be with you when you cleaned out John’s house or to come here tonight.” His

eyes bounced between mine as I processed what he'd just admitted. "I came because I wanted to be here for you. You've had to deal with a lot of shit... and having said that, I know you are emotional right now. I stopped the kiss because I don't want to become another of your regrets."

I wanted to argue he wouldn't be, that some sort of internal switch had flipped that had me realizing he wasn't the nemesis I originally labeled him as. But that would've been my libido talking. Because debating his comment in any way after I'd just spent the last few hours bawling over a man that I never knew had insanity written all over it.

He studied my expression, waiting for something. I gave him that by smiling and nodding. "You're right. I really appreciate you being here, and I lost my head for a moment."

"We both did." Based on the frown that flashed over his handsome features, either he didn't buy my excuse, or he didn't like me using it to begin with. Regardless, the moment between us vanished, allowing malaise to seep right back in.



The punishing wind and rain hadn't let up. Even though I wasn't the least bit hungry, we ended up ordering room service. For me it was the distraction it supplied. We were able to sit at the table and discuss things other than what tethered us.

We talked about his brothers, and how interesting life had been for them being identical triplets in school. He shared how his own father had died from a sudden heart attack, and how John's death hit him even harder because of the similarities. I knew his mother remarried, and his stepdad was a good man. I even knew the truth behind how Max and his wife, Jade, had gotten together, as well as the story with his brother Nate and his fiancée, Amy.

It was nice to listen, get lost in his life, and forget about mine. The disparities between our backgrounds should've made me feel lonely, yet hearing about his somehow comforted me.

Brad must've realized he'd been doing all the talking, because he said, "Tell me about your students."

I watched him pop the last fry into his mouth while a smile automatically lifted my lips. “When the school year begins, normally they’re little tyrants who like to push boundaries and test the waters. But sometime around October, something clicks in their little minds. It’s so rewarding watching them absorb whatever I teach, and more so when they retain it months later.”

“I can tell you love what you do.”

“I do.” I considered the way I left my current class, feeling a bit melancholy. “I’m bummed that I may be missing a lot of their progress, but I’ll get to see them next semester when they begin first grade. Our school has a passing off ceremony on the first day of school. It helps when Kelly and I introduce our kindergartners to their new teachers.” When he continued to silently stare at me, I deflected and asked, “What made you become a bartender?”

“The tips,” he automatically responded.

“Well, at least you’re honest.”

He folded his arms and shrugged. “I bartended in college. The money was fantastic, and while taking business classes, I quickly realized I was good at it. Wasn’t long before I became a manager, and by the time I graduated and moved back to the city, I had enough experience to want to become my own boss.” His gaze cut away for a moment before he added, “Besides my mom helping with money my dad had left her, it was your dad who actually enabled it to happen.”

“You had said he gave you a chance?”

“Yeah. One day on my way home from work, I came across a FOR RENT sign in the window. The sports bar I managed wasn’t too far from there, but that day I took a different street home, and it felt like fate was what had me stumbling on John’s building. I literally dialed the number while staring at the sign. The real estate agent arranged for me to meet with the owner right then and there. Two steps through the door and I knew that was where my bar would be.”

“Was it previously a bar?”

“Yeah... a dump. Really bad, but beneath it all I saw a vision and what could be. The entire time I babbled, your father scowled at me without saying a word. To this day, I feel like I wasted my breath with details such as having a cosigner in my mom, and that I’d work my ass off to do well. I don’t think he cared, and apparently, I did him a favor. Renting it to me spared him from having *to deal with the idiots who had responded to his ad thus far*. Those were his exact words.”

“Right place at the right time.”

“No doubt. Six months later, I moved into one of the apartments on the second floor. Six months after that, I had my grand opening. That day I was scared shitless, but no one would know.” I could easily envision Brad, radiating a sexy confidence, as he always did.

“When did my dad—” I literally stopped in my tracks, having realized I’d referred to John as my dad. Brad’s expression remained even when I continued: “Um... when did you take over your whole floor?”

“That took a fuck ton of convincing. Besides mine, there was only one other apartment rented on my floor. Once the bar began thriving, my brother Nate made a flippant comment about moving to a better building. I had a better idea, and when that tenant decided to move out, I took the opportunity to pitch it to John. He made me suffer and wait weeks for an answer.”

“Well, based on the costs of rent in this city, you must’ve been paying a fortune.”

Brad looked down at his empty plate when he admitted, “Your dad gave me a great deal.” When he returned his focus to me, I could see the admiration he felt clear as day. “That was just the man he was. More interested in things being even-keeled, no complications. The way he finally saw it, I eliminated him having to deal with three other strangers every month.” He exhaled audibly before smiling. “And now the prick made it so I never have to deal with a landlord again.” Before I could comment in any way, he pointed at my plate. “You barely ate.”

“Wasn’t very hungry.” I pushed it toward him. “You want the fries?” He responded by taking my plate and swapping it for his empty one. Amused, I watched him grab the ketchup to douse them.

“Who doesn’t put ketchup on fries?” he asked before shoving a few into his mouth and throwing me his smirk while he chewed.

“It’s gross.”

“What’s gross is putting mustard on a burger,” he argued. “You’ve made it inedible.”

“Whatever. Hey, I have a question. What did you do with John’s gun?”

“Turns out I don’t need to turn it in to anyone. Caldwell said I either obtain a license for it or just hold on to it as a keepsake. If it’s okay with you, I’ll put it in my safe at the bar.”

“That’s absolutely fine. By the way, I spoke to him yesterday,” I admitted, causing Brad’s brows to raise. “Caldwell.”

“What about?”

“You acting as manager. He thought it was a great idea and will work up a formal contract. I also spoke to the tenants.” Surprised with myself, I felt the need to tell Brad about the conversations I’d had with them. He interjected with tidbits about each tenant, like the woman who liked having sex on the roof.

“So it’s a common thing? How old is she?” On the phone she sounded like she was older.

“I don’t know, probably sixty something. The only reason I know is because John found Betty up there on more than one occasion. Your dad nicknamed her the Roof Harlot.”

“Um... eww.”

“I think it’s great,” he admitted with that smirk. “Good for her.”

“I’m not knocking her having sex. Why can’t she stick to her apartment?”

“Because it’s hot.” He leaned on his elbows, drilling his eyes through mine. “Wondering if someone is watching or not makes it even hotter. Besides, John preferred it because his bedroom wall bumps hers. Betty is also a chronic moaner.” I could feel my cheeks heat beneath his stare, and when I looked away, he chuckled. “You’re adorable when you get embarrassed.”

Old instincts had a snippy comeback sitting on the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed it, not wanting to ruin our newfound civility. Instead, I playfully stuck out said tongue. All levity instantly vanished in his expression when our eyes connected. And then he randomly said, “It’s, um... getting late. I should get going.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll pick you up around nine?”

“You don’t have to pick me up. I can—”

“I’m picking you up,” he insisted. “Besides, you need to check out tomorrow, so you can throw your suitcase in my trunk, and when we’re done with the house stuff, I’ll take you to the building.”

“Kelly got to you?”

“She’s right. There’s no reason why you shouldn’t be staying there.”

“For one, there’s no furniture or—”

“I have a guest room,” he said, again cutting me off.

“I’m not staying in your guest room.”

“Relax, She-Dev... ah... Sheena.”

“Nice deflection.” He grinned at me, and I swear I felt a tingle between my legs.

“What I was about to say was, relax, I’m not asking you to move in. You can stay with me until you get furniture and whatever else you need.”

Discussion was closed when he stood to put on his jacket. He then walked to the door, threw me a wink, and left.

And right then and there I had a feeling that everything in my life was about to change, one way or another.

Chapter 16

Brad

Each step from her hotel room into bed had every muscle in my body feeling stretched and tight. Throwing into the mix how my thoughts whirled in disarray contributed to a sleepless night.

My main issue... *she* kissed me.

Again.

Not only did that in itself have me discombobulated, but I'd stopped us from going further. Me. I was well aware that made me sound like a walking hard-on—still, it was true. In my defense, I never had gotten close to a woman who'd been emotional. The entire situation was an anomaly. Never could a female exasperate and arouse me at the same moment.

What the ever-loving fuck was that about?

Without quality sleep happening, I was able to work out, shower, replenish supplies behind the bar, and get paperwork done in my office. I needed to pull some favors to have my shift covered today. Worth it. Besides, wasn't that a perk of being the boss?

At eight thirty, I grabbed a jacket and my keys, flipped off the lights, and headed out the back door to pick her up. It took a few minutes to grab two coffees in the café on the corner, and a few more to retrieve my car from

the garage across the street.

But once I started the drive across town, I'd been so lost in thought that I almost missed the turn where her hotel was located.

After pulling under the portico, I moved past the valet attendant and maneuvered my car away from any traffic due to guests arriving. Since it was still well before nine, I texted Sheena.

I'm downstairs. I know I'm early. No rush.

The bubbles began immediately bouncing before her reply came.

I'll be down in a few.

Those *few* dragged longer than the drive had, but she finally appeared in jeans and a clingy long-sleeved pink T-shirt and sneakers. She wheeled her suitcase behind her, looking around the circular drive. Her hair was up in a ponytail again, revealing the slim column of her neck.

When I honked, she spotted me and smiled. While walking over, I'd gotten out and met her at the back of the car.

"Morning," she said shyly. Except for a light-pink gloss on her lips, her face was as natural as it had been last night. In the daylight, the flecks of green in her eyes practically sparkled, and I could clearly see the faint smattering of freckles over the bridge of her nose that I had never noticed before.

Stunning.

"Hey." I took the bag and tucked it into my trunk. "How are you today?"

"Better," she responded with a firm nod. "I managed to sleep well. Thanks again for last night."

"Stop thanking me. I didn't do anything." When I slammed the trunk shut, I added, "Though I did bring you coffee. Milk and sugar, right?"

"Yes. You remembered." It wasn't a big deal, although the awe written on her face said otherwise. "Thank you." It looked like she was about to say something else but instead walked around to the passenger side of the car. Since she didn't wait for me to open her door, I moved to the opposite side, letting myself in and sliding into the driver's seat. She already had the insulated cup marked with an S in her hand. "I really needed this."

“This will be my third for the day,” I admitted with a grin.

Her head twisted from her cup to me. “You’re being so nice to me. It’s throwing me off.” Her words said one thing, but the grin on her face another altogether.

We proceeded to stare at one another, and back was the crackling I’d felt the night before. Who was I kidding? I had felt it every time I was in her company. However, it now took on a life of its own, and I had no idea how to maneuver through it.

So, like a man, I shrugged and said, “I guess I’ll have to piss you off to balance things.”

“Bring it, Navarro,” she snapped before plastering on a smirk that made my cock swell. It was like she went to bed as one person and woke as another.

“Be careful what you wish for, She-Devil,” I teased, giving it right back to her. The apples of her cheeks tinged pink just as her tongue poked out to moisten her lips. And damn if that didn’t make me get even harder.

Self-preservation mode forced me to look away and start the car. It had more to do with breaking her spell than to get on with our day. But when I made the mistake of inhaling, her rosemary mint scent hit me in such a way I mumbled, “Intoxicating.”

“Did you just say *infuriating*?”

“No...,” I said, affronted, and needing to change the subject, I asked, “Um... music?”

“Sure.”

With a jab of my finger, a classic rock song filled the silence, and we set out to New Jersey.

“My mom loved this song,” she said a bit somberly.

“It is a good one.” Not knowing much about the woman besides that her name was Rita and the impression John’s letter had given me of her, curiosity had me asking, “How old was she?”

“Forty-seven.” Even younger than John.

“Jesus. Far too young to have died.”

“Yeah.”

“How old are you, Sheena?”

“I’ll be twenty-eight in June. You?”

“We all turned thirty-three in November.” Getting back to her mom, I asked, “What was she like?” But when her expression grew sadder, I amended, “We don’t have to talk about this.”

“No, I don’t mind. I like talking about her. She was more like my sister than a mom. She was only twenty when she had me. Appearance-wise we did have the same hair color, same eyes. Our personalities, though, couldn’t have been more different. Mom was a bit more of a free spirit than I am.” A sweet smile spread when she added, “Getting her to commit to something was like pulling teeth. Her standard response was always, ‘We’ll see.’”

That made sense to what John’s letter insinuated. “Did she ever marry?”

“No... but she dated a lot. Never could quite find what she was looking for, though,” she admitted while staring out the window. “It began well. She’d always get this optimistic glow about her every time she met a man she liked. It wasn’t long before she realized they were too clingy or too aloof or too inconsiderate or too indifferent toward me. Still, that never killed her spirit or deterred her from believing she would someday meet her person. Always hopeful something great was coming along. And then she got sick, and that light within her dimmed.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” She got quiet for a bit and then added, “People always think they have time. You probably can relate with your dad dying. Although I couldn’t imagine how awful that must’ve been for you. I had months to prepare myself. Even with John. Sure, the situation was different in every way, but still deep down I felt that one day we would eventually come face-to-face.” As she looked out the passenger window, I heard a sigh before she said, “More regret.”

Unless I asked her a question or made a comment, she remained quiet for the rest of the drive. I was sure to keep the conversation light, nothing too

personal.

No sooner had I turned the car onto her father's street than Sheena released a gasp. My gaze landed on the massive tree that looked like someone had taken a chainsaw through the center of it. Half fell directly onto the second story of John's house. If anyone had been in that bedroom, they wouldn't have made it.

"Oh my God," she said, leaning forward to get a better look out the front window. Although the blue plastic tarp that had been draped over a huge portion of the roof hid the true damage, based on the size, one had to assume it *was* pretty bad. The tree and John's property had been cordoned off with yellow caution tape, and a utility truck worked on the wires it had taken down with it. "Is that John's?" she asked, pointing to an older model Honda whose roof had been crushed by a separate branch. "I don't remember Caldwell mentioning a car."

"No, he hadn't gotten around to buying one yet." I pulled up to the curb across the street, cut the engine, and leaned onto her side to look out the same window.

"Whoever it belongs to, I feel bad."

"I guess that's why we all have insurance." When I glanced at Sheena, her expression made it look like she was on the verge of panic. I took her hand, causing her to swing her gaze my way. "Sheena, it'll all be fixed."

"I know."

"Do you?" I gave her a sympathetic smile while smoothing out the line creasing her forehead.

She leaned into my touch and closed her eyes before replying, "It's not the house. I can't help thinking what could've happened had John been home." Her eyes drilled into mine before she quietly added, "That would've been even more horrific than losing him to a heart attack." It was a grave thought, and one that I didn't want her to dwell on.

So, to deflect, I tugged on her hand and said, "Let's go see if Murphy has any information for us. It looks like emergency services were already here and deemed the house unsafe. There won't be much we can do, so we'll

find a diner somewhere close by to get breakfast and make some calls.”

“Okay” was all I got... until her fingers tightened around mine and she met my gaze head-on. Right then and there, I knew this woman had the ability to ruin me.



After knocking on the Murphys’ door, we ended up setting up shop in their dining room to make all necessary calls. It took one lengthy call to file the claim, and by the end of it we arranged to have an insurance agent come to the house and assess the damage.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Murphy fed us and catered to anything we needed. An hour later, the agent arrived, surveyed the damage, took her photos, and promised to process the claim without delay.

Mr. Murphy was very helpful in giving us names of reputable contractors, two of which came by and would be working out their estimates ASAP. The third would check out the damage the next day, to which Mr. Murphy, or Fred as he kept insisting that we called him, would meet with him, and call us once done.

All in all, the hours we spent in Jersey had been productive, and by the time we arrived at my garage around 4:00 p.m., we were wiped.

“Irony is now that this happened, I’ll be staying in New York for a while after all... but I can’t take any pieces of furniture out of the house to use in the apartment.”

“Well, good thing you’re staying with me.” I half expected her to argue when I took her hand in mine, her suitcase in the other, and led her into the building. That argument finally came when I stopped one flight up and continued to my door. “Brad...”

“Until you get what you need, my spare room is all yours.” I left no room for debate. But this was She-Devil we were talking about.

At my door, she yanked her hand from mine and folded her arms defiantly. “This is a bad idea.”

“Do you have a better suggestion?” I barked, not caring that my anger

came through. When silence followed, I said, “Thought so.”

Instantly, gone was the camaraderie we’d shared all day, and back was that tense, electric, completely confusing thing between us. And I’d be lying if I didn’t admit there was a tiny little voice in the back of my mind chanting that she was right. This *was* a bad idea.

Fuck that voice.

I unlocked the door, leaving it gaping open behind me, and wheeled her suitcase directly to my spare bedroom.

I needed a shower, and not just to clean the stress off my body. This woman drove me to behave like a fucking teenager trying to hide his boner.

Once I deposited her luggage in the guest room, I reappeared to find her hovering near my kitchen island, reading something. John’s obituary naming Sheena Devlin as his surviving daughter. It ran in the paper last week, and I had stalled in giving her a copy, knowing it would upset her. When she looked up at me with glassy eyes, I said, “That copy is for you.” She nodded solemnly. “You okay?”

“Yeah. It’s just strange seeing it confirmed in print like this.”

“I know.” Appearing lost and confused, I changed the subject for her. “The dresser in your room is empty if you’d like to unpack some things. So is the closet. Your bathroom has all you’ll need... towels as well. I have a ton of drink choices in the fridge, including wine and beer. Help yourself. I’m hopping in the shower... and then we’ll decide on dinner.”

“Thank you, but Brad, this is temporary. One night, maybe two. You don’t have to go out of your way to accommodate me... or even entertain me. I’m a big girl.”

I knew her well enough to assume the sudden snippiness could’ve easily been because of sadness that she suppressed. But any sympathy I held, or even patience, vanished when she added, “Maybe it’s best I go back to the hotel?”

“Why do you do that?” I snapped, folding my arms as she had earlier.

“Do what?”

“Make everything a debate? Especially when I’m trying to help you?”

At first, her eyes flashed with anger as she went to respond, until something caused her to smooth out the scowl and sigh. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I do that with you. Normally I’m the most complacent person you’ll ever meet.”

“I must bring out the worst in you,” I teased... kind of. We sort of did that to each other. Who the hell knew what it was in her that caused me to always want a fight? Maybe common sense knew any fight could serve as a prelude to making up. “Regardless of what you may think, I really am here for you, Sheena.”

“I know.” She seemed to consider something and then reached her hand toward me. “Truce?”

“Sure.” I shook it and smirked. “Although this will be our third attempt. Or is it the fourth? I’m losing track.” To be sure the levity remained, I lifted her hand and kissed it. “I’m going to go shower.”

“Me too.”

We both retreated to our rooms. During my shower, I thought about the roller coaster that was our relationship. Up and down it went, usually dictated by whatever vulnerabilities she felt at the moment. But whenever I challenged her, made her see what I saw, she usually came around.

No more than ten minutes later, I yanked on a pair of comfortable sweatpants and headed for the kitchen. Sheena wasn’t there, and while hearing the shower running, I took it upon myself to open a bottle of wine. We could both afford to loosen up a bit. Just as I pulled out menus to choose from, a knock sounded.

Since the only people in my life with a key to get into the building were my brothers and mom, I opened the door, guessing who of the three it was.

Nate.

“I knew it was you.”

“Good work, Sherlock... seeing that Max is in Miami and all.” He pointed a finger and grinned. “So you are alive.” Without invite, he pushed past me into my apartment. “Where’ve you been?”

“Don’t you ever work?” I asked as a response. The man literally had gone from being a workaholic to a slacker after falling in love.

“Don’t you?” he countered. “I came by the bar to see if I could use your SUV this weekend. Amy and I want to attempt camping again, and my poor Jag is still traumatized from the last time.” He plopped his ass on one of my barstools. “But you weren’t there in your usual perch, and your staff had no idea where you were except that you took the day off.”

Hearing the shower turn off caused him to tilt his head like a puppy. “Do you have a chick here?” he asked with another grin. “An ‘afternoon delight’ situation?”

“Lower your voice,” I grumbled. “Sheena is—”

“She-Devil?” he said, cutting me off loudly.

“Can you shut the fuck up? It’s not what you think.”

Not looking the least bit convinced, he settled back and countered. “Then why is she here?”

I quietly explained what had happened since the last time we’d spoken, including cleaning out John’s house, consoling her over the contents of that box, and learning a tree had fallen on the house. I left out anything at all that didn’t involve those specific situations, yet he snickered at me skeptically.

Chapter 17

Sheena

The nice hot shower did wonders. I could feel the tension from our long day at John's house leaving my body and swirling down the drain. And combined with another agreed-upon truce with Brad, things were looking up for the first time in days.

I took a few minutes to call the principal at my school. Except for an email, I hadn't spoken to him since arriving in New York. Mr. Schneider was extremely sympathetic to my situation. He assured me, yet again, that I should take the time I needed and not to worry about my job. We decided during my absence I would read my class a story every Wednesday afternoon via video call. Mr. Schneider then assured me that no matter when I returned, come the fall my new class would be waiting for me.

Knowing I would be seeing their adorable faces made me feel better, and I mentally added visiting the library for books to read them to my list of things to do.

I pulled on a T-shirt and a pair of yoga pants, brushed through my damp hair, and headed toward Brad's living room. But once out in the hall, I could clearly hear two men talking... about me.

"Wipe the smirk, asshole," Brad whispered harshly. "She's really getting it from all ends, and the least I could do is make it easier for her to be

here.”

“Yeah, right,” another man retorted in a normal tone of voice. “I’d believe that load of crap if you weren’t you. No doubt you’re trying to figure out how she can get it from all ends for sure.”

“Fuck off.” A pause came before Brad lowered his voice even more and said, “It’s not like that with her.”

“Yet. We both know it’s a matter of time before you fuck her.”

Having heard enough, I turned to retreat to the guest room, but the floorboard beneath my foot creaked.

I halted... as did the voices.

There were certain mortifying situations in life when one found oneself frozen in a state of *What now?* As I held my breath, waiting for the answer to that question, the voices never resumed, which meant I needed to move—and quick.

But before I could turn around and slink back into my room, Brad appeared around the wall.

“Sheena?”

“I, um...” All words failed me as my eyes focused on his bare chest and traveled down the smattering of hair centered between sculpted pecs, the tiny trail of it leading into a waistband of gray—*very* revealing—sweatpants. I took in the deep V of his hips and his sexy bare feet.

Meanwhile, he stood silently the entire time I eye-fucked him... six seconds, to be exact.

Trying to recover from even more embarrassment, I flipped my gaze back up to his face, my cheeks flaming, and rambled, “I just needed a toothbrush. I must’ve... um... dropped mine in the hotel room, and I, um... looked everywhere. Can’t imagine how I’d forget that. Do you have a spare?” I sounded like an idiot, and the way he stared at me made me even more nervous. “You don’t have to get it now. I didn’t mean to interrupt. I’m sorry, I’ll just... um...”

Shit.

Why bother? Without another word, not that any I had sputtered until then were brilliantly thought out, I turned to walk away, only to be stopped in my tracks when he gripped my arm.

“Stop. Come meet my brother Nate.”

I looked down at the T-shirt and yoga pants I’d thrown on as my hand flew to my damp head. “No, I’m not really dressed—”

Ignoring me, he pulled us into focus, where an exact duplicate of Brad sat. Nate stood from his stool at the island, clearly amused by the situation. And although the face was identical, and the suit he wore molded over a body that seemed to mimic Brad’s, it was the man still holding my hand that had my mouth going dry.

“Nate, this is Sheena,” Brad said, not having released his hold on me.

Nate stretched his hand in the space between us. “Nice to meet you... Shee... na,” he said, the humor he must’ve felt now enhanced by a grin worthy of a toothpaste commercial.

“Same.” I gripped, shook, and released his hand hastily, as though it were a white-hot branding iron. And while I was at it, I slipped out of Brad’s hold as well.

“I heard so much about you,” he went on to say. “Have to admit, you’re nothing like I envisioned.”

I glanced at Brad, who threw a death glare at his brother. “Is that so?” I could only imagine what Brad had said about me.

“Yes. I half expected a cute set of red horns to be protruding from the top of your head.”

“Okay, thanks for coming,” Brad barked, moving right to his brother and shoving him toward the door. Nate chuckled the entire time, until he slammed a hand on the wood before Brad could open it. “Do I get to borrow the car?”

Brad leaned over and snatched a set of keys off the entry table, thrusting them in Nate’s hand, and resumed his mission. “Okay... bye-bye. Don’t get eaten by a bear.”

With that, he slammed the door just as I heard, “Nice to meet you, Sheena!” from the hall.

I should’ve been annoyed, angry even. But for some reason I found the situation funny. Especially when Brad looked at me like he could die. “Sorry about that.”

“No worries, but I do need to go blow-dry my hair so I can refasten the horns,” I said, turning to leave before I rushed toward the man and jumped on his body no different from how a monkey lunged for a tree.

“Whoa... hold on,” Brad said, halting my exit with that same firm hand on my arm. “Just to clarify, what you heard before was just Nate being Nate.”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“Sheena...” He threw me a stern expression. “We both know that isn’t true.”

“So you want to... um... fuck me. . .” Her cheeks reddened before she added, “Whatever. I get how it goes.”

His expression became livid. “How what goes?”

“You’ve been really nice to me, even when I know you don’t like me. It’s what men do.” I turned to leave, and his grip tightened. “What?”

“Don’t *judge* me. I’m not the one who kissed you without warning... twice! Maybe it’s you who wants to take out your resentment by fucking me,” he practically growled, and my eyes dropped to his crotch on their own accord. “Point proven,” he added snidely. “Do you like what you see?”

Again, my gaze dropped, and all I could think about was holding in my hand what I could see. Still, I lied and said, “You’re delusional.”

“Am I? Then why did you kiss me that first night we met?” he challenged. “And again last night?”

I had no comeback that wouldn’t strengthen his argument, so I went with the truth. “The night we met, knowing you knew my dad made me resent you before you even said a word. And then you tried to pick me up, chased after me to the street. I’m pretty sure you wanted in my pants even then.”

“I did,” he interjected.

“You weren’t so subtle about it. So, yeah, part of me thought, *What would it hurt?* You’d never see me again, and if the day ever came that we did meet face-to-face, how satisfying would it be to know I used you. Regarding last night’s kiss, that was merely a result of my emotions getting the best of me. Kissing you helped me forget... so I guess I ended up using you in a different way.”

“And yet I come off as the bad guy?” One brow rose, as did the corners of his lips. “It’s all very calculating, Miss Devlin. My She-Devil nickname is apropos, wouldn’t you say?”

“Screw you.”

“Is that an invitation?” he goaded while his gaze slid over my body like the slow pour of honey. By the time his eyes finally returned to mine, it felt like his hands had joined the journey covering every inch of me. “Your body says yes. You’re not wearing a bra, and your nipples are winking at me.”

Bastard. I covered them up by yanking out of his hold and folding my arms. That maneuver had him full on grinning. It would be so easy to wipe that grin from his face by storming off and moving upstairs. Hell, I’d sleep on the hard floor to spite him. Having said that, based on how my body ached for his touch, it would be easier to give in and get lost in Brad.

And as that debate ensued in my mind, he had to go and say, “Maybe that’s our problem, Sheena. We’re so hot for each other, it’s our libidos that keep trying to pick a fight.”

With that, he molded his hand to readjust himself, and there went my resolve. “Yeah, maybe” flew out of my mouth before I thought better of it. My gaze cutting to that erotic piece of furniture behind him had him turning, and when he realized it was the sex chair I was looking at, that one brow of his rose again... and so did my heart rate.

“What’s going through that mind of yours, Miss Devlin?” The smirk deepened. “Imagining how it would feel while draped over my chaise?” He drilled me with a salacious stare, and I’d never felt so exposed, so vulnerable, and so turned on in my entire life.

He knew it too. Brad Navarro could see right through me. That was proved when he stepped closer, wrapped his arms around my waist to rest both hands on my lower back, and pulled me into his hard body. His *very* hard body.

As his dick nudged against my belly button without shame, the contact instantly set me on fire. I caved, spectacularly, and clasped his face to go all in.

As he had last night, a sexy low moan rumbled through him. This time, the kiss wasn't slow, or sweet, or tender. This time it was a catastrophic explosion of what we each had tried to suppress since the day we'd met.

We were about to cross a line, change everything between us. But in that moment, I really didn't look past his mouth devouring mine. I didn't look past anything that didn't involve his body colliding with mine.

Consequences be damned.



Brad

If she hadn't ventured a kiss, would I have?

Fuck yes... my limit had been met. I couldn't get enough of her lips, and there was no fucking way I would stop it this time.

I'd been a walking erection for far too long. Yes, her smart mouth, a turn-on since day one, had my body coiled and ready to strike. But the combination of the kiss she'd once again initiated, the eye-fuck I received, and those pebbled nipples poking through the knit fabric molding over her breasts all had me striking.

I walked her backward until her legs hit the chair, and in one swift move lowered her onto it and me onto her. The sudden shift caused her to pull away and gasp just before I reattached our lips. My tongue tangled with hers while all the sexual tension that had simmered between us finally came to fruition.

And it was about damn time.

Before either one of us could come to our senses, I slipped my hand beneath her T-shirt and rubbed my palm over one of the nipples that had taunted me. I swallowed her moan and molded my fingers over her breast. When she pushed into my hold, I broke away to lift the knit and latch my mouth around the stiff peak. She was soft and sweet and addicting. I could only imagine how she tasted elsewhere.

As I sucked on her, my other hand slid down to the waistband of her knit pants and sneaked under the fabric. Feeling her damp skin had me instantly lifting my head to ask, “No panties?”

“I dressed in a rush,” she explained with a shrug.

“Well, fuck.” My cock twitched when my fingertips began exploring the flesh pulsing beneath my touch. My gaze remained tethered to hers as I began circling her clit. She closed her eyes and huffed, pressing the back of her head against the leather. “Your body was waiting for this. Yes?” Her eyes flew open, but she said nothing. Our breaths mingled, and our eyes engaged in a wordless debate. “So no then?”

Four seconds later, she said, “Yes.”

That simple word had all hell breaking loose.

I slid a finger into her heat, and she gripped my arm to keep it there. “Fuck, you are so ready for me,” I said while never stopping my hand’s motions.

“Aren’t you as well?” she asked, brazenly molding her hand over my cock with her gaze pinned to mine. I liked this Sheena.

“More than you know.” I pushed into her hold, and that flash of feistiness glimmered in her eyes. Until then, I had assumed the spark in her eyes was combative in nature. But now, as I manipulated her pleasure, I believed the fervent expression had nothing to do with vexation and everything to do with wanting me.

I could’ve played with her for hours, but there was something I needed to do first or I’d bust a nut. When I stopped and stood, she stared at me in shock.

“Don’t move.” With that, I left her there panting and calmly walked to

my room. Less than a minute later, I returned with a condom. Not wanting to waste another second, I dropped my sweatpants, tore open the foil packet with my teeth, and watched her watch me roll it over my length. She looked nervous enough for me to ask, “You can say no at any time, Sheena. Are you sure you want to do this?”

She nodded. “We’re doing this.”

Now that I was bare except for the rubber protection, I needed to see all of her. Her eyes followed me as I came to stand beside the chaise, and then they slid shut when I pinched the hem of her T-shirt and lifted it over her head.

Tossing it aside, I commanded, “Look at me.” Once she did, I tucked my fingers into the waistband of her pants and peeled them off her long, toned legs. I had yet to see them, to really see any of her, and I took my sweet-ass time enjoying the view. Every inch of her skin was flawless.

“You’re stunning.” Her cheeks became rosier as I continued to rake my focus over her body. The more I stared, the more she fidgeted. Adorable. “Although I want to watch you come on my cock, the best position for this chair is from behind.” In one fast motion, I turned her around, and she released a surprised gasp. “We’ll save face-to-face for my bed.” The curve of the lounge forced her ass to be higher than the rest of her. I took another moment to admire the view. From the valley of her lower back to the rise and slope of a perfect peach to the arch of her foot, every inch of her was graceful.

Gripping my cock with one hand, and her ass cheek with the other, I positioned myself at her entrance and teased a bit. “There’s so much I want to do with you, Sheena... but I need to do this first.” With that, I slid in and impaled her with one deep thrust.

I couldn’t help but look down to where my cock disappeared and then reappeared with each piston of my hips. Her perfect ass hit my pelvis with each pump, and a sexy moan filtered out of her mouth. I smiled when her fingertips pressed into the leather upholstery. But then she began moving with her own rhythm, and the smile slipped right off my face.

“Fuck,” I said on an exhale. “You feel perfect.”

Her response, “So do you. Don’t stop.”

“Not even if the building caught fire. Shit... I love this chair... fuck...” My communication then morphed into carnal grunts and huffs of air. Although I didn’t think I’d ever been that deep inside a woman, I still wanted in deeper. The way she tightened around me made it impossible to go slow, and I had to start reciting the alphabet backward to stop from coming too soon.

“Are you close?” I asked through gritted teeth. She gave me a shaky nod, but that wasn’t a good enough confirmation. So I took matters into my own hands, slid my hand beneath her, and ran a finger over her clit. Instantly, her sounds became throatier, her body began pushing harder up against me, and she clenched like a vise around my cock.

That was all it took for me to come like I had never come before. It wasn’t my short dry spell that caused the eruption. No doubt my cock decided to truly let loose because it recognized Sheena was the best fuck I’d had in a very long time.

Who was I kidding?

Probably ever.

That should’ve scared the crap out of me. Even more so when at that moment a realization slammed into my mind no different from the orgasm that had slammed through my balls.

Sheena wasn’t just a hot woman I wanted to fuck once and be done.

She was a smart, sexy woman I wanted to be with for more than just one night. I wanted to wake up with her more than just one morning. I wanted to have her coming on my cock more than just this time.

Never... ever, had that happened to me.

Ever.

Chapter 18

Sheena

Brad may have been only the second guy I'd had sex with, but even my inexperienced body knew that what had just happened was incomparable. Maybe not having been with a man in so long had caused me to be super sensitive to any contact. And I wouldn't doubt that erotic piece of furniture in the middle of his living room played a huge part. But a more likely reason I'd practically orgasmed at his first touch was because of my intense attraction to him.

Regardless of the why behind my epic release, I was certain it would be used as a benchmark for any future ones that I experienced. Yes, it was that good.

So much so, I remained still, trying to gain my bearings. And even during my pleasure-induced haze, I was acutely aware awkwardness could hit at any moment and to plan my escape into the guest room.

That opportunity came when he wordlessly pulled out and removed the condom. Sexy as hell to watch, by the way. Sexier still was how he so confidently stood there in all his naked glory.

While forgetting my initial task of fleeing, my eyes feasted on his ridiculously sculpted chest before following the hair trail right down to the semihard proof of his virility.

Stunning.

After a very thorough perusal I lifted my gaze, and the acknowledgment I received toward my shameless gawk came with his wink. I merely shrugged as desire flooded my insides, overruling any embarrassment that I should've felt.

"Don't move," he gruffly commanded, as he had earlier, and stalked to his kitchen to dispose of the condom. Ignoring his command, I quickly reached for my clothes. But he merely dropped the thing into the trash and walked back toward me, causing my shameless gawking to resume.

When he pulled a chenille throw off the couch, wordlessly lay behind me on the chaise, and covered us both, the T-shirt I held fell to the floor.

"What are you doing?"

"I need to come down from that high." My ego wanted to revel in the fact that he needed a moment because of me, but the more likely scenario leaned closer to it being a typical line that he used. I doubted I was the first woman he'd screwed on that chaise.

Against my logic's better judgment, I relaxed into his hold. Enjoyed it, even. I had no idea where what had occurred between us a few minutes ago would lead... tonight, tomorrow, or even next week. I did know a huge part of me hoped this new phase would continue. That should've scared me since Brad was now in my life, whether I liked it or not.

Sure, being in New York was a temporary thing. But if given the choice between the tense energy we had shared until tonight, or more of the same of what had just happened, I'd take the latter, please. I wasn't a fool.

Feeling every part of his body pressing up against every part of mine served as kindling to a renewed desire for him. And if that weren't enough to have my libido raging in search of round two, the way he kissed my bare shoulder certainly did the trick.

Just as I was about to turn to initiate more, he buried his face in my hair and inhaled. Goose bumps spread over my flesh, which caused him to bring the throw higher over my shoulders. "You're still cold," he said absentmindedly, shifting it so that it covered more of me. Although I was far

from cold, the sweet gesture added the sensation of butterflies flapping in my stomach to all the yearning that pulsed within me everywhere else. “You good now?” he asked, tenderly stroking my arm, oblivious to my plight.

“Yes. I’m great.” I should’ve been embarrassed lying there naked with him, but it surprisingly felt instinctual. I liked getting a glimpse of this romantic side, one that I hadn’t known existed until now. “You?” I asked, debating if I should reach back to stroke him, turn as I had originally planned, or push my butt against him to relay a clear message.

“I’m fantastic.” He continued running a soothing hand over my arm. “Starving, though. What would you like for dinner?” Although it wasn’t food that I wanted, unfortunately, his question made the call as to what would be happening next.

“I’m easy,” I said a bit petulantly. But the moment the words were out of my mouth, I stiffened and clarified, “Foodwise.”

“I was just going to argue that you’re anything but easy, Sheena,” he replied with a chuckle. “But I think that’s part of my attraction to you.”

Ignoring the jab behind his comment, I focused on the part that made my body thrum. “You’re attracted to me?”

“Don’t you think I’ve established that already? And I know you feel the same. You aren’t very subtle about it.”

I scoffed while twisting to stare at him. “How exactly?”

“Well... your eyes flash with intensity. Your cheeks tinge pink.” He skimmed a fingertip across the side of my face before bringing it to my lip. “Your lips part before you moisten them. Just to name a few.”

“And you think that’s all because I’m attracted to you?”

“Without a doubt.”

“You’re delusional.”

“Or very perceptive.” When I fully turned to face him, and tiny lines creased the corners of his eyes as his smile grew, I got caught up in his web. I liked looking at him, more than I should. And the more I did, the more he stared back. But with each second that ticked by, his stare slowly began

losing the humorous edge as a weighty intensity took over. His eyes dropped down to my lips, and when they came back up to connect with mine, he rumbled, “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” I asked, a bit breathily.

“Like in that serious almost angry way of yours. Another thing you happen to do, by the way. But this example poses a problem for me because then”—he ever so slightly pressed his hips forward to prove his point—“I have this to deal with.”

“Then let’s deal with it,” I replied, mimicking his press forward and shamelessly taking the opportunity to reveal what I wanted.

“Oh, we will... but not here, and not in a rushed way. Food first; then we’ll *deal* all night long,” he admitted, retaliating with yet another more forceful prod. With that, he got up off the chaise and said, “Get dressed, and I’ll order dinner. How’s Italian sound?”

“Sounds perfect.” All of it did... having dinner as well as his plans for the rest of the evening.

“Good.” He strolled over to his kitchen and opened a drawer. Meanwhile, I remained right where I was to shamelessly gape at his perfect form for the third time in ten minutes.

While digging through menus, naked as the day he was born, he cut his gaze my way and sighed before having the nerve to say, “I’d appreciate it if you could put some clothes on. It’s distracting, knowing you’re naked over there.” At my silence, he turned to witness my wide-eyed gawk. “What?”

“Um... at least I’m covered.”

After looking down, he grinned and countered, “Touché.” However, he continued rummaging through the paper pile as if we hadn’t just established my point.



After sharing a delicious dinner of salad and pasta, as well as a bottle of merlot, I was feeling no pain. I was also now even hornier for the man.

Stuffed and satisfied, Brad suggested we move to his couch and watch a

movie. Besides the title and the two actors starring in it, I couldn't tell you what it was about. Because my mind was busy reeling with thoughts that what had happened between us earlier would happen again later tonight.

In just a few days he'd managed to break through my defensive wall while leaving a gaping hole where he was able to manipulate my logic at his will. The result had me throwing caution to the wind. By nature, I wasn't a reckless person, but he managed to pull an adventurous edge out of me. It was a strange dynamic between us.

Sure, it could be blamed on having sex, and truth be told it made me want more... so much more. Not just more of *that*. More sharing meals together while talking about our lives. More relaxing on his couch, watching TV. More sexy glances and instigating touches.

Was I so hard up for a man's affection it could cause a tsunami of imagery that would never come true? Probably. I was sure my current state of vulnerability had a lot to do with it as well. But if I was being honest, deep down I knew it was Brad himself having me acting so atypically.

From the moment I'd met him it was instant attraction for me... even as he'd acted like a cocky, arrogant jerk. Witnessing him drop those pretenses drew me in more. Having them reappear every so often when I angered him had me wanting him more. It all made me wonder where things would go from here.

Until that little rational voice inside my head quipped... *nowhere*.

I closed my eyes to sort through my thoughts, and a few seconds later I felt him lean into me. "Wake up."

"I'm not sleeping."

"Yeah? What's happening in the movie?" he challenged. My mouth opening and closing caused him to smirk. "Exactly."

I couldn't very well admit I hadn't paid attention because I was too busy analyzing our behavior and future. So instead I merely shrugged. With that, he grabbed the remote and turned off the TV.

"Time for bed." Those three little words caused my heart rate to spike and nerves to churn in my stomach. "I need you nice and alert," he added,

worsening my predicament.

But wasn't that what I had wanted all night?

Yes.

Now that it was upon us, did it make it any less daunting?

No.

He took my hand and tugged me toward the opposite end of the apartment. Each step we took worsened my anticipation, and once inside the bedroom it mimicked a herd of horses galloping through me. With a flick of a light switch, he turned on the two bedside lamps.

The only time I had seen his room was when he gave Kelly and me a tour. And its masculine energy turned me on now just as it had then. Decorating-wise, it was more of the same modern vibe happening in the rest of his apartment. Everything about it screamed of a sexy, understated luxuriousness. From the cloudlike gray bedding to the black wood furniture, his place was a prime candidate to be featured in a design magazine.

As I took in the details, I cut my gaze at him to see his eyes narrowed on my stoic expression. "Are we doing this?"

Now he asks?

"Yes," I replied matter-of-factly. My nervousness took a back seat to my desire, and short of a meteor smashing through his bedroom window, at this point nothing would stop me.

"Good." His mouth morphed into a smirk. "Just checking." He then pulled me into his arms and began kissing me in a soft, slow, mind-numbing way.

When his tongue slipped into my mouth, and his thigh slipped between my legs, I responded enthusiastically by shoving my fingers into his hair and pushing my body against his. He suddenly stopped, mumbled something that sounded like "fucking hell," and dragged me right over to his bed.

Like a switch flipped within him, he went from unharried to frantic, pulling off my T-shirt and peeling off my yoga pants. There I stood, naked and bare, as his heated gaze licked over every inch of me. He then tucked his

fingers into the waistband of his sweats and shoved them off impatiently before positioning me in the center of his bed.

I watched with heavy lids as he pulled open the nightstand drawer, removed a foil packet, and rolled on the condom. But instead of positioning his hips between my legs, he flattened his body on the mattress, bringing his head between them.

“I just need to do this first,” he said, those green eyes of his searing through mine as he covered my clit with his mouth.

I expected it to feel good, but what I hadn’t expected was for the sensation to travel through me no different from if I’d been electrocuted. It never lessened, not when he changed tactics by slowly lapping over my sensitive flesh, or when he teased me with the tip of his tongue. All of it, every move he made, had that current intensely zapping through my body.

Just when I thought I couldn’t take any more, he slid two fingers inside me. I could feel myself clenching on its own accord as he resumed pleasuring me with his mouth. With each swipe of his tongue, each suck on my clit, each pump of his fingers, my back arched a bit higher off the bed. He placed his free hand on my lower stomach, holding me there and forcing me to accept his oral assault. What he did with that tongue, with that mouth, was straight-up magic.

At some point, I called out his name, or at least I think it was his name. I’d gone into some sort of euphoric trance while he remained determined on his task. Every inch of me went into lockdown as an orgasm the likes of which I’d never had ravished my senses. He didn’t let up until my trembling body slackened from head to toe. Even then, he gave me one more long, slow swipe up the center of my still-quivering flesh before repositioning until his dick replaced where his mouth had just been.

While staring into my eyes, he braced himself by placing his hands on either side of my head before slowly sliding a few inches of his length into me and then pausing.

His doing so caused the orgasm I’d just had to build again enough for me to desperately rasp, “More.”

With that, he pushed in deeper, causing a delicious sensation of being

filled perfectly to course through me. Still, I wanted all of him and wrapped my legs around his torso, prompting him to go deeper still until his hips finally pressed against mine. Again, he paused, but that time I welcomed the delay to adjust to his size. The entire time he'd been penetrating me not only with his dick but also with a fierce stare.

He hadn't even moved yet, but my orgasm was well on its way. And once he did begin pumping his hips back and forth, it was hard for me to breathe and think at the same time.

Five or six thrusts was all it took before I announced, "I'm coming." Although I didn't need to. I already knew he felt it with every plunge based on the clench in his jaw, the piercing glare from his eyes.

He increased the pistons into my body, until he stopped to release a carnal groan before admitting, "Me too." I watched in awe as he came apart because of me. "Christ, Sheena," he growled through gritted teeth, and I knew it kept going for him with every twitch of his body inside mine.

I ignored that part of my brain that wondered how many women had witnessed that same gorgeous display... or how many women had the privilege of being with him in this way. I refused to go down that road while he was still in me.

Instead, I cataloged it all, every expression he made, every quiver of his muscles, every second of this encounter so I'd remember what it felt like to be with Brad Navarro once this thing between us ended.

Chapter 19

Brad

It didn't make sense. Not in the way I'd wanted her body tucked up against mine once we'd finally fallen asleep last night. Not in the way I'd loved seeing her moving around my kitchen making me breakfast. Not even in the way the words *stay here with me* sat on the tip of my tongue when she kissed my cheek before heading out to shop for things she'd need in John's apartment.

I offered to go with her, but she insisted I get on with my regular routine. She was right. Today was Friday, and I owed it to my staff to show up and pull my weight. Instead, I gave her a key to my place, along with the alarm code.

Concerned when I didn't hear from her all day, I shot her a text to be sure she was okay. A quick reply came that she was getting a lot done and all was good.

Once the TGIF rush began trickling in, I became too busy to think of a certain blonde. It'd be easy to say the local televised games were what brought in the crowd, but it was always one thing or another that had New Yorkers choosing Brad's Tavern to unwind.

As the bar became busier, I felt like myself for the first time in days. Having spent so much time with Sheena, or even having her on my mind so

much, wasn't a bad thing... it was a confusing thing. And distraction from all that confusion was a *good* thing.

I looked up from the frosty mug I'd been filling to see Kipper sitting at the opposite end of the bar. Just as Bobby passed her what looked like a soda, I served the beer to my customer and headed over.

Her eyes connected with mine before she said, "Hey, stranger. How are you?"

I waved a hand, indicating the crowd. "Busy." Guilt that I hadn't reached out in so long hit me when I asked, "How are you doing?"

"Good. I was in the neighborhood and came by to say hello. It's been a while."

"It has been." It then registered that I'd seen Kipper on the same day that John and I shared our last lunch together. "I have some bad news. John died."

Her mouth gaped in shock. "Oh no. When?"

"A week after I last saw you."

She nodded, remembering what I just had. "You were heading to his house for lunch when we... um—"

Sparing her, I interrupted, "Yeah."

"How did it happen?"

"Heart attack. Things have been crazed since."

"I'm sure. I'm so sorry, Brad. I know you were close."

"Thanks. So what's up with you?"

"A lot... all good, though." We stared at each other for a beat before she added, "That morning after I left your place, Ken called me." When my brows rose in confusion, she elaborated, "The guy I tried to forget by sleeping with you."

"Oh right."

"Well, we talked, I fessed up, and we sort of got back together." The look on her face confused me more than the dude's name had. Did she think this would upset me? Kipper and I both had declared sleeping together that

night was a mistake.

Wanting to set the record straight, I threw her a bright smile. “That’s fantastic, Kip. If he treats you right, then I’m happy for you.”

Relief caused the frown to slip into her own smile. “Thank you. He does. We were both at fault, and now that we talked it through, it’s been going great. I think we’re heading in the right direction.”

“That’s awesome. Good luck to you guys.” A few new customers hovering near Bobby had me adding, “I’ll be back.”

For the next few minutes, I filled one order after another before an older customer asked for a Bloody Mary. “Bob, I need to run to the kitchen,” I called out.

As he threw me a thumbs-up, I retreated to grab the ingredients I’d need, only to be assaulted the moment I stepped through the door. “We have a problem,” my cook Jason announced while pointing to the fryer. “Busted.”

“What do you mean *busted*?”

“Oil won’t heat,” he said with a scowl. “That means no fries, nuggets, sticks, poppers, churros, wings—”

I raised a hand to stop him from going through most of the menu. “Got it... no fried foods. I’ll tell the waitstaff.” Could be worse. The grill, fridge, or oven could’ve busted instead.

Suppressing a sigh, I whipped up the Bloody Mary and then made my rounds to the four waiters and two waitresses working tonight, announcing the change in menu. Deciding to sidetrack to my office, I rummaged through a file cabinet in search of the warranty information as a reminder to call for a repair in the morning. While there, I typed up and printed a prepared apology that I’d have my waitstaff hand our customers along with menus. Who knew how long it would be before the fryer was back in working order?

By the time I slipped back behind the bar, Kipper was chatting with Bobby.

“Here he is,” Bobby said as I approached. “Speak of the devil.”

“What did I do now?” My gaze bounced between them.

“Well... maybe the better question should be who did you do?” Bobby replied with a grin. “You just missed Trixie.” Instantly, my eyes darted around the bar, hoping she’d truly left. Picking up on my paranoia, Bobby added, “Once I introduced Kipper as your girlfriend, hoping that would give her the message, she took off.”

“Good thinking,” I said, clapping a hand on his shoulder. Bobby knew the deal with her and had just done me a huge favor. “What did she say?”

“Well, first she wished Kipper luck before calling you a prick... and then she stalked away a few steps, came back to add... and I’m quoting... *you’re nothing more than a man-whore who can’t keep it in your pants.*”

Bobby paused and Spud, who had given up his stool for Sheena when she’d first come to the bar, and one of my regulars, piped in next. “Don’t forget the part where she said she hopes your dick shrivels up and falls off. Oh, and that you catch perpetual crotch crabs.”

“Whose side are you on?”

“Yours.” The ass lifted his beer in a toast.

“Needless to say, I think she finally got the hint,” Bobby tacked on while suppressing a grin. “So you’re welcome.”

“Yeah... thanks.”

I knew having a one-night stand with her was a stupid move. But like an idiot, I’d made an even bigger mistake by taking her to my cousin’s wedding a few months ago.

My reasoning was twofold: to avoid my mother from setting me up, and to avoid going stag when even my brother Nate had a date. That invite had her assuming more would come of our relationship. Although I repeatedly explained to her that I wasn’t interested in dating anyone, that woman refused to accept reality.

Thank God the fryer broke, otherwise I would’ve been verbally berated in my place of business. I’d missed quite a tantrum but based on how most of those sitting at the bar continued to grin at me, they had witnessed the entire spectacle.

Roger, another fixture at my bar, raised his tequila shot and said, “To the

man-whore we all know and love.”

I was used to the ball-busting, and I flipped the finger to anyone around him who echoed his words and followed suit while saying, “You can all fuck the right off...”

That was until a head of platinum-blond hair sitting a few seats away caught my attention... and the familiar pair of emerald eyes holding mine caused me to freeze like a deer in headlights.



Sheena seemed fine after I acknowledged her presence. And while I worked the bar, she laughed and chatted with Kipper and Bobby while sipping a glass of wine.

However, the moment I stepped away to take a piss, she took off.

By the time I closed the bar and walked into my apartment, it was very late. She had left a lamp on for me; otherwise, there was no sign of her. Wondering if she was awake, I tiptoed down the hall toward my guest room. But upon seeing the door closed, I headed to my room to shower.

The shower that usually relaxed me at the end of a long day failed to do so. And I tossed and turned all night, never falling into even a fitful sleep.

Come morning, the apartment was eerily quiet. It was close to 9:00 a.m. once I washed up and set out to make breakfast. Before doing so, I walked to her room to see if she was up. The door was wide open, the bed was made, and Sheena wasn't there. Her suitcase remained, though. I guessed that was a good sign. Still, where could she have gone so early?

There wasn't a doubt she was avoiding me. Who could blame her?

Hours after we fucked she'd discovered I had quite the reputation. It wasn't something I could deny. I liked my social life and never made excuses for it. Yet there I was hating that she'd witnessed all the ball-busting.

While feeling ashamed, I walked into my kitchen and noticed a note she'd left on the island.

Hey...

The third contractor we're waiting on an estimate from called me last night and requested I meet with him first thing. I'll keep you posted.

S.

After making a much-needed cup of coffee, I decided to work out in hopes of relieving my bottled-up tension. But as I walked through my apartment over an hour later to take a shower, my insecurities got the best of me when I still hadn't heard from her, and I texted:

How's it going?

It took her a few minutes to respond.

Good. He wanted to show me a house nearby with a different dormer design that could reduce the cost.

That's great. Do you need me to come out?

Her reply came quick.

No... all good.

With that decided on, I got to work. Even though the bar wouldn't open for hours, the fryer still being broken, combined with the piles of paperwork on my desk, proved I had plenty to do.

After securing a repair person, miraculously, I plowed through a ton of the admin stuff, made the calls I needed, placed orders, and even paid bills to lessen the load on my bookkeeper.

Just as I locked my office door to check out the stock situation behind the bar, a knock came from the front door. When I opened it, a man holding a clipboard smiled.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"I have a delivery." A huge, double-parked truck caught my attention. It being Saturday meant I wasn't expecting any deliveries. Regardless, they wouldn't be arriving at the front door.

"For?"

He glanced down and said, "Sheena Devlin. We tried buzzing the

apartment number, but no one answered.”

“She isn’t home. I’ll let you in.”



As I waited for the men to bring up Sheena’s furniture, I busied myself moving a bunch of bags that she had plopped in the center of the living room. From the looks of them, they were kitchen and bath items she’d need.

It took a few trips for the delivery men to carry in the pieces. Once a couch, small coffee table, a lamp, a dinette set, and a small dresser had been unwrapped and positioned, the man I now knew as Hank said, “All done.”

“What about the bed?”

He skimmed his paperwork and began shaking his head. “No bed ordered.”

“Okay, thank you, guys.” I was in the middle of tipping them when Sheena walked in.

“Hey,” she said, her gaze bouncing between us and the furniture while mine gobbled up her hot body... and a quick glance revealed the two men beside me were doing the same. I strategically placed myself within their line of sight, and one raised brow had them both darting their eyes away.

Only she could make well-worn jeans, Chucks, and a long-sleeved white T-shirt sexy. Of course, the highlights in her hair, full pink lips, and sparkling green eyes played a huge part.

“The delivery wasn’t supposed to come until after three,” she claimed, oblivious to the ogling.

Hank again skimmed his paperwork. “Sorry, miss. We don’t have that directive. Brad was very helpful, though.” A jerk of his head toward the door set them both in motion as he added, “Bye, folks.”

“Thank you,” she called out to them, and after the door slammed shut, she asked me, “How much did you tip them?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Her lips instantly twisted into a scowl. “Brad.”

“Sheena.”

When I gave her a wink, she gave me a sigh. “Thank you. I’m so sorry I wasn’t here.”

“Again... it wasn’t a problem. Everything go okay at the house?”

“Yeah. I got his proposal, and after reading through the three estimates we have, I think I like him the best. He said he could start ASAP, which is a plus. I’ll call him later to offer him the job.”

“That’s awesome. The sooner the better.” As awkward silence fell between us, I glanced around the room and said, “The stuff you bought looks great in here. I had them put the dresser in your room. Is there more coming from another store?”

“No. I still need to get some kitchen stuff, but I got everything I need furniture-wise.”

“What about a bed?”

Her eyes held mine before she said, “I planned on getting an air mattress today.”

Was she serious? “Why an air mattress?”

“I figured this stuff could be left here for whoever rents the place. But bedrooms are personal, and it’s silly to waste money on a set that I’ll only need for a few weeks or so.”

There were so many things in that one sentence that bothered me, but I began with, “You plan on sleeping on an air mattress?”

“Well, yeah.”

Fuck, I shouldn’t have cared if she slept on the damn floor, but it was proved otherwise when I barked, “You’d rather that than sleep at my place?”

I watched as she sighed and sat on one of the chairs at the table. “Brad, I appreciate you helping me these past few nights, but I think it’s best I stay up here.”

“Why?” When her eyes widened, it seemed that my question had caught

her off guard. Undeterred, I folded my arms, waiting for an answer.

But when all I got was “Because,” I pushed the issue.

“This has to do with what you heard last night.” It wasn’t a question... and there wasn’t a doubt in my mind that *wasn’t* the real reason behind her acting this way. The awkwardness, the avoiding me, all pointed to my theory.

“Brad, you don’t owe me an explanation. Hell, you owe me nothing.”

“Yet you’re using what you heard as an excuse.”

“No, I’m not. We’re complicated, and I think it best we keep our relationship on a friends-only basis.”

“No.”

“No?” she asked incredulously.

“No.”

My arrogant response flipped that fiery switch within her, and she rose and folded her arms in the same way. “I say yes. It was a mistake.”

“That’s a lie.”

“A lie?”

“That’s right. I happened to have enjoyed fucking you, and I know you enjoyed being fucked. But putting that aside, and despite what you heard about me, it was *more* than just a good fuck... for me at least. And I want to do more of that with you, along with other things. I want to spend time with you, in and out of a bedroom.” I closed the distance until we were inches apart. “That’s not normal for me, but I have no problem admitting to all that because it’s the truth. Does it confuse me? Fuck yeah. Doesn’t matter, though, because I like you, Sheena... more than just as a friend. Will you admit the same and stop lying to yourself?”

A searing battle ensued between our gazes before she snapped, “I’m here temporarily, and there’s no point in continuing something that will be ending soon. Except for owning this building together, we have nothing else in common. Not to mention we barely know each other.”

“I disagree. We know the important things. But if you need fun facts, then my favorite color is black, my birthday is November sixth, I hate

mushrooms, and my favorite movie is *Goodfellas*. You prefer jeans and Chucks as a form of fashion, you hate ketchup, and the first sign that you're pissed off comes when you fold your arms." I poignantly stared at her posture to prove my point. "But none of that means a hill of beans. If you enjoy being with me, and I enjoy being with you, then that's the answer. Who knows what will be in a few weeks, a few months? Your father dying without warning proves we need to enjoy every day we have, take one day at a time, and trust that what will be will be." I pulled her into my arms, and shockingly, she didn't resist. "Besides, it's not like you live in Australia. Last I checked California was a short plane ride away."

Again, her eyes widened in surprise while I schooled my own. Where the fuck that came from, I had no idea. But now that I'd admitted there could be a future between us, for whatever reason, I didn't regret it. "Do you like spending time with me, Sheena?"

"Yes."

"Then how is this a mistake?" When she didn't look convinced, I kissed her chastely. "Here's an idea... we'll enjoy the time we have together and figure the rest out later. Yeah?"

"But—"

I placed a finger over her lips. "No *but*. It's simple. We like how things are going, right?" She nodded. "So then we have every right to enjoy it and keep it going. Right?" The next nod came hesitantly, forcing me to remove my finger and peck her lips again.

It was then the frown smoothed out as she replied, "You should've been a lawyer."

"Nah... I leave that to Nate. I'm pretty sure having a stick up your ass is a requirement." I kissed her again and loved how she relaxed into it. But when we pulled apart, I stared into her eyes and for good measure added, "And there's no fucking way you're sleeping on an air mattress."

Chapter 20

Sheena

When I arrived in New York a few weeks ago, the last thing I'd expected was to be in a relationship with—scratch that... *living* with, Brad Navarro.

I'd like to say it kind of just happened, but that wouldn't be entirely true. In hindsight, there has always been an undeniable pull between us. It was only a matter of time before it became too strong to fight.

Lord knew I tried.

Truth be told, the next morning I regretted giving in to that pull. Mainly from fear of how much more I now desired him. And after hearing his customers joking about Brad's promiscuousness... *hours* after we had sex! How could I not get spooked? I then knew sleeping with him was a huge mistake and said as much the next day.

He wouldn't have it.

Needing to vent, I called Kelly, and not surprisingly, she touted that everything he said had made sense. I *was* attracted to him. I *did* like hanging out with him. I *really liked* having sex with him.

Regarding what loomed in our future, Kelly posed the question—*Did any relationship have a guarantee of a future?* If that was the benchmark among singles, no one would make it more than a few dates. She defended

his past, reminding me that of course a hot bachelor like Brad would be a “man-whore,” as he’d been called. What mattered was how he treated me in the here and now. And the last point she made was that I had every right to enjoy my time in New York, with Brad’s help.

Kelly did a lot of the talking... but Kelly was right... because now, after having spent a really nice week together, I had no regrets. That didn’t mean I still didn’t worry about what would be. In such a short amount of time, I’d managed to fall under his spell. What would happen to my heart weeks in?

My time in New York depended on the renovations on John’s house. The contractor said the work would take six to eight weeks to complete. That brought me to July... that was a hell of a long time to be under Brad’s spell. But again... I liked being there.

He and I kind of slipped into a routine. Each morning he’d wake me up after his workout and we would have breakfast together. During the day we’d visit sights I had yet to see in New York, or he’d help me with issues that popped up regarding the house repairs. Late afternoons, he’d go to work, and I’d keep busy by picking out flooring and paint colors. Or I’d work on my class plans for the upcoming school year. I even delivered a fruit basket to the Murphys as a thank-you for all their help.

In the evenings, I’d go to the bar, have dinner, and spend time with Brad. I loved watching him interacting with his customers while flirting with me. After a few hours, I’d then head up to his apartment to read or watch TV. I’d try to stay awake until he got in, but I always failed. He didn’t mind, claiming I needed the nap to catch a second wind for the sex we would then have.

Lord knew I was no expert, but the sex was fantastic. It didn’t matter if we bickered or even fought, and we could really duke it out, because when we intimately came together, everything clicked. Brad was a different person during those times, and he made me never want to leave. But I had to leave, and that reality hung in the back of my mind like an anvil about to drop.

I wasn’t sure why I’d bothered to stock John’s apartment with kitchenware, furniture, and bathroom essentials. Except for using it as a home office space, I haven’t spent a night there all week. It did come in handy

when I video called my class to read them one of their favorite stories. The substitute teacher filling in had them all make cards, which she planned to mail to me. I loved those few hours on Wednesday, and I couldn't wait to repeat them.

The best part of my time with Brad was all our chats. In one week, he solved my claim that we didn't know each other well.

From my first memory to the moment that I stepped off the plane last Valentine's Day, he wanted to know it all... including the real reason I kissed him that night. I repeated that resentment made me want to use him while admitting that I'd also been insanely attracted to him... and that was why I'd chickened out.

He considered my excuse before claiming he was glad that we hadn't slept together, because that might have sent us on a different path, and he liked where we were now. Needless to say, I swooned over his admission.

The more I got to know him, the more I liked him. He shared stories of the trouble he and his brothers had gotten into. He described their personality differences. And since I already met Nate, he even went as far as saying he couldn't wait for me to meet the rest of his family.

Instinct almost had me saying—*you can't be serious*. Really, the man I was slowly getting to know was worlds apart from the person I assumed he was. Sure, we still bickered and argued, but the difference now was it usually led to fantastic makeup sex.

Things progressing as quickly as they had made no sense. It was hard to trust it or not question it... harder still to believe that anything would come of it. But Brad was right. If I had to be in New York, there was no reason I couldn't enjoy spending time with him.

When I emerged from the bathroom, he stood staring out the window, and I took a moment to appreciate his naked torso, the jeans that molded over his ass, his long legs, and his bare feet. Brad was a yummy package.

And then, as if sensing me, he twisted my way. "Hey." It was time for him to ogle me as his gaze raked over my body. "You look beautiful."

Looking down at the pink sweater and jeans, I smiled. "Beautiful? More

like comfy.”

“I say beautiful,” he countered before pulling me into his arms and burying his nose in my hair. “Christ, I can’t get enough of this scent. I smelled you before I heard you.”

“It’s my mom’s. She used to make soaps, shampoos, and lotions.”

He straightened as his eyes widened. “Really?”

I nodded. “It started as a hobby, but after so many of her friends loved the stuff, she began selling it at the farmers’ market for extra cash.”

My admission caused him to take another sniff. “It’s addicting.”

“It is. I’m glad she taught me how to do it. I feel like she left a piece of herself behind, a physical reminder. I can send you some once I get back to California.”

It took him a moment to respond. “That sounds great.” There was something he wasn’t saying. I could see it in his eyes. But before I could ask him, he kissed me chastely. “Speaking of reminders, today is the first Sunday of the month.”

It took a few seconds for it to click. “Your monthly lunch date with my father.”

“Yeah. It’s strange. Seeing him has been a constant for so many years, I don’t know what to do with myself.”

He went to say something else, but it seemed that he thought better of it. This time I asked, “What?”

“I don’t want to upset you.”

“Upset me how?”

“By talking about him.”

Was that what he’d been hiding? His words caused a lump to form in my throat, mainly because of what we’d both lost. And I wrapped my arms around his torso before saying, “You’re grieving too. Please don’t hold anything back because of me.”

“I wasn’t sure what you were feeling, and I’ve been afraid to ask.” He

reciprocated the hug and kissed the top of my head. “After you read his letter, you haven’t really talked about him... and that’s understandable.”

“Sure, I’m still carrying a lot of regret regarding my dad, but the bitterness is gone. I have been thinking about him a lot, though.” The intensity of his stare caused me to look away, and I added, “I tend to keep things in. Sorry, it’s just the way I am.”

“You’re much like your father.”

A sad smile tipped up my lips. “You’re right. I am.”

He cupped my face with one hand to bring my eyes back to his. “Sheena, you don’t have to apologize for who you are. But if you did want to talk about my relationship with him, or vent about your lack of one... well, you can. No matter what it is.”

“Thank you.” When he gave me a nod, I admitted, “You know, you continue to surprise me.”

An adorable smile lifted the corners of his lips. “Everything these past few weeks surprises me,” he claimed before winking. Instinct had me wanting an elaboration as to what he meant, but the tenderness in his eyes served as all the information that I truly needed for now. “What do you want to do today?” He pointed out his window. “It’s a nice day.”

“We could have lunch in honor of John.”

His brows rose a bit. “Really?”

“Yeah. Where did he like to go?”

Another small smile spread. “He really didn’t have a favorite restaurant and preferred eating at his place. When we did go out, he liked supporting local places that most New Yorkers would consider dives. Said they always had the best food because they needed to work harder for the business. But his absolute guilty pleasure was sitting on a bench eating hot dogs on a beautiful day in Central Park... that was before he moved to Jersey and went organic on me.” Brad searched my expression before asking, “How does that sound?”

Suddenly I wanted to feel that connection to my father through doing something that he loved to do. “Hot dogs in Central Park sounds perfect.”



Brad insisted we take the subway because any respectful New Yorker knew how to navigate the metro system. After emerging at Rockefeller Center, we walked our way uptown, making a few stops along the way, including at the fountain in front of the Plaza. The looks he received from females hadn't gone unnoticed by me. And it wasn't the jeans, green T-shirt, or beige jacket that he wore. Brad had a face that should grace magazine covers.

Hand in hand, we navigated Fifth Avenue and all the people who seemed to be heading to the same place we were. The lovely May weather must have pulled them out in droves.

"If you want, we can check out the zoo. It's just up ahead."

"That sounds fun."

"But first our gourmet lunch." Brad led me to a hot-dog vendor's cart parked right outside the entrance and asked, "Ketchup, right?" The moment I scrunched up my nose, he chuckled and said to the vendor, "Four please... with mustard."

"Four?"

"You can't just eat one." He threw me a wink while pulling out his wallet. "Soda or water?"

"Water."

"Two waters," Brad tagged on, giving the man a twenty-dollar bill and adding, "Keep the change."

The vendor thanked him with a smile. Meanwhile, I watched skeptically as he fished out a hot dog from what looked like a vat of water, plopped it on a bun, smeared it with mustard, wrapped it in foil, and repeated the process.

Soon enough, he passed Brad four aluminum rolls and the two ice-cold bottles. I guessed the price didn't include a bag.

With our lunch in hand, we entered the park and found an empty bench facing the pond. Brad lifted two of the packets and handed me one. "You're in for a treat." He unwrapped his, waited for me to do the same, tapped mine, and we both dug in.

“It’s really good,” I said after swallowing my first bite.

“I’m honored to have popped your dirty-water-dog cherry,” he casually admitted just before I went to take another bite.

With the thing suspended an inch from my mouth, I narrowed my eyes suspiciously. “Dirty-water dog?”

“Yep. That’s what they’re called. If I told you that beforehand, you wouldn’t have tried them.” He took another chomp, leaving a little nub of bun between his fingertips. “Don’t think about it too hard,” he touted before popping the bread nugget into his mouth.

I stared at the thing as though something would crawl out of it. “Maybe you should have waited until I finished mine to disclose that fun fact.”

“They’re perfectly safe. The water temperature probably kills any of the bad stuff.” He unwrapped his second hot dog, taking half of it with one bite, and through chews mumbled, “Besides... it’s not like the headlines... are filled... with New Yorkers dying... from hot-dog consumption.” An adorable grin spread as he nudged me with his elbow. “Just eat it.”

With our eyes tethered, I took another taste. It really was yummy, and I finished it, understanding how easy it was to eat more than one. But when I looked up, I saw his stare remained focused on my face and was becoming much more intense. I asked, “What?”

Wordlessly, he reached and swiped his thumb over my bottom lip, slipping it into his mouth to lick off what appeared to be mustard. He wasn’t done and leaned closer to give me a languid kiss. It went on, becoming more intense, and he managed to work me up right there on a bench in a crowded park.

“Ahem.” We both twisted toward the interruption to see a pretty brunette pushing a carriage beside an identical duplicate of Brad. “Fancy seeing you here,” he said before offering his hand to me. “I’m Max.”

“Sheena. It’s nice to meet you.”

“I’m Jade,” his wife said next, with a huge smile. She dipped her head a bit and added, “And this is Michael.”

“I love that name.”

“After our dad,” Brad offered.

The adorable toddler looked up at me with big brown eyes exact to his mother’s. Drawn to him, I squatted to his level. “Hi, Michael.” My soothing tone of voice, combined with a soft tickle beneath his chin, had him giggling. “He’s precious,” I said to his parents. “How old is he?”

“Almost fifteen months... born on Valentine’s Day.”

“You make beautiful babies.”

“Thank you.” Jade stared at her husband lovingly as she rubbed a bump that barely showed beneath her sweater. “Our second is coming in late July.”

“Congratulations!” Turning my focus to Michael, I tickled his belly while saying, “You’re going to be a big brother.”

When he opened his arms and reached for me, Jade’s face lit up. “You can pick him up if you’d like. Although he may not want you to put him back then.”

“That’s absolutely fine.” I didn’t need my arm twisted and reached in to unsnap Michael from the stroller. The moment I raised him in my arms, his chubby little hands cupped my face to plant a wet kiss on my cheek, and I laughed. “Oh, thank you so much,” I said before tickling again.

Jade laughed as well. “He just learned how to give kisses.”

“Should I worry?” Brad asked, coming to stand beside me to give his nephew a kiss on his cheek.

“Yes, you should,” Jade responded with a wink. “He loves pretty girls.”

“Duh. . . he’s a Navarro,” Max quipped, planting a kiss on his wife’s lips.

“Well... not to be outdone...” Brad followed suit and kissed me as well. It was tame compared to the kiss they’d witnessed a few minutes earlier, yet I still felt awkward. That was until I saw a stunning smile spread over Jade’s face as she had some sort of silent conversation with Brad that had him rolling his eyes.

While Michael played with a strand of my hair, Jade asked, “Have you guys been here long?”

“Just a few minutes.” I nosed toward our lunch on the bench. “Brad introduced me to dirty-water dogs.”

“Big spender,” Max said.

“Shut it. We’re having lunch in honor of John, and this was something he liked to do.”

Sympathy immediately altered their expressions. “Oh right... it’s the first Sunday.” Max filled in the blank and he looked at me. “We’re so sorry, Sheena.”

“Thank you.” I had no idea how much they’d been told, and based on Brad referencing me to Nate as a she-devil, who knew what he had said to this brother? I didn’t blame him when not long ago I considered Brad to be the enemy. As a distraction I tickled Michael’s belly again, causing him to squirm in my arms as more giggles came.

“Once Sheena eats her other hot dog”—Brad gave me a conspiratorial look—“I’m going to show her the zoo.”

“That’s where we’re heading,” Jade said enthusiastically. “Why don’t we go together?”

“Unless you want to be alone,” Max tagged on, looking down at his wife.

“Oh... right... sorry.” Jade leaned closer and loud whispered, “But this is a first, and I’m so happy to have met you that it would be great to get to know you some more.”

Before I could ask, *First what?* Brad sighed and said, “You have diarrhea of the mouth...” Jade merely stuck out her tongue at him, unfazed by his scowl. My brows shot to my hairline, assuming he would’ve nixed the idea. He further shocked me by asking, “Is that okay with you?” A lingering questioning expression forced him to add, “Going with them?”

“Of course.”

“Okay, good.” After shoving the remaining hot dog in the pocket of his jacket, he grabbed the waters off the bench. “Let’s go to the zoo with Michael, Max, and Miss Annoying.”

Meanwhile, I was left with so many questions I planned to ask him the moment we were alone.

Chapter 21

Brad

The zoo experience lasted only through the penguin and sea lion exhibit before Michael had had enough. During that short amount of time, Sheena and Jade hit it off.

Not wanting to part ways yet, another invite from Jade came when she asked us to join them at their apartment so the girls could continue getting to know one another. A tiny red flag instantly sprang up in my mind. No doubt Jade running into us would now have her foaming at the mouth that I was with someone. And if it were anyone else there with me, I would've set my sister-in-law straight. Then again, I wouldn't be in that park on a Sunday afternoon with anyone else.

And that realization caused another red flag to wave frantically in my mind.

But since I had a few hours before I needed to be at the bar, there we were, walking back to their apartment like they hadn't just met Sheena an hour earlier.

Their instant connection shouldn't have surprised me. Putting aside her she-devil tendencies, Sheena was a sweet person. Truth be told, that ire she reserved for me was probably why I was so hot for her then and now.

Still, it caused a weird sense of pride to have my brother, sister-in-law, and nephew all smitten with her. In fact, Michael was the most smitten.

I saw firsthand how good she was with kids, and imagining her teaching a class of kindergartners caused that same pride to swell. Did I even have the right to be proud of her? Not even three weeks ago, our connection was based on sarcasm and resentment. Two weeks ago, we became some-what civil but considered each other nothing more than business partners. And now here we were living together, having sex, being a... dare I say... couple?

Coming off a phenomenal week with her made me antsy for more. Was that how commitment happened? One day you were convinced of your certitude, the next a little voice inside your head kept chirping, "*You want more.*"

It was hard to wrap my brain around the progression we had made in such a short amount of time. Even more baffling was how being with her didn't spook me. Being obsessed with her was what had me terrified. I couldn't blame the sex, because even that first night when I didn't know who she was, something had drawn me to her. Once we met, and began fighting, the pull only intensified. And now that we have had sex, shit, I couldn't get enough. I didn't mean just in bed, although those times were mind-blowing. In general, even when I was at the bar, and she was elsewhere, Sheena would be on my mind.

Red flag number three.

After arriving at their apartment, we settled in the den. Sheena and I sat side by side on the couch as Max placed his son down near the pile of toys in the corner.

"Can I get you guys something to drink? Iced tea..." Jade named a few other choices.

"Iced tea sounds great," Sheena said before I nodded. Expecting Michael to lose his shit because his mother had left the room, he instead chose a red toy car and waddled over, offering it to Sheena.

"Thank you," she said, accepting it with a stunning smile before slipping onto the floor to play with him. Mesmerized by her, I couldn't stop staring until my gaze cut toward Max.

One brow rose as his lips quirked into a smirk, and in that expression, I knew a third degree was coming the second we were alone. Of my two brothers, I was glad it was Max and not Nate who saw this atypical behavior. That hypocritical prick would never let me live this down. True, I'd always proudly bragged that my anti-relationship gene made the divorce attorney's pale in comparison. This would only fuel him more.

When Michael pointed to the other toys in the corner, Sheena followed him over to the stash as Jade returned and placed a tray holding our drinks on the table.

"He conned you into playing?" she asked Sheena, joining them on the floor.

"Oh, I went willingly." A few seconds later, Michael's face turned beet red just before that unmistakable sound came from wrecking his diaper.

"Dude... that's *not* how to impress two pretty girls," I said, and *said* girls laughed.

"I'm going to go change him." Jade picked up the little monster, but when Michael reached for Sheena, Jade amended, "I guess you'll join us?"

"Absolutely." Despite the disaster in his pants, Sheena took my nephew into her arms and followed Jade down the hall.

"Wow," Max said once we were alone. "You've got it bad."

"I like looking at her. She's stunning."

"She is, but it's more than that."

"More than what?"

"Just her looks. It's written all over your face. Who are you and what have you done with my brother?" And here came Max's version of a third degree. "Don't get me wrong. I love seeing you like this," said the mush.

Pretending ignorance, I snapped, "Like what?"

"Like..." He considered his reply. "You're gaga over her. It looks good on you. Although I'm super confused. From what Nate said, you two hated each other." Max leaned in a bit and lowered his voice. "She's far from a she-devil, though."

Fucking Nate.

“She was going through a hard time,” I defended.

“Of course. Anyone would understand that. But... she’s here temporarily, just lost a father that she didn’t know, and is vulnerable. Keep all that in mind, Brad.”

“There’s nothing to keep in mind.” I stared at a face identical to mine. “I happen to like hanging out with her, and she feels the same. Besides, we’ve been very open and honest with each other.”

“Meaning, you told her you only do physical?” More like she found that out on her own, but I said nothing. Now wasn’t the time to get into all the confusing contradictions clogging up my mind. Taking my silence as a yes, he added, “Well, it sounds like you two have it figured out. Just don’t hurt her.”

Part of me resented the assumption that I’d hurt her, while the other part couldn’t argue the possibility. It was rare for Max to give me advice on relationships. Then again, there was never a point, because I never really had one.

Max has always been a romantic, and before Amy, Nate only engaged in fuck-lationships, as he called them. So, of the three of us, he dubbed me the relationship virgin.

But before I could defend myself, Jade came in holding that baby monitor thingy, sans Michael and Sheena.

“He’s napping?” Max asked.

“Yeah. He could barely keep his eyes open.”

She placed the thing down as I asked, “Where’s Sheena?”

“Bathroom.” That ever-present smile my sister-in-law has been sporting reappeared when Max patted his lap and she settled on it. Leaning closer to me, she whispered, “I love her, Brad... and she is not evil.”

“I can’t help that Nate gossips like a girl,” I countered, ignoring the tiny fact that I had ragged to him about Sheena.

“Well, I’m glad we ran into you guys,” she went on to say. “It’s a funny

coincidence, because I was going to call you this morning and forgot.”

“About what?” Jade called me only if she wanted something, and when she glanced at Max, I thought, *Here it comes*.

“My family is going to Miami for Mother’s Day. We decided to surprise your mother and fly her and Mitch down as well.”

“That’s nice.” My sister-in-law was always planning shit like that.

But she wasn’t done, as was proved when she tossed out, “The real surprise will be her three sons will be there.” Before I could say a word, she pressed her hands together and begged, “Please? It would mean so much to her.”

“Ugh... when is Mother’s Day?”

“Next Sunday,” she said as though it were obvious.

My eyes bulged. “Not all of us can traipse around the country without proper notice. I do have a business to run.” I reached for a glass of iced tea and took a sip.

“Of which you’re the boss. I also wanted to throw a surprise engagement party for Nate and Amy. It would be great if you and Sheena—”

The trace of liquid left in my mouth went down the wrong pipe, causing me to cough. “Whoa...” I glanced at the hallway before lowering my voice as well. “Sheena?” I shook my head and stared as though she’d sprouted antlers. “You need to calm down there, Mrs. Mush.” She rolled her eyes at the nickname while I continued: “Whatever this is between us is only a week old. Before then, yes, I had nicknamed her She-Devil because she *hated* me.”

Undeterred, Jade merely quipped, “Well, there’s a fine line between love and hate.” The exaggerated huff of air I released went ignored. “Come on, Brad. Stop overthinking it. It’s just us gathering in a different state to celebrate the day. Hell, Nate, Mr. Divorce himself, took Amy to your cousin’s wedding weeks after they started their thing.”

“I’m not overthinking anything. I just don’t want you putting her on the spot.”

“Okay, assuming she wants to go... do you want her there?”

Of course sat on my tongue, but that was a knee-jerk reaction, and I instead shrugged. “It doesn’t matter if I can’t go to begin with. My bar doesn’t give me the liberty to take off whenever I want to.”

“Dude, it’s not like you’re running the country,” Max said with his own eye roll. “It’s time you loosened the reins a bit. Delegate or you’ll never have a life.”

“Says the man who until recently never left his gym,” I griped. That was only partially true, when it’d been a few years since he had indeed loosened the reins in his own businesses. “Besides, I don’t know if Sheena would want to do that.”

“After what she’s just been through, she would probably love to explore a new city.” Jade folded her arms defiantly. “Besides, you won’t know until you ask her.”

My response was again halted as Sheena came into the room, hovering a bit until I patted the cushion beside me.

Sensing our hesitation, she asked, “Did I interrupt something?”

Jade looked at me, and I looked at her while Sheena’s focus ping-ponged between us.

“I was just telling Brad why he should come down to Miami for Mother’s Day,” Jade admitted. “Since he hasn’t been able to join us the last few times that we were together.”

“Don’t blame me. We were just all together for...” I paused, searching my memory for the last time we had been.

“Our birthday party,” Max filled in the blank.

“Right... back in November. You weren’t with us for the holidays, or for Easter. And you’ve had so much stress lately...” Jade’s sympathetic eyes cut to Sheena, and a returning smile encouraged her to continue. “Anyway, that’s what you walked in on.”

“Like I said, I think it’s a great idea.” Her comment meant they’d talked about this in Michael’s room. She then looked at me and added, “You should go.”

“Yeah, maybe. Provided I can make arrangements for the bar.” Sheena nodded in understanding.

But that was all I said. Even while Jade’s brows rose, encouraging me to ask her, I chickened out. I recoiled like a coward. I deflected by asking, “So how about those Yankees?”



Since leaving my brother and Jade’s, I’d flip-flopped between asking her and not asking her. A huge part of me knew there was no way she would agree to this. It was one thing to run into family at the park or sit around having iced tea and casually chatting, but another to invite her to a family function in another state.

Then there was the other part of me that wanted to convince her to come. Yes, it would put our connection under the microscope. It would throw me into the relationship ring without proper training. Regardless, for the first time in my life, I saw *more* than just a physical relationship... and I saw it with Sheena.

No sooner had we gotten into my apartment than I cracked. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” She dropped her tiny bag on the foyer table before taking a seat at the island.

I joined her, standing on the facing side, and leaned on my elbows. “Would you come to Miami with me?”

Her green eyes immediately widened. “You’re serious?”

“Yeah. Jade is right in it’s been a long time since we all got together, and she wants to throw a small surprise engagement party for Nate and Amy. I’d have to shift some things at the bar, but I think it would be a nice distraction after what you’ve been through.” She stared at me for a long pause and then shook her head. “What?”

“Brad, I’m worried you are caught up in the sex we had and it’s making you feel like you owe me something.”

That was not what I’d expected her to start with. “Um... *what?*”

My question, combined with the frown on my face, forced her to elaborate. “I don’t want you to feel the need to put up a false pretense now that we’ve had sex.”

“What false pretense?”

“Your brother and sister-in-law were shocked to see you at the park with me. But when Jade gushed—”

Her pause had me prompting, “Jade gushed how?”

“She meant nothing by it but went on and on how she is so excited for us. Clearly, she misinterpreted our relationship. Even after telling her that it’s only been a week, she claimed that was an anomaly for you. Which is fine... and what we shared was amazing. Still, you don’t have to feel responsible for me while I’m here or feel obligated to ask me to come.”

“That’s what you think I’m doing? I asked you because I feel obligated?”

“Well, yeah.” She looked at me peculiarly. “I don’t know your family, and I barely know you.”

“Sheena. Jade gushing is just Jade being Jade. I’m not going to deny the Brad they saw today was one they’ve never met. I won’t make excuses for my past, but I’m different with you. I have no idea why.” She looked at me like I was talking in tongues. Who could blame her when even I struggled with these alien thoughts and emotions? I waved a dismissive hand before saying, “Despite all that, nothing on my end has changed since we talked last weekend. In fact, if anything, I feel even stronger than before that we should spend time together.”

“For now.”

“Goddamn it... stop saying that!” Her eyes widened at my outburst, and I scrubbed a hand over my face to calm down and try a different tactic. “Look, I was pretty clear when I said I’m enjoying whatever this is. You claimed the same. And I’ve ignored how every chance you get you say, *When I get back to California*. Can we just forget about that right now?”

“How can we, Brad? I have a life, you have a life, and it’s okay to enjoy each other’s company while acknowledging we do have an expiration date.

Casually mentioning a long-distance thing happening between us doesn't mean it would automatically work."

"No, it doesn't, but if both parties are willing..."

"What exactly are you saying?"

I rolled my eyes at her pigheadedness. "I need to spell it out?"

"Yes, Brad. Spell it out."

"I... like... you," I admitted, although another word almost dangerously slipped out of my mouth.

None of this made sense, and I didn't recognize the person I had become this past week. This was something Max the mush would do. Going—as he called it—gaga over a girl. In fact, he had done just that with his wife. When Max fell fast and hard for Jade, none of us had been surprised.

As for Nate falling, we were all shocked. But in his case, it was his cock that led him to a happily-ever-after. The cynic divorce attorney often bitched and moaned that men confused lust for love.

Love wasn't on my radar. I take that back. I *loved* being a bachelor in New York City.

In a matter of ten days, that logic had dissipated.

So what the hell was my excuse? And why I was even considering the L-word at all was a whole other level of insanity.

Ten days.

Shit like that didn't happen in ten days.

I needed to talk to someone because this couldn't be normal.

Maybe it was time to seek professional help. I could see it now.

Hi, I'm Brad, serial man-whore who suddenly can't imagine my life without a blonde she-devil who only came into it nineteen days ago. Oh... and by the way... ten of those days we were at each other's throats.

"I like you too," she admitted, but looked no less baffled.

I walked around the island and pulled her off the stool and into my arms. Out of nowhere, a jolt of emotion zapped the center of my chest proving it

was more than like, and that caught me off guard. But while I struggled to understand it, there was one thing I was willing to admit out loud. “Provided I can go myself, I want you to come to Miami with me.”

As her eyes drilled into mine, she had no idea of the metamorphosis my psyche seemed to be going through. How my head and heart were both loaded with bewildering emotions I’d never in my life experienced.

And as my heart wanted to beg her to *please* come, I had no idea why it suddenly felt so strongly that she should. Her decision would prove to be a linchpin in our relationship... as though, if she said yes, then the scary part of her leaving New York could be dealt with somehow.

It seemed an eternity before she said, “Okay, I would love to come.” She smiled at the relief in my expression. “You do realize that this is lunacy, Brad.”

“Without a doubt. But something is telling me to trust it.” I kissed her softly. “So trust me?”

“I trust you.” Her words said one thing, yet the doubt in her eyes another. But when she lifted onto her toes to take over the kiss, I wondered if the doubt I saw was just her working through her own confusions.

And as her sweet lips moved against mine, right then and there I knew this woman had me by the balls.

Chapter 22

Sheena

“Mimosa,” the flight attendant said as she offered me a crystal flute.

“Thank you.”

“And your coffee, sir.” Brad also thanked her and placed his mug on the table tray. She then passed us a plate with assorted pastries before retreating to serve another passenger.

“It really is too early to be drinking,” I said. Hell, the sun was barely up, but I had no issue raising the effervescent beverage to take a healthy sip.

“For the next four days, we’re officially on vacation.” Brad the enabler smiled at me. “And it starts right now. Eat something and you’ll be fine.”

“Okay.” I didn’t need my arm twisted and took a croissant to enjoy with my cocktail. While relaxing against the cushy first-class seat Brad had insisted on booking, I wondered how I had gotten here.

One thing I knew for sure, my time in New York was flying by. Another week gone, and the last seven days had been more of the same euphoric existence that we seemed to have ambled into. I say *amble* because, although our shocking connection became stronger by the day, we truly didn’t know how to navigate it. All while that battle of wills we’d shared since day one had not diminished in the least.

Neither he nor I had an issue speaking up if something bothered us. During an argument, Brad had admitted he wasn't afraid to hurt my feelings if he were to speak his mind. In fact, I think it turned him on to rile me up. Our last fight happened when I needed to go to Jersey to meet with the contractor because a problem had been discovered with dry rot in the attic.

Brad insisted he come with me, and I refused because he had plenty to deal with at the bar. That was when he claimed he didn't trust that the man wouldn't try to rip me off. In other words, he believed that I had no idea what I was doing. The way he tried to baby me hit a nerve for some reason, like I couldn't tie my own shoes without him. Screw that.

I handled the situation just fine, and when I came back, I bypassed eating dinner at the bar and instead ate alone in John's apartment, not wanting to see Brad.

Later that night, he barged in, furious that I hadn't gone to his place. Obviously, he had been ready to talk about it, where I had instead clammed up. He was so right in that I was just like my dad. The thing with Brad, he would relentlessly push and push until I finally voiced out loud what had my panties in a bunch. That was how he handled a conflict, and he refused to allow me to stew. He also refused to go to bed angry, especially after he apologized, and he made sure to wear me down until I forgave him... usually by using his oral skills.

I did forgive him, going as far as admitting that it was dumb to flip out while acknowledging he meant well. But not before making it clear that I didn't appreciate being made to feel incompetent.

Speaking up in that way earned me another orgasm. Apparently, that was all he wanted... honesty.

Each argument we had, each meal we shared, each night we had sex, each morning we woke together brought us even closer. And with each day that went by, I fell a bit harder for a man who squirmed his way into my life.

Between those passionate nights, he spent a lot of time at work, preparing for Miami. First thing he did was promote his assistant manager, Vic, to manager. Brad then promoted his head bartender, Bobby, to an assistant manager role, along with one of his waitresses. All three employees

being at Brad's Tavern since it opened meant their advancement was long overdue. He also arranged for his bookkeeper to work three days a week instead of one.

Brad created a new reality where he wouldn't need to work around the clock like he had been. Still, I could tell it was difficult for him to count on others to handle his precious bar. That proved true when he booked the first flight out of JFK on Mother's Day morning instead of flying out Saturday, which was the busiest night of the week.

It had nothing to do with not trusting his employees, and more to do with not having complete and utter control himself.

Personally, I was proud of him. Not only with his business decisions, but of the way he steered his way through life. I could see why my father, a textbook introvert, got along with him so well. Brad made no excuses for the person he was. Although he had admitted how our connection confused him, that hadn't stopped him from exploring what *could* be.

Whereas I struggled with what *would* be.

When apart, I allowed my mind to mess with me. How could a serial philandering bachelor suddenly want the opposite of the lifestyle he'd created? But when together, every doubt I had vanished. For someone who had no experience with having a relationship, the man was a master. Considerate, chivalrous, adorably mischievous, and attentive were just a few of his qualities. Throw in sexy as hell and a champion in the bedroom, well, that had all those pesky doubts crawling back into the shadows of my mind.

The entire situation terrified me. It seemed too good to be true, and I couldn't help but worry about when the other shoe would drop. He kept assuring me it was simple. He liked spending time with me, so he did as much as he could... always ensuring that I still wanted the same... and I did.

He had asked me to trust him, and I would... all while wondering if it was truly that *simple*.

As Brad scrolled through his phone, I twisted my head and, upon his feeling my gaze, had that sexy smirk appearing. "Have you changed your mind?" he asked, not looking away from the small screen.

“No.” I watched as he tucked his phone into his pocket before turning toward me.

“Are you sure?” He buried his face in my hair and inhaled.

“I’m sure.” But as I said that my gaze swept over the mostly empty cabin, and my libido chimed, *Oh just go for it.*

Picking up on my wavering, he nuzzled my ear with his nose before whispering, “If you had worn a dress, it would be really easy.” He then placed a hand on my denim-covered thigh, adding, “But having these around your ankles in the bathroom as I fucked you from behind would be so hot.”

“And illegal.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s a misdemeanor.” My gawk had him grinning, which in turn had me grinning. “There’s that smile.” My nerves had gotten the best of me from the moment we’d woken this morning, and worsened while packing, riding to the airport, and maneuvering our way onto the plane. He kept trying to loosen me up, with his last attempt suggesting we join the mile-high club. “I knew eventually you’d relax. Was it me or the mimosa?”

“Both.” I kissed his cheek. “Sorry that I’ve been cranky.”

“I like when you’re cranky,” he shamelessly admitted. “I did manage to distract you in the shower.”

“Yes, you did.” I stared into his eyes. “All kidding aside, I think I have the right to be nervous.”

“Let’s dissect it. You already met my brothers, and Jade. Her family is very down to earth. My parents are harmless, and Amy is very easygoing. Plus, with the rug rats there, you’ll be in your element. Besides, I don’t plan on spending more time than I have to with my family. This is just a beach vacation.”

“Still...” My childish response had him smiling again before pecking my lips with a chaste kiss.

Although Jade and Max had room for everyone, the only guests staying at their house were her parents. It had to do with all the surprises that would be revealed today.

Brad had no issue with staying in a hotel on the beach, which was also where Nate had booked a room for him and Amy. That did help eliminate the awkwardness that came from staying at someone's house. It was bad enough I still struggled with that in Brad's apartment.

"Let's get back to distracting you." With that announcement, he roped his arm around my waist to resume nuzzling my neck.

But between my panted breaths because of what his lips were doing to me, I stubbornly whispered, "I'm not having sex on this plane."



Knowing Brad and I were expected at one thirty, we drove straight to the hotel once we retrieved our rental car. With just enough time to check in, have a quickie, shower, and change, we then headed over to Max and Jade's.

The neighborhood was quaint. Not far from downtown Miami, it still felt a world away, with the large grassy lots holding Mediterranean-style houses of varying sizes. They were all pretty in their own ways, but as Brad pulled the rental car onto a long paver stone driveway, the house before us was downright spectacular.

Its clay-tiled roof, asymmetrical facade, arched windows, and lush landscaping made Jade and Max's second home look like a resort one would never want to leave.

Brad opened my car door and whistled through his teeth. "Pretty damn nice," he said, vocalizing what I'd been thinking.

"I'd say." After hoisting our beach bag onto my shoulder, I asked, "You've never been here?"

"No. Last time I came down, they were in a condo in South Beach." While he grabbed the gifts from the back seat, I got out on my side and couldn't stop staring at the house. "Can you take this one?" he asked, passing me the bag holding toys we got for the kids. Brad then snatched up the four cellophane-wrapped bouquets we'd picked up on the way for the mothers in the house in one arm and took my hand with his free one. "Let's do this."

I robotically followed him toward the front door, but before he rang the bell, he stopped to stare at me. "You look gorgeous." His gaze appreciated

the pink sundress I had on. “But you’ll look even prettier if you smile, Sheena.” At his command, I forced my facial muscles to do their job while trying to ignore the condors that had taken flight in the pit of my stomach.

“Better?”

“Much,” he quipped before pressing a hard kiss to my lips.

“Don’t rile me up, Mr. Navarro.” It was bad enough between bouts of nerves, since leaving the hotel I’d been lusting over the way his perfect body looked in khaki shorts and a pale-blue polo shirt.

“You’re right. No riling.” With that, he adjusted himself and then stabbed the button with a rigid finger.

Five seconds later Max opened the door. “Your sister-in-law is stressing,” he said to his brother as a greeting. “Everyone will be here any minute, and you’re late.”

“It’s Sheena’s fault.” My mouth gaped as I shoved him with my shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Sheena. I don’t believe him.” Max leaned over and kissed my cheek. “Glad you decided to come. Jade is so excited.”

“How about you let us in,” Brad rudely interjected. “These flowers are wilting, and I’m sweating my balls off.”

“Oh... sorry.” Max moved aside, and I knew it wasn’t the Florida heat that had *me* feeling sticky and sweaty. Thankfully, the immediate blast of air-conditioning helped with my predicament.

One look at the foyer, and I was already won over. “Your house is gorgeous, Max,” I said, appreciating the elegant marble floors mixed with colorful prints on the walls.

“Thank you. We love it.”

“Not sure why you would want to leave it,” Brad countered. I had to agree.

“It’s just a house. We love New York as much as we love it here. But Jade did a great job decorating it.” The foyer alone had me swooning with its staircase that extended up a floor, wrapping along the wall in a dramatic

curve. Yet it didn't seem pretentious at all.

"She did this on her own?"

"Yeah," Max said with a grin, the pride evident on his face.

"She should ditch the lawyer gig."

"She's only doing the lawyer gig for me," Max replied with a smirk. "I'll give you guys a tour later. You bought your suits, right?"

I patted the tote on my shoulder and Max nodded. "Good."

The moment we stepped into a great room that took up the entire width of the house, Jade looked up from what she was doing, and a brilliant smile spread over her face.

"Hi!" she exclaimed, coming right for us from a massive island. Wrapping her arms around me in an affectionate hug, she added, "I'm so happy you came."

"Me too... thanks for the invite." And I meant it. Although Brad had asked me, I now knew Jade had nudged him a bit into doing so.

"Our pleasure." The genuine smile that remained on her face could calm a rabid dog. My nerves may not have left, but a few minutes in and I already knew coming had been the right decision.

Brad motioned toward the floral bundles in his arms. "Vases?"

"I'll get them," Max said.

While he retrieved four vases from a cabinet, I placed the bag of toys down on the island. "These are for the kids."

"That's so sweet of you."

As Jade went back to plating cut-up vegetables around a bowl of creamy dip, Max said to Brad, "Speaking of gifts, you owe me a thousand dollars."

"For what?"

"We discussed it." Max's brows rose in challenge. "The travel gift card for Nate and Amy."

"For two grand?" Brad shook his head. "I thought it would be a few hundred bucks. I already sent them a huge basket of sex toys for them to

enjoy after they got engaged.” I forced myself to school my expression over how casually he mentioned sex toys to his sister-in-law.

“As thoughtful as that was” — Jade raised a poignant brow— “this gift is a bit more appropriate.”

“Albeit boring.”

Max rolled his eyes just as Jade sighed at their exchange.

Meanwhile, I took a moment to admire the space. The kitchen matched the foyer with its white background palette consisting of cabinets, granite, and even the floors. In the adjoining family room, pale woods and soft beige leather furniture created a calming aura. But the blues and greens found in the decor details were what made it stunning.

A wall of glass provided the clear view of a screened-in backyard oasis, where a patio table, loungers, and a bar area had been set up. The sprawling pool with a jetted tub and waterfall focal wall took up a good chunk of the area, but there was still plenty of grass and shrubbery that created a very private space.

“Jade, I am in love with this house.”

“I am too. It’s all a testament to how hard Max has worked with his gyms.” The same prideful expression her husband had sported came through when she looked at him with a brilliant smile.

Knowing he had two locations, I asked, “Are you going to expand?”

“Probably not.” A small smile lifted the corners of his lips. “I’ve received offers but am happy with my work–life balance as it is.”

“That’s important.” It was always something I strived for. I couldn’t imagine not being happy with a career, while not having time to live a life as well. Watching as Jade plated an assortment of appetizers on a flat bamboo platter, I asked, “Can I help with anything?”

“Absolutely not.” She lifted the tray loaded with cheeses, fruit, and crackers. “This is the last thing I needed to do before they all get here. I’ll be right back.”

As she stepped out of the slider, Brad asked, “Where is everyone,

anyway?” He then glanced to where Jade was outside, snatched a pig in a blanket, and popped it into his mouth.

“Sapphire and Greg took the kids to Disney for a few days and are arriving around three,” said Max. “Jade’s parents, who have no idea their daughter is in Florida, took Michael for a walk. Nate and Amy are probably using every minute to screw before they need to leave the hotel. Mom and Mitch are at the beach until they think we’re taking them out for a late lunch.”

Brad had given me a family-tree lesson of who would be here, and still I had a hard time keeping track.

“Then why did we have to be the first ones here?”

“Because you two are the only ones who know all that is happening here today. Everyone else assumes they’re surprising someone and were told by my wife to arrive at ten-minute intervals starting at two—”

Brad raised a finger, halting Max’s word. “So, wait. Mom doesn’t know I’m here... or Nate... Amy and he don’t know it’s their engagement party... Jade’s parents think they’re the only ones spending Mother’s Day in Florida... and all else will be revealed assuming they arrive at their appropriate times?”

“Correct.” Max leaned closer and added, “It’s all ridiculous, if you ask me.”

“I heard that,” Jade said, appearing from the patio. “I want them all to be surprised.”

“I think it’s sweet of you... and I’m sure they’ll all appreciate it.”

“Thank you.” Jade smiled at me. “See, Sheena appreciates my efforts.”

“Sheena is just thrilled this circus you orchestrated will take the focus off her.”

Again, I gawked at Brad... but when all was said and done, he was absolutely right.

Chapter 23

Brad

With each guest that arrived, another “Surprise!” needed to be shouted. Gotta love my sister-in-law... and all the tears of joy proved that Jade was right with her intentions.

My mom and Mitch were shocked that I’d finally left the bar and joined the family for a celebration. Jade’s parents Ruby and Lawrence were shocked that their daughter Sapphire and family had flown to Florida to celebrate Mother’s Day after having a baby a few months ago. Nate and Amy were shocked that everyone was celebrating their engagement.

I, however, was not at all shocked that Sheena fit right in with them all.

Jade had thought of everything, including the outdoor air conditioners that, along with the ceiling fans above the patio, managed to squelch the heat. It was nice being there, and I was glad I’d brought Sheena along.

Once everyone was ready to enjoy the day, Max and Greg decided to take their kids into the pool for a bit. But not before my brother coerced me into playing bartender. Once I ensured everyone had one of my cocktails in hand, I plopped down next to Sheena to relax.

It was strange how comfortable I felt having her beside me. Having my arm across her shoulders, speaking for both of us regarding what had been

happening since John died, and even the kisses I gave her here and there all felt second nature.

Like Jade, my mother had a perpetual smile whenever she looked at Sheena and me together. After a while, I merely rolled my eyes whenever she directed it my way. But Mom being Mom, she cornered me in the house and made sure I knew that she was over-the-moon ecstatic with my transformation... yes, that was the word she had used.

As the day went on, I was happy to see that Sheena's nerves vanished. I loved watching her engaging with my family and holding conversations with people she had met only a little while ago. All in all, it was a great day.

A few hours later, the caterers appeared to grill steaks, burgers, and dogs, along with several salads and sides to complement the meal. The eating, drinking, and celebrating continued throughout dinner and dessert. Before we knew it, the sun had set, and it was time for the kids to be put to bed.

At that point, the older folks settled into the den to watch a movie. That was when the rest of us changed into our swimsuits to make good use of the outdoor oasis.

We all sat around the edge of the pool, comically paired off boy-girl, boy-girl. Ensuring Sheena's body was pressed up beside mine, we enjoyed the cool water lapping around our legs.

Max and Nate debating over something stupid caused the conversation to revolve around the trouble the three of us had gotten into when we were younger. But when the guys then slipped into talking about sports, Jade plastered on a devilish smile and announced, "Us girls are going to take our drinks to the jetted tub."

"Are we boring you?" Nate asked.

"Kind of... plus we just want to talk about you," Jade shamelessly admitted as her eyes caught mine.

That instantly caused my hackles to rise, but I played it cool and winked at Sheena before the ladies carried their cocktails to the opposite end of the yard.

The entire time, my focus was strictly on the hot blonde in the pale-pink bikini. Those sexy little scraps of fabric hugging her in just the right way, along with the color enhancing the creaminess of her skin, made me yearn for her. Family day couldn't end soon enough.

As they all settled around the stone edge, us guys moved back to sit around the table. Nate then lifted his beer and motioned toward them while staring at me. "You do realize it's *you* they went off to talk about."

Duh sat on the tip of my tongue. Instead, I flipped him off before looking over to where the girls were all leaning in, whispering conspiratorially, giggling, and glancing my way.

"No doubt," Max said, adding his two cents. "I heard Jade and Amy singing your praises earlier."

"Singing *what* praises?"

"Your boyfriend skills," Greg piped in. *What the hell?* At my gawk, he grinned. "Sapphire mentioned the same to me. Said it was so sweet." That had the three of them chuckling at my expense.

Had I been so much of a Neanderthal until now that ensuring my girl had a cold drink, keeping an arm around her whenever we sat next to one another, or having my eyes on her when we were apart constituted boyfriend skills?

But choosing to focus on the title, I harshly whispered, "I'm not her boyfriend."

"Denial much? You asking her here says otherwise," Max suggested. "Although that shocked me. After we saw you guys last week in the park, Jade and I bet you would chicken out and not ask her. Needless to say, I lost."

"You can imagine my surprise when I walked in to see the she-devil here, in the flesh." Nate narrowed his eyes on my face. "Have you been hypnotized?"

"Have *you*?" I snapped. "Before Amy, you were no better."

"This is true. But I own it." Speaking of Amy, she suddenly began animatedly talking to Sheena, and with each wave of her hand Sheena's eyes widened a touch more. "Right now, my girl is telling your girl about the book

she wants to write revolving around the way you came together.” Nate smirked annoyingly. “Apparently you’re a hot trope... the man-whore falls into insta-love.”

“What the serious fuck is *insta-love*?” Thinking better of my response, I amended, “I’m not in insta-love.”

“It’s just how it sounds.” He tried to hide his grin, but failed when he went on to say, “And yes, you are in insta-love. Right, Max?”

“Oh, for sure.”

“Shut up, Mr. Mush.”

Ignoring me, Nate argued his case like the prick lawyer he was. “Amy said that a single man falling for a woman isn’t all that unusual. Hell, I’m proof of that. But a serial bachelor like you falling in love in like two weeks...” It was three. “Well, that’s a romance lover’s wet dream. It’s irony.”

“I could see the movie now,” Max interjected. “If she writes it quick enough, maybe that company turning Amy’s books into film will crank your story out as soon as her series ends production next winter.”

“Just in time for Valentine’s Day,” Greg suggested. “Who between the two of you would play Brad?” he then asked, also acting as if I weren’t sitting right there. The more their asinine conversation bounced back and forth, the more annoyed I became.

“I’ll do it,” Nate said, raising his hand. “Hell, I’ll do it for free.”

“It won’t work.” Max shook his head. “Based on his past, it’d need to be soft-core porn, and there’s no way Amy would let you writhe around with someone else.”

“You’re right.” Nate’s eyes bulged. “Unless... Amy dyes her hair and plays Sheena herself. Shit, we would have fun doing an erotic movie on Brad’s behalf. Or... we just cast Sheena as herself and put in a Hemsworth brother to represent us.”

“Fuck that,” I mumbled. “No one touches her.”

“Why not?” Nate challenged. “She’s single... right?”

“No... she’s mine.” Although mumbled, those words came out no

differently than a breath I needed to take. And in that moment, not only had I realized the enormity behind those three little words, so had my brothers.

While Max grinned, Nate pushed a finger behind his ear. “What was that? I think you just said she was yours.”

That was when I barked, “Okay, I’m done...” I drained my beer and placed it on the table, pointing to each one of them while saying, “Fuck you... and fuck you... and fuck you the most!” I ended my tirade on Nate. “You can all suck my—” I purposely let my words dangle. Fill in the fucking blank. But the farther away I walked from the table, the more I could hear the three of them falling into hysterics at my expense.

Undeterred, I headed toward the girls, who were all gaping at me, no doubt from having witnessed my outburst.

“Babe, ready to go?”

She nodded, and as the rest of them giggled, I could tell that Sheena was trying hard to hold it together.



Sheena was in a great mood, chatting during the entire drive back to the hotel. While it made me happy that she had fun, it took every fiber of my being to not interrogate her. It needed to be said: the fact she didn’t bring up what had been discussed made me antsy.

So much so, the moment we slipped into bed I pulled her against me and asked, “Are you glad you came?” Her hand resting on my chest rose and fell with each anxious breath I took.

“I am.” I knew she had, based on the smile that had remained on her face all day. “I loved getting to know your mom, Mitch... everyone. They were all so welcoming toward me. Not having a family of my own, it was great feeling like I was a part of yours.”

“I had no doubt.” When she fell silent, I casually asked, “So what did you girls talk about?”

Although she stared at the ceiling, I could see her face clearly... including the smile that lifted her kissable lips. “Not much,” she responded,

just as casually.

“It looked like Amy was yapping up a storm,” I prodded. “Being a writer naturally makes her a chatterbox. I’m sure she chewed your ear off.”

“She’s hilarious” was all I got.

“How so?” Who knew what that erotic author had said to Sheena? The deep-rooted ball-busting vendetta Amy had against me, all because I had come on to her before she got with Nate, meant the woman would have no shame spewing anything that popped into her head... including spilling that I was once attracted to her.

“I just love how she tells a story,” Sheena admitted, and then fell silent again.

“Okay, I can’t take it anymore. I know she mentioned a book that she wants to write about us. I know she probably told you that at one time I was attracted to her. And I’m sure she had an opinion about us seeing each other.” My admission had Sheena lifting her head to look at me. But the way she rolled her lips over her teeth meant my suspicions were on point. “I’m right.”

“Yes, she talked about all that.” The smile broke through before she added, “And gave us details on the book she would love to write.”

“Details?”

“Yeah... regarding the plot... and the trope.”

“Figures.” My grumble and scowl had her laughing. “That amuses you?”

“It does. Of course I said she was off the mark.” Her green eyes searched mine for a pause. “Unless you’re being a hypocrite and are holding back on telling me something like you accuse me of doing to you so often.”

Touché. But despite her calling me out, I denied her claim by saying, “I’ve been very honest in how I feel... as well as how much that confuses me.”

She considered my claim and nodded. “You have.”

When she rested her head back down on my chest, I pinched and twisted her chin to return her focus to me. “What aren’t you saying?”

“Nothing. That’s exactly what I told the girls.” As though wanting to change the subject, she gripped the hem of my T-shirt between her fingers and dragged it up to expose my abs.

While her eyes focused on my bare torso, I asked, “Are you trying to distract me?”

“Is it working?” She then bent to place an open-mouthed kiss on my flat nipple. The feel of her mouth sent a stinging current straight to my cock.

“It’s working.” Although there was probably a fuck ton more to say, clearly, talk time was over.

I followed suit by slipping my hand beneath her tank top to cup a bare breast. My thumb skimming over her pebbled nipple caused a sexy little moan. That spurred me to shift beside her, peel off the tank, and mold my mouth over her tit. The moan intensified, rumbling through her chest as I sucked on her sweet skin. With my mouth replacing my hand, it had other options and skimmed down her torso, landing on her sexy little boy shorts.

Tight-knit fabric seductively covering her thighs, her mound, left little to the imagination. Good thing I already knew firsthand what hid beneath it, and with a firm touch I traced the outline of her clit. Her hips rose, seeking more. I didn’t need my arm twisted and jolted between her legs to peel the fabric off before tossing them to the floor.

A carnal smirk spread across my lips, just before I dragged my tongue over her bare pussy. Again, her hips chased my touch, and on that prompt, I thoroughly began eating her. Each gasp of breath she expelled caused my cock to twitch. Having her smooth, warm, wet flesh pulsing beneath my tongue made me harder than steel.

Never breaking stride, I pumped two fingers into her pussy, and yet another moan echoed around us. It didn’t take long for me to bring her to orgasm, but the moment her tremors settled, I yanked off my T-shirt and boxers before positioning myself between her still-spread thighs.

“Sheena, do you trust me?”

“Yes,” she said breathlessly.

Having her blind faith caused my heart to join the party—still, I

elaborated by adding, “I’ve never had sex without a condom, but I want to come inside you.”

“I want that too,” she responded. “And I’m on the pill.”

While staring into her eyes, I slowly slid into her inch by torturous inch. But having a mind of its own, my cock wanted no part of that slow pace and responded for both of us by initiating a deeper, harder plunging rhythm.

“Fuck!” I cried out a bit too loudly. If anyone was in the hotel’s hallway, they most definitely would have heard me... yet I didn’t care. As amazing as it had felt before, going in bare was fucking heaven on earth.

I couldn’t help but look down at where my cock disappeared inside her with each thrust, only to then reappear while glistening from her arousal. On and on the euphoria that came with each lurch went, and within seconds my dick decided it was ready to come. No doubt all the times I’d denied it from feeling such perfection were what had it taking the wheel.

Doing the best that I could to stave off my climax, I stabbed in and out of her tight wetness. But the sensation perfectly coursing over every blood vessel on my shaft’s surface felt like gripping fingers and made it almost impossible to hold back. Worsened still when her smooth legs wrapped around my ass, pushing me deeper.

“Don’t stop,” Sheena requested, although she didn’t need to. I had no intention to, or to even slow down for that matter.

Upon her spoken words, I started to spasm inside her. I began rubbing her clit, and only a few seconds later I knew she was on her way as well. And then she clenched tightly around me, and I could no longer hold back. While I released inside her, my orgasm took every ounce of logic with it as it happened. The rest of me was not prepared for the overwhelming emotions that came along with mind-blowing sensations.

Not my cock as it pulsed inside of her. Not my heart as it swelled in a way that never had happened with another woman before. Not even my mouth when it blurted out, “Fuck, I love you, Sheena,” before clamping shut, knowing that it had just fucked up royally.

There I was, the man-whore, professing love while fucking the woman

who'd flipped my world off its axis.

Speaking of irony.

Consumed with her own orgasm, I wasn't sure she'd heard me. And then her body stiffened a pause before she tightened around me.

The moment she was done, I collapsed on her, exhausted. Even after I pulled out, there was no sign that what I had said had registered. I couldn't fault her. Sheena was just like John to the core, and unless I pushed and prodded, it was hard to get her to open up.

But because of my blunder, I slipped into being that hypocrite she had accused me of earlier. Still, I couldn't bring myself to mention what I had said or to confirm my epiphany.

Regardless of my cowardness, I knew it was only a matter of time before my admission would fester and eat away at me until I addressed it with her.

At some point in the near future, I needed to confess that I didn't want this to end. I no longer believed we *should* try to continue once she went to California, but that I now knew we *would* try. And while I was at it, I needed to gain the courage to tell her uttering those words wasn't because I was consumed by the throes of passion. I meant them.

Hell froze over... I had fallen in love with the she-devil.

Chapter 24

Sheena

While Brad and Nate discussed sports, and Amy read her book, I lifted my face toward the sun, enjoying the warmth that came from being in Florida. It was as close to feeling like I was in California as I'd felt since I had left my beloved state.

Although I loved my cute little apartment, it was just a place to live. Maybe it was because Mom and I had moved so many times while she was alive. We always stayed in San Diego, so it hadn't affected my schooling or friends. Still, I never had the opportunity to grow attached to a structure.

Mom always got bored with one location but made each new address feel like home, with the colorful accessories and photos of us she kept in specific places of honor. Those were the things I missed from my apartment.

That had occurred to me only upon seeing Jade and Max's homes. Brad's place was decorated in a very modern, sterile, bachelor kind of vibe. But his brother and sister-in-law's Miami home, and even their Manhattan apartment, felt lived in. Memories had seeped in everywhere you looked. It made me miss my mom and her things. It also had me aching for a family I no longer had.

Brad's mother, Monica, was one of the warmest women I had ever met. Her laid-back attitude reminded me of my mother's, and the two would've

gotten along beautifully.

I loved watching Brad interact with his brothers. I loved how all three grown men adored their mother and respected their stepdad, Mitch. I loved how Max and Nate doted on their girls, including the way Brad doted on me. Despite the ribbing and humorous antics, the Navarros were a tight-knit family. They had each other's backs no matter what, and I felt blessed to have been in their company.

Being in Miami with him was a slice of heaven. In just a few days, my tan came back, my hair lightened... and I fell harder for a certain bar owner who'd never really had a girlfriend before but was sure good at it.

Strangely enough, we hadn't argued since arriving. It also needed to be said, he didn't push me to talk about certain things like he would've back in New York. It most definitely had to do with Brad saying he loved me a few nights ago. The incident went ignored, but the moment it was out of his mouth, I could tell he regretted it. And his failure to bring it up meant he wanted to pretend that it didn't happen. So I pretended the same.

I took it for what it was—a man overwhelmed by the moment. It was the first time we hadn't used a condom, and for sure that had prompted his slipup.

Despite all that, and based on the conversation I'd had with the girls while in the jetted tub, the tiny voice inside my head kept chirping, *Maybe he does love you*. Of course, my heart did a happy dance whenever I allowed myself to truly consider that possibility. My logic, however, wasn't sure how to feel about the situation.

It didn't matter what Amy's take on the whole thing was. She wrote *fictional* tales for a living. When you broke it down, until me, Brad had been extremely promiscuous in his social life. He also never had a relationship to speak of. That made it very hard to trust what he thought he might be feeling.

There was only one thing I could do—to take it all with a grain of salt, keep my expectations low, and appreciate every minute we shared. I was used to people letting me down, intentional... or not. That created an instinct to depend on no one but myself.

As Brad had promised, we spent a lot of time on our own. We did have

dinner with his family last night, and today we were relaxing with Nate and Amy at the hotel. Although they were staying the rest of the week, it was our last day in Miami. After my first impression of Nate and knowing Amy wrote erotica, surprisingly enough, I really liked them.

Jade and Max were awesome, but we had more in common with Nate and Amy. It was nice hanging out with another couple, and now that we had, I wondered if it was something we'd continue to do back in New York.

Speaking of, once we returned to reality, I needed to plan out the rest of my time there. It was dependent on the construction at my father's house, and my teaching schedule. But the true contributing factor would revolve around a conversation that needed to be had with Brad.

"Baby, are you ready for another?" Amy lifted her empty glass and answered by bouncing her head up and down. The typical way Nate looked at her like he wanted to eat her for lunch had me turning away. Funny, all three brothers had perfected that expression.

And just as I moved my attention to Brad, sure enough, the same intense smirk was plastered on his face while he stared at me. "You too, Sheen?"

"Yes... thank you."

On their own accord, my eyes devoured his body. Those broad shoulders that tapered to a narrow waist... the way his navy swim trunks hung low on his hips, revealing the sexy ridge that made me stupid... and his happy trail... oh, and those abs worthy of a fitness magazine.

Who was I kidding? Every inch of him made me stupid.

"We'll be right back." Brad bent to peck my lips before he and his brother walked toward the bar on the opposite end of the pool. The back of him as sexy as his front, and, pathetically, I tracked him the entire time.

Apparently I wasn't the only one. There wasn't a female in the vicinity who hadn't watched as the two super-studs strolled their cocky asses across the grounds. Neither paid them any attention. It was sexy as hell knowing I was with one of those men... kind of. Brad and I hadn't labeled what we were.

When Brad's attention swung my way, he winked, and my insides

clenched with desire on their own accord. “Damn.” Realizing where I was, I turned to see Amy staring at me. “Um... ,” I said, feeling my cheeks redden, and she laughed.

“I get it. They are beautiful specimens.”

“They are.” I sat up straighter and hugged my knees, my focus on how he interacted with his brother. “As much as they are all identical, they are all so very different... do you know what I mean?” I didn’t want her to think I lusted over her guy just because he looked like Brad.

“I know exactly what you mean.” She mimicked my stance and followed my gaze before adding, “When we talked about Brad liking me, I kinda left out a big part.” Thinking she was about to tell me they slept together, I felt every muscle in my body tense. I wasn’t sure if her noticing was what had her adding, “I’m not telling you this to rub it in your face, but before Nate and I got together, Brad tried his damndest to sleep with me.”

Relief hit at the word *tried*... until the rest registered. “He did?”

She hesitated before saying, “Yeah.” During our girls only chat, when Amy mentioned Brad, she made it sound like he had a crush and nothing more. But then a comment Jade had made popped into my thoughts. At the time I didn’t understand what it meant. *Brad and Amy would’ve never worked out*. As quickly as she’d said those words, she’d clammed up while exchanging a look with Amy.

Seeing my frown forced Amy to reach over to squeeze my hand. “Sheena, I’m only mentioning this to prove my point. I’m sorry.”

“No, no... I appreciate you telling me.” I tried to find any hints that Brad was still attracted to Amy, but not one red flag came to mind. “You’re very pretty. I can see why.”

“I don’t think it had to do with my looks so much as my occupation,” she admitted with a smile.

“Yeah, that too.” I matched her grin.

“Regardless, he and I just didn’t mesh. And because I never showed interest, yet had with Nate, his ego took a hit. But it was different with Nate. That spark was instantaneous. It’s no different than when Jade and Max got

together. Sure, before knowing he was a triplet, I thought Max was handsome. Then I got to know him and now consider Max like a brother that I don't have." Her face scrunched up adorably. "Saying that out loud sounds twisted, because he looks just like my fiancé." She raised a hand, palm up. "That's my point. It doesn't matter that they all are identical. Just like you said, their personalities are so very, very different... and that's what attracts us."

"You're right."

Amy glanced toward the bar before leaning a touch closer. "It's obvious that man loves you."

I worked very hard to school my features. Despite being confused over what Brad had blurted out, that was between us. But I did say, "It's not like that. We're just getting to know one another."

Her pink-tinted lips quirked before she said, "Timing means nothing. My father always claimed he fell in love with my mother the day they met." We watched the guys paying for the drinks, and she quickened her words. "We've never seen him like this. It only takes one person to come along and disrupt everything you thought you knew, flip everything that you believe upside down. You did that to him."

He did that to me. Again, I kept that to myself. What I did offer was, "It's been so great, and so confusing. Besides dealing with deep-rooted emotions toward my father, adding what's happened between Brad and me to the mix..." I looked at her, a bit lost. "Well, you can imagine."

"I can, actually. It wasn't much different for me with Nate. I purposely shoved him into a box, labeling what we shared in a way I was comfortable with." She released a sarcastic huff and mumbled, "Yeah, that didn't last very long," just before plastering on a smile as they stepped up.

"What didn't last very long?" Nate asked, with Brad in tow.

"Nothing." When he narrowed his eyes suspiciously, she added, "The activity we engaged in this morning on our balcony."

Like magic, Nate's skeptical expression morphed into a cocky smirk as Amy took the fruity daiquiri from his hand. "Told you I'd get you there

quick,” he bragged.

“Thank Christ our balcony is not near yours,” Brad griped before passing me my mojito. He then slipped himself behind me on the chaise and whispered, “We’re having sex on our balcony tonight.”



The last twenty-four hours of our trip went by quickly. Most of the time Brad needed to prove we were a hotter couple than Nate and Amy. He even made a second attempt at trying to convince me to have sex on the plane. But beneath that playfulness, attentiveness, and affection, Brad seemed preoccupied.

It was only when he thought I wasn’t paying attention that I’d catch him staring into space while appearing as though he had a million things on his mind.

On the drive home from the airport, I had asked if he was okay, and he claimed he was anxious to get to the bar after being gone these past four days. I didn’t think that was the reason. Since he had professed love, he’d been acting more like me... holding things in. Each time I tried to call him out on it, I chickened out.

But when we finally got to bed last night, and he merely pulled me against him without initiating sex, I knew this time I needed to be the one to push him into opening up.

The next morning, as he ate his eggs, I pulled a page from his playbook. “Okay, what’s wrong?”

His eyes lifted to meet mine. “Nothing.” Like he’d done to me, I raised my brows and folded my arms in wait. “What?”

“You’re acting like me.”

“Like you how?” he asked, amused.

“Like me as in I clam up if something is bothering me. Usually you don’t let me.” Mimicking another one of his methods, I stood and came over, forcing myself onto his lap. “Usually you force me to open up... in a very specific way.” I placed my lips on his ear and whispered, “I’ve been paying attention and have a few tricks up my own sleeves.” I then tugged on his lobe

with my teeth, and he released a tiny moan.

“You *have* been paying attention.”

When he gripped my face to kiss me long and hard, I allowed the distraction for a few minutes. But once we broke apart, I pushed harder. “I need you to be honest with me.” His green eyes darted away, and I waited him out for the second time.

“It’s about what I said in Miami.” I had seconds to decide how to respond to that... torn between pretending ignorance or admitting that I had heard him. He made the decision for me by adding, “That I love you.” It was seeing the vulnerability in his eyes that had me nodding. “You heard me.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I’ve been struggling with that.” He regretted it.

Ignoring the pinch in my chest, I plastered on a smile. “It’s fine. I understand why things are said when a person is distracted. Don’t worry about it.”

He tilted his head a bit and narrowed his eyes. “You think I didn’t mean it?”

Back to my norm, I clammed up and looked away.

“Sheena,” he said, taking hold of my chin to return my gaze to his. “Do you think I didn’t mean it?” I remained silent, forcing him to say, “Talk to me.”

And just like that, he flipped the situation so he again had the upper hand in this discussion. “Brad, I know you care about me. It’s fine. I don’t expect you to be professing your love.”

“Sheena, I’m not struggling because I said it... I’m struggling because of how I said it... and because I knew this was exactly how you’d react. If I could take it back I would, only to have the chance to properly admit that I have fallen in love with you.” The corners of his lips lifted at my stunned silence.

“You have?”

“I have. I love you. And it doesn’t matter if you’re here, or in California,

or in Timbuktu... I want us to be together.” I went to say something, and he placed a finger over my lips. “I don’t want you saying anything because you feel pressured to. It’s more important that you know how I feel, and that I hadn’t said those words in the heat of the moment.” He kissed me softly and searched my eyes. “Now that you know what it was that had me stressed, and what I want for us, I want you to take your time and decide if you want the same.”

I didn’t need time... but knowing how his brain worked, I wasn’t sure he’d believe me. So I nodded and kept to myself what I would eventually say out loud once the opportunity presented itself.

I loved him too.



After taking our discussion to his bed, and then showering, we each set out to start our days. Besides running to the grocery store to fill Brad’s empty fridge, when I left the building to head to the parking garage, I saw a short, stocky man in a suit, taking pictures.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

His gaze raked over me before he put out his hand. “Simon Roth. I’m an old friend of John Porelli.” As I shook his hand, I couldn’t help but feel something seemed off. Maybe it was the icky leer in his eyes, or his smug expression. Picking up on my hesitancy, he plastered on a fake smile and added, “Are you his daughter, Sheena?”

“I am.”

“Do you have some time to chat a bit?”

“Regarding?”

“This run-down building. For years, I tried to take it off John’s hands, and I would love to make you an offer. You’re from California, correct?” I remained silent, and he took that as an opportunity to add, “I’m sure you’d much prefer to take a very generous offer and go back to your life than stick around nursing this eyesore.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Roth, but you have no idea what I would

prefer.”

My snarky response did little to deter him as he pulled out his wallet and then a business card. “Here’s how you can reach me.” He then retrieved a folded piece of paper from inside his suit jacket. “Here’s my proposal... double market value.” His eyes drilled into mine as he added, “Think about it. I’d be happy to sit down with you and Caldwell to discuss details.” A chill ran up my spine over how much this man knew, yet he assumed I owned the building, which meant he wasn’t privy to Brad being co-owner.

His snake-oil salesman smile spread when I shoved the card and paper into my bag. Knowing I had no intentions of meeting with him, I suspected he wouldn’t just slip back into the hole he’d crawled out of.

Once in the car, I called Mr. Caldwell to get his advice on how to handle Roth. I then got on the road, turning on music while pushing Mr. Roth out of my mind.

The drive to Jersey was quick, and when I pulled up in front of the house, I was surprised to see so much headway had been made. The contractor explained the weather had been in their favor. He walked me through small details that needed to be done on the outside, but for the most part the remaining work was all inside.

A flash of disappointment came from their progress, and I knew it was because the day I no longer needed to be on the East Coast was quickly approaching. Despite knowing where Brad stood regarding us, or that I felt the same, I still worried about the logistics.

Long-distance relationships were trying even for veteran couples. We were so new... would we survive that kind of stress? I forced the negativity out of my mind, and instead focused on my reason for being there.

A few hours later, I had chosen paint colors for the bedroom, as well as flooring, and had met with the real estate agent to discuss a plan for putting the house on the market. I even visited with Mr. and Mrs. Murphy, filling them in on the house as well as my relationship with Brad. They were thrilled for us and made me promise we’d come have dinner with them soon.

By the time I made my way back to the city, a ridiculous smile remained plastered on my face. I cranked up the radio and made the quick drive back

while in a great mood... mainly because I couldn't wait to see Brad.

Chapter 25

Brad

The clock on the wall advertising my most popular beer read just past noon. It was the calm before the storm. Somewhere around three was when Manhattanites sauntered in, wanting to get their weekends started.

Although it was nice to lie on a beach with a sexy blonde, it felt good to be back in my environment, back in my element. Concerns about leaving the bar had been unwarranted. My staff did a great job holding down the fort. Of course, they made sure I knew it. Not because they thought I wouldn't appreciate all they did, more so because they wanted to prove I could indeed have a life.

As Bobby filled in the bar stock, I whistled while wiping down the shelves.

"Wow... I can't wait to see your reaction after I complete my next project." He assumed I'd been grinning like a fool because he just showed me how he had reorganized the stockroom. Yes, that was something I'd been meaning to get to since forever... and I was grateful to scratch that off my to-do list... but he was way off the mark.

My hot little she-devil was who had me walking on clouds. She'd been gone only a few hours, and I missed her. Christ, I couldn't get enough of her. Physically, we were extremely compatible. She responded well to my

domineering ways in the bedroom. I responded well to the naivety that came from lack of experience. We were a perfect fit.

Even our personalities were well matched. When I went hot, she cooled me down. When she went silent, I urged her to talk. When I thought about my future, I saw Sheena in it.

Before Miami, my growing feelings had confused me. And after, having had such a great time with my family, and an even better time alone with her, those feelings only intensified. In fact, it felt like I'd been through an emotionally charged awakening of sorts. That should've weighed heavily on me. Yet I felt lighter.

Besides to my parents, maybe to my grandparents when they were alive, and to my first girlfriend when I was seven, I had never professed love. As a thirty-three-year-old man doing so for the first time, it seemed I should've been second-guessing that revelation. Yet I wasn't.

Again, was that how it worked? Love? Once it hit, it calmed the soul? Were all the things that freaked you out before no longer an issue? Was my acceptance of love without hesitation proof that my feelings for Sheena were undeniably real?

My answer to all those questions was a resounding yes.

But where I'd been all in, she'd been more cautious. I understood her reasons. It was a lot to digest and until recently hard for even me to wrap my brain around. I'd never considered a future dependent on someone else.

More proof I knew it was real... seeing a life with Sheena exhilarated me. So many clear-as-day scenarios often popped into my thoughts. A game plan had even begun to formulate—maybe I could open a second Brad's Tavern in San Diego. Hell, if Max could do it with MAXimum Fitness in Miami, why couldn't I?

At one point when Sheena was playing with all the kids on Mother's Day, I could clearly see myself visiting her while she taught her class. That led to another possibility—maybe we could be in California during the school year and then in New York City for summers.

Of course, this was all dependent on Sheena wanting what I did... and

yes, she still hadn't professed her love, but I knew she loved me.

I could tell.

No one could've predicted we would've ended up here. I, for one, never saw it coming. When you broke it down, we'd both been through quite a transformation.

Gone was her resentment toward John... and me. I loved how well she'd adjusted to this new chapter of her life... with me. Even the way she slowly began to open up was amazing to watch... because of me.

After Sheena announced she had arrived at John's place, throughout the day I received random pictures with excited emoji revealing the progress. Each adorable text brought a smile to my face. As I completed wiping down the last of the glass shelves behind the register, I caught sight of my latest grin in the mirror.

Shit, I had it bad.

"Excuse me." I turned to see a short stocky man at the other end of the bar.

"Oh hey." I slung the dishrag under the counter and made my way toward him. He seemed out of place, being there in a suit so early in the afternoon, but still I asked, "What can I get you?"

His eyes cut to the liquor bottles behind my head, and he shook his. "Nothing to drink. I'm looking for Brad Navarro."

"I'm Brad."

"Simon Roth," he said, offering me his hand. I leaned closer to shake it while thinking that name sounded familiar. At my silence, he released me and added, "I'm an old friend of John Porelli."

And then it hit me. This dude was the bloodsucking developer who had set his sights on the building a few years ago. A conversation I'd had with John back then smacked into my mind. "An old friend?" I challenged the liar. I clearly remember John using the word *cocksucker* when referring to Roth.

"More like old acquaintances," he amended as his sleazy gaze glanced around my bar. "I'm so sorry about John. That was quite a shock."

“Can I help you?” I asked, cutting right to the chase.

An amused smirk lifted his thin lips before he reached inside his suit jacket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. He slid it across the bar and held my eyes. “I have a very generous proposition for you.”

Leaving it where it rested, I folded my arms. “I’m not interested.”

The smirk morphed into a grin. “You haven’t even looked at it.”

“I don’t need to look at it. I’m not interested in selling.”

“Not even if I’m offering double the value... as is,” he countered. “With all its old lead paint and rusted pipes, we both know with each year that goes by, a dinosaur like this building will require more and more repairs.”

“The answer is still no.”

“But you co-own it with a Miss Sheena Devlin... John’s daughter, correct?”

Instantly, my hackles rose. “She’s not interested either.”

“Interesting... she took my card *and* my proposal earlier today.” Every muscle in my body clenched. “Lovely girl... pretty too. It must be so tough for a schoolteacher to make ends meet in such an expensive state like California.” His beady little eyes focused on the clench in my jaw before he added, “The money she could make off this building is life altering.”

“Get the fuck out of my bar,” I seethed... and combined with the glare on my face, my words had him raising his hands.

“There’s no need for hostility. Just think about it.” He plastered on a gross smile and threw out, “She is,” before sauntering out the door. Through the window I watched him get into a black sports car that clearly screamed small-dick syndrome before driving off.

Just like that, my euphoria vanished. Roth had to be lying. No way would Sheena give that fucker the time of day. I debated calling her, but knowing she was probably driving, I decided to wait until she got here. Together, we’d call Caldwell and figure out a way to keep that prick from sniffing around here ever again.



I couldn't believe that fucker had tried to pretend he and John were friends. Most of what he knew was public record; the rest he could've guessed. It was the specifics to Sheena's life in California that I couldn't stop thinking about. Selling would be life altering for her... but so would selling John's house, along with all the other financial gains she'd received from her father.

That asshole had me right back to feeling like I had the day I discovered Sheena owned most of my building. That same level of panic had returned over being dependent on someone else... and combined with not knowing exactly what had transpired between them, it caused my blood to simmer for the better part of the last hour.

Bobby smartly refrained from mentioning the complete about-face I'd made with my mood. I could feel his eyes on me when I stormed off toward the stockroom without a word.

As I reached for napkins on the shelf, a slender arm snaked around my waist. A few weeks ago, it could've been any female I had encountered in my life, but the smell of rosemary and mint tipped me off.

When I turned, there she was in her go-to outfit of jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt. Today's pale-green color enhanced her eyes. But it was her electric smile that settled my ire just a touch. "Hey."

"Hi!" She tossed her bag on a nearby box before kissing me long and hard. Once she pulled away, she asked, "So... guess what?"

Assuming she was about to tell me about her run-in with Roth, I replied, "I know."

Her brows rose in question. "Elise called you?"

Equally confused, I countered, "Who's Elise?"

Sheena's puzzled expression held as she explained, "The real estate agent you put me in touch with. She and I met today to discuss listing the house."

"Oh... and?"

“We had decided on a price based on comps in the area. But then she called me on my way home and thinks she may already have a buyer. Newlyweds who want to live on that street because her parents aren’t too far. They also want a fixer-upper. How perfect is that?” A renewed smile spread, and her eyes danced excitedly. Everything in her demeanor didn’t jibe with my mood.

“That’s great,” I said a bit despondently.

She tilted her head adorably, tightening her hold around my waist. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah... what else happened today?”

“Well, except for painting, the outside of the house is all fixed. Inside, the electrical is done, and they already started putting the drywall up.” Swiping her thumb over my lips, she teased, “This isn’t your shade,” before another brilliant smile tipped up her lips. “Anyway, I had lunch with Mr. and Mrs. Murphy and kind of told them about us. They are so excited they made me promise we’d go there for dinner when you could. I think I’d like to get them something for all their help during this mess. Although I have no idea what, since they never leave their house.” She pecked my lips again before asking, “How was your day?”

“Fine.” Still, I waited... and still, she said nothing about Roth.

“Do I need to pull a Brad move to get you to tell me what’s wrong?” When she nuzzled up to me, I gently pushed her shoulders away, and she masked her hurt with concern. “Okay, spill... tell me what happened.”

“Nothing other than I had a visit today from a Simon Roth.” The color drained off Sheena’s face, but still, she remained silent. “We had a very interesting conversation... but I think you know that, because you had one with him yourself.”

Something sparked in her eyes just as she stepped away from me. “I spoke to him for like three minutes.”

“Long enough to take his card and proposal,” I challenged.

“Wrong,” she snapped, abandoning all pretense, and fisting her hips. “When I left this morning, he was out on the sidewalk taking pictures. I asked

if I could help him, and that was when he said he knew my father, was sorry for my loss, and that he would love to take the eyesore off my hands. He pushed his card and that proposal on me and came on so strong I felt gross. As soon as I got in the car, I left a message for Caldwell but haven't heard from him yet. My run-in with Roth can't be a coincidence."

"Of course it's not... he purposely sought you out, knowing he had no chance with me."

"Well, he has no chance with me either..." She paused to measure my expression. The silence between us became deafening until she harshly accused, "You don't believe me?"

The three or so seconds it took me to answer had the anger slipping off her face. But the disbelief that replaced it was so much worse.

"I do believe you." I did... but I couldn't understand why she hadn't mentioned it until I brought it up. Why would she keep that from me?

"You don't look like you do," she responded sharply.

Attempting to better explain my issue, I took in a deep breath and calmly said, "I'm just wondering why you didn't think it was important enough to call me... or even tell me now."

"I didn't want to upset you, because it's a moot point."

"So why call Caldwell if it's a moot point?" When the question ricocheted out of me, her head drew away, clearly taken aback.

"Because Roth claiming that he was a friend of my father's, knowing stuff about me, yet never mentioning you, freaked me out. I wanted Caldwell's take on the situation. Really, I wanted to know if he had ever spoken to Roth, and if so, what was said."

"Okay," I said blandly. "I know what your father said about the prick... he hated his guts."

It all proved what a snake Roth was. And Sheena's admission meant Roth did his homework before he ambushed her. A tiny part of me settled, knowing she hadn't had a lengthy conversation with him about California. It all made sense... then why did a tiny voice in my head choose that moment to remind me there was a time not long ago she would absolutely be open to

selling the building?

It was another voice... one that was much sterner and more logical, that reminded me a lot had changed since then.

Sheena wouldn't ever betray me like that. When push came to shove, Roth was the snake who would twist shit around for his benefit. He didn't mention me to Sheena because if Roth had done his homework, he knew there was no way I would sell the building. By telling me he had already spoken to Sheena, he wanted to instill doubt that my partner was open to selling. Create discord among the ranks.

Meanwhile, as Sheena merely stared at me impassively, I closed the distance to pull her into my arms... but she wouldn't have it and shoved me away.

"Don't." Anger rekindled in the way she folded her arms and glared at me.

"Come on, Sheen... I was just caught off guard by what he said. I'm sorry."

"You may be sorry now, but your knee-jerk reaction speaks volumes, Brad. You don't trust me."

"I trust you." After my assumption, those words sounded hollow even to my own ears.

She calmly reached over to grab her bag, and when she turned, gone were all signs of anger. All that was left in her expression was sadness... or maybe it was pain. Seeing it, seeing the disappointment in her eyes, caused a knot to form in the center of my chest. But when she turned on her heel and calmly walked out, that knot felt more like a gaping hole.

I had no idea what to do. Give her time? Chase after her and force her to forgive me?

What I ended up doing was standing there staring at the doorway, feeling like a farce. In one fell swoop, I'd just proved that I knew nothing when it came to love. She was right. I did have a knee-jerk reaction to Roth. I did allow a seed of mistrust to take the helm.

Right then and there, I knew I'd royally fucked up.

How could I even begin to convince her that wasn't a true indication of my opinion of her? It wasn't like falling in love came with a freakin' manual.

"Fuck!" I grabbed a bottle of olives off the shelf and threw it against the wall. With an exhausted sigh, no sooner had I begun cleaning up the mess infused with shards of glass than Bobby bolted through the door.

"What was that?"

"Nothing." As his gaze took in the scene, he went to say something, thought better of it, and turned to leave. "Bobby..." Waiting for him to meet my eye, I asked, "Can you handle the bar without me?"

"Of course."

"Thanks." That was all I said. I gave no explanation, no indication how long I'd be gone. He nodded and left, while I quickened my pace, knowing I had to get my ass upstairs. Because each minute that ticked by meant it would be that much harder to convince Sheena that I did trust her.

Chapter 26

Sheena

He could apologize all he wanted... it was obvious that a deep part of his subconscious still didn't trust me. The more I paced across my father's tiny apartment, the more my chest ached. As a result, angry tears came fast and furious.

With that knee-jerk reaction, he had assumed the worst. A part of me couldn't blame him. There was a time, not long ago, when an offer like Roth's would've prompted me to convince Brad to sell. That kind of money was unfathomable. Never again would I struggle with finances.

But that no longer mattered to me... and he should've known I wouldn't have considered it.

In a relationship as new as ours, lack of trust was monumental. Maybe it was better to have learned that now than after I allowed myself to become even more invested. And as quickly as that revelation popped into my head, another one countered that I was already very much invested in Brad Navarro. Because of that... the current ache would pale in comparison to the one I'd feel by walking away.

Slamming my hands against my tiny kitchen table, I cried, "Ugh!"

Consumed with conflict, the urge to escape him along with the

emotions that he stirred within me began to fester. Really, I didn't need to be in New York any longer. The construction was on its way to completion. The listing was all set to go. I could easily return to California to think things through, distance myself from him, and leave all the drama behind.

Except I loved the man behind the drama.

I could kick myself for having lost sight of the big picture. I had lowered my guard enough for Brad to infiltrate my heart. I had gotten wrapped up in the fairy tale that our connection created.

Despite our closeness, we still barely knew each other. So much had happened between us since my dad's memorial a month ago. I had changed, as had he. And although I could vouch that my feelings for him were as real as real could be, it was hard to truly know if his were.

Just weeks ago, he'd been screwing any female who had crossed his path... including me. Getting under my skirt provided a challenge for him. Kissing him that first night we'd met probably provided a goal. And I didn't doubt owning most of his building provided an incentive.

That Brad, the happy-go-lucky bachelor who was living his best life, couldn't be far from the surface. It was on me believing that he could change in such a short amount of time. I didn't care what Amy claimed... that insta-love crap happened only in the movies or in books.

I hadn't been upstairs for more than ten minutes when I heard the doorknob jiggle in its frame. Upon finding it locked, a knock preceded him saying, "Sheena, open the door."

I wouldn't be able to ward him off for long, as the man had a set of keys. Still, I stubbornly ignored his request. Sure enough, and in true Brad fashion, I heard him retreat without a word, knowing he would be back with said keys.

A few minutes later, the unmistakable sound of a key sliding into a chamber echoed. I quickly wiped away any sign of tears and steadied myself. Hurricane Brad then swung the door open, slammed it shut, and came right for me.

"No..." I raised a hand to stop him. His steps faltered, but he respected

my wishes. I didn't have a chance in this discussion if he attempted to manipulate my emotions with touch.

There we stood with maybe five or six feet separating us, yet it felt like a barren desert.

"I trust you," he started with. "I absolutely trust you."

"Maybe now, after thinking about it. But while Roth was spewing his half-truths, you doubted me and made that known." I wanted to add that it took years to build trust, and one instance to break it. Any relationship would be tested by that.

This awakening was our test.

The clench in his jaw while remaining silent spoke volumes. Needing to keep the upper hand, I went on to say, "Brad, what's done is done. It's fine. I don't blame you. It just proves that we don't know each other very well."

"No, it doesn't," he snapped impatiently. "I fucked up. People fuck up. It's that simple."

Again with the *simple*. It took every fiber of my being to keep from screaming out in frustration that it was far from simple.

Choosing not to address his comment, I instead added more space between us and sighed. "Look... you now know I have no intention of entertaining Roth's offer or talking you into selling." Although he should've known that on his own. "But until we figure things out, I think it's best we proceed only as business partners."

"No." He folded his arms defiantly.

"Yes." Mimicking his stance, I went on to admit, "We need to take a break." He needed to figure out if his claim to be with me held once I wasn't here to influence him... and I needed to figure out the same.

"So when things get tough, you avoid?"

"This has nothing to do with avoiding, Brad."

"Your history with John says otherwise."

My mouth gaped before I whispered, "That's not fair." I could tell by the sullen expression he regretted his statement. Still, I tipped my chin up in

defense of myself. “Yes, I avoided my father for fear that I’d care even after discovering that he didn’t. Who could blame me? But this has nothing to do with that. It has to do with trusting one another. Your reaction was pure human instinct. It’s easy to doubt someone, especially when you don’t know them well enough.” He went to speak, and I raised a hand. “And... we clearly don’t know each other well enough. It’s that... *simple*, and I think...” I paused, forcing my lungs to drag in a deep breath because I knew what came next could change everything. “Like I said... we should take a break.”

I almost caved while his green eyes drilled into mine with an intimidating intensity. That, combined with the still-present clench in his jaw, made it impossible to know what he was thinking. Yet I refrained from asking. It felt as though an eternity passed as I waited for him to clue me in.

During that tense state of limbo, my heart pounded, anticipating heartbreak while wondering if his ego would play a role in his emotions.

My assumption held true when he scrubbed a hand over his face, sighed in frustration, and countered angrily, “You need a break? You got it.”

“Thank you,” I said, even while knowing our relationship may not survive. A huge part of me wanted to run into his arms and admit that I understood why he’d doubted me. But that smaller part of my logic weighed heavier.

If it was so easy for him to doubt me now, how could I ever know he’d trust me in the future?



Brad

Thank you?

For a second those words didn’t register as we stared at one another. And then they clicked. Thank you for giving her the break she wanted? Thank you for not fighting her? Thank you for a great month?

Who fucking knew?

She blandly voiced those two words no different from if I had just complimented her T-shirt and jeans. Meanwhile, I clenched my jaw to stop from lashing out that her suggestion we pause our relationship felt no different from a sucker punch to my gut.

During our battle of wills, the pull she had on me never lessened. It was the vibrancy I would normally see in those gorgeous green irises that definitely dulled.

I hated being the cause of sadness in her eyes. I wanted to wrap her in my arms and convince her that she was overreacting. I wanted to tell her I loved her. The tug was so strong, I had to lock my knees to stop from closing the distance. I had to bite my tongue to hold back those three little words, because saying them to her now would just be a reminder she had never said them to me.

Really, Sheena retreating into herself shouldn't have surprised me. It was how she handled things. I probably shouldn't have compared her to John, and I felt bad about that. But my point was valid. Like him, she always kept emotions inside... and like him, with time, she would eventually open up.

But determination in the way she stood across the room while everything between us hung in a balance said otherwise. Her unbreakable resolve had always been a turn-on for me. It now felt like a nuisance in our relationship.

Maybe she was right.

It'd been, what... a month since we'd gone from adversaries to lovers? It took longer to grow a fucking potato. I wasn't impulsive by nature. There were only two things that I'd impetuously jumped into with both feet—renting the space for my bar and proclaiming love to Sheena.

It was ironic that they were weirdly tied to one another.

Uncomfortable with the tension that grew between us, she quietly said, "I, um... I have some calls to make... things to work out at home." Or in other words... this discussion was done.

"Yeah, okay. I need to get back to the bar. If you need me, I'm downstairs." The slight scowl smoothed a bit when she nodded. My claim

held much more weight than it implied. And then something occurred to me, and I impulsively asked, “Home where?”

She stared at me before stating the obvious. “California.”

What the serious fuck?

In that moment, every restraint I held vanished when I barked, “So, in taking a break, you meant physical distance included? Do you plan on packing your bag and hightailing your ass to the airport before I close the bar tonight?”

She seemed taken aback by my accusations. “No... but I should get back. There’s another month to the school year. If I leave soon, I can finish it up,” she explained in a rush of words... none of which meant a pile of beans to what the real issue was.

Calling her out on it, I snarled, “Cut the shit, Sheena. This has nothing to do with school.”

“It has to do with needing space. I think it’s better we’re apart during this break. I have a lot to think about, as do you.”

“Don’t put this on me. I was prepared to discuss my stupidity and move on.” I avoided admitting I had come up there prepared to talk it out and lay everything I hoped for on the line... like wanting to split our time between California and New York or sharing my vision of opening a second location in San Diego.

But telling her about those pipe dreams now would sound like a desperate plea for forgiveness. Especially after knowing she had already made the decision to fly back to California.

She looked away for a beat and then met my gaze. “I need time to think.” Her blank stare seemed to look straight through me, and I knew it wouldn’t matter what I said.

“Fine.” She had made up her mind, and that prompted me to add, “The ball is in your court, Miss Devlin.” With that, I turned and walked out her door.

I sure talked a good game, though, because one step into the hall had me wanting to go back in and tell her she was being ridiculous. By leaving her

alone with her negative thoughts, I knew I had just made a huge mistake. Allowing her to be alone with her convictions, without being there to defend mine, could be a recipe for disaster.

Our disaster.

Until now I never knew what love felt like. Had I avoided it my entire life because I assumed this was *exactly* what it *would* feel like? If so, to be honest, this shit sucked.

Upon hearing the bar noise that always comforted me, I took the stairs at a quick pace, now needing the Friday afternoon crowd to distract my mind as well.

When I scooted under the hinged opening, Bobby glanced my way and asked, “You okay?”

“I’m fine.” He went back to jerking the frosty stainless shaker in his hands. Feeling bad for having left him to fight the masses, I instantly began filling drink orders like a bartending machine.

Hours went by, and except to take a piss, I never stopped working. As afternoon turned to evening, I ignored the hunger pangs in my stomach no different from how I ignored the pangs in my chest. I smiled when I had to, responded to questions when asked, but the usual friendly engagement I held with customers was absent.

My regulars noticed, asking if I was okay. Each and every time I’d nod and say, “All good.”

Over and over, I claimed that lie until someone countered, “Bullshit.”

I glanced up from the beer bottle I had just uncapped to see Nate sitting at the farthest end of the bar, still in his suit, having come from work. Amy must have had plans, because that was the only time I’d seen my brother saunter into my bar alone.

After passing an icy Modelo to my customer and taking his money, I walked over toward Nate with no emotion whatsoever.

“What do you want?” I wasn’t in the mood to have him bust my balls.

Assuming I meant drink wise, he said, “Woodford... neat... and a

burger.” After placing his order with one of the waitstaff, I robotically poured the liquor for my identical brother and slid it over to him.

“Here you go.” He took a sip while narrowing his eyes on my face. “What?”

“Just trying to figure out what the hell crawled up your ass.” Nate looked around the crowded bar. “Can’t be business,” he said as I continued to wordlessly stare back. “Wait...” He pointed a finger at me. “Is there trouble in paradise?” My lack of response and the look on my face had the snark leaving his demeanor. “I know that pathetic look. What happened?”

“The fuck if I know.” That was a lie. I knew what had happened. A redhead signaling for me stole my attention for a few minutes, and during that time I decided to confide in Nate.

Once I returned to his corner of the bar, I lowered my voice and went through the chain of events, from Roth walking in on me to me walking out on her.

“Just like that?” The lift of my brow had him adding, “You’re just going to let her go back to California?”

“And how do you suggest I stop her?”

“By crawling back to her with your tail between your legs and making her understand the level of your feelings.” For a moment I thought it was Max in front of me, pranking me into believing it was Nate. Who was this man giving me relationship advice?

It sounded as though he had solid experience in what he was peddling. Guessing my thoughts, he nodded. “That’s right... I know what I’m talking about. By putting it all out there for Amy, telling her exactly what I felt for her, I won her back.” The corner of his lips quirked up in that cocky smirk we had all perfected. “Of course, chasing her to Costa Rica helped as well. Maybe you *should* let Sheena go back to California, and then show up to bring her back here. Amy calls that a grand gesture and claims it’s necessary in romance books.”

“My life isn’t a fucking book,” I snapped, and he grinned. Frustrated as all fuck, I knew, without a doubt, letting her go back could have this break

she wanted becoming permanent. I scrubbed a hand over my face and sighed. “This is exactly why I avoided relationships.”

“You’re preaching to the choir, dude,” Nate countered. “But now I can’t imagine ever going back to that kind of an empty existence. If you love her... you need to fight for her.”

My heart clenched, and I stared into his eyes, a bit panicked. “But what if she doesn’t love me?”

At first, he said nothing. He then tilted his head, pity clear in his expression, and said, “There’s only one way to find out.”

Chapter 27

Brad

Nate was right. Whether she loved me or not, I had to come clean regarding the level of my feelings for her. Tell her everything I saw in my future. If she didn't feel the same, then I would let her go.

Forcing myself to give her time, after closing the bar I went to my place and got into bed alone. It had been the first time in weeks, and I hated every inch of cool bedding that spread around me. I should've been exhausted, having just worked ten-plus hours straight, but staring at the ceiling until the sunlight poked through my blinds proved otherwise.

Come morning, I forced myself to move through my routine of working out, showering, and even getting paperwork done in my office.

Until somewhere around noon, when panic hit that giving her too much time could mean she was already on a flight back to San Diego. Would she leave without saying goodbye? I had no idea... and with that realization I heard her voice claiming we didn't really know each other well enough.

So with that valid possibility as a motive, I trudged my way up to her apartment to either gain clarity or closure.

Just before I knocked on her door, I heard Sheena recounting what had happened when she saw Roth. Like a creeper, I listened to her explaining

how she'd approached him as he took pictures of the building. Without taking a breath, she kept going with the chain of events until I heard, "*I told him we needed to take a break.*"

"*Oh, Sheen,*" a familiar voice said over the cell's speaker. "*You don't mean that.*"

"*But I do, Kelly. Whenever he's near me, I lose myself. I need space to think things through.*"

"*What exactly do you need to think through?*" Kelly countered. "*These past few weeks, through our calls, I saw a side of you I had never seen before. It was no longer about house repairs or legal crap...*" She paused a beat before adding, "*It wasn't even about your dad anymore. It was all about what you and Brad did that day, or how he treated you, what he said. He clearly makes you happy, and that makes me happy.*"

"*But he doesn't trust me, and that changes things.*"

"*It doesn't have to.*" Silence on Sheena's end prompted Kelly to say, "*I'm flying out.*"

I knew I shouldn't have been standing there eavesdropping, but when Sheena said, "*No... I'd rather come home,*" I couldn't bring myself to leave.

"*Sheen...*"

"*I need a break, Kell. Don't look at me like that,*" she griped, making it clear the friends were video chatting. "*I need space, away from him, to think things through.*"

"*I get that, but don't let this break become a regret. You've spent so many years regretting, and I don't want you to go down that road again.*"

"*But how can I get over the fact he assumed the worst?*"

"*You said he apologized.*"

"*Because I called him out on it.*"

"*So?*" After a quick pause, Kelly then echoed Sheena's words, "*Don't look at me like that. We all make mistakes. It's how we act afterward that counts, Sheena. Give him a chance.*" I had to assume the audible frustrated sigh was Sheena's. "*Promise me,*" Kelly prodded.

A door suddenly slammed behind me, and someone said, “Hey, Brad.” I turned to see Betty, the roof harlot, holding the hand of an older man. Not wanting to speak, I smiled and nodded. The woman obviously didn’t get the hint that we needed to be quiet when she very loudly admitted, “I’m about to show Bruce the roof.” She then giggled very loudly, threw me a wink, and headed for the stairwell with Bruce in tow.

And that was when Sheena’s door opened. She appeared wide eyed and asked, “What are you doing?”

“Can we talk?” I glanced at Kelly’s face visible on the cell phone Sheena clutched. “Hey, Kelly.”

Even though she couldn’t see me, she replied, “Hey, Brad.”

With her eyes tethered to mine, Sheena said, “Kell, I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay. Love you.”

Once the screen went black, Sheena moved into the apartment, and I followed. Needing to come clean, I started with, “I heard your conversation.” The silent scold only forced a shrug. “I’m sorry. But I guess now we’re even.”

“How do you figure that?”

“When you listened to me and Nate.”

“Oh yeah.” Her lips lifted in the sexiest way, and I again had to lock my knees to keep from going to her.

We stared at one another, practically picking up the same tense vibe as last night. When she broke the tether to sit at the small table, I folded my arms and leaned against the kitchen counter. And again, we stared.

“You wanted to talk?” she finally asked.

“Yeah... I guess I should start, huh?”

“That’s usually how it works.” I smirked at her snark, taking it as a good sign, and then came to sit across from her.

“I want you to hear me out, and not speak until I’m done. Can you do that?” It took her five seconds to nod, and only then did I begin. “Whatever it is you’re assuming, convinced of, even, it’s not true. I do trust you...”

completely. I was so angry seeing that prick in my bar, pretending he had some earth-shattering conversation with you. Hearing his offer, one that would set us both up for life, added guilt into the mix. I never looked at that damn paper. But by refusing to even discuss selling the building, I'm affecting your future. All of that fucked with my head, and I took that out on you.

"Before Roth showed up, I had worked out a plan. I never had the chance to share it with you, and after our discussion yesterday, bringing it up would seem like I was throwing a Hail Mary." The rise of her brows had me clarifying, "Football term." When she rolled her lips over her teeth, I shrugged and continued. "My point with all this is, I want to be with you, Sheena. You already knew that before yesterday, and I'm reminding you of that now. Nothing has changed on my end. I may not know you as well as you think I should, but I know you well enough to want to map out a future for both of us."

"But you live here and—"

I reached over and placed a finger on her lips. "Let me finish. I see us splitting our time between California and New York. I see myself possibly opening a second location in San Diego, where I would work during the school year. Come summer, I see us here in the city until the new school year begins. I see vacations, date nights. I see building improvements we decide on together. I see it all."

Her mouth gaped, and I wasn't sure if it was in a good way or bad, so I plowed on. "It may take a while for us to get to that plan, but until then we'll do the long-distance thing. I fly out to you, you fly here. Either way, we'll figure it out... together." I shook my head with a sigh. "I once thought my brothers were idiots for having fallen in love, but I get it now." As her vibrant green eyes shimmered, I paused, not wanting to scare her. But then I knew it was now or never, and that had me admitting it all. "You already know I love you, Sheena. What you don't know is that when I envision my future, I see you in every part of it."

I watched the shock in her expression turn into something else. With the slow roll of one single tear, again, it could've been just about anything that caused it. More regret, realization that she wasn't in the same place I was,

fear, and maybe even pity. Whatever it was that ran through her mind as she stared into my eyes had me holding my breath.

Until I couldn't take it any longer, and I rasped out, "Say something."

Another tear escaped before she hastily wiped it away and took my hand. "I love you too, Brad. I think I've known that since the day you helped me clean out my father's house. I definitely knew the day you said you loved me. And you were right, saying it then didn't seem right. But I do... I love you. It's probably why your reaction yesterday hurt me so much."

"I'm sorry about that. I will tell you I'm sorry every day, if that's what it'll take for you to believe me."

"I do believe you... it just took me some time to realize it." Her eyes searched mine before she added, "And... I love your plan, although that's a lot to digest right now." But when I went to argue that it truly was simple, she placed her other hand on our entwined ones to stop me. "What's most important... I also want to be with you. So you're right... we'll figure it out together."

I searched her expression for signs of doubt. All I saw was my own emotions shining back at me. Her green eyes may have been a bit more vibrant than mine. Her lips fuller, pinker. Her slim nose, high cheekbones, long lashes more feminine. But the love that came through in her brilliant smile mimicked the love I felt bursting behind my chest wall.



It was Sunday evening.

Normally I'd be in the bar loving my bachelor life... instead I spent the day wrapped around my girlfriend, and it felt amazing.

Boy, have things changed.

It'd been thirty hours since I shared my plan and she professed her love. Sheena expressing her feelings for me seemed to serve as the glue to our relationship. It cemented us as a couple. We were now Brad and Sheena. Not until she said those words did I truly realize how much I needed to hear them... and hearing them affected me more than I thought possible.

Except for necessary human maintenance such as cleansing, eating, sleeping... we haven't stopped "making up."

I couldn't get enough of her. Shit, I literally came inside her not ten minutes ago, and I was ready to go again. We finally got ourselves dressed, with plans to leave my apartment and grab dinner. But when she leaned on the kitchen counter to scroll through her phone, seeing her perfect ass jutting out behind her set me off... again.

Wordlessly, I came up behind her, circled her waist with my arms, and skimmed my lips up the side of her neck.

"Mmm," she hummed, and I could hear the smile behind that contented sound. When I popped the button on her jeans, she giggled before saying, "Brad, I'm starving."

"So am I," I countered while slowly lowering the zipper.

"I meant foodwise."

"Soon."

I slid my hand into her underwear until it was resting comfortably against her smooth, warm pussy. It took only a slight shift of a fingertip to have her groaning, "Oh God."

That was all that was necessary for me to hastily remove my hand, twist her around, and shove the stiff denim down over her hips. Surprise morphed into a sexy little smirk that further fueled my mission, and I dropped to my knees. Once I removed her shoes and jeans, tossing them to the side, I lifted one leg onto my shoulder, exposed her by pulling the panties to the side, and met her gaze. When one swipe of my tongue over her clit caused a carnal moan, along with her shoving a hand into my hair, I admitted, "This shouldn't take long."

With each suck, lick, and nibble, she writhed against my mouth so erotically I had to palm my denim-covered dick to placate it. But when it throbbed incessantly and painfully, I was forced to abandon my task.

"Wait... now you're stopping?" she asked, frustration clear in the tone of her voice.

"I'll finish that later," I explained while standing.

As my fingers frantically worked the button and zipper to release my anxious cock, she nodded, understanding the situation. Not bothering to remove any articles of my clothing, I released myself long enough to plop her bare ass on the counter.

During it, she let out an adorable squeal that died a quick death the moment her gaze dropped down to witness the slide of my hand up and down a hard-on that could drive nails. Meanwhile, the sight of her bottom half in only panties sitting on my counter monopolized my attention.

All humor vanished when I took one step closer. While still gripping my dick, I rubbed the tip over her, using my other hand to hold the lacey fabric to the side.

She breathily said, “Don’t tease me.”

“Teasing would be me walking away... and I have no intention of doing that... ever.” With one quick stab I breached her opening. With one smooth slow thrust I was balls deep, and I had to mentally recite the alphabet to stop from coming too soon.

The way her hands tucked under my T-shirt and traveled over every ridge and bump of my abs drove me to repeatedly piston my hips. The fabric limiting her exploration caused her to bark, “Off.”

She shoved the hem up at the same time as I gripped the back neckline and yanked it over my head. As her fingers resumed their path, a small smile lifted the corners of her mouth. Unable to resist, I bit down on her bottom lip and tugged.

The move had her abandoning my abs, shoving her fingers into my hair, and pressing her lips to mine. As our tongues tangled, I pumped harder and faster. The more I did, the more her warm pussy clenched around my engorged cock. Everything ceased to exist except for Sheena and me coming together in the most perfect of ways.

“Are you close?” I asked against her lips. I received a jolting nod. But regardless of her declaration, I slipped a hand between us and circled her clit in time to the thrusts. Seconds later, she buried her face in my neck as a contraction squeezed the fuck out of my cock. It blew my mind, thus blowing my load, and it went on and on and on.

It took a full five minutes for our breathing and muscle memory to return to normal.

“Wow,” she finally said. “That was amazing.”

While she stared deep into my eyes, and her fingers played with my hair, all I could utter was, “Uh-huh...” Apparently basic language skills escaped me. The emotions I felt as I stared at the most beautiful woman that I had ever met overwhelmed me in the best of fucking ways.

Shee-na. She-Devil. It didn't matter what I called her... because *she* was mine.

Epilogue

Sheena

Three Months Later

I poked my head out the door and, upon seeing no one looking my way, hastily walked back to my seat and refastened my seat belt. While my eyes darted from person to person in search of clues that they might have heard us, including the flight attendant serving the man in 5A, Brad calmly appeared and sat beside me, clearly amused by my nervousness.

“That was fun.”

“Fun?” I scoffed, before harshly whispering, “My heart is pounding. You’ll regret what we just did if I die of a heart attack.”

Taking my hand, he kissed it before whispering, “Relax. There are three people in first class, and two of them have earbuds in.” He leaned closer to say directly into my ear, “Also... for the record... I knew I’d eventually break you.”

All I could do was smirk, because he was absolutely right. It seemed this man could talk me into doing just about anything, including having sex across his desk on a busy Saturday night, with hundreds of people a few feet from his door. Or on the roof of our building to dethrone the Roof Harlot. Or in that tiny airplane bathroom as we coasted across the sky toward Costa Rica.

The vacation we headed to both thrilled and saddened me at the same time. The reason for our trip was Nate and Amy's wedding. But being it was the end of August meant once the week was up, I'd be flying directly to San Diego to start the school year. I had just spent four months with this man, and being a part wasn't going to be easy.

The upside was Brad would be joining me... for a week.

Again, that both thrilled and saddened me. I couldn't wait to show him my life in California, and between work and him I knew that week would fly by. Once it was over, Brad would be heading back to New York, and we would begin our long-distance relationship.

All part of his master plan.

He intended to fly back to California once a month until Thanksgiving. I would then go to New York for each of the extended holidays. Come January, we would again resume the once-a-month thing until June, when I would return to New York for the summer.

During our separation, Brad would hire another manager to get the bar running like clockwork in preparation for his ultimate goal. By this time next year, he hoped to have a Brad's Tavern in San Diego, where we would live together from September to June.

I loved the entire plan. Sure, getting through the separation we faced until then would be tough. But knowing what we were both working toward filled me with a level of excited anticipation I had never experienced in my entire life.

Normally I wasn't one to believe in fate, or destiny, or, as my boyfriend's popular karaoke event at the bar suggested, kismet.

But how could one explain being thrown into a perfect stranger's life with no warning, and having the interaction go from mildly hostile to wildly impassioned in the matter of a month? What were the chances? In Brad's words... not a *chance* in hell.

And yet here we were... apparently, hell can freeze over.

There had to be a higher power involved in something as random and far-fetched as Brad and me coming together. Especially considering my

cautious way of treading through life versus him having had mastered the act of promiscuousness.

Although my father had unknowingly played a part by connecting the two of us through an inheritance that he assumed would happen years down the road, his dying so young had brought us together... with a little help from the tree crashing through his roof.

Brad whole-heartedly believed that part was all Dad, because that action had kept me in New York, which created the situation for us to fall in love.

My man, the dreamer.

No matter what it was that brought us to where we were now, every day I thanked this higher power for it happening. I also spoke to my dad a lot. I tucked his license in my wallet, kept his watch among my jewelry.

Photos of him that Brad had framed and placed in his apartment, along with my father's uniform hanging in the closet, had me feeling his presence every day. The other newly framed pictures I had packed into my suitcase along with a bunch of Brad and me would do the same back home.

All the things I never got to say, new emotions that have grown after reading Dad's letter, I say out loud to him whenever I have the chance. I hope he hears me, knows how truly sorry I am that we never connected in life. Then again, would I be where I was now if all that happened hadn't happened? It was a bittersweet sentiment.

While Brad stared out the window, watching our descent, I shamelessly stared at his stunning looks. It was what first attracted me to him. Back then, I'd assumed he was nothing more than a cocky, arrogant, conceited asshole. And yes... to a degree he still is.

But beneath all that bravado, the man beside me had this unapparelled need to please those he cared about. He also had an abundance of love to give. Maybe he had banked it all his life, waiting for me. If so, I again had to thank a higher power, because the man was the perfect boyfriend. Except when we fought. He was stubborn as all hell... but making up was always worth the argument.

Sensing my gaze, he twisted to stare at me. "What?" he asked, amused.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Nate getting married. Before Amy, he would’ve been the last person on earth to take that step.” I knew it had to do with his former profession of being a divorce attorney. Amy not only had him changing his focus from divorce to pro bono cases, but she also had changed his view on love.

And Brad’s transformation was no different. Except for the night Brad had laid all his feelings for me on the line, claiming he needed me in his future, we never really discussed forever after again. I kind of liked that we hadn’t. Whether tomorrow or in ten years, I knew this man beside me was my person.

“People change.” I said it wryly, and he caught the message.

“Yes, we do.” He leaned closer to kiss my nose. “I, for one, am glad they are tying the knot in Costa Rica. This works well for us. We deserve a tropical vacation before reality kicks in next week.”

“I agree. I’m excited.”

He stared at me with a sweet smile. “The upside is it won’t be a huge production... so we’ll have plenty of downtime.” His gaze dropped to my lips before he leaned in and kissed me long and hard. “I also made sure our room was on the opposite side of the resort from everyone else’s.”

“Of course you did,” I replied with an all-knowing smirk... to which he shrugged before kissing me again.

Besides Brad’s family, Amy’s mom, and stepdad, Jade’s family would be there along with a few friends. It would be very low key. Originally, Nate and Amy wanted to get married in June. Come September, Amy’s book series would begin filming on the Sphere streaming service, and the couple wanted to take a long-extended honeymoon before then.

But Jade, as Amy’s matron of honor, had begged for them to push it to August, not wanting to waddle down the aisle. Jade, always the attorney, argued her case that every day with Nate was a honeymoon. Wanting to make her best friend happy, Amy caved. She and Nate decided on the anniversary of the dating event they’d both attended, which happened to have been the night they came together... or as Brad so crudely corrected, that it was the

night that they, um... fucked, for the first time.

Jade did deliver her baby on time. An adorable little girl they named Jenna came at the end of July. Apparently, she would be wheeled down the aisle in her stroller as the flower girl. Her brother, Michael, would be acting as ring bearer.

The honor of best man went to Max. Brad was not happy when Nate used the toss of a coin to decide which of his two brothers would stand beside him. The ever-present competition between the triplets was funny to watch.

“What are *you* thinking about?” he asked, repeating my question.

“How happy I am.” It was the absolute truth.

As the pilot announced our descent, Brad took my hand in his and squeezed. “I love you, She-Devil.”

His comment caused an instant grin. I no longer took offense to his nickname... because I loved him too... very, very much.



Brad

Ten Months Later

It seemed like yesterday that Sheena began the new school year and I boarded a plane back to New York without her. I spent the entire flight wishing the next nine months would fly by. I remember thinking being together only a few days a month, a week here and there, would undoubtedly be torturous.

And it was.

Every time I slipped into a cab outside her apartment in San Diego and headed to the airport, I left a piece of my heart with her. Having her for four whole days during Thanksgiving, ten during Christmas and New Year's, was amazing... until she needed to leave me once again.

But miraculously, time did go by. January became February. April became May. And here I was, back in California for my weekend with her.

The difference this time around: she would be joining me on the flight back to New York. She would be staying with me all summer, and a new chapter where we would split our time between the East and West Coast would finally begin.

I found a great little bar for rent not far from the beach. The interior was half the size of my location in Manhattan, but the outdoor deck made up the difference. The first thing I did was hire a manager. She came highly recommended by Kelly, since it was her sister. Cloe would oversee the minor renovations that would be happening when I wasn't there, as well as hiring a staff. We had plenty of time to get it all done before my grand opening in October.

So many wonderful things coming... but there was one extremely exciting thing that I needed to do first. I had plenty of help to pull this off. Kelly deserved a medal for all the frantic calls I'd inundated her with these past few weeks.

When the text I'd been waiting for popped up on my phone, I walked down the hall and positioned myself just outside Sheena's classroom door, where I found Kelly. The smile on her face was infectious as she silently gave me a double thumbs-up.

Knowing that reading hour was over, I heard Sheena's sweet melodic voice instruct the class to take their seats.

At that moment, Kelly walked into the classroom and said, "Sorry to interrupt." From where I stood, I watched the first little boy I knew to be Ben take his cue and lift a piece of construction paper printed with the letter W. His action caused a chain reaction, and one by one, each student lifted their own paper, making the letters fall into place like little dominoes. Even before the last paper rose above a little girl's head in the back row, Sheena's gasp filtered out into the hall.

That was when I strolled in with a smile on my face and a turquoise ring box in my grip. Her gaze instantly shifted to me as her mouth gaped.

Waving toward the little arms holding the message that read **Will you marry me, Miss Devlin?** I walked to where she stood, popped the top of the box, and dropped down on one knee.

“Will you?” I asked above the giggling around us.

First came a frantic nod, and then a whispered, “Yes.”

Without delay, I slipped the two-carat emerald-cut ring out of its temporary velvet home and onto its permanent home circling her finger. Its brilliance flashed like a flare beneath the fluorescent classroom lights. But even more blinding was the brilliant smile on my fiancée’s face.

In my peripheral, I saw Kelly simulate clapping, prompting cheers to break out among my little helpers. That signaled the nice ladies in the main office to parade in with cupcakes and juice, causing the sound of applause to heighten.

During it all, I stood and pulled Sheena into my arms. Needing to keep it sweet and innocent, I quickly pecked her lips. “I can’t believe you did this. I love that you included my class.”

“Well, I love you, future Mrs. Navarro. I wanted it to be a special proposal for you.”

“Mission accomplished... and I love you too... so very, very much.” Her eyes became misty when she went on to say, “I’m so grateful my father split his assets between us.”

“Me too.” There wasn’t a day that went by that I didn’t thank that crabby pain in the ass. So many times I wished John were around to witness what he was responsible for. Not only for bringing Sheena and me together, but to see for himself how she finally had moved past the years of resentment and regret. Then again, if he were alive today, there was no way of knowing if Sheena and I would be where we were. Something told me our fates were destined to collide at some point. But who knew if the end result would have been the same?

My eyes sliced over the munchkins in attendance before I whispered, “When does the ending bell ring? I need to take this G-rated proposal into XXX territory.”

“Not for ten minutes.”

“I guess I can wait. We do have forever to celebrate us.”

“Yes, we do.” She pecked my lips quickly. “For now, let’s get ourselves

a cupcake before my little monsters eat them all.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Gripping her hand in mine, I led her toward the celebration that was happening in our honor.

And once that bell rang, I couldn’t wait to lead her toward the rest of our lives... together.

This woman who blew into my life like a hurricane had changed it in every way. From the sexy defiance she revealed when standing up for something that was important to her, to the demure smile on her gorgeous face before I took her, to her intoxicating scent I couldn’t get enough of... I loved every single thing about Sheena Devlin... and she was all mine.

ONE LAST SHORT

Epilogue

A.M. Madden

About Seven Years Later

If the coordinated scream “Happy birthday!” didn’t clue the Navarro triplets into what they had just walked into, then the massive banner that read HAPPY 40TH MAX, NATE & BRAD sure did.

Three pairs of gorgeous green eyes took in the crowd gathered by the door. Three identical faces spread into that smirk each brother was known for.

“Wow,” Max said, first to speak. His gaze raked over the five most important people in his life. Jade, his gorgeous wife, held their youngest’s hand. At age four, Andrew was more interested in the balloons littering every inch of the room than wishing his daddy a happy birthday. Andrew’s sisters, Jenna and Lauren, stood beside him in their adorable matching pink dresses and pigtails. Lauren wanted to do everything her older sister did, including dressing like her.

And then there was Michael, compared to his siblings looking so grown up at the age of nine. Like Max, Michael was the perfect big brother. Even though Michael had two years on Jenna and not two minutes like Max had on Nate, he was patient, kind, and stern when needing to be.

Each of the four were part Max, part Jade, in every way from their shared coloring to their easygoing personalities. As Sheena once said years ago, they did make beautiful babies. If Max had his way, Jade would've been pregnant with their fifth by now. Jade, on the contrary, claimed they were done.

Max had opened a third gym in California not far from Brad's bar. And although owning three successful locations in three different states meant their time was precious, made even more so with four kids, Max wouldn't trade their lives for anything. He loved every chaotic, stressful, frenzied minute of it. He also loved his family more than anything in this world, and he had a few tricks up his sleeve to change his wife's mind about having more babies.

Meanwhile, Nate had immediately bolted for his wife, Amy, lifting her up in his arms as their son looked on from his stroller. Between Amy's success with her books being produced in film, and Nate's successful law firm, any free time they had they traveled the world. His brothers accused that they were on a perpetual honeymoon, and Nate couldn't deny their claim.

Because of their glamorous jet-setting lifestyle, it had taken a while for the couple to decide on whether they wanted children. And now that Zayden was part of their world, they couldn't remember life without him. But as enamored as they were with the adorable toddler, who was a spitting image of his dad and uncles, they were not interested in adding any other rug rats to their family of three.

Finally came Brad, the one who had surprised them all by falling in love with Sheena in just a few weeks, proposing in just a year, marrying her a few months later, and adding twins nine months after they said their vows.

At six years of age, the siblings were mini versions of their parents. Bryce had his mom's blond hair and green eyes, but his mischievousness came straight from Brad. Where his sister, Brynn, with brown hair and green eyes, had a mild-tempered disposition that she got from Sheena.

Like his brothers, Brad had become a master at juggling business and family. Once the twins were born, Sheena had taken a leave of absence from

her teaching job to be a full-time mother. She loved splitting her time between California and New York, and despite constantly being exhausted, especially now while being pregnant again, she wouldn't trade one minute of the frenzy for anything in the world.

Family was everything to the triplets, as was proved with the turnout for their birthday celebration. As their parents and friends all happily applauded the brothers, they each stared at one another knowing they were the luckiest fuckers on earth.

These three men may have been identical in their physical features but couldn't have been more different in their personalities. Also different were the paths they each took to find their happily-ever-afters.

Max and Jade's start may not have gone according to plan with their unplanned pregnancy. Nate may have pushed Amy into a relationship by having sex happening again, and again, and again. And Brad may have eaten his words when he not so kindly told Sheena that there wasn't a chance in hell, although in his defense, he was referring to selling the building.

Regardless of how their stories all began, what mattered for the Navarro brothers were the end results.

They each fell madly, deeply, and hopelessly in love.



The End



Haven't read Max or Nate's books yet?

You can do so here:

Not According to Plan

Max's book:

books2read.com/AMMaddenNotAccordingtoPlan

Not Happening Again

Nate's book:

books2read.com/AMMaddenNotHappeningAgain

Acknowledgments

My twenty-third book is live... not including the five I cowrote with Joanne Schwehm. It's hard to believe I had that many stories in my head... especially when I can't seem to remember what I went into a room for. #BrainFogIsReal.

But I couldn't have written them without my family's patience, support, and understanding while I'm in my writing zone. I love you guys... J, A, and R... you are my world.

Thank you, Joanne Schwehm. I am so lucky you're there for each and every book I write. When my brain stops working, your brain picks up the slack. It's rare to find a friend who is more like family, and I found that with you. Love you, my sorella.

I want to thank all the bloggers who have supported me through the years. Some of you have been with me since day one, and I can't begin to express my appreciation, as thank you doesn't seem enough.

A huge thank-you to Stephanie Phillips, SBR Media family, for being my agent and having my back.

To my awesome editor, James Gallagher. I always appreciate your editing skills, and it's always such a pleasure to work with you.

Thank you, Tami Norman at Integrity Formatting. I love how you make my books look so pretty and unique.

I lost count how many covers Sommer Stein has made for me, but I love each and every one of them. I especially love how well you pulled together these two illustrated covers. Thank you.

Thank you, Wildfire Marketing family, for always helping me gain interest for my new release.

And finally, my biggest thank-you goes to all my readers. Whether you read one or all, I can't put into words how unbelievably grateful I am that you found me. Love you all so very much!

One last thing: After you've read a book, please take a few moments to post a review. It's the single best way to thank your authors. If you really liked it, tell a friend.

Xoxo

A. M. Madden

More from
A.M. MADDEN

The Back-Up Series

(sold individually or in a boxed set)

Back-Up

Front & Center

Encore

Backstage

The Devil's Lair

Backstage Pass

Sold Out

A Lair Novel

Shock Jock

Liner Notes

Trey

Destined

True Heroes Series

Stone Walls
Glass Ceilings
Dark Corners

Breaking the Rules

LOVE on the Horizon
Hostile Workplace
Upside Down
No Turning Back

Stand-Alone Novels

Vanishing Act
The Shortstop

Cowritten with Joanne Schwehm

Finding Mr. Wrong
Taming Mr. Flirt
Scoring Mr. Romeo
Craving Mr. Kinky
Loving Miss Sassy

Entangled Publishing

Not According to Plan: A Navarro Triplets Novel

Added by author:

Not Happening Again: A Navarro Triplets Novel

Not a Chance in Hell: A Navarro Triplets Novel

You can purchase any of the above at ammadden.com/books/

About A.M. MADDEN

A *USA Today* bestselling, award-winning author, A. M. Madden is also a Jersey girl whose love of romance started at twelve after reading Judy Blume's *Forever*. As a self-proclaimed hopeless romantic, she believes that true love knows no bounds.

In her books, she aspires to write fun, sexy, realistic love stories that will stay with you long after you turn the last page. She creates realistic characters and believes there's no better compliment than when readers feel they know the characters personally.

When not writing, she's busy being a wife to her soul mate and a mother to two boys she believes are the most handsome men on earth. She loves to cook, hates to bake, and dreams about living at the beach someday.

You can contact A. M. Madden at

ammadden.com

Follow A. M. Madden

[Facebook](#)

Twitter: @ammadden1

Instagram: ammadden1

Email: ammaddenauthor@gmail.com

[BookBub](#)