



# Roses & Thorns



Book Two

# Oleander



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BECCA JAMESON

# OLEANDER

## ROSES AND THORNS, BOOK TWO

BECCA JAMESON




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# CONTENTS

[Newsletter](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Book](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Also by Becca Jameson](#)

[About the Author](#)

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[Becca's Newsletter Sign-up](#)

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

*She brought me to my knees the moment I met her. I'll stop at nothing to keep her safe...*

### **Kalinda**

I'm from the wrong side of the tracks. A nobody barely surviving on the tips I make dancing for sleazy men. That's what makes me an easy target. My stalkers know it. When they make me disappear, I know no one will ever look for me. I spend a year in captivity, training to service the Master who will purchase me as his sex slave. But they've underestimated me.

### **Jagger**

I've been on this human-trafficking case for a month. When I get the call that a woman has been located, my heart stops. It stops again when I see her. She brings me to my knees. She's fierce and determined. She's also breathtaking and damaged. It's not rational, but she's mine, and I'll do whatever it takes to protect her from the man who sold her and the man who bought her.

They know who I am. They know where we're hiding. How long can I keep her out of the hands of some very powerful men who aren't willing to give up?

## CHAPTER ONE



Jagger's heart pounded as he jumped out of his car and ran toward the house. It was already surrounded by several cop cars and an ambulance. He'd gotten the call ten minutes ago, and he'd been fucking glad he'd only been ten minutes away from the scene.

Flashing his badge to everyone in his wake, he was given a wide berth. They were expecting him.

The front door was standing open, and he rushed into the house, glancing back and forth before choosing to go right because that's where all the commotion was.

"Agent Whitley?"

Jagger came to a stop in front of the female officer. "Yes. Where is she?" He wasn't interested in small talk. He wanted to get to the woman.

The officer stepped aside, giving Jagger a straight view of the corner of the room. "Fuck," he muttered under his breath. If what he'd been told was true, this woman was the second one to have been found since the slave auction a month ago. Other than the rescue of Gemma Romano, he'd had zero leads on the other five women.

Was this girl even a woman? She looked so small where she sat curled in a ball in the corner of the room.

"No one has been able to get her to talk or move. She screams when we reach for her," the officer informed him.

Jagger nodded as he slowly finished his approach. He squatted down when he was about a foot away. Jesus, she looked young. Gemma had told Jagger and his team everything she knew about the other five women. This one definitely fit the description of the woman called Oleander, but Gemma had believed all of them to be at least twenty. This woman looked younger.

She was blond and long curls hung all around her face and down her body. She was naked, covered in blood, and shaking badly. She was also rocking back and forth slightly, whimpering.

Jagger had no idea what she'd been through for the past month, but he *did* know what she'd been through for the past year. If this was indeed Oleander, she'd been kidnapped and brought to Jovani Russo's house almost a year ago.

"My name is Jagger. Can you tell me your name, honey?" Jagger asked in the calmest voice he could muster. His heart hurt for this woman. He wanted to punch a hole in the wall, but he forced himself to remain calm.

She didn't flinch at his question.

Glancing around without moving his head, he determined the details he'd been given were accurate. A large dead body lay two feet from her. It had already been ID'd as Rinaldo Gustaf—the owner of the home. Luckily, it was covered with a sheet, but blood ran across the hardwood floor of this room he thought was a library or an office.

The only lights came from the streetlights and patrol cars through the large windows. Jagger was glad no one had filled the room with bright lights. They would probably send this woman into an even greater panic. He wished someone would turn off the flashing police lights.

"We don't think the blood is hers," the officer informed him as she stepped closer.

"Are you injured, honey?" Jagger asked, hoping to reach her by any means possible.

She continued to rock. Someone had draped a sheet over her, but she'd let it fall to the floor around her. She was huddled so tightly he couldn't make out the rest of her body. Blood was smeared on her face and down her arms. Her hands were covered in it.

Jagger wished to fuck they could remove the fucking body, but he understood the need not to tamper with evidence. The goal here was to remove the woman, not the body.

Seeing no other option, Jagger chose the only method of reaching her that might result in a positive identification. "Oleander?"

She gasped as she glanced up at him before jerking her gaze to the floor. Bingo. Her breathing changed to rapid panting. "Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry," she muttered.

"No need to be sorry. I'm here to help you."

"Gaze to the floor. Gaze to the floor," she murmured.

Jagger hesitated for a second before realizing what she was talking about. He knew this fucking case inside and out. She was trained not to make eye contact. She'd been apologizing for looking at him.

"I'm here to help you, Oleander," he repeated. He hated using the fucking name she'd been assigned, but he had no idea what her real name was, and she had at least responded to it.

"Are you going to take me to jail now?" she asked the floor in a voice so soft he barely heard her.

"No, honey. You're not in trouble." *Fuck*, but he hated this.

"Please take me to jail, Sir," she told the floor. "Please."

Jagger slowly reached for the sheet and lifted it to cover her, tucking it under her chin and wrapping it around her small body. Why did she want to go to jail?

He feared he knew the answer. She probably believed it would be the safest place on Earth. Bile rose in Jagger's throat, partly from the strong scent of blood but mostly from the unimaginable anger he was feeling.

The thought that someone had treated this woman so badly made him want to fucking scream and throw things. More than one someone. He had no idea how many people had mistreated her or how badly she was injured emotionally and physically.

What he did know was that she had somehow managed to get a gun and killed this motherfucker lying to one side of her. She had to have some level of strength of mind and understanding to have accomplished that.

He wanted to praise her, but her state of mind was precarious.

Jagger glanced at the officer. “Did she place the 911 call?”

“No. The neighbors heard gunshots.”

Jagger nodded. “Do you have the weapon?”

“Yes. It was next to her on the floor. All six rounds were fired. Two are in the wall behind us. Four hit their mark.”

Jagger swallowed. He didn’t want the officer to continue speaking. It was probably retraumatizing this woman. “Okay.” He inched closer. “I’m here to help you.” Maybe if he said that enough times, she would believe him.

She squeezed into a tighter ball.

How much should he tell her? “I know who you are and what you’ve been through. You’re not at fault. I’m here to get you someplace safe. You’re safe now.”

She tipped her head back again, huge blue eyes wide. “You’re not going to arrest me?”

He shook his head. “No, honey.” He hated calling her Oleander. He knew it wasn’t her name. He wasn’t sure *honey* was appropriate either, but until he knew her real name, it was at least kinder. “How about we get you out of this room, clean you up a bit, and get you to the hospital.”

“Hospital?” Her eyes widened further. She shook her head. “No. He’ll find me there. Put me in jail.”

Jagger cringed. “Can you tell me your real name?”

She tucked her chin against her knees again. Her skin looked flawless. She was like a porcelain doll. Jagger couldn't be sure there were no marks on her from the last month, but he didn't expect to see any old ones from her time in Jovani Russo's captivity. That motherfucker was sadistic, but he hadn't touched the women in any way someone would be able to tell. They'd been sold in perfect condition. Even their virginity had supposedly been intact.

"Oleander," she muttered.

"What was your name before that?"

She rocked harder but didn't respond. Either she was afraid to reveal her name, or she didn't remember.

"Can I help you get out of this room, Oleander?"

"Why isn't anyone arresting me? I killed that man." She nodded toward him.

"Because it was in self-defense, honey." He drew in a slow breath. "Did you come here of your own free will?"

"No, Sir."

"Were you permitted to leave if you wanted?"

"No, Sir," she whispered. "I'm a slave."

Jagger stiffened and drew in another slow breath. At least she seemed to know what was happening, even if her outlook was warped. "Slavery is illegal. You were fighting for your life."

"You should arrest me," she insisted.

Jagger glanced at the dead body. The man was big. It was impressive that she'd managed to take him down. "He can't hurt you anymore, honey."

She lifted her head and turned to stare at the body before meeting Jagger's gaze again. "He didn't hurt me. He's not the one I'm worried about. Please arrest me."

Jagger's breath hitched. "Is there another man?"

She nodded.

Jagger glanced at the officer as she turned and fled the room. He looked back at Oleander. "Where is the other man?"

"I don't know. He's coming for me."

"Do you know who he is?"

She shook her head, her curls flying around her face.

"Can you tell me what he looks like?"

"I've never met him."

Jagger frowned, trying to make sense of what she was saying. Had she been sold to someone else already?

Oleander pointed at the dead body, causing the sheet to fall to the floor again. "I killed that man. You have to arrest me. Please. Before he gets here."

"When are you expecting him?"

She licked dry lips. "Tonight." Her body started shaking.

Jagger twisted around to make sure someone else was listening. Two male officers were behind him. They both took a step back, one of them getting on his radio.

"Let's get you out of here before he arrives, yeah?" Jagger encouraged.

"Will you take me to jail, Sir?"

"You don't belong in jail, honey. You need a doctor."

She shook her head violently. "No. I'm not hurt. I'm a criminal."

This was the hardest situation Jagger had ever been in since he'd started with the FBI over ten years ago. He'd never seen anyone so broken in his life. He had a crazy idea that might appease her. "Do you think there's a chance the man is watching?"

She nodded.

"How about if I put handcuffs on you to get you out of here? That way if he's watching, he'll think you've been arrested, and he won't look at the hospital."

She bit into her bottom lip, blinking a few times while she processed the plan. “You need to take me in the police car to the police station.”

Jagger rubbed his brow and sighed. Christ, this was insane. “Okay. I’ll go with you. When we get there, we’ll get you cleaned up, and then you can tell me everything that happened.”

She nodded rapidly and held out her hands, heedless of the fact that she was naked. “You have to make it look real, Sir.”

Fuck. This was fucked up. But he understood, and she had far more wits about her than he’d originally expected.

Jagger twisted to look at the officer who remained in the room behind him. He recognized this particular man. He was in his mid-forties. Seasoned. He wouldn’t be as freaked out by this arrangement as a rookie cop. “Higgins?”

The man stepped forward, brows raised.

“Were you listening?”

Higgins nodded as he cringed. “I’ve never done anything like this, but it’s not a bad idea.”

Jagger sighed in relief. “Is one of those patrol cars yours?”

“Yes.”

“Can you get people to back up while we lead her out of here?”

“Yes. Give me two minutes.” He started to walk out of the room.

“Higgins.” Jagger called him back. “I want every uniformed officer in the vicinity fanned out for blocks.” If some motherfucker was watching this house right now, Jagger wanted him arrested.

“I’m on it.”

Oleander was stiff, but she’d stop rocking. “Thank you,” she mumbled.

Jagger reached out a hand. “Can you stand, honey?”



She set her small fingers in his palm and let him help her up.

Jagger snagged the sheet on the way and wrapped it around her, trying hard not to stare at her body. “Can you hold this around you?”

She glanced at it as if just now realizing she was naked. She fisted the material in front of her, but looked toward him again. “I need cuffs. He needs to see the cuffs.” She was shivering now. She might have been cold, but he suspected her nerves were the main culprit.

Jagger glanced around. There were no other clothes in the room. He would bet money she had no clothing in this house, and he certainly wasn’t going to take the time to search.

Jagger tugged off his jacket and held it open for her. “Stick your arm in, honey.”

She flinched. “I’ll get blood all over it.”

He nodded. “Small price to pay for your freedom, don’t you think?” He was impressed she had enough brain cells functioning to even care or notice the blood.

“Thank you,” she murmured as she stuck her arm in the sleeve and let him wrap it around her to get her other arm in.

Jagger zipped up the front all the way to her chin. She was more than a foot shorter than him. She might be five-two if she stood at her full height. The jacket fully covered her. It reached damn near to her knees.

She seemed stronger now. She was snapping out of the stupor she’d been in when he’d arrived. “I killed someone,” she murmured as he pushed the sleeves up so her hands could reach out.

She glanced at the body again and shuddered. She was still stunned by her actions.

Jagger set a finger under her chin and lifted it. “You had no choice.”

She nodded. “I’m scared,” she whispered.

“I know you are. We’re going to get you out of here, and I’m going to do everything in my power to make you not scared.”

She held his gaze, searching it as if trying to decide if she could trust him. Finally, she nodded. “Thank you.”

## CHAPTER TWO



Kalinda couldn't stop trembling. She couldn't stop glancing at the dead man on the floor. She'd killed him. It was hard to believe she'd actually done it. And now, this man was being irrationally kind to her.

He'd said his name was Jagger. She didn't think he was a police officer like everyone else standing around the room, but he spoke to them as if he were in charge. He was tall and broad, and she should be scared to death of him, but she wasn't.

He'd crouched down to her level. He'd spoken to her calmly. He'd brought her out of the near panic she'd been in. The fog was clearing now.

She still wished he would have the police arrest her. It was the only way she could think to remain safe.

When the officer named Higgins returned, he handed Jagger a pair of cuffs.

With a finger, Jagger lifted her chin. He was frowning. "Are you sure this is how you want to leave? I could have the paramedics bring in a gurney and wheel you out as if you were injured."

She shook her head and extended her wrists.

Jagger sighed as he cuffed her hands behind her back. "I'm going to lead you out to the patrol car and ride with you to the police station."

“Okay.” She was secretly glad. He was the only person who seemed to understand, and she trusted him. At least as much as she could trust any man, which was huge.

Jagger was different from most men she’d met in her life. Genuine. He didn’t put off a single vibe that he intended her harm.

Kalinda kept her head down as she let Jagger lead her to the patrol car with a firm grip on her bicep. In her peripheral vision, she could see dozens of people. There was a collective gasp among them. Several police cars were parked in the street. All of them had their lights on.

When they reached the patrol car, Jagger set a hand on her head and helped her duck into the back seat. He surprised her a moment later when he slid in next to her, forcing her to scoot over. She didn’t make it very far without the use of her hands, so she was uncomfortably close to him when he shut the door.

She held her breath as he helped her scoot over a few more inches. “Lean forward so I can take these off,” he whispered.

She glanced at him. “What if someone notices?”

Jagger held her gaze, brows furrowed. He lifted a hand as if he was going to brush her hair back but then lowered it with a glance out the window. They had an audience. In fact, when she looked out the back of the patrol car, she noticed two news vans had joined the crowd. Cameras were pointed toward her.

She shook her head and leaned away from him. “Leave them.”

He drew in a slow breath, his gaze locked on her. “Only until we pull away from the curb.” Then he leaned back and faced the front, frustration sliding off him in waves.

Kalinda watched him closely before suddenly remembering herself and jerking her gaze down to the floor while she squirmed to put more distance between them.

Jagger suddenly turned toward her, lifted her by the waist, and set her fully in the seat. He reached across for the seatbelt next and fastened her in.

Kalinda leaned forward to keep the pressure off her wrists, grateful a moment later when Officer Higgins climbed in the driver's seat, started the car, and drove away.

Unexpected tears fell, and she started shaking as emotions overwhelmed her.

Jagger immediately reached behind her to unfasten the cuffs.

She pulled her hands to her front and rubbed them together, unable to stop the onslaught of tears. She hadn't cried for so long that she'd forgotten it was even possible.

Leaning forward, she tried to shield her face. Her hair fell in filthy ringlets around her.

Jagger rubbed her back. "You're okay now. I promise. It's over."

She cried harder. He had no idea what he was talking about. It would never be over. Through blurry vision, she tipped her head in his direction. "You'll put the cuffs back on when we get there, right?"

He frowned. "No. You understand you're not in trouble, right?"

She slowly turned her face back to her lap, rocking again. She tucked her arms in close and rubbed her hands together. Trouble? She would always be in trouble. He didn't live in her world.

His hand slid up to her neck, and he rubbed her gently. "You're safe now. I promise."

She looked at him again. She needed him to understand. "You can't promise that. The only way you could possibly keep me safe is to put me in jail."

He swallowed hard, and his hand tightened on her neck. He leaned in closer. "I can and will keep you safe without bars. You have my word."

She stared at him. "You don't know who you're dealing with."

He leaned in closer. “I know more than you think. I’ve been working on your case for a month.”

She gasped, and then she recalled he’d mentioned something about knowing what she’d been through. He’d also known her name—at least the one she’d been assigned by Master J.

“You’re the second woman to be rescued, honey.”

Her breath hitched. Someone else had escaped? One of the other girls?

He nodded. “Gemma Romano.”

She frowned.

“Marigold,” he clarified.

Her heart was pounding. “Mari escaped?”

“Her buyer was an informant for the FBI. She wasn’t sold to a real slave master.”

For the first time in she didn’t know how long, Kalinda managed a slight smile.

“I’ll call her and have her meet us at the police station. You can talk to her.” He pulled out his phone.

Kalinda reached over and grabbed his hand before she could think to stop herself. “Don’t. It won’t be safe. I won’t endanger her life.”

“She’s safe. I promise. The man who sold you was arrested last week.”

Kalinda sat up straighter. “Master J?”

He smiled. “Yes. He’s behind bars. You will not be.” He flipped his hand over under hers and squeezed her fingers.

She shook her head. “I’m happy for her, but I’m still not safe, Sir. I’ll never be safe. The man who bought me will come for me. He’ll hunt me down until he finds me.”

Jagger frowned. “The man you were expecting tonight is the man who bought you?”

She nodded. "I think he was coming from another country. That man I...killed, he was pretending to be the buyer. He took his place at the auction and brought me to his house to wait for his boss to pick me up."

Jagger rubbed his chin. "You've been at that house for a month without meeting the buyer?"

"Yes, Sir."

He squeezed her hands again. "You don't have to call me sir. I'm not your Dom."

"It's ingrained in me...Sir," she informed him.

He breathed heavily through his nose. He was frustrated, and she believed it was with her situation. Not with her. He suddenly jerked his attention to the driver. "We're not going to the station, Higgins."

Higgins nodded in the rearview mirror. "Address?"

Jagger rattled off an address.

Kalinda panicked. She jerked her hand out of his and grabbed his arm. "Where are we going?"

"My house."

She gasped. "What? Why? We can't do that. He'll find me. Please. When he does, he'll kill you. Do you have any idea what that man paid for me? You have to arrest me. It's the only way. I had this all planned out."

Jagger's brows lifted. "You had what planned out?"

She twisted in her seat. "Everything. See? It's premeditated murder. I planned it. I killed that man so you would arrest me."

Jagger's brows shot higher. He leaned in closer, not looking the least bit flappable. "Did you willingly agree to being trained as a sex slave for the past year, Oleander?"

She winced. "No, Sir."

"Did you willingly go home with the man you shot in self-defense tonight?"

She shook her head. He'd already asked her these questions. He knew the answers.

"When was the last time you wore clothes, Oleander?" His voice was gruff.

She licked her lips.

"When? Tell me when," he insisted. His voice was no longer as soft as earlier, but he wasn't a threat to her either. She knew it in her gut.

"Over a year ago," she murmured.

"Was your buyer's lackey keeping you against your will for the past month?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Where? Where have you been for a month inside that house?" His questions kept coming.

She looked away.

"Tell me, Oleander. Where has he kept you for a month?"

She jerked her gaze back to his. "You already know, don't you?"

"Yes. Tell me yourself."

She searched his face. He knew. Someone had probably informed him before he'd arrived.

"Tell me, Oleander. Tell me about your amazing month-long vacation at the home of Rinaldo Gustaf." He leaned in so that only a few inches separated their faces.

"A cage in the basement," she whispered. More tears fell. She couldn't stop them.

"How did you get out today?"

"He forgot to lock it. He was in a hurry because he needed to run an errand before my buyer arrived."

"What did you do while he was gone, Oleander?"

"I ran upstairs. I wanted to get out. All the doors were locked from the inside. So were the windows. I could tell they



had sensors on them. So, I found a gun in his office and waited for him to return. See? I planned to kill him. Why don't you believe me?" she nearly shouted.

Jagger grabbed her hand again. "How long before he returned."

"I don't know. Ten minutes maybe."

"And then what?" Jagger asked.

"And then he came into the office and set something on the desk. I was standing in the corner. I lifted the gun and shot every bullet. I missed a few times, but I got him." She shuddered. She would never be able to erase that memory.

"And then what happened, honey?" Jagger's voice was much lower now. Controlled.

She stared at their combined hands. Hers was covered with dried blood. He didn't seem to care. Why was he comforting her? "I was so shocked that I slumped to the floor. It didn't take long before I heard sirens."

"That's what you wanted, wasn't it? To be found. You wanted the police to arrest you so you would be safe from your buyer when he arrived."

She nodded slowly. It had been a brilliant plan. Jagger was ruining it.

Jagger lifted her hand to his face and rubbed it against his cheek. His voice was very low and controlled when he spoke again. "The justice system doesn't work that way. When someone is kidnapped, trained as a sex slave, held against her will, and sold for a million dollars, she is allowed to do whatever it takes to survive. You did. You're so strong I'm in awe of you." He lifted her chin. "You survived. You are not a murderer, Oleander. You're a survivor."

She didn't realize huge tears were now falling until Jagger wiped them away with his thumb. "You're a survivor," he repeated. "And you're safe now."

"I'll never be safe," she repeated.

"You will. I'll make sure of it."

“You can’t promise that.” She cocked her head to one side, a question she should have asked earlier burning. “Who do you work for?”

“The FBI.”

“We’re here, Jagger,” the driver said.

Jagger lifted his gaze. “I need to open the gate. I’ll be right back.”

Kalinda was stunned. This man had seriously shocked her. He left the door open when he exited the car to jog around to her side of the vehicle. He reached for a panel and tapped the screen several times before returning as the gate swung open.

“Pull around back, will you, Higgins?” Jagger asked.

“Sure thing.”

Higgins drove around to the back of what looked like a mansion and parked the police cruiser. “Do you want me to come in?”

“Yes.” Jagger removed her seatbelt, climbed out of his side of the car, and reached for her to help her slide across the seat. “The ground is cold. Can I carry you?”

She shook her head. “I’m fine.”

He hurried over to a glass door along a wall of windows and typed in another code before opening it. There were a few lights on inside, but he immediately disabled the alarm at a panel and turned on all the lights.

“Come in.” He motioned her forward. “You have to be freezing.”

She was actually warmer than she’d been in a long time. His jacket was the most clothing she’d had on in over a year.

“I need to call my boss,” Higgins stated.

“Go ahead. I’m going to call for some other people to come over. Can you stay until they get here?” Jagger asked.

“Of course.” Higgins nodded as he pulled out his phone.

Jagger took her by the shoulders. “Look at me.”

She tipped her head back.

“You’re safe.”

She closed her eyes. He’d said he worked for the FBI, but she didn’t think he understood the gravity of what had happened tonight.

Jagger released her and took two strides toward the fridge. He yanked it open, pulled out a bottle of water, opened it, and handed it to her. “Drink.”

Kalinda took a step backward, trembling.

“Fuck. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound so harsh.” He took a long swig of the water and then held it out to her. “You have to be thirsty.”

She didn’t even know if she was thirsty. She couldn’t recognize thirst right now. She also had no idea when she’d last had a drink of water, so she took it and drank as much as she could.

Jagger pulled his phone out and tapped the screen.

“Who are you calling?” She wanted to trust him. She didn’t have anyone else in the world she could trust. However, she also knew he had an agenda that didn’t mesh with hers.

“Gemma.” He lifted his gaze to hers. “Marigold.”

She drew in a breath. It was hard to imagine that one of them had escaped. Even though Jagger had told her Marigold’s buyer had rescued her, that was hard to process.

Someone must have answered because Jagger started talking. “Damon, how fast can you get to my place?”

## CHAPTER THREE



As soon as Jagger hung up with Damon, his phone rang in his palm. *Shit*. The screen showed the incoming call was from his boss, Diane Malinsky. He had no choice but to connect.

“What the fuck, Whitley? Please tell me what I’m hearing from the police isn’t true.”

Jagger rubbed his forehead as he prepared to take heat from his boss. “There weren’t other good options,” he informed her.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” she shouted.

Oleander flinched. Jagger knew she could hear the yelling through the phone. Malinsky was so loud that Oleander probably heard her exact words.

“No other options? What about a hospital? Huh? That would’ve been the first logical option. Or how about the police station for questioning?”

Jagger gritted his teeth. “She’s not being charged with a crime, and you know it.”

“That doesn’t mean she doesn’t have information we need, and *you* know it.”

“Look, I can’t talk to you right now. I have a frightened woman standing in my kitchen, wearing nothing but my jacket and covered in blood. Of course, we have questions. She’ll answer all of them. But the police station wasn’t the right place for her, and the hospital wouldn’t have been safe.”

“Why the fuck not? The buyer is dead.”

“He wasn’t the buyer,” Jagger informed her, keeping a close eye on the shivering woman in front of him who looked like her legs might give out at any second.

“Fuck,” Malinsky muttered. “I’m heading over there. Don’t fucking leave.”

“I would expect nothing less. Damon and Gemma are heading here, too.”

Malinsky groaned and ended the call.

The water bottle slid through Oleander’s fingers and hit the floor. There had only been a few inches of water left, and it shot up into the room and splashed around their feet.

“Oh my God.” Oleander dropped to her knees and set her hands on the floor. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’ll clean it up.”

Jagger squatted in front of her. “It’s just water, honey. No reason to panic. I’ll clean it up later. Let’s get you to a bathroom so you can clean yourself up. I bet you’d like a shower.”

He hated how heavily she was breathing and that she had started rocking back and forth again. It was a defense mechanism. Her mind was on overload. She couldn’t take much more. He was shocked by how much she’d endured and how lucid she’d been on and off until this point.

“Do you have some paper towels?” she asked.

He reached out and stroked her shoulder. “I’ll get this later,” he reiterated.

She shook her head. “Towels. Please. Let me do it.”

It seemed easier to let her play this out than to continue arguing with her, so he rose, took long strides across the room, and returned with an absorbent dishtowel.

When he squatted back down, he began to wipe up the water, but she took it from him and did it herself.

Jagger was concerned. This hair-brained idea to bring her to his house had probably been as batshit crazy as his boss had implied. He knew it had been. But he’d needed to make a

decision. The hospital had been off the table. She would have been hysterical in such a public space, and rightfully so.

The police station had been out too, as far as Jagger was concerned. He'd been afraid she would insist on being locked up, and Jagger's gut told him that was a terrible idea. The last thing she needed after what she'd endured was a night in jail, covered in blood, wearing nothing but his jacket.

He shuddered. No. This had been the only real option. "Come on," he encouraged. "Let's get you cleaned up." He reached out a hand.

She took it and rose to her feet, teetering. "I'm going to get prints on your floor, and blood is all over me."

He tipped her head back with his fingers. "I don't care about your footprints. I care about helping you. You'll feel much better after a shower."

She nodded. "Okay." Her legs were shaking again though. She would never make it up the stairs and into his bathroom.

Without a word, he bent and scooped her up into his arms, cradling her as he carried her from the kitchen. "Lights," he stated as he passed through the living room.

All the lights came on, illuminating Higgins who was tucking his phone into his pocket. "My boss isn't pleased," Higgins stated.

Jagger nodded. "Mine dropped several F-bombs. She's on her way over here now."

"Good. I'll wait for her to get here. Where are you taking her?" Higgins nodded toward the woman in Jagger's arms.

"Bathroom. She needs to clean up."

Higgins rubbed his hands together. He was uncomfortable. Jagger couldn't blame him. But the officer followed Jagger up the stairs.

Jagger probably should have headed for a guest bath, but so far, this evening he had done nothing he "should have" done. He was totally off script, which was why he found

himself standing in the master bathroom, lowering Oleander to her feet.

She spun around while he pulled clean towels out of the closet. Her eyes were wide.

Higgins remained in the bedroom, not even stepping into the doorway.

Jagger was kind of glad. He wasn't going to stick around much longer either. He turned on the shower and then faced her, but she was staring at the huge, whirlpool tub.

Jagger had never used it. It hadn't even occurred to him she might prefer a bath. He flipped off the shower and passed her to reach for the nozzles on the tub instead.

She took a step back when he looked in her direction, wrapping her arms tight around her small frame. The sleeves of his jacket were hanging almost past her hands.

“What’s wrong, honey? You were staring at the bath. I thought you’d prefer the tub.” Suddenly, he recalled a detail that should have occurred to him before now. “When was the last time you had a proper bath, honey?”

She licked her lips. “I don’t know. I can’t remember,” she whispered.

He knew from Gemma that Master J had washed the women with a garden hose over a basement drain. That meant Oleander probably hadn't had a shower in over a year either. Rinaldo Gustaf hadn't given her free rein of the house and bathroom privileges.

Jagger was determined to give her this one thing. He felt the water. “How hot do you like it?”

She took another step back. “I’ll get your tub dirty,” she mumbled.

Jagger turned off the water and sat on the edge of the tub. “I don’t care if the tub gets dirty. It’s a tub. I want you to get in it. Can you do that for me?”

She looked at him, saying nothing before glancing back at the water. Finally, she nodded.

Jagger rose and hurried over to the shower to grab some body wash, shampoo, and conditioner. He set all three on the edge of the tub. "I'll wait in the bedroom. Take all the time you need."

He took two strides toward the door before she stopped him. "No. Please. Don't leave me in here alone."

He froze a second before facing her.

She was gripping his jacket tightly around her. "Please."

"I can't stay in here while you bathe, honey. It's not appropriate."

Her brow furrowed. "Appropriate? I don't even know the meaning of that word anymore."

He flinched. What she was saying probably rang true for her.

"Was it appropriate for someone to hold chloroform over my face, knock me out in my sleep, and kidnap me? Was it appropriate for me to wake up naked and alone in a cold, dark basement in a cage? Was it appropriate that I spent the next year being trained as a sex slave for a man who intended to buy me and use my body?" Her voice cracked and rose higher.

Higgins showed up in the doorway, but he didn't come in. He didn't say anything either.

"No, honey. None of that was okay," Jagger responded. He couldn't keep from fisting his hands at his sides. He wanted to strangle someone. "But I'm not in the sex-slave business. I'm one of the good guys. I can't stay in the room while you take a bath. My boss would fire me on the spot."

She glanced at the tub and then back at him. "Fine. I don't need a bath."

Jagger sighed and rubbed a hand down his face.

Higgins disappeared for a moment and returned with a chair. He set it in the doorway facing out, one brow lifted.

Jagger nodded. Good idea. He pointed at the chair. "I'll sit right there. I won't shut the door. But you have to promise to



wash yourself, rinse the soap off, empty the tub, and refill it. I want you to soak in warm water.”

She nodded. “Yes, Sir.”

Jagger nearly groaned. He’d issued orders, and she’d responded. He needed to stop doing that. She wasn’t his. She wasn’t a submissive from Roses and Thorns. She was a scared woman who needed someone to trust.

He rushed over to the chair and sat in it, leaning forward to put his elbows on his knees and rub his temples again. This was the most bizarre night of his life.

Higgins was standing by the door to the bedroom now, and once Jagger took his seat, Higgins leaned against the frame. He didn’t need to say a word for Jagger to read his expression. Both of them were worried about the backlash they would get from this. But this was exactly why Jagger had asked Higgins to stay. He hadn’t wanted to be left alone and end up in a compromising position with a battered woman.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he heard the water splash, indicating she’d gotten in. No one spoke for a long time. The only sound was water occasionally splashing, and then the sound of it running down the drain before Oleander turned the spout back on to refill it.

“There’s a button on the side you can push to turn on the jets,” he informed her.

A few minutes later, she turned the water off and started the jets.

Jagger’s phone buzzed, and he pulled it out of his pocket. There was a text from Damon indicating they were at the front door. Damon had his own code for the front gate, but he couldn’t get into the house without Jagger opening the door.

Jagger glanced at Higgins. “Two people are at the front door. Will you let them in?”

Higgins nodded, turned, and took off as if he’d just been given a lifeline.

“Jagger?” The voice behind him sounded nervous.

“You okay, honey?”

“I’m nervous.”

He glanced over his shoulder without thinking, relieved to find her buried under bubbles from the jets. “You’re going to get through this.”

She turned off the jets. The only noise in the room was the sound of popping bubbles. Jagger didn’t move. He could only see her face, but damn she was pretty. Much better now without blood in her hair and smudged all over her cheeks.

“I’ll shut the door so you can get out and dry off. Gemma just got here. She brought you clothes. I’ll have her bring them up.”

Oleander’s eyes went wide, and she sat upright, splashing water over the edge of the tub. She grabbed the sides. “No. Please don’t go.”

Her chest was heaving, and Jesus... He had to jerk his gaze toward the bedroom. He’d already seen her breasts, but seeing her huddled in the dark corner of the library of her prison didn’t compare to seeing her sitting in his bathtub with water sluicing down her pert breasts. He’d never be able to erase her pink little nipples from his mind now. *Fuck.*

How old was she? Her body was fucking perfection. Every inch of it. Which was why she’d been kidnapped in the first place. All six of the women would undoubtedly be stunning.

“I’m sorry, Sir,” she whispered.

He flinched. “You have nothing to be sorry about, honey. I’m just trying to be respectful here. Can you let the water out and wrap up in that towel on the counter?”

“Kalinda.”

He frowned, fighting the urge to glance at her yet again.

“That’s my name,” she murmured. “Kalinda.”

He drew in a breath and smiled. “I love that name. It’s very pretty.”

He heard the water draining for a second time, followed by the slosh as she rose to standing.

Finally, she spoke again. "I'm covered, Sir."

Jagger rose and moved the chair out of the way. "You don't need to call me, Sir, Kalinda. I'm not your Dom."

She nodded. "Habit."

He stared at her again. It was difficult to look away. She was short enough that the towel covered her to her knees. Still, she was stunning. Her blond hair hung in long wet ringlets. Her pale skin was pinkened from the warm water.

"Thank you. I feel much better."

Footsteps preceded voices heading toward them.

Jagger turned toward the entrance to his bedroom to find Damon and Gemma entering. Damon had a firm grip on Gemma's hand, and he wrapped an arm around her waist as they stepped inside as if he were trying to hold her back.

She looked anxious. Wide-eyed and fidgety. "Are you sure it's her?" she asked softly.

Kalinda stepped up next to Jagger in the doorway, gripping the towel around her chest.

Gemma gasped, her hand coming to her mouth. Tears started falling. "It's really you."

Kalinda nodded. "I never thought I'd see any of you again."

Damon had a bag slung over his shoulder, and he lowered it to the floor without releasing Gemma. He kissed her temple. "Take a breath, baby."

Gemma drew in a lungful of air. "I brought you some clothes."

"Thank you." Kalinda stepped closer to Jagger, putting herself slightly behind him.

He wasn't sure what to make of her stance. It worried him that she saw him as her savior or something.

Gemma tipped her head back to look at Damon. "I'm okay. I promise."

He frowned but released her.

She picked up the bag and carried it to the bed. "It will feel weird at first. Wearing clothes. Took me a while to get used to it," she said as she opened the bag and removed a pile of clothes.

Jagger winced. He'd known what Gemma had gone through when Damon had first found her. She'd hated clothing. She still had an aversion to tags and anything itchy.

Kalinda was trembling, and she wrapped her arm around his.

Jagger tried to lift his arm and extricate himself from her death grip, but she held on tighter.

When he glanced at Damon, he found his friend's brows lifted in question.

*Yeah, I have the same questions as you. Don't look at me like that.*

*Did Damon fucking smirk?*

Jagger inched toward the bed, Kalinda clinging to him the entire time.

Gemma turned around to hold up a few things. "Can I help you get dressed?" she asked gently.

Kalinda's nails dug into Jagger's arm even through his shirt. "I think I can manage," she responded.

Jagger turned to face her. "Damon and I will step out of the room. We won't even close the door."

She flushed, shaking again. Her lip was trembling. "Is there something wrong with me?"

Jagger's eyes shot wide. "What do you mean?"

"You don't like to look at me." She jerked her gaze to the floor.

He groaned. “That is not true. It’s just not appropriate. You’re confused. You’ve been through hell. I’m trying to be professional. I’m an FBI agent. I need to ask you questions. My boss will, too. I need you to be dressed, honey.”

Jagger winced internally as that pet name slid out of his mouth in front of Damon and Gemma. It didn’t mean anything. He’d simply started calling her that to avoid the poisonous flower name she’d been given as a slave.

Damon must have communicated silently with Gemma because the two of them quickly fled the room and shut the door.

Jagger tipped his head back and groaned as he faced Kalinda and wrapped his hands around her biceps. When he thought he had his emotions under control, he lowered his gaze.

“You said you wouldn’t let anything happen to me.”

“I won’t. I promise.” He meant every word.

“Don’t leave me.”

“I’m only going to be in the hallway.”

She jerked her gaze around the room. “There are windows. Closets. Too many doors. Someone could be hiding in them or come in through the window.”

Jagger hated how scared she was. So frightened that her fear was irrational. It was well-founded though. He understood that part. It was a wonder she wasn’t still sitting in that corner, rocking and catatonic.

If he left her, she might go inside her head and do exactly that. His boss would be here any moment. If Malinsky thought for one second that Kalinda needed psychiatric help, she would order it done, and that would be the end of it. Jagger wouldn’t have a leg to stand on. He would also look like a fucking idiot arguing his case.

The easiest thing to do right now would be to help Kalinda get dressed and get out of this room before Malinsky arrived.

Jagger sat on the edge of the bed so his face would be lower and more in line with hers. He slid his hands to her shoulders and stroked her skin. Inappropriately. “You should be in a hospital, Kalinda.”

She stiffened and shook her head violently, tears streaming down her face. “No. Please. He’ll find me there.”

He cupped her face with one hand. “Look at me, honey. I wasn’t finished.”

She trembled so badly it was a wonder she was able to remain upright. The tears wouldn’t stop. He wasn’t sure she knew they were trailing down her cheeks.

“I need you to work with me here. I shouldn’t have brought you to my house. I should’ve taken you to the hospital or the police station. I made a rash decision. But we’re here now, and I’m inclined to agree with you that you’re not safe.” This woman was tugging at his heart strings.

“I can’t promise my boss is going to let you stay here. She’s not pleased with my detour. It wasn’t professional. We aren’t permitted to get personal with a subject, but this case was already personal from the moment Damon rescued Gemma. I know more about it than just about anyone. I want to help you.” He lowered his head a bit to make sure she was paying close attention.

“Okay.” She nodded eagerly. “So, you won’t leave? You won’t make me go to the hospital?”

“I’ll do my best to argue my case. In exchange, I need to know you’re stable enough to make wise decisions. That means I need you to put clothes on, go downstairs with me, and answer questions. Can you do that?”

“Yes.” She nodded again, standing taller with more certainty. “I’ll do it. I can do it.”

Jagger gritted his teeth when she stepped to one side of him, yanked the towel off, and handed it to him before picking up a thick white sweater and pulling it over her head.

At least she was covered. It reached past her bottom. She rummaged through the pile, found panties, and put them on

next. Black leggings followed. White socks next.

She hadn't put on a bra, but he could live with this. At least she was fucking covered now. Not without him getting far too many glances in of the rest of her body, but this was an improvement.

Her hair was no longer dripping. It was starting to dry. Curls framed her face and danced along her shoulders and down her back. Jagger had the urge to sit her down so he could comb through the tangles, but that was absurd, so he chased the visual away and tucked a lock behind her ear.

"We'll deal with your hair later, okay?" Why did he have to go and ask that question? Jesus.

"Yes." She stood stronger. "I'm ready. Just don't...leave me."

"Deal." He prayed he could hold his end of this bargain. There was a solid chance Malinsky would lose her shit and insist on taking Kalinda to a more appropriate location. He could think of at least a dozen places that would be more appropriate than leaving her here in his home.

He nearly groaned as he realized Malinsky was not going to permit that in a million years. And what the fuck was Jagger going to do with Kalinda anyway? He wasn't trained to handle what she was going through. He needed to be on the trail of her buyer, not babysitting.

The thought of letting someone else protect her though made bile rise in his throat. No fucking chance in hell. He'd given her his word. He intended to keep it.

## CHAPTER FOUR



Kalinda stared at Jagger's couch where everyone expected her to sit. She rubbed her hands together, trying to convince herself it was okay.

Ever since she'd entered the room, she'd been overwhelmed. Higgins had left, but a stern FBI agent named Diane Malinsky had arrived, as well as the man Jagger had told her was an FBI informant, Damon, and Marigold.

*Gemma.* Kalinda repeated the name several times in her head, trying to remember it. She'd only known the dark-haired woman as Marigold. Master J had forbidden the girls from talking to each other, and they hadn't dared take a chance and share personal information.

It was surreal seeing someone else who'd been in captivity with her. It was difficult to meet her gaze. It was difficult to meet anyone's gaze after months of being punished any time she'd lifted her head.

Damon kept a hand on Gemma's arm, making Kalinda wonder what their story was. Were they a couple? That was confusing.

The female agent was sitting in an armchair. "I know you're probably exhausted, Kalinda, but I need to ask you some questions. It's important that we act fast."

Gemma wiggled free of Damon and came to Kalinda. She glanced at Diane. "Give her a second."

Diane nodded. "Of course." The woman's brow was furrowed. She was frustrated, but based on what Jagger had



told Kalinda in the bedroom, Kalinda assumed Diane was not pleased with Jagger.

Gemma clasped Kalinda's hands. "It's hard to sit on furniture."

Kalinda nodded on a sigh. Gemma understood.

"I struggled at first. It's even weirder sleeping on a bed. It's too soft. Too warm." She smiled.

Kalinda appreciated her attempt to lighten the mood.

"Clothes, too. They still make me itch. The tags are the worst. Damon cuts them out of my clothes."

Kalinda glanced at Damon. "Are you with him?" She didn't know how to ask the question.

"Yes. I knew him before I was kidnapped. He spent three years looking for me. He's my rock." She squeezed Kalinda's hands.

Kalinda was glad for this woman. They weren't exactly friends. They barely knew each other. They hadn't swapped stories about their lives. Kalinda knew nothing about Gemma and vice versa. But they had a shared experience that would make most people shudder, and it was nice having Gemma in the room.

"You're not a slave. It took me a long time to internalize that. You might have to repeat it over and over in your head. Eventually, you'll believe it and create a new normal."

"I... I can't..." She didn't know how to finish that statement. There were so many possibilities.

"I know. Let's sit together on the couch. You need to tell the FBI agents everything you know so they can find the man who bought you."

Kalinda glanced at Jagger as Gemma guided her to the sofa.

He was standing a few yards away, brows furrowed, feet planted wide, arms crossed. He looked formidable. He would frighten her to death if she didn't know another side of him.

The gentle man who had been nothing but helpful and understanding since he'd walked into that godforsaken office.

It felt good to sit on a cushion, and Jagger's black leather sofa was extremely comfortable. It felt like a cloud. Kalinda tucked her feet under her and wrapped her arms around her body. She'd warmed up for the first time in a year in the tub, but now, she was cold again. She didn't think she'd ever truly be warm again.

Gemma sat next to her, holding her hand.

Damon took the armchair opposite Diane.

Jagger stood like a statue.

"Have a seat, Whitley," Diane ordered.

Jagger shot her a look before sighing. Instead of settling in the obvious spot on the other end of the couch, he dragged the coffee table situated between everyone out of the center and sat on its surface.

Kalinda wished he were next to her instead. His touch calmed her and warmed her skin. However, she kept reminding herself of his words in the bedroom. Kalinda needed to act less affected than she felt or risk this female agent insisting on having her sent to a hospital. The idea made her want to vomit.

It wasn't rational. She didn't know Jagger. She'd met him a few hours ago. She knew deep inside that she was a mess and would likely never fully recover from what she'd experienced for the last year, but she'd latched onto his kindness and wasn't willing to let it go.

Diane cleared her throat. "We have every available person searching for the man you claim was supposed to pick you up tonight, and so far, we don't have a single lead."

Kalinda winced. She hated the way Diane spoke to her.

Jagger jerked his attention to his boss.

Diane sighed. "Sorry. I didn't mean that to sound accusatory. Would you please tell us what has happened in the past month, Kalinda?"

Kalinda felt the waves of frustration coming from Diane, but when she looked toward Jagger, he sent her a different vibe. Encouragement.

Kalinda licked her lips. She lowered her gaze. She needed to close her eyes and go into her head so she could tell everything she knew. It was the only way there would be a chance of someone finding her buyer.

Kalinda had enough sense to know two things. She wouldn't be safe until the buyer was caught, and no one else would be safe either. She never wanted this to happen to another woman. She'd do everything in her power to stop it.

After drawing in a deep breath, she forced herself to lift her gaze and focus on the base of the glass lamp that sat on a small round table between the two armchairs. "I had no idea the man who took me from that auction wasn't my new Master. I don't think Master J did either. He didn't say a word to me. He simply manhandled me into the back of his truck, forced me to sit on the floorboard, and drove to his home."

No one made a sound, but Jagger leaned forward so his elbows were on his knees.

*You can do this, Kay. You have to.*

"I had no idea where I was or where I went." She jerked upright and looked directly at Jagger, realizing she still had no information on her location. "Where am I?"

"Denver, Colorado." His voice was soft.

Kalinda flinched. "Denver?" She wiped a hand down her face and rubbed her eyes. She thought back. "I guess I've been in Denver for a year then, right?" She looked at Gemma.

"Yes. The authorities know exactly where we were kept now. They've combed the house where Master J kept us."

"You caught him," she reminded herself out loud as she looked at all the other faces.

Gemma responded. "He was careless and showed up at a club where I saw him."

Kalinda stared at Gemma. "A club?"

“Roses and Thorns. I’ll tell you about that part later.” Gemma gave Kalinda’s leg a reassuring pat.

Why on earth would Gemma have gone to a club of any sort in the past month? It made no sense.

“Can you tell me your last name, Kalinda?” Diane encouraged. “And where you’re from?”

Kalinda nodded. “Spiers. I don’t know how I got here. I was in Vegas.”

Diane leaned forward. “We’ll need an account of everything that happened to you a year ago, but right now, I’m most concerned about tonight.”

Kalinda nodded and forced herself to get back to her own story. There would be plenty of time to speak to Gemma later. “When that man arrived at the house, he parked his car in the garage and shut it. I never even saw the outside. He grabbed me from where I was huddled on the floorboard behind him and...” She squeezed her eyes shut.

She should have made a run for it right then. Why hadn’t she? She should have pushed the button for the garage, raced toward the door, and rolled under it, screaming.

“Kalinda?” Jagger’s voice reached her.

Kalinda wiped her eyes. Gemma handed her a pile of tissues. “It’s okay.” She rubbed her arm.

Kalinda looked at her. “Why didn’t I run right that second?”

Gemma licked her lips. “You were in shock. You were also naked. It was cold out. It would have been too risky. It’s not your fault.”

People kept telling her it wasn’t her fault, but wasn’t it? She’d battled the “what ifs” in her mind for the past year, still beating herself up over her own responsibility. Her mistakes. Her naivete that had caused her to feel invincible in a fucked-up world in which bad things happened to good people every day.

She drew in a breath and focused on that night. “I followed his instructions because I couldn’t convince myself to do anything else.” She was so furious with her weaknesses.

“We were brainwashed, Kalinda.”

“Kally. Kal. Kay. Kalinda is fine, too. Whatever.” Why was she discussing her nicknames right now?

“You weigh about a hundred pounds, Kally. That man was three times bigger than you.” Jagger said this. It helped. And she liked the way he called her Kally. His tone wasn’t like anyone else’s. It felt like he caressed her with the word.

Kalinda nodded. “He led me to his basement and into a large kennel. I was scared out of my mind. Without a word, he left me there.”

“My team has sent me pictures of it, Kalinda. I’m so sorry.” Diane sounded much more understanding.

Kalinda rubbed her hands together in her lap.

“Did he bring you food and water?” Gemma encouraged.

“Yes. Once a day. The cage had a toilet, a sink, and a narrow cot. He gave me one scratchy blanket. I huddled under it for the entire month.”

“Did he tell you why you were there, Kally?” Jagger asked.

“He said my buyer was coming to collect me from another country. It wasn’t until this morning that he told me it would be today.”

“And then what happened?” Diane prompted.

Kalinda rocked forward and backward. She should be warm. She had clothes on for the first time in a year, including socks and a thick sweater, but she felt chilled.

Jagger stood, crossed to the couch, tugged a throw blanket from the back of it, and draped it around her like a cape.

Kalinda nearly cried. He had no idea how much his kindness affected her. She looked toward Diane. “He was flustered today. I think he was worried about meeting up with

my buyer. I don't know, but when he brought me food, he forgot to lock the cage."

Everyone stared at her, collectively holding their breaths it seemed.

Kalinda continued. "He was muttering something about needing to leave for a while. An errand or something. And then he left. I heard the garage door go up and back down. I stared at that open cage door for long seconds, knowing this was my chance. Living in that basement alone with no human interaction had driven me crazy, but I knew there were worse ways to live, and I suspected if I got transferred to the buyer and taken out of the country, I would find out just how much worse my life could be."

Gemma put an arm around Kalinda. "You're doing great."

Kalinda shook violently. Even the soft blanket couldn't warm her up. She needed to get all of this out. "I snuck out of the cage and rushed up the stairs. I'd hardly seen the main floor of the house, and it had been a month. I didn't know how much time I had, how long he would be gone, or when the buyer was coming. I could see frost on the window. I knew it was cold outside. There were no visible blankets or coats or anything I could put on."

Kalinda rubbed her knees. She was panting. Nerves were eating at her. Going over the details of the last hour at that house made her want to vomit.

"Take a breath, Kalinda. You're doing great," Diane said, reiterating what Gemma had said like they were a group of cheerleaders.

Kalinda nodded slowly and squeezed her eyes closed as she relived the details. "I ran from room to room, afraid to go to the second floor. If he got home, I'd be trapped upstairs. I kept looking outside. I wanted to run next door and ask for help or just take off running down the street, but I was locked in the house. I was afraid an alarm would go off if I broke a window. Plus, it was cold outside, and I was naked."

She was repeating herself. She couldn't help it as the thoughts flew out of her. Her thoughts had also repeated themselves over and over as she'd raced around the first floor like a madwoman.

"In the kitchen, I grabbed a knife. I don't know what I thought I could do with it. I was nowhere near big enough to take on any man, but I carried it with me anyway. When I got to the library or office or whatever that room was, I started yanking open drawers on the desk."

She stiffened, curling into herself tighter as she remembered the moment an idea formed. "The bottom drawer had a gun. I grabbed it. I wasn't sure I could shoot it. I had never touched a gun. I had no idea how easy or difficult it might be."

Her voice shook. She could hear it wavering. She drew in a long deep breath. "I was palming that gun when I heard the garage door go up. I thought I might faint. I've never been so scared in my life. More scared than I was when I woke up to find out I'd been kidnapped. I slammed the desk drawer closed and moved into the darkest corner of the room. I had the gun in my hand. I can't remember what I did with the knife."

Kalinda covered her face with her hand, trying to think. Where had the knife been? "I don't know. I... I have no idea what I did with the knife. Maybe I dropped it. The next thing I knew I was shaking violently in the corner of the room, trying to figure out what to do."

Gemma held on to her tighter. It helped Kalinda feel grounded and almost human.

"I could hear him in the kitchen. I knew I had a limited amount of time to make a decision. The buyer would be there any minute. I had no idea when or what time it was. It was dark already, but that didn't mean much to me. I couldn't think how I could get away. If he caught me with that gun, he could easily knock it out of my hand and restrain me. He might punish me—or the buyer might when he arrived."

Kalinda lifted her head to stare across the room at nothing and no one. "Suddenly, it was clear. I had to kill him. I had to

shoot every bullet in that gun so that one of the neighbors would hear it and call the police. Because the only chance I had of staying alive for another day would be if I got arrested for murder. The only place I would be safe would be in prison.”

Someone’s breath hitched. Kalinda thought it might be Diane’s.

Kalinda turned her gaze to Diane. “That’s still my only option. I don’t know why I’m here. I should be in jail. You should call the police and have them come and arrest me.”

Diane’s brows shot up. Her mouth fell open.

“No one is going to arrest you, Kally,” Jagger insisted.

She jerked her attention to him. “I killed a man,” she shouted. “It was premeditated. Don’t people who commit premeditated murder go to prison?”

Diane shifted her weight and leaned forward.

Kalinda watched her out of her peripheral vision before turning back to her. “Can’t you see?”

Diane shook her head. “No, Kalinda. That doesn’t qualify as murder. It was self-defense. No one is going to arrest you.”

“But the buyer will find me.” Her voice continued to rise. She knew she was a bit hysterical, but she needed them to understand. “He might even kill the people I’m with.”

Kalinda yanked her attention back to Jagger. “If he figures out I’m here, he’ll come here and kill you and take me. He paid a lot of money for the perfect sex slave. By now, he has realized I’m missing.” Kalinda jumped to her feet. “He’s got to be furious. I bet he’s a rich man. I bet he’s already found me. I bet he’s out front now, waiting for the chance to kill everyone in his path and take me. You’re not safe with me.”

She started crying, hysteria consuming her. She fisted her hands at her sides.

Diane stood. So did Jagger. Damon, too.



Jagger took a step forward and stopped. “Kally, I know you’re scared. You have every right to be. But no one is going to find you here, and even if they did, they can’t get into my house or even onto my property.”

She shook her head. “You don’t know that.”

He nodded. “Yes, I do. I have cameras aimed all over the place. My alarm system is state of the art.”

Diane stepped behind the chair and started pacing. “He’s right.” She sighed. “I don’t like it, but he’s right.”

Kalinda shook her head. “No.” She crossed her arms and hugged herself.

“I can’t believe I’m going to say this,” Diane began, “but you’re safer here than at the police station. Too many people come and go from there. Anyone can walk in the front door. It would be hard to guarantee your safety there. Too many employees. Someone could easily walk in, say they’re your lawyer, and get access to you.”

Kalinda gasped. She hadn’t thought of that.

Diane turned to Jagger. “I need the name off that chip.”

Jagger nodded. “I’ll grab the scanner.” He rubbed the back of his neck as he left the room.

“What chip?” Kalinda shuddered as she looked at Gemma. “What chip?” she repeated.

Gemma was the last to stand. She stroked Kalinda’s arm. “There’s a small chip under the tattoo on your thigh. It has information.”

Kalinda’s vision swam. “What kind of information?”

“Probably the buyer’s name.” Gemma helped Kalinda sit back down. “Jagger is going to scan it so he can pull the data.”

“Scan it how?”

Jagger returned holding a device she’d never seen before. It looked like a battery-operated thermometer. A small white device. He squatted next to her. “You won’t feel a thing. It’s just going to pull the data off the chip.”

“How long will it take you to get the name?” Diane asked.

Jagger glanced at her. “Seconds. After I cracked the code to pull the information from Gemma’s chip, I set this scanner to read the data on anyone we find.”

Kalinda flattened her hand on her thigh and reached for the godforsaken tattoo to rub it. It had always been a little sore.

“Can you bend your knee out for a moment, honey?” Jagger asked gently. “It can scan it through your clothes.”

She couldn’t stop shaking. In fact, Jagger had to put a hand on her inner thigh to hold her steady as he held the device near the location of the tattoo.

The scanner beeped, and Jagger released her to stand. A moment later, he staggered backward. “Holy fuck.” He grabbed the scanner with both hands and leaned in closer. “Fuck. What the fuck?”

Suddenly, he dropped the scanner on the floor and scrambled back several steps, almost falling on his ass. He set both hands on his head and tugged at his hair.

He was scaring Kalinda to death. She couldn’t imagine what he could possibly have seen that would be this upsetting. The president of the United States? Russia? Saudi Arabia? Ten thousand thoughts raced through her mind.

Damon leaned down to grab the scanner off the floor. He gasped before he met Diane’s gaze and then Jagger’s. When he looked back at the scanner, he said, “Property of Jagger Whitley.”

## CHAPTER FIVE



Jagger dropped into the armchair Damon had occupied a moment ago and ran a hand over his face. His mind was spinning.

Damon was sitting directly in front of him on the coffee table, leaning his elbows on his knees, inches separating them.

Diane was on the phone pacing. “I don’t care if you have to call the fucking governor. Get every fucking man in a three-state area working on this immediately.” She was formidable on a good day. She was currently pissed. This was not a good day.

Kally was sobbing. She’d also stumbled backward and had curled up in the corner of his couch.

Gemma was comforting her.

Jagger needed it to be him, but right now, he was in too much shock, trying to wrap his head around this development, to even comfort himself.

Diane ended the call and sat next to Damon. “Get a grip, Whitley.”

He nodded. He was trying.

“You know how those chips work,” Diane continued. “You’re an expert. It takes two seconds to change the data.”

“Oh, I’m well aware,” Jagger agreed. “Do you think that makes me feel any better?” He leaned forward, meeting her gaze dead on. “The motherfucking seller was either watching

the house before I even arrived, or he got there mighty goddamn fast and followed the police cruiser when we left.”

“I know.” Diane nodded. “We’re working on it. Every available man and woman is on it.”

Jagger shoved to standing. He needed to be moving. He needed space. He needed to breathe. He started pacing while he ran a hand through his hair. At this rate, he was going to pull every strand out by the roots before morning.

“You think the seller was watching?” Gemma asked. “Don’t you mean the buyer?”

Damon shook his head and fielded her question. “Most likely the seller. He’s the one who put the chip in. Or had it done. I doubt the buyer knows about it. I certainly wasn’t told you had a chip in your leg. Whoever paid for Kalinda most likely doesn’t know about the chip either.”

Kally wiped her nose on a tissue and sniffled. “I don’t understand. I thought you said the seller was in jail.”

Gemma turned back to her. “Master J was only a middleman. Someone is above him.”

Kally stiffened. Her face turned pale. She grabbed the arm of the sofa so hard her knuckles turned white. “So, two men are after me?”

*Fuck. Just fucking fuck.* This wasn’t going to help matters at all. Jagger had wanted to wrap Kally up in a bubble and shield her from this shit. Instead, the problems were compounding.

And what the hell was he thinking anyway? She wasn’t his to protect. She was a victim of sex trafficking. A woman who’d been through hell before he’d rescued her tonight.

Shit. That wasn’t true at all. He hadn’t done a fucking thing to rescue her. She’d rescued her damn self. What did she need him for? He was just some random FBI agent called in to cover this case because he was friends with the long-time informant, Damon.

Still, she met his gaze with desperate eyes. Pleading with him to fix this. She trusted him to keep her safe—at least as much as she could trust any human. He'd made her a promise, and he needed to pull his shit together and follow through.

Kally shifted her gaze to Gemma again. “We have a chip in us?” She wasn't really asking. She was just trying to wrap her head around the idea while she rubbed the spot on her inner thigh where Jagger knew they would find a Roses and Thorns tattoo—an exact replica of the club logo used by Jagger and Damon's friend Robert.

They'd known from the moment they'd seen the tattoo on Gemma that someone was either trying to make it look like Robert was involved in human trafficking or else the ring leader got his jollies ruining people or fucking with them.

Gemma shook her head. “I had it removed.”

Kally's eyes widened. “I can do that?”

“Yes. The doctor I used was amazing. I went to her to have the chip removed, but when she offered to remove the tattoo, I about did a happy dance in her office. The scar is very small. It will fade to nothing. Besides, no one can see it.” She glanced at Damon, her cheeks pink. “Except Damon, of course,” she murmured.

Jagger's chest was tight as he watched Kally rub the inside of her thigh as if she could make the fucking tattoo and chip disappear. He wished he could make that happen for her, but it wasn't going to happen any time soon. It wasn't a priority right now. Keeping her alive was.

“We need to consider a safehouse,” Diane stated.

Jagger chuckled, though not with any level of humor. “For whom?”

Diane groaned.

He shook his head. “No. Not if you mean you intend to move Kally someplace. No.”

“Whitley...” Diane warned. She was losing her patience with him. He knew it. He didn't give a fuck.

He stopped at the back of the armchair, set his palms on it, and leaned forward. “*No*. How long have you known me, Diane? I’ve worked for you for ten fucking years. Have I ever once made a bad decision? *No*.” He didn’t need her to answer his rhetorical questions. “So, I’m going to need you to be flexible on this.”

Diane sighed.

Jagger gripped the back of the chair and pointed at Kally. “I made a promise to that woman that I would keep her safe, and I intend to keep that promise, so do what you have to do. Take me off the case. Put me on leave. Mark me down for vacation effective immediately. A sabbatical. I don’t give a fuck what you call it. For now, she stays here in my home. It’s the most secure place I know of. This fucker knows where I live. I’m sure he’s had tabs on me since he realized I’m on this case. That’s been a month. He probably has surveillance on me as we speak. He can’t get in. Kally and I will discuss the situation in the morning and decide what we want to do next.”

Diane slowly rose to her feet. Her teeth were gritted tight as she rubbed her hands together. “Jagger...”

Now, she was going to call him Jagger instead of Whitley?

“End of discussion,” Jagger insisted. “Unless and until Kally declares she would prefer a different arrangement, she’s with me.”

He had to hold on to the chair to keep from shaking. He didn’t even know who he was. He’d never gotten this emotional about a subject. *Never*. He had no idea why he was this time either.

Kalinda Spiers was under his skin. He wasn’t sure when it happened, but it had. She was counting on him. She looked at him with wide eyes as if he alone could fix this. And by God, he intended to.

“How long, Jagger?” Diane asked. “How long are you willing to go into hiding to protect a subject?”

“Subject?” His voice rose. He pointed at Kally again. “That’s a human being.”

“You know what I mean.” Diane groaned. “This could go on for months.”

“Then I’ll take a leave of absence.”

She flinched. “You can’t be serious.”

“Dead serious.”

Silence stretched between them. The only sound in the room was Kally sniffing, and it nearly broke him. He wanted all these people to get out so he could touch her. He didn’t give a fuck that it was irrational. He needed to pull her into his arms more than he needed his next breath.

“Okay,” Diane finally conceded. Her shoulders dropped. “Let’s table this discussion for tonight. It’s late. I’m sure Kalinda is exhausted. Put her in a guest room and let her get some sleep. We’ll talk again in the morning. I’ll put two men outside your house and one in an unmarked car in the street.”

Jagger finally released a breath. “Thank you.” He didn’t miss the way she’d intentionally ordered him to put Kally in a guest room.

Damon was rubbing his jaw. He opened his mouth and then closed it. If he dared comment on Jagger’s decision, Jagger would probably deck him. The two of them had been friends since they’d met in college. Damon knew Jagger better than just about anyone alive. That meant he also knew that once Jagger made up his mind, he wasn’t going to change it.

Considering the way Damon had left his senses and gone out on his own to make the incredibly risky decision to purchase Gemma in order to save her, he certainly couldn’t judge Jagger for wanting to protect Kalinda.

“Do you want us to stay?” Damon asked.

Jagger shook his head. “No. We’ll be fine. Do you have security?”

Damon chuckled. “Don’t insult me. My house is like Fort Knox these days.”

Gemma was rubbing Kally’s back. “Do you want me to stay the night? I can if you’d like.”

Kally rubbed the tears from her cheeks and sat up straighter, probably forcing herself to pull it together or at least give that impression. “No. I’ll be fine. I just need sleep.”

“We’ll talk tomorrow then, okay?” Gemma asked.

“Yes. I have so many questions,” Kally told her.

Gemma stood, leaned over, and hugged Kally for several seconds. “You’re going to be okay. I promise. It might not seem like it right now, but you can get past this. I’m still a work in progress every day, but eventually, it gets easier to remember you’re a regular citizen with rights and choices just like everyone else.”

Kally nodded. “Thank you.”

Jagger was glad they were all leaving. He walked everyone to the front door and held it open while they got in their cars and drove toward the gate. He continued watching as the gate opened, the two vehicles left, and then it closed.

After shutting the door, he locked both the knob and the deadbolt. He checked the alarm panel and reset it. There were sensors on every window and door, including glass break sensors.

Realistically, no one was getting in. With two men outside and one on the street, those odds went up tremendously. That didn’t mean he wouldn’t worry and check the monitors a thousand times, but intellectually, he knew they were safe.

Jagger padded back to the couch, sat next to Kally, and pulled her into his arms as if he had every right to do so. He didn’t. He shouldn’t be touching her at all. She wasn’t in any state of mind to make this kind of decision to consent to even so much as a hug.

Nevertheless, she clung to him, wrapping her arms around him and holding on to him as if they’d known each other for years and had just heard some bad news.

He rubbed her back as she pressed her small body against him. “You’re safe,” he promised, more for himself than her at this point.



She finally leaned back and met his gaze. “I know there’s no way to protect me completely, nor for the rest of my life, but I appreciate you trying. It means the world to me. Would you really take a leave of absence, though?” She frowned. “I don’t want to interfere with your job.”

“Let me worry about my job. All that matters right now is getting you healthy emotionally and physically while keeping you safe.”

“Why?”

He frowned. “Why what?”

“Why are you doing this? Why would you put your life on hold for me? You just met me. I’m a disaster. I’m going to inconvenience you. Why, Jagger?”

He set his forehead against hers. “I don’t know. My gut tells me it’s important.” That was as honest as he could be.

She stared at him. “Now what?”

“Now, we sleep. Unless you’re hungry. When did you last eat?”

“A year ago,” she stated. “At least anything decent. But I’m too tired to eat right now. I need sleep more than food.”

“Okay.” He stood and pulled her up to stand next to him. “I’m going to double-check the security and turn out the lights. You can go on upstairs. There’s a guest room across from the master where we were earlier. It looked like Gemma brought you plenty of clothes. Can you find something to sleep in?”

She nodded, but when he turned to walk toward the kitchen, she followed him.

He checked the back door, the windows, and the panel next to the entrance. Every few seconds, he glanced over his shoulder. She was still there, following him, leaving very little space between them.

“Kally?” he asked as he turned toward her.

“I’ll wait for you,” she insisted.

“Okay.” He didn’t want to pressure her. Considering how much she’d clung to him all evening, it shouldn’t surprise him that she wanted to stay close. He couldn’t blame her. Plus, he didn’t really like the idea of her being out of his sight either.

He worried their motives were different. Fuck. He *knew* they were. She needed months of therapy to work through what she’d experienced. She did not need a man hovering around while she sorted her shit, especially not one who couldn’t stop looking at her because he was infatuated like a fifteen-year-old boy.

Jagger finished reassuring himself the house was locked down and then nodded toward the stairs. “Let’s go up.” He was trying not to touch her more than necessary. It was inappropriate. She needed someone in her court to help her get safe, not to get in her pants.

When they got upstairs, she followed him into his room and watched as he gathered the pile of clothes and tucked them all back in the bag. “I have two guest rooms,” he told her. “Want to pick one? Or shall I?”

She was wringing her hands together and shuffling her feet. “Please let me stay in here? I don’t want to be alone. I’ll sleep on the floor. Your carpet is more comfortable than any place I’ve slept in over a year.”

He drew in a deep breath and set the bag of clothes on the armchair in the corner of the room. “You’re not sleeping on a damn floor, Kally. Never again. If you don’t want to be alone, I’ll sleep on the floor.”

She looked down, still fidgeting. “You can’t do that.”

“Of course I can.” He squeezed her arm and then walked past her toward his dresser. After grabbing a T-shirt and a pair of sweats, he set them on the bed. “There’s a new toothbrush in the bathroom—first drawer on the right. You might want to change out of that sweater. I’ll let you use the bathroom while I change in here.”

She hesitated and then looked around his room—into every corner.

“What are you looking for, honey?”

“Do you have cameras?”

He winced. What a fucked-up world she'd been living in. “Not upstairs. I have motion detectors downstairs and cameras outside the house, but no one will see you in this bedroom or the bathroom.”

She nodded slowly and rubbed her hands together. “I haven't even peed without being watched in over a year.”

His chest tightened. He wanted to punch someone. What sort of sick fuckers didn't let a woman at least have the dignity of using the toilet alone?

“Usually, someone watched me pee,” she continued. “If not, they were filming it. The man who held me for the last month always had a half dozen cameras on me.”

Jagger gritted his teeth. “I'm so sorry. No one is ever going to violate your privacy like that again. Take all the time you need in the bathroom. If there's something I don't have, let me know, and I'll get it.”

She was shaking again. He hated when that happened. He wanted to hold her. He had to keep reminding himself it wasn't appropriate even though he'd already done so several times.

“Sorry,” she murmured. “You didn't need to know all that.”

He closed the distance between them and tipped her head back with two fingers. “I want to know everything. Don't hold back. I want you to tell me every single detail when you're ready. Partly because it's my job, and I need to know to help me catch the motherfuckers who did this to you, but also because I care about you, and you need to purge this shit. Talking about it will help you get past it.”

“Marigold, I mean, Gemma, seems good,” she blurted.

“She's doing amazing, considering it's only been a month. She was in captivity with Jovani Russo for three years. Damon is helping her.”

“Jovani Russo is Master J?”

“Yes. That’s his real name.”

“And he’s in prison?”

“Yes. I’ve interviewed him numerous times. Several people from my department have, too. We will continue to do so as often as we need, but it’s become apparent he probably doesn’t know much. I don’t think he knows who he was working for.”

She nodded slowly. “I’m trying to keep up. I’ll probably ask the same questions over and over. You think there’s a man above Master J, and he’s the real mastermind behind this? You think he was watching us tonight?”

“Yes. I’d say that much is definitive. We scoured that house where you were kept for a year. We turned over every piece of paper, dug into every corner of his computer, his phones, that entire basement where you were held captive.” He struggled to keep his voice calm while he filled her in on this. She didn’t need him to be hysterical, but he couldn’t erase what he’d seen in that basement and all the things Gemma had told them about. Master J was a sick fucking bastard. Whomever he worked for was undoubtedly worse.

She chewed on her lip, thinking. It was impressive how level-headed she seemed.

“You have to be exhausted, honey.”

“Maybe, but my mind is racing.” She met his gaze again. “Do you think you can find the other four girls?”

“We’re going to do everything in our power to do so.”

“They might not even be in this country.”

“I know.”

“I wouldn’t be in the country right now either if I hadn’t killed that man.”

He stepped closer and slid his hand to her neck. “I know that too,” he whispered.

“Do you know who any of them are?”

“No. If the other four were brought here to Denver from other parts of the country like you were, anything is possible. I’m hoping when you tell me more about your past, I’ll be able to come up with at least a profile that will help us contact other departments around the country and figure out if other missing women fit the profile.”

“I’ll tell you everything I know. You should take notes.” She glanced around.

He chuckled. It startled him. Nothing was funny here. But her eagerness was an about-face to the woman he’d met in the corner of that fucking office several hours ago. She’d been nearly catatonic and desperate. This version of Kalinda was far more lucid and in control of her mind. “I will, but not tonight, Kally. You need sleep.”

“I doubt I’ll be able to sleep, but I’ll try to be quiet and still so you can.”

He released her and pointed toward the bathroom. “One step at a time. Go use the bathroom.”

He watched her as she entered the bathroom and held her gaze for long seconds when she turned back toward him before shutting the door.

He nodded. “You’re safe. I’m right here.”

She finally shut the door.

He stared at that closed door for a while, heart pounding for about a dozen reasons. One of those reasons was because he felt the strongest pull toward her. It was insane. He had no business thinking about her that way. He needed to get his head out of his ass.

*She’s not yours. Stop it.*

## CHAPTER SIX



Kalinda leaned against the bathroom door as soon as she shut it. She considered locking it but decided it wasn't necessary. There wasn't a chance in hell Jagger would come in here unless she called out to him that she was bleeding. He was trying to give her privacy.

She rubbed her temples and shook her head. She knew her view of things was often warped to the point of not being recognizable as normal behavior after the past year of insanity.

Jagger wasn't *trying* to give her privacy. He was simply doing so because it was what people did. Normal human beings didn't video people on the toilet while they peed. They didn't stand over them and watch either.

Kalinda finally shuffled across the room and entered the smaller attached room with the toilet. She peed, washed her hands, and searched for the toothbrush.

While brushing her teeth, she stared at herself in the mirror. She hadn't seen herself in a mirror in over a year. She barely recognized the woman staring back at her. She looked paler than she remembered. Her hair was longer; the ringlets clumped because she hadn't combed her hair after she'd washed it earlier. Her eyes were sunken blue orbs that looked sad.

Would she ever feel happiness again? It was hard to imagine right now. Maybe she would. Or maybe she wouldn't be able to pull herself back together.

She rinsed, added her toothbrush to the holder where Jagger's sat, and met her gaze again. "You can do this. You're alive. You're strong. You can't let them win. They did not break you."

The pep talk made her feel better. At least, that's what she told herself.

What was going through Jagger's mind? She wasn't sure how he saw her. Probably as a broken little girl who needed to be coddled and protected. He would be right about that to a certain extent.

But there was more. He watched her constantly, even when he didn't think she noticed. His brow was furrowed most of the time. He was concerned, but she thought it was more.

When he touched her, it was so damn tender. When he held her gaze, didn't he communicate something more than just an FBI agent doing his job?

Maybe she was making this shit up because he was so attractive and sexy and kind. Perhaps she just wanted him to be interested in her as more than a battered woman he'd rescued from hell.

Attraction probably hadn't even entered his mind. And why the hell would she be thinking anything about any human she encountered? It made no sense. Maybe there was some sort of syndrome for women who fell in love with their rescuers.

*Love? Good grief.*

She turned from the mirror and left the room.

Jagger's back was to her. He was leaning over the bed, arranging pillows. His ass was even better in the cotton sweats. His torso was broader, too. She hadn't thought about a man like she'd been thinking about him in so long. Far more than a year. She'd been single and uninterested and had a blindfold on when it came to men long before she'd been abducted.

"I don't even know if I can sleep on a bed, Jagger," she informed him, rubbing her arms. She hadn't changed clothes

either, but she didn't care. This was the first time she'd had clothes on in a year. They were comfortable, and she was warm—also, a first.

She glanced at the floor where he'd tossed a few pillows and a blanket. Even the floor pallet looked like a luxury.

He pulled the covers back on the bed and patted it. "I bet you'll get comfortable. Climb in."

She wrapped her arms around her middle again and stared at him. There was no way she was taking his bed. She also didn't want to be that far away from him.

He groaned. "Don't look at me like that. Get in, honey. Please."

She stepped closer and touched the mattress. It was so soft like a cloud.

Jagger suddenly swooped down, swept her off the floor, and deposited her on the bed. "You don't want to change?"

She shook her head. "I want to be warm."

He pulled the covers up to her chin. "You're going to burn up in that sweater."

"I won't." She didn't want to argue with him about the sleeping arrangements anymore because she didn't want to annoy him. "Thank you," she said as she turned onto her side and curled into a ball.

She let the covers come halfway over her face. She couldn't remember when she'd last been this comfortable. The tension she'd had in her neck for the past year was easing. She was still scared, but for the first time in forever, she might be able to sleep without panicking.

Jagger turned out all the lights.

She gasped and lifted her head. "Can you..." She could only see his silhouette across the room.

"Too dark?"

"It's fine." She didn't want to be a pain in the ass about the lights either. He was doing so much for her. She needed to be



more accommodating.

He turned on the bathroom light and closed the door halfway. “How’s that?”

She relaxed back onto the mattress. “Thank you,” she whispered again.

He lowered onto the floor next to her, and the room went silent.

Silence, she was used to. She hadn’t been alone while she’d been in captivity because she’d nearly always been with the five other women, but they hadn’t been permitted to talk to each other, and none of them had been willing to risk even whispering most of the time.

The basement in Master J’s house had been dank, cold, and scary. Concrete. Unfinished. She shuddered as she remembered how she’d slept every night for that year.

The past month had been similar but different. She’d still been in a basement. There had still been cameras. But she’d been alone. The solitary confinement had been excruciating, especially because the man who’d put her there had provided her with little information.

All she’d known most of that time was that he was not her buyer. His job was to hold on to her until her buyer arrived. Both of them would be watching her at all times through the cameras.

The rules hadn’t changed. She wasn’t permitted to touch herself more than absolutely necessary. She wasn’t given clothes, but the man never complained that she spent most of the past month huddled under the blanket.

The biggest difference had been that he hadn’t restrained her at night. She shuddered at the memory. There was almost nothing worse than having your arms and legs secured to the corners of a cot every night. It was enough to drive a person mad. It had damn near broken her.

She scooted to the very edge of the bed so she could see Jagger. She needed to be able to see him at the very least. He was her safety net. When she settled on the edge of the

mattress, she looked down at him and found him also watching her.

After a few seconds, he lifted a hand toward her. She wiggled one out from under the edge of the covers and stretched it down to clasp onto his.

“Close your eyes, honey. I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be right here. No one can get in here.”

She tried. She should be tired. But every time she closed her eyes, she panicked. The backs of her eyelids were scary. She couldn’t relax. She was afraid she would wake up and find out all of this had been a dream.

The only way to be sure that didn’t happen was by touching Jagger. She’d be able to relax if she could just touch him. Not just his hand. More of him.

Without a word, she slid off the side of the bed, landing on soft feet next to his waist.

He watched her.

Holding her breath, she eased alongside him, curled against his body, and set her cheek on his chest. She didn’t breathe again until he wrapped his arm around her and held her close.

“Too soft in the bed,” she whispered as if that would explain her need to come down to the floor.

“It’s okay,” he whispered back, kissing the top of her head. “Sleep.”

She finally closed her eyes, content with the feel of his heart beating under her cheek.

When she opened them a few moments later, light was streaming in the room. She was also no longer on the floor. She was on the bed. But Jagger’s strong arm was still around her. His hand was clasping both of hers against her chest, not in a restraining way but in a comforting way.

He was spooned behind her, her back against his front. A feeling of peace overwhelmed her, sending shivers down her body.

Jagger must not have been asleep. He squeezed her hands and kissed her neck. “You slept,” he whispered.

“How did you move me without me noticing?” she whispered back.

“Carefully,” he chuckled, the vibrations shaking her body. “You were clinging to me with a death grip. As long as I didn’t break that connection, you stayed asleep. The floor was killing my back.” His breath was gentle against her ear.

He’d kissed her. Twice. Not on the lips, but still. What did it mean to him? It meant the world to her.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

She stiffened. “No. Don’t move. Please.” She probably should be hungry, but she didn’t want to move.

“I’m breaking so many rules, Kally.”

She licked her lips. “I won’t tell.”

“You don’t have to. My boss knows. Damon knows. I didn’t hide my feelings well last night.” He hugged her tighter. “I shouldn’t be touching you.”

“I like it.”

“That doesn’t make it right. You’ve been through hell. I’m taking advantage of you.”

“You’re not. Not if I want it.”

“You can’t know what you want, honey.”

“I know I want you to keep calling me *honey* and *Kally*. I know you make me feel safe. I know I can’t stay with you forever, but please let me for a little while.”

He stiffened slightly.

“Please...” Fear suddenly consumed her. What if he let Diane take her to a safe house? “I’ll be good. I promise. I won’t argue with you. I can even cook and clean and—”

He growled, cutting her off. He also rolled her to her back and stared down at her. “Stop.”

She bit her lip, trying not to cry.

His brow furrowed. “I don’t want you to be *good*. You need to be *you*. You need to argue with me if you don’t agree about something. The only thing that makes me feel like I’m not doing more harm than good here is that you’re feisty. It tells me they didn’t entirely break you. And you’re not cooking or cleaning. You’re not my housekeeper, and you’re certainly not a slave. Understood?”

She nodded, though she wasn’t entirely sure what he meant. She just wanted to be agreeable. If she could just be... good...maybe he would let her stay for a while. The thought of being separated from him was too much to bear.

He lowered his voice and held her gaze. “I don’t want you to focus on cooking, cleaning, or trying to earn your keep somehow. I want you to focus on getting emotionally healthy. That’s going to take time. If you want to do something for me, I have a challenge for you.”

She nodded eagerly.

He surprised her by sliding off the side of the bed, then tugging her along with him. He scooped her into his arms and carried her to the bathroom.

Her heart was racing as he deposited her on her feet. He cupped her face. “I want you to take a bath or a shower. Get dressed. Comb your hair. Whatever else you would ordinarily do in a bathroom in the morning. I’m going to go downstairs and cook breakfast. When you’re ready, join me so I can feed you.”

Her breath hitched. “Can’t you stay here with me?”

He shook his head. “I can’t be with you every second, Kally. I can be close. I won’t leave the house. If you’re worried about someone getting to you, I promise that’s not going to happen inside this house. Three men are outside guarding us. The alarm is set.”

She glanced around. She really wanted to be able to stay in this room alone. “Maybe I could take a shower later instead.”

His hands slid to her biceps. “How about if you try doing it now? If you panic, come get me. I bet you can do this, though.

My boss will lose her shit when she finds out we slept together. Her head will explode if she thinks I showered with you.”

“You don’t have to shower with me. You could stand in the doorway while I do it,” she suggested. Why was the idea of him leaving the room so overwhelming?

“Nope. I’m going to leave the room. I’m going to shut the door. Why don’t you lock it? You’ll feel safer with it locked.”

She lifted her hands and grabbed the front of his T-shirt. “Please don’t tell Diane you slept with me.”

His brow furrowed while he held her gaze. “We’ll see. I’m not in the habit of lying to my boss. I won’t go out of my way to tell her, but if she asks directly, I won’t lie.”

Kally sighed. “She’ll make me stay somewhere else.”

“Nope. She doesn’t have that kind of power.”

She frowned. “She said last night—”

He interrupted her, shaking his head. “You’re not going anywhere. I’ll handle it.”

“She could fire you.”

He shrugged. “So be it.”

Kally gasped. “You can’t lose your job over me.”

Jagger chuckled. “Which is it, Kally? You want me to stay in the room while you get naked, or do you want me to keep my hands to myself so I don’t lose my job?”

He was joking, she thought. Sort of. “Both?”

He kissed her forehead, released her, and took a step back. In fact, he backed all the way to the door. Grabbing the frame, he spoke again. “Kally, I’m going to be blunt with you. You’re a gorgeous, sexy woman. I’d have to be blind not to be attracted to you. It’s irrational, and I’m sure I’m out of my head letting you stay with me, but I can’t seem to make good choices where you’re concerned. I can’t stand the idea of you being somewhere else, trusting someone else to protect you. It makes my chest tighten. So, I’m not going anywhere unless

and until you're ready to walk away. However, that doesn't mean I'm so out of my mind that I would touch you inappropriately, and seeing you naked tests my willpower. So, please. Take your shower. Put on another bulky sweater, and try not to look cute." He grinned.

She thought she might have smiled. "I'll do my best."

When he stepped out and shut the door, she remained rooted to the spot. She tried to remember everything he'd said in that little speech, but it was a lot to take in.

At least he seemed to be attracted to her, so that was a point in her favor. He was also being a gentleman, and that endeared her to him even more. Though she found herself wishing he would be a bit less gentlemanly.

Since she'd never felt that way before, she wasn't sure she should trust it. She wasn't stupid. She knew she was vulnerable and desperate. Was she grasping at the first man to show her kindness in her adult life? Maybe. But was that a bad thing?

Deciding on another hot bath, she turned on the water to fill the tub and removed her clothes. As it filled, she stepped into the luxurious bath and leaned back as the water rose over her.

She closed her eyes and ran a hand up her stomach and between her breasts. When her forearm grazed her nipple, she flinched, jerking her eyes open to look around and make sure no one had caught her.

Her heart raced as she reminded herself no one was in the room. There were no cameras. No one was going to punish her for the accidental touch.

In fact, no one was going to know. Her breath hitched when she intentionally dragged her fingers over both breasts. She glanced at the door next, wishing she'd locked it now. But she hadn't, and she certainly didn't want to get caught touching herself if Jagger returned to check on her.

On the flip side, there was no way he would walk into this bathroom unless the house was on fire. He'd made that clear.

And besides, why should she be embarrassed by touching herself? It wasn't against the law. It had simply been against Master J's rules. Rules meant to keep all the girls pure for their buyers.

The reminder made her feel a bit sick to her stomach. Kally hadn't been the sort of person who'd masturbated even before she'd been abducted. It hadn't seemed like a hardship to continue *not* masturbating when she'd arrived in hell. At least until that fucking piece of shit had started touching her inappropriately, training her body to respond to his unwanted touch.

Kally gasped as she realized the water had gotten too high in the tub while she'd been inside her head. She rushed to turn it off and let a bit of it out before it started sloshing over the side.

She grabbed a washcloth and the body soap and quickly washed her body. Her hair had dangled in the water and gotten wet too, but it didn't need to be rewashed this morning. After ducking under the water to completely wet it, she put conditioner on it. It was going to take a while to comb through the curls. An extra dose of conditioner wouldn't hurt.

When she was done, she turned on the jets and leaned back. It truly was luxurious. She'd never had a tub like this in her life. She'd rarely taken a bath. In most places she'd lived, the tub hadn't been clean enough to touch with more than her feet or even flip-flops.

Being in the tub felt nicer this morning. She wasn't as anxious as last night. She could relax more. She closed her eyes again. That didn't make her panic as much, either. For a long time, she'd hated closing her eyes. Horror awaited her behind her lids.

This time, she thought she might have smiled. The soap she'd used was Jagger's, so it smelled like him. Instead of picturing horrifying things she'd endured or expected to endure in the future, she found herself picturing the man who'd come to her rescue last night.

He hadn't been the first person to enter the house. The police had come in before him. They'd knocked several times before ringing the doorbell while Kally had hovered in the corner of that library, frozen, unable to respond.

She'd been afraid they might leave, but she hadn't been able to move, so she'd screamed as loud as she could. That had worked. The police had busted the door down and rushed into the house.

It had taken seconds for them to find her and the dead body in front of her. She'd been surprised when they hadn't immediately arrested her. Now that she thought back on the situation, it seemed more logical. After all, she'd been naked and had probably looked crazed. Her hair hadn't been combed or washed in several days. It had been hanging in her face, covered in blood. She'd been cowering in that corner.

Of course, they hadn't arrested her. She'd looked like a victim. She *was* a victim. When they'd asked her name, she'd told them it was Oleander. She'd been shocked when they'd seemed to recognize that name and know her story.

Everyone had jumped into action. More cops. More hovering. More questions. But she hadn't answered because she'd been too stunned. All she'd been able to think was, *Why aren't they arresting me?*

And then Jagger had arrived. He'd squatted down to her level. He'd known who she was. He'd been sympathetic and kind and called her *honey*. And now, she was lusting after him.

She could picture him with several different expressions even after one night. Brooding. Angry. Frustrated. Determined. Empathetic. Even lustful. He'd definitely looked at her as if he'd wanted to devour her a few times. It didn't matter if she'd made that up in her head or not.

Under the bubbling water of the jets, she let her fingers glide over her breasts. Her breath hitched when she flicked her nipples. She had no experience with touching herself. She had no experience feeling arousal that was self-induced or even consensual. But this felt good, thinking of him while she pinched her nipples.



He'd looked at her with that lusty glaze when he'd seen her naked in this bathroom last night. She didn't think he'd minded that she was petite with small breasts. Hell, in her experience, it didn't seem most men minded.

"Kally?"

She immediately bolted to sitting upright at the sound of her name coming through the door. "Yeah?"

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, yeah, uh-huh."

"Can I come in?"

"Yes," she said without thinking or hesitating.

The door opened a moment later, and Jagger's gaze came to hers. He froze in the doorway with his hand on the knob. He stared for several seconds before looking down. "Sorry. Uh, why did you say I could come in if you weren't dressed?"

A flush warmed her cheeks, and she slid back into the water, covering her breasts with her hands. "I don't know," she muttered. "I'm not used to having the choice to say no to someone."

He nodded. "I was worried about you. You've been in here a long time."

"I'm so sorry." She reached for the button to turn off the jets and then lifted the stopper in the tub. "I'll hurry."

"Kally, honey. You're not in trouble. You don't need to hurry. I was just worried. You're fine. Take your time. Don't rush. I'll go back downstairs." He shut the door, leaving her feeling awkward and kicking herself for touching herself and lingering in the tub. She had no idea how long she'd been in here. How inconsiderate.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



Jagger could have kicked himself for opening that door. He'd had only one thing in mind, fear. Not only had she been in there a while, but she hadn't responded the first few times he'd called her name.

The way she'd bolted upright when he'd opened the door had made him feel like an ass. Considering how tight and hard her nipples had been, he suspected he'd interrupted her and felt even worse.

He'd offered her a safe place to be alone, and then he'd violated that offer by interrupting it. He was still kicking himself in the kitchen when he heard her enter.

He turned around from facing the stove to find her shuffling into the room, wearing an outfit similar to last night's. Brown leggings, a thick tan sweater, and socks. Her hair was combed this time, and the ringlets hung all around her, making her look like an angel.

She was fidgeting again, her gaze on the floor. "I'm sorry I took so long and scared you."

He came to her, stroked her arms, and tipped her head back, needing to make a few things clear. "You don't need to be sorry. I shouldn't have walked in on you. It was inconsiderate. I'm the one who should apologize. I told you I wouldn't bother you, and then I did."

"It's your house," she pointed out.

"That doesn't matter. I don't have the right to violate your privacy, Kally." She was clearly struggling to believe that.

Sometimes, she stared at him with a look that indicated she was wavering between reality and the warped world she'd been taught to believe in. She would need deprogramming as if she'd been in a cult.

He suspected he'd completely stopped her from finishing what she'd started in the tub. Especially considering how fast she'd come downstairs after his interruption. *Shit.*

"Come. Let's eat. You have to be starving." He slid a hand down her arm, tugged her hand free from where it was tangling with the other hand, and backed up, luring her with him. "I thought we'd sit at the island if that's okay."

She nodded before hesitantly climbing onto the stool.

"Is there anything you don't like?"

"I...I don't know."

"Okay. Then I'll pile your plate up with food, and whatever you don't like, you don't have to eat." He filled her plate with scrambled eggs, bacon, hashbrowns, pancakes, and berries.

When he set it in front of her, her eyes went wide. "Oh, my God. Jagger..."

"What's wrong?" He wasn't sure what her shock was from. She hated breakfast? She thought it wasn't enough? She thought it was too much? She didn't like her eggs scrambled? Anything was possible.

"It smells so good." She didn't look at him. Her gaze was on the plate. "I haven't had...well, any of these things in so long." Her hand was shaking as she reached out and picked up a berry. "Is this a blackberry?" She finally glanced at him.

"Yes."

"I don't think I've ever had one."

He forced himself not to react as she broke his heart. Her lack of exposure to nutritious food extended back far longer than her captivity. He knew this after printing out the report Malinsky had sent him this morning. It was sitting on the

island in front of her in a folder. He intended to talk to her about it after they ate.

“Try it, honey,” he encouraged.

She set it down carefully as if she didn't want to bruise it. “I'll wait for you.”

*No. No, no, nope. No.* He lifted her chin. “This is not a formal dinner in a five-star restaurant, Kally. It's breakfast at home. You don't have to wait for me to start eating. Just dig in.”

Her face turned pink. She swallowed. “Okay,” she murmured.

He released her, headed back to the stove, filled a second plate, and returned. She hadn't moved. “Kally...” he warned. He didn't want to be bossy. She'd endured enough of that. But he did want her to be assertive even if he had to demand it.

“I...” She licked her lips. “I couldn't.”

He picked up the carefully placed blackberry and held it to her lips. “Try it.”

She opened her mouth and accepted it.

He watched as she chewed it, and the sun got brighter when she smiled. *Fuck me.*

“It's delicious.”

“I'm glad you like blackberries. There are plenty more if you want them.”

“They must cost a fortune,” she commented as she ate another one.

*Oh boy.* He suspected she had food insecurity issues. Price would be at the top of that list. He didn't want to make it worse. Hell, he had no idea what the fucking blackberries cost. He'd placed a grocery order two days ago, and the food had shown up. Period.

He didn't want her to flinch, so he fibbed a bit. “They're in season, I guess. Not a big deal.”

She ate another one, ignoring the rest of the food.

He rose from his stool, headed for the fridge, and grabbed the entire carton. When he returned, he set it in front of her.

She gasped. “That’s a lot of berries.”

“Yep. Eat as many as you want.” He picked up his fork and took a bite of eggs, hoping to encourage her to follow him.

She did. Her eyes were wide as she glanced around her plate as if deciding what to eat first.

He pushed a jar of syrup toward her. “For your pancakes.”

She glanced at it. “That’s real maple syrup.”

*Jesus.* “Yes.”

“I’ve never tried that either.”

“If you don’t like it, we can buy the high-fructose corn syrup kind. Some people don’t care for the real thing.” He knew that was true even among people who could afford it.

She lifted the jar and carefully let a small trickle run onto her pancakes.

“You won’t even be able to taste it if you don’t pour more than that, honey.”

“I don’t want to waste it.”

Jagger rose again. He quickly grabbed another plate from the cabinet, set it in front of her, and used his fork to stab her pancakes and shift them to the new plate. He picked up the syrup and poured it generously over the stack, letting it run down the sides so it was practically swimming.

She giggled.

Jagger’s heart seized. He could live a long and happy life if he got to hear that sound every once in a while. He smiled at her. “Now, it won’t get on your salty foods. Eat, honey. Please.”

She took a bite of the pancakes and moaned around the flavor as if they were orgasmic. Watching her eat certainly was. His cock was hard.

Once she got started, she didn't stop. She didn't eat super-fast, but she didn't often pause either. She ate more than he could have imagined possible, which pleased him. That included all the bacon and every bite of the pancakes and syrup. Every berry. Most of the hashbrowns and eggs.

She moaned as she leaned back. "I'm going to die. I shouldn't have eaten that much."

She'd also had a glass of orange juice, but he just now realized he hadn't offered her coffee.

"Did you want coffee or tea?"

She shrugged. "The only times I've tasted coffee, I thought it was kind of gross. I've had iced tea before, with sugar."

"How about some hot tea then? You can put honey or sugar in it. It might help settle your stomach after eating so much."

She slid off the stool and threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around him and hugging him tight. "Thank you. That was the best meal I've ever had."

He pursed his lips and rubbed her back. It was breakfast. Nothing fancy. How would she react at lunch? He turned to more fully face her and held her between his legs, kissing the top of her head even though he'd given himself a pep talk against doing so again.

She just felt so damn right in his arms. In his house. In his life.

Eventually, he leaned back. "Let me fix you some tea and clean this up, and then we'll talk, okay?"

She nodded, but she looked nervous. "Can I clean up?"

"No. You can sit right here and drink your tea." He rose, lifted her off the floor with his hands at her waist, and sat her back on the stool.

She watched him intently while he made her tea, set it in front of her, and then provided her with honey, sugar, and a spoon. He quickly cleaned the kitchen while she sipped the tea.

“I like it,” she declared.

“I’m glad. So far we haven’t found anything you don’t like.”

She shrugged.

He set the last dish in the dishwasher and turned toward her. “Wait. Was there something you didn’t like, Kally?”

She scrunched up her face.

He stalked toward her. “I told you not to eat the things you didn’t like.”

She bit her lip, but she had a shockingly mischievous expression, almost playful.

He grabbed her around the waist and stepped far too close. “What didn’t you like, Kally?”

She released her lip and winced. “I’m not a huge fan of eggs.”

“Then why did you eat them?”

“I didn’t want to waste them or hurt your feelings. You cooked them.”

“From now on, I want you to tell me what you don’t like. I’m not even going to cook anything without asking first. If you lie to me, I’ll...” His voice trailed off when he stopped himself from finishing that sentence. What naturally would have flowed from his lips in this scenario with any other woman wouldn’t have been appropriate with Kally.

“You’ll what?” she asked softly. “Why did you stop?”

“Because I wasn’t thinking about who I was talking to. I would’ve been kidding. Being punished wouldn’t be a playful joke to you.”

“Oh. Maybe not. Not yet, anyway. But I’d like to be the sort of person who can take a joke. Maybe you can help me.”

“I’d be honored.” He shouldn’t be touching her. Yet again. But he lifted her to the floor. “Let’s go to the living room.” He snagged the folder off the island.

“What’s in the folder?” she asked as she followed him.

“Your life.” He sat on one of the couches, grateful when she took a seat next to him. She leaned into him as if they’d known each other for a decade and were so comfortable together that they had this level of familiarity.

“What does that mean?” She looked up at him with wide innocent eyes. She didn’t seem daunted, just curious.

“Diane sent this information over to me this morning. The FBI will want to know everything they can about you because you never know what detail might help us catch whoever abducted you.”

She nodded. “Okay. I want to help.”

“I’ll tell you what I know from the file, and then we’ll fill in the details, okay?”

“Yes.”

“According to Diane’s search, you were born in a small town about an hour from Vegas. You lived there until you were sixteen, right?”

“Yes,” she whispered, not looking at him anymore. She burrowed deeper against him, absently fingering the long-sleeved shirt he wore.

“No siblings. You lived with your mom. She died that same year?” he asked gently.

“Yes,” she whispered. “You really do know a lot.”

“Only what’s public record. Elementary schools, middle school. You left when your mom died and went to Vegas, right?”

She nodded.

“Did anyone know that?”

“No,” she murmured before tipping her head back. “Can I get in trouble for that?”

“No, honey. You’re not in trouble for anything. Absolutely nothing. I’m just verifying the details.” He stroked her soft



hair away from her face. “I hate that you were all alone at such a young age, but it wasn’t your fault.”

“I knew some girls in high school who said they were going to Vegas after graduation to get jobs. I thought I might be able to get a job if I went there.”

“And you did, didn’t you?”

She nodded. “I worked at a gas station for a while, but it didn’t pay enough money for me to afford the room I was renting, so I...”

“You did what, Kally?” he asked, trying not to show her his concern. He wouldn’t judge her. He’d promised himself he wouldn’t.

She pointed at the file. “Is it in there?”

He shook his head. “No. There’s a gap in your work history, which means you must have been doing something that paid in cash and wasn’t reported.”

“Is that illegal?” she asked.

He turned his body to more fully face her. “Kally, you are not in any trouble. I don’t give a fuck what you did to pay the rent when you were sixteen and homeless. I am not going to judge you. I may not know you well, but what little I do know tells me you’re smart, hardworking, and conscientious. I’m just trying to understand everything that happened to you.”

“I lied about my age.” Her eyes were big.

“Lots of people lie about their ages to get jobs, honey. No one gets arrested for it. If your employer had been caught hiring underage people to work for him, he might have gotten fined, but not you. The only way you could’ve gotten into trouble at the time would’ve been if you were dealing drugs or selling your body for sex in Clark County.”

She flinched. “I never sold my body,” she said emphatically.

He wrapped his arm around her and held her close. “Honey, that was kind of an assumption considering what you were abducted for.” He lifted a brow.

Her cheeks turned bright red. She licked her lips. “You know what I was sold for...” She said this as if it just dawned on her.

“Yes. I can’t know for sure it’s actually true that you’re a virgin, nor can the men who sold you either, but I have to assume they didn’t pick up a woman from the street corner and insist she was untouched.”

She lowered her forehead to his chest, not looking at him. “I hate that you know that. I hate that so many people know everything there is to know about me. It’s embarrassing and humiliating.”

He rubbed her back, aching for her. “Why would you be embarrassed for people to think you haven’t had sex?”

She shrugged against him. “It’s my business.”

“That’s true, but not something to be embarrassed about. And I’m sorry so many people know everything there is to know about you. I hope you’ll understand that the more the FBI knows, the easier it will be to find this asshole and put him behind bars.”

She didn’t say anything for a while. Finally, she continued. “I was dancing. There are plenty of clubs off the main strip that don’t care about anything else as long as you’re pretty. I never took my clothes off. But, apparently, I have rhythm. Dancing came easily for me, and I made more money in one night than in a week at the gas station. The owner paid me in cash, and he let me keep my tips.”

Jagger tried to imagine this shy, slight, timid woman dancing on a club stage and failed. But he understood. He couldn’t blame her. “So, you did that at night and went to school during the day.”

She flinched and tipped her head back again. “You even know I went to school?”

He shrugged. “That part wasn’t hard to discover, honey. You finished your GED and got your associate’s degree from the local community college—with honors. Now, I understand how you were able to do that.”

Her cheeks turned pink again. “I wanted to be better than how I was raised. My mom used to make fun of me for studying. She said it was a waste of time. But I had some teachers who believed in me and told me I was smart. They encouraged me to get an education. I was starting to think I could break the cycle and be someone worthy, and then I woke up in that fucking basement in Denver to find out I would never be anything.”

Jagger grabbed her shoulders and looked her in the eyes. “You’re amazing. So strong. I’m in awe of what you’ve survived. You’re already somebody I envy, and you can still be whatever you want to be. What were you studying?”

“I wanted to be a teacher. I wanted to work in a low-income school like the kind I went to so I could encourage other kids to study hard and get out of the slums.”

“And you still will,” he promised.

She rolled her eyes. “It’s a pipe dream. I lost faith about ten months ago. I’m done thinking I’m better than my mother always said I was.”

Jagger’s breath hitched. “You’re free now. You survived. You got yourself out without any help from anyone. It will take some time for you to heal emotionally, but you will.”

She jerked free of him and rose from the couch to stand. She was shaking as she put some distance between them and stared at him. “Jagger, that’s a pretty picture and all, but I’ll never be the woman I was before I was abducted.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT



“Kally...”

She shook her head, feeling a bit hysterical now. “No. You don’t get it. I’ll never be whole. I’ll never be able to walk out the door and do normal things other people do. I don’t even want to go near a door. I don’t even like windows. I’ve been through things that changed me. I can’t be fixed. And I’ll make peace with that. What I want is to help you find out who did this and stop them from abducting other innocent girls and selling them into sex slavery.”

Jagger stayed in his seat. He nodded. “I’ll do everything in my power, honey. But—”

She shook her head. “There are no buts. I spent a year of my life in a fucking basement, eating just enough to keep me alive. Food with no taste. No seasonings. No flavor. I spent my days going through a series of required positions until I could do all of them in my sleep. *Naked.*” She screamed that last word.

She was pretty sure she was spitting as she shouted. For some reason, she couldn’t stop herself from continuing. It was like everything bubbled up inside her, and it needed to get out. She needed him to understand how fucking broken she was.

“Master J wasn’t the only man around us. We had trainers. We spent hours kneeling, standing in different positions, and lying prone. It was cold and damp in that fucking basement. The trainers laughed at us. They liked it when we had goosebumps because it kept our nipples hard.”

Jagger looked like he was holding his breath. He didn't interrupt her.

“Do you know how many hours those slimy men made me hold my legs open so they could stare at my fucking cunt?” She shuddered.

Jagger's jaw tensed.

“They waxed me too. They tied me down and waxed my pussy every few weeks so it would always be bare and exposed. They liked to make us stand still while they teased our nipples with everything from feathers to their gross hands. I wanted to vomit every time one of them touched me.”

Her hands were fisted so tightly at her sides that her blunt nails dug into her palms. She welcomed the pain.

“And the nights were worse. Can you believe that?”

He swallowed. He knew. He knew all of this. He'd heard it from Marigold. Gemma.

She didn't care. She kept going. “We had cots with thin mattresses. They restrained us at night. Ankles and wrists. Spread open. Exposed. They draped a scratchy blanket over us, and we didn't dare move an inch because the only thing worse than that fucking itchy blanket was shivering all night in the cold. Do you know why we had to sleep restrained and spread eagle? *Do you?*” She leaned forward.

Jagger's hands were fisted at his sides, too. He looked like he might jump up and single-handedly kill all those men. If only he knew who they were.

She didn't stop. “Because we needed to learn to *control ourselves,*” she screamed. “We weren't permitted to masturbate. If we so much as scratched an itch, we were punished. The reason they strapped us to the cots at night was so they could fucking sleep without having to guard us. As if anyone could possibly feel the urge to fucking masturbate under such conditions.”

Kally took a deep breath, her body trembling as if she were back in that basement still. She took a step back and crossed her arms. “I'll never be able to close my eyes without going

back there. I can see the smirks on their smarmy faces. They're burned into the backs of my eyelids. I doubt I'll ever be fully warm again. Wearing clothes feels funny. I can't imagine putting shoes on."

So far, she'd worn only the things Gemma had brought her. Gemma had understood better than anyone what she would need and what types of clothing wouldn't make her panic. There had been tennis shoes in the pile, but Kally hadn't put them on yet—just socks.

"Finish school? Ha. I'll be lucky if I can step outside without a panic attack." She glanced at the door. She wasn't kidding. She hadn't considered that fact until now, but the thought of being in public made her skin crawl.

The look on Jagger's face was one of compassion. That was the only way she could describe it. And bless him for not trying to tell her he could fix things. He knew better than to promise the impossible.

She stared at him and figured, *fuck it*. She might as well continue to purge her thoughts. It wasn't like it could hurt anything. Her world could not be worse. "Do you know what's the craziest thing of all, Jagger?"

He licked his lips. "What, honey?"

"Since you walked in that house last night and squatted in front of me, I've actually spent an irrationally large cumulative chunk of time thinking about what it might be like to have sex. With you. I've never had thoughts like that before. I've rarely met a man decent enough to ponder him even touching me, let alone seeing me naked. Even though part of me doesn't want to have anything to do with men ever in my life, another part of me is so drawn to you that I wish you'd just carry me to your room, strip me naked, and fuck me so I'd know what it felt like. I bet if I lost myself in your eyes and your touch, I could forget those assholes for five minutes. It would be heaven on earth. Granted, I'd have to come back to earth and face my fucked-up life afterward, but at least I wouldn't still be a virgin. I'd know. I'd be part of the secret club of women who've had a cock inside them."

She couldn't believe she'd said all that, and she immediately turned away from him and wandered toward the attached kitchen. If she were a normal human being, she'd step closer to the windows and look out at the view of his amazing backyard. She hadn't noticed it until now.

But she wasn't normal. She was too fucked up to get close to a window. What if someone was watching? What if they stormed the house and took her? She didn't actually care if they shot her through the glass and killed her. That would be preferable to being dragged bodily to a waiting airplane and delivered to the man who'd purchased her.

Jagger's hands landed on her shoulders.

She flinched for a moment and then leaned into him. He was so solid, emotionally and physically.

"Thank you for sharing that with me," he said softly.

She chuckled. "Which part? The part where you had to endure listening to how badly I've been abused or the part where some strange fucked-up girl has fantasies about you fucking her."

He wrapped an arm around her and held her against him. "I will listen to anything you want to tell me, honey, and I'm glad you feel like you can share. Both the good and the bad. You are not fucked-up. You've been through a lot. Horrific things. You're going to need counseling to work through your experiences. You might even want to see the same counselor Gemma goes to. Dr. Carol Langston. She's been a godsend for Gemma. She's a therapist with the FBI."

At the moment, Kally couldn't imagine repeating all of that to another person, but she might feel differently someday. Plus, that doctor would already know most of the story from Gemma. That could be nice.

"As for you having fantasies about having sex with me, I have a few things to say."

She stiffened.

"Not bad things. Don't panic. Just things to think about. One, you are precious, sexy, smart, gorgeous, and so fucking

strong. If by some chance I ever get the opportunity to call you mine, I'll be the luckiest man on earth. I knew that in my soul as soon as I met you. You bring me to my knees. I haven't made a solid rational decision since I met you. Two, I don't mean to sound patronizing, but you can't make life-altering decisions right now. You're still reeling from a year of hell. It would be selfish of me to take something precious from you before you're emotionally ready to consent. And three..."

Kally's breath hitched when his mouth came closer to her ear. "I will never fuck you. Not in a million years. I would make sweet, sweet love to you until you scream my name over and over, but it would never be violent or forced."

Her knees nearly gave out. It was a good thing he was holding her upright. Her mind was reeling from his words. The combination of his warm breath, his soft tone, and his caring words made her feel an actual genuine arousal for the first time in her life.

She'd been aroused before, many times in the past year, but always by force. Being restrained and sometimes blindfolded while strangers groped her until she grew wet was humiliating and mortifying. It was worse when they laughed.

No one had ever penetrated her. That part of her had been saved for her buyer. But they'd tried to train her body to react to the slightest touch to her nipples or clit. She wasn't even sure if she would ever want someone to touch her like that again.

Except for some reason, she found herself craving exactly that from the man currently holding her together. Would she be able to endure his touch in reality? She wasn't sure. She might actually kick him in the balls and run and hide.

He rocked her body back and forth, never letting go. After a few minutes, he gave her another squeeze. "I need to ask you more questions, honey. Can you tell me more? I know it's the last thing you want to do, but time is of the essence. There are four more women out there somewhere. The FBI would like to find them."

"I'll do whatever I can," she responded.



“Can you tell me more about your abduction itself?” He turned the two of them toward one of the armchairs.

It surprised her, and she panicked for a moment, thinking he intended for her to sit somewhere else, but as soon as he dropped into the chair, he tugged her forward and silently encouraged her to sit on his lap.

Relief flooded her. She couldn't explain why she liked him touching her, but she did. She felt grounded when she was close to him, even more so when he held her.

He threaded their fingers together and brought their combined hands to his cheek to rub her knuckles against his cleanly shaved skin. At some point, he'd taken a shower and shaved. She assumed he must have done so in another bathroom in the house while she'd been in the tub.

She leaned her head on his shoulder and took a deep breath, letting herself go back to that time a year ago. “I was naïve and careless and stupid.”

“Kally... You were twenty-one and trusting. You cannot blame yourself for the actions of others.”

She shrugged. If he only knew how many nights she'd stared at the ceiling, shivering, reminding herself of her mistakes, of what she'd done wrong. She couldn't blame herself for the fact that men had taken her, but she could blame herself for not seeing it coming and taking precautions. It would have helped if she'd never taken that job in a sleazy bar dancing for even sleazier men.

Jagger rubbed her fingers with his thumb. He didn't rush her.

“I think I know who actually kidnapped me even though I never saw them again.”

Jagger leaned around to meet her gaze. “That would be helpful. Do you think you could still identify them?”

“If it's who I think it was, yes. I've never been able to get their images out of my mind.”

He gave her a squeeze. “Tell me what happened.”

“So, I was working at night, obviously, and taking classes during the day. I had saved up for a computer so I could do everything online. It was a lot. I wasn’t getting much sleep, but I was doing it. There were these two men who started coming into the club. They came every night. I felt like they watched me closer than some of the other girls. They sat up front and slipped me a lot of money. They also hung around between my shifts, tried to buy me drinks, and engaged me in conversation. They weren’t much different from other men at the club, except they were persistent.”

“How long did this go on?”

“A few weeks. My semester ended, and I was looking forward to recouping some sleep. I got off late one night, went back to the house I was living in, and dropped into bed. No one else was home.”

“You were renting a room, right?”

“Yes. There were three other girls living there.”

“Would any of them know something?”

Kally shrugged. “I doubt it. I didn’t spend much time with them. They mostly teased me for being a Goody Two-shoes and stopped asking me if I wanted to go out with them after a while. I’m pretty sure no one was home when I was taken.”

“Did any of them work at the same club as you?”

She sighed. “No. That would be convenient.”

“Okay. Go on.”

“When I woke up, I was bound and gagged and being tossed over Master J’s shoulder. He was hauling me into the house I would live in for the next year. It was dark outside, and I was groggy, so I didn’t have the presence of mind to pay attention to my surroundings.”

“That’s okay. We know where you were now.”

Kally nodded. “Right.” She drew in another breath. “Master J carried me downstairs to the basement and dropped me onto the concrete floor. Two of the other trainers were there. They laughed while I squirmed around in a panic. There

was nothing I could do. The only clothing on me was the T-shirt and panties I'd worn to bed."

Kally's heart rate increased as she forced herself to relive that night. It wasn't something she wanted to do often, but she did want to make sure the authorities had every detail possible if it would help them catch these men.

"Master J must have had a long conversation with my abductors because he started telling the trainers how naïve and stupid I was."

"What kinds of things?" Jagger asked. He didn't flinch, and he never stopped rubbing Kally's fingers, or her arm, or her thigh. Soothing. Comforting. Encouraging.

"He knew a lot of stuff about where I worked. He knew that I walked home alone every night when I got off. He knew that I didn't drink or accept offers to go out after work. He also knew the other dancers used to give me shit for being a virgin."

That made Jagger flinch.

Kally shrugged. "They weren't mean about it. It's not as if I told anyone I was a virgin. They just assumed I was since I never accepted any offers to go out with men, not the men at the club or men they tried to set me up with. One day a few days before I was taken, two of the ladies came into the dressing room after my set and told me they knew someone who would pay a pretty penny for my virginity. I blew them off and told them I wasn't interested. No matter how tempting anyone's offer was, I was never willing to cross that line. I wasn't a prostitute. I kept telling myself I was a good dancer. People liked to watch me. They paid money for it. But I wasn't a hooker."

Jagger hugged her closer. "Take a deep breath, honey."

Kally hadn't realized she'd gotten so agitated as she'd told the story. She was stiff. She took several breaths and let them out slowly.

Jagger rubbed her back. "You okay?"

“Yeah.” She just wanted to finish this part so she didn’t have to explain it again. “When I came out of the dressing room a few minutes later, those two men were in the hallway. They stared at me, paying closer attention than usual. I rolled my eyes and told them to get over themselves. It wasn’t going to happen. And then I left.”

“Do you think they followed you?”

“I know they did. They followed me the next night, too. And two nights after that, I woke up in Denver. Even though I didn’t even know I was in Denver until last night.”

“Okay.” Jagger smoothed a lock of her hair back from her forehead. “That’s enough for now. Do you think you can describe those two men to the police?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll get a sketch artist to come to the house.”

Kally stiffened again. More strangers. More questions. More stress. Although, it was necessary. She knew she needed to do this. Tell everything she could remember. Every detail might help.

## CHAPTER NINE



Jagger rubbed his temples as he leaned against the window in the kitchen. He knew Diane was just doing her job, but sometimes, she was too intense. She'd asked Kally the same questions over and over. The same questions Jagger had already asked her and put in his report that morning. And all this after a lengthy session with the sketch artist who left there a while ago with two incredibly detailed sketches.

There was no reason to drag Kally through the saga again. Kally looked ready to drop from exhaustion, but she never complained. She sat at the kitchen table with her heels on the seat in front of her, hugging her knees to her chest. Sometimes, she rocked forward and backward. She glanced at the windows a lot as if she expected someone to shoot through the glass and kidnap her from the kitchen.

Jagger couldn't blame her. More than one man was definitely pissed that she'd slipped through their fingers. Not to mention the fact that they knew exactly where she was. Her seller had made that clear when he'd changed the information on the chip to indicate Jagger was her buyer.

He ran a hand over his face again as Diane leaned back in her seat, rattling off facts. "It's unfortunate there was never a missing person report," she muttered.

Jagger shoved off the glass and came to the table. He set his palms flat on the glass surface between Kally and Diane and looked at Diane. Glared at her. He didn't like her tone of voice. It was accusatory.

She lifted her hands, eyes wide. “I’m just talking to myself.”

“I’ll walk you to the door.”

She needed to leave. Kally was long past done. Jagger knew Kally was holding her shit together so Diane wouldn’t decide she needed to be moved to a psych ward. If there was one thing Jagger had learned about Kalinda in the past eighteen hours, it was that she was strong and smart as a whip.

But she had a breaking point. Everyone did. Diane was pushing Kally to hers.

Diane sighed as she stood, gathered her things, and stuck everything in her satchel. “Call me if she thinks of any more details, no matter how small they may seem.”

Jagger pushed from the table, squared off with his boss, and crossed his arms. They didn’t normally find themselves at odds. He’d worked for her for ten years. She was damn good at her job and wouldn’t sleep until she solved a case.

He was well aware of what was different about this case and how it was affecting his behavior. He had feelings for the victim. He knew it. Diane knew it. It was unprofessional and totally against all policy.

Insinuating he couldn’t do his job was over the top, though. “Diane, I’m a great agent. I’m capable of knowing when to call you.”

She nodded. “I know you are.” She glanced at Kally. “But...”

He shook his head. “Nope. There is no *but* here. My perspective about the case isn’t clouded. You know me. You know I would never jeopardize a case.” He motioned toward the front door, not wanting to argue with Diane in front of Kally any longer. The last thing he needed was for Kally to think she was causing a problem with his boss. It would add to her stress.

“Thank you for being so thorough, Kalinda,” Diane said to her with a forced smile. “You have my direct number if you think of anything else or need anything.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Kally responded.

“I’ll be right back,” Jagger told her. He looked at her for longer than a pause, trying to ascertain if she could handle him leaving the room for a few minutes.

She nodded and didn’t move.

When he reached the front door, he glanced back toward the kitchen to make sure Kally hadn’t followed them before facing Diane.

“Look, Jagger...”

He shook his head, getting in her face. “No. *You* look. You sound like you don’t even believe her story half the time, Diane. It’s insane.”

“That’s not true. I believe her.”

“Then you might want to work harder to make that obvious. It’s not her fucking fault that those men were thorough when they abducted her. Did you miss the part where Russo dumped her belongings on the basement floor and stomped on them? Her computer. Her phone. Her purse. Her identification. Even most of her fucking clothes?”

Jagger was trying not to shout, but it was hard. He was so angry he could punch a hole in his own wall.

“I heard her.” Diane put her hands on her hips.

“She was basically a runaway, Diane. She didn’t have close friends. Those girls she lived with thought she was a freak. They probably took one look at her room and assumed she’d moved without notice. Skipped town. Whoever those two men were who took her knew that. They were smart. Why the fuck would those other girls have called the cops? And told them what? ‘Yeah, uh, our weird virginal roommate didn’t come home for two days. She took all her stuff and just left.’”

Diane nodded. “I hear you.”

“Do you? Those other girls in the house were selling their bodies for the rent money in Clark County, Nevada. Prostitution isn’t legal in Clark County. Not to mention they

were probably underage. I'm sure they cleaned out that room and found another girl to rent it before the dust settled."

"You're right."

"On top of that, Kally was an underage dancer in a dive club off the strip. Do you think her boss called to say she was missing when she didn't show up for work? Jesus, Diane. The fuckers who stalked and abducted her knew exactly what they were doing. They made a clean sweep. They got away with it, too."

Diane held up a finger. "So far. I was listening, Whitley. I heard every word, and I'm going to have people scouring every dive bar in Vegas within the hour. It's not Kalinda I'm frustrated with, and you know it."

Jagger gasped. "Are you telling me that because you're angry with me, you think it's okay to treat the victim like she might be lying?"

"No. I'm telling you I'm beyond concerned about your involvement with her and your feelings for her. She's young. She's impressionable. She's been through hell. She needs help."

"And I will get her all the help she needs, Diane," he muttered through gritted teeth. He knew he wasn't being rational either, but he couldn't help it. "Do you have anything else you need to say to me?"

Diane blew out a breath and stared at him. "You're serious about helping her, aren't you?"

"Jesus, Diane, yes."

"Why?"

"I don't fucking know, okay. But I'm going to do whatever it takes. There's not a chance in hell I'm going to leave her with someone else. A man who paid one million dollars for her got stiffed last night, and the man who collected that money was watching me get her out of that house. She is not safe."



“I know that, Jagger. Everyone knows that.” Diane glanced toward the kitchen.

Jagger jerked his gaze in that direction, too. Luckily, Kally hadn't emerged yet.

“You're going to see this through, aren't you?” Diane stated in defeat.

“Yes. All the way through to the end.”

“If it takes months?”

“If it takes years,” he assured her.

“I can't hold your job forever.”

He nodded. “I'd appreciate it if you'd keep me on staff for as long as possible. I'm more helpful if I'm in the loop.”

Diane sighed. “You act like you're going to quit.”

“I don't know what I'm going to do yet. I have one priority.”

Diane nodded slowly. “Okay. I'll do my best. You're no longer on this case, but I won't stop anyone from sharing information with you and touching base. You're officially on paid leave.” She lifted a finger. “For now. Don't make me regret it.”

“Thank you.” Jagger took a deep breath and opened the front door. He watched as Diane got in her car and headed for the gate. A guard was stationed at the gate, and one constantly circled the property. There was still a man positioned in the street, too.

None of that was keeping Jagger from feeling antsy. He thought they might need to consider leaving and going somewhere else soon, but he wasn't sure how Kally was going to react to that, so he would keep it to himself for now.

When the gate was closed, he shut the front door and turned around. Kally was standing in the middle of the living room, arms wrapped around herself as she often did. Not closed off exactly. More like cold and shut down.

“How much did you hear?” he asked as he approached her.

“Most of it,” she admitted. “I’ve gotten good at eavesdropping in the past year. I kept hoping if I accidentally heard the right information, I might be able to escape.”

He pulled her into his arms. “Diane is good at her job.” He wasn’t sure why he felt the need to defend her.

“I’m sure she is. I get it. She’s worried about you.” She tipped her head back and set her chin on his chest. “You wouldn’t really quit your job over me, would you?”

“In a heartbeat.”

Her eyes went wide. “Why?”

He shrugged. “Some things are more important than a job.”

“But you don’t know me.”

“I know enough. I know that no matter what happens between you and me, it changes nothing. I won’t turn you over to someone else for protection. I can’t. No matter what, I will be with you until you either tell me to take a hike or I’m certain you’re completely safe. That means a lot of people have to be arrested and convicted before I’m going to walk away.”

She swallowed. “And then you’ll walk away?” Her voice was soft.

He shook his head. “Nope. You’ll still have to tell me to go.”

She sighed. “What if I’m lying? Diane has her doubts.”

“No, she doesn’t. She knows you’re not lying. She’s frustrated because I’m being stubborn and breaking all the rules. She’s taking it out on you, and she shouldn’t.”

“She’s right, though. No one even called in a missing person’s report.”

Jagger grabbed Kally’s hand, turned, and marched toward the stairs. He was glad she followed. He certainly didn’t want her to feel forced.

He tugged her all the way into his bedroom, shoved the bag of borrowed clothes off the armchair, sat, and pulled her into his lap. Finally, he spoke. “Those men knew what they were doing. They stalked you until they overheard a key piece of information that meant the jackpot, and then they took you in the middle of the night and left a trail of evidence that you had skipped town. I’m sure the front door wasn’t even locked on that house.”

Kally chewed on her bottom lip while she listened.

“On top of that, Gemma knows you. She was there when you were brought in. Another slave. And you have that fucking tattoo on your inner thigh. No one thinks for a minute you’re lying. Got it?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“Good. Now, you must be exhausted. I chased Diane out of the house as soon as I realized you were close to a full panic attack.”

She played absently with the front of his shirt. “The windows make me nervous.”

“I know they do.” He pulled her against his chest and held her close, breathing in her scent. It was a bit masked by his own damn shampoo and soap. “We’re going to nap, and then we’re going to eat a late lunch, and then we’re going to order you some shampoo.”

She giggled. “Shampoo? How is that a priority? Sleep, food, shampoo? Yours is fine.”

“Mine is making you smell like me. I want to know what you smell like when you use something sweet and floral and girly.”

She sobered, her smile falling as if she realized she shouldn’t be smiling. “Having real shampoo, conditioner, body soap, and hot water is a luxury. Hell, it was a luxury before I got abducted. Now, it’s like heaven. Don’t spoil me. I can’t stay with you forever. When I leave, I won’t have nice things. I don’t want to get used to them.”

Jagger stopped breathing. He blinked several times. “I prefer to think maybe you’ll grow to like me and not leave.”

She stared at him. “You can’t mean that. I’m not from your world. I’m just a girl who was living and working on the wrong side of the tracks, and it caught up with her because no one cared about her. I’m nobody. I get that you feel sorry for me. You probably even feel responsible for me because you’re a good guy. You made me a promise when I was at the end of my rope, and you’re too nice to take it back. But—”

Jagger shook his head. He gave her a bit of a shake, too. “No, Kalinda.” He couldn’t explain why he felt so strongly about her, but he did. He’d known other guys who’d met their soulmates and had known it on the spot. He’d always rolled his eyes and thought they were loony toons. But they’d been right, and all of them were the happiest fuckers he knew.

That’s what had happened here. He knew it in his heart, in his head, and in his gut. Kally was his. She was going to be the light in his world for the rest of his life if she’d have him. She’d run him over like a freight train. Knocked him on his ass. He would not be walking away from her unless she wanted him to. Ever.

He licked his lips. “Look at me.”

She’d ducked her head to watch her fingers as she fiddled with the front of his shirt again.

When she lifted her eyes, he met them. “Call me crazy, but I have no intention of ever willingly letting you go. You’ve brought me to my knees. I want to hold you, protect you, listen to you, and help you get through this, but I also want to make sure you have everything you ever wanted in life. I want to help you get whole again. I want to help you finish your education if that’s what you want. I want every part of you you’re willing to give me. I’m a patient man. I won’t pressure you to return my affection. I know you have a lot to deal with before you can even consider what I’m proposing. But I’ll be right here while you figure it out. And, if you look up one day and realize you don’t feel the same way about me that I feel about you, I will not only help you move on, but I’ll make sure

you have a bank account that ensures you never want for anything.”

Her eyes went wide. “A bank account? Did you miss the part where I’m not a hooker?”

He cringed. “Kally, that’s not what I meant.”

“It sounded like it was what you meant.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I’m just saying I won’t let you go back to the way things were before. I’ll help you get on your feet and make sure you stay that way. There are no strings attached to my offer. You never have to sleep with me or touch me in any way.”

Jagger released her and lifted his hands out to the sides, feeling like an idiot. Did she really think he planned to keep her as some sort of mistress?

He rubbed a hand over his face. “Fuck.”

She still sat on his lap, gripping his shirt. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I know you didn’t mean it that way. I was just reacting. My head is spinning. I’m struggling to believe I’m really here and not still in that fucking basement.”

When she leaned into him and tucked her head against his neck, he wrapped his arms around her again. They needed sleep. He rose, carried her to the bed, tugged the covers back, and slid her to the middle.

Then he climbed in behind her, pulled the covers mostly over her, and spooned her from behind like he had last night.

She was stiff for a while, breathing heavily. Undoubtedly, her mind was racing as she tried to process everything he’d said.

He smoothed her soft curls from her face and kissed her neck even though he had no right to do so. “I’m sorry. You didn’t need me to drop all that in your lap right now.”

She slid her hand over his and threaded her fingers between his from the back. Clutching his hand, she pulled it against her chest and held on tight. “Did you mean it all?” she asked softly.

“Every word. As far as I’m concerned, you’re mine. To hold and protect. To make laugh. To cry with when life doesn’t go our way. I’m going to get lost in your eyes every time you look at me for the rest of my life. I know it as strongly as I know my name. Naysayers can fuck themselves and stay out of it.”

She pulled his fingers to her lips and kissed them. It was the first time she’d set her lips on him, even though he’d taken that liberty with her several times. “I want to believe all that is possible.”

“I’ll show you.”

“I’m going to crack, Jagger. I’m holding on by a thread. I’m too exhausted to deal with the pain of what I’ve been through. I’m in shock. I’m scared out of my mind about how you make me feel. On top of that, people are outside even now, waiting for the opportunity to snatch me out of your hands. They won’t stop until they have me. I’ll be out of this country so fast you won’t even be able to blink. You’ll never be able to find me.”

He held his breath, hating the panic in her voice. Hating that she was right.

She twisted to look at him. “You can’t look for me, Jagger. Promise me you’ll move on and let me go.”

“Not a chance in hell, honey. Never. If anything happened to you, which it won’t, I would never ever stop looking for you. Damon spent three years looking for Gemma, and he found her. Now, they are the luckiest people on earth. Their love is the kind of thing that makes everyone around vomit,” he joked, trying to lighten the mood.

He failed, apparently, because Kally sat up next to him and turned to face him. Her expression was fierce. “It wouldn’t be the same, Jagger. I’d be broken beyond repair. I know what Gemma endured. I was there. She was there for three years. It was unimaginable, but she wasn’t raped. Not in the literal sense. And neither was I. If there’s a man out there from a foreign country waiting to collect me... He doesn’t have kind, gentle plans for me. He intends to hurt me in the worst

possible way. I know this. It's why I killed a man last night. I would do anything to avoid going with the man who bought me for a million dollars. Anything, Jagger. Do you hear me? So, don't look for me. You wouldn't find me. I wouldn't exist anymore. All you'd have to bring home would be a body."

Jagger sat upright next to her, towering over her, grabbing her head so she couldn't look away. "Don't talk like that, Kalinda. Ever. And don't think like that. First of all, no one is going to get their hands on you. But if by some chance they do, you will fucking hold it together until I can get to you. Do you understand?"

She stared at him wide-eyed. "No, Jagger. I'm not strong enough. I won't let someone fucking hurt me like that. I can't. I'd rather jump out of the plane as it took off. I'd rather run into traffic while he dragged me down the street. I'd rather jump down onto the subway tracks. Fuck him. Fuck his million dollars. He can fuck himself, but he can't have me."

She was so firm. It was amazing how strong her convictions were, considering how long she'd been living in hell. She'd climbed out of that world not even twenty-four hours ago, and already she was the strongest woman he'd ever met.

God, he loved her. More by the minute. Yes, loved. He wouldn't say that to her right now and make her even more frustrated, but he would never forget the moment he'd known. This moment right here. This one where she was staring him down with her fierceness and determination.

She wasn't going to win this fight, though. And it was a fight. They'd probably have a million of them in the course of their lives, and he would cherish every second of every argument because they would be seconds he had with her.

He stroked her cheek with his thumb. The Dom in him, who'd regularly gone to Roses and Thorns to relieve some stress with a willing submissive, wanted to toss her back on the bed, hover over her, and make himself clear.

But he couldn't do that with Kally. He likely would never be able to exercise any kind of consensual force with her. It

would make her panic. She wasn't submissive. She would always be his equal in every room of the house.

Instead, he gently stroked her cheek. "I understand your frustration. I can feel your fear and your pain. I hear you. But you need to hear me, too. I will never give up on you. Never. I'm going to stick to you like white on rice until you believe me. You don't want to shower alone? You got it. I won't leave you in the bathroom alone anymore. You will not know fear because I will not give you the space to feel it. The only way someone is going to get to you is over my dead body. But on the off chance they do, you will fucking stay strong for me. You do what it takes to survive. You shut your mind down and get out of your body while that fucker touches you. Understood?"

Bile came to his throat at the thought of anyone touching her. He would rip them limb from limb and not leave enough pieces to identify the body. His heart stopped at the thought of her giving up.

Suddenly, she gave him a weird smile.

He narrowed his gaze in confusion. "Kally?"

"I was just wondering how you were going to come for me after they took me since you said it would be over your dead body."

He drew in a breath and rolled his eyes, unable to keep from smiling back at her. His woman had a sarcastic, sassy side. And now, he loved her even more.

He lowered her to her back, hovered over her, and met her gaze. "Has anyone ever kissed you?"

"No," she said breathlessly, licking her lips. "I never let them. I never wanted anyone to."

"Do you still feel that way?" If she did, he would back off. He could wait.

"No." She slid her hand up his back and pulled him forward. "Kiss me."



## CHAPTER TEN



Kally needed this. She needed him to kiss her. She needed to feel... Just feel. Alive. Like she mattered. Like someone cared.

She liked the way he looked at her, his gaze penetrating. It wasn't lascivious or predatory. He wasn't lusting after her like she was a piece of meat or a quick fuck or a hooker or trash or expendable or not worthy.

Jagger looked at her like he cared.

His nose rubbed gently along the seam of her lips before he muttered against them. "This is so wrong..." he whispered. "I shouldn't be taking advantage of you like this." He drew in a deep breath. "Fuck it," he mumbled.

And then he claimed her lips. His hand tightened in her hair, sending panic down her spine for a fraction of a second before she remembered this was Jagger. He would never hurt her.

She opened her mouth for him and reached with her tongue.

He jerked back so their lips were no longer touching and stared down at her. "Uh-uh. Wipe your mind of everything you were taught. This isn't a job. I'm not your master. If you want to kiss me, it better be because you feel something inside you. I want your stomach to flutter. I want you to feel antsy. I want you to writhe in my arms when I kiss you. Do what feels natural. Kiss me with your heart."

She was panting, confused at first, but then she realized what he was saying. She'd gone into her head to pull out the

training she'd been given on kissing. How to please her master with her mouth. It was all she knew.

She licked her lips and nodded. He was right about the fluttering and the antsy feeling.

He lowered his lips again, nibbling around her mouth, teasing her with tiny flicks of his tongue. She whimpered when he licked the seam.

This time, she parted for him because she wanted to. She wanted more from him. She wanted to experience kissing in a way she'd never imagined.

And she did.

Jagger angled his head to one side and deepened the kiss, sweeping his tongue into her mouth to dance with hers. When he gave her tongue a quick suck, she gasped. Her hands went to his waist before smoothing up his back to grip his shoulders.

Jagger kissed her like she'd only read about in books. He devoured her as if their lives depended on it. When he finally released her lips, he was panting. Also grinning. His forehead touched hers, and he closed his eyes. "Yeah..."

Her heart beat faster. She loved that he was pleased. "Yeah?"

He nodded. "Fuck, yeah." He rose a few inches, studying her face. "Jesus, you're beautiful. And twenty-two." He groaned as he dropped to his side next to her, resting his cheek on his palm. He threaded his other hand with hers and let them rest on her belly.

"Is twenty-two a problem?"

He pulled her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "Mmm. I'm thirty-five, honey."

She shrugged. "I don't care."

"You should care. You have your whole life in front of you."

“My whole life?” Her voice rose. She jerked her head toward him. Inches separated their faces. “Until yesterday, my entire life was measured one minute at a time. It was all about survival. When would I get my next meal? When would some sick fuck strap my arms above my head and hose me down with cold water so he could grope me? When would someone strap me over a bench and tease my clit until I wanted to scream? When would someone hold my butt cheeks open and torment my most private parts until I relented and pretended I liked it?”

Jagger’s hand tightened on hers.

She had to give him credit. Even though he looked a bit green, he didn’t look away or close his eyes. He listened to her.

She finally squeezed hers closed, trying to block out the horrifying memories that assaulted her.

Jagger pulled her closer to his chest and held her tighter. He didn’t offer platitudes.

She breathed heavily for a few moments and then looked at him again. “I may be young in years, but I’ve seen things no one my age should see. I grew up in a house where my mother did lines of cocaine on the coffee table while a series of disgusting boyfriends rotated through the revolving door. Every one of them was slimier than the last. At least she wasn’t home when she died. Two cops came to my door to tell me. I barely flinched. All I could think about was getting rid of them before social services showed up to take me into the system. I had thirty minutes to pack what I could carry and get the fuck out of that shitty apartment. I was already old. Everything I’d eaten from the time I could stand on two feet had been prepared by me. By the time I was five, I learned to steal money from my mom’s drug stash and walk to the gas station on the corner to buy food. I got my tampons and pads from the school nurse when I started my period. I never owned a bra until I bought it myself with babysitting money. I was on my own, working long hours to pay rent at sixteen. I started dancing at seventeen. I finished my GED and got my

associates all on my own. I was abducted at twenty-one. Don't talk to me about being young. I was never young."

Jagger released her hand to slide his up to cup her face. He held her gaze steadily. "I'm sorry. You're right. I know enough about you to know you are fierce, strong, determined, and hard-working. You've lived more than most people twice your age. If my age doesn't bother you, I won't mention it again."

She rolled toward him and grabbed the front of his shirt in her fist as if it would help if she held on to him. Maybe it would keep her from falling and falling and falling. "Now, I'm fucking exhausted. The only time I've slept more than a few restless hours at a time was last night. Would you..." She drew in a breath. "I may be fierce about some things, but I'm not feeling strong or brave. I'm just tired and scared and..." She fisted his shirt harder.

He slid his arm around her and flattened his palm on her lower back. "I won't move. I'll be right here. Sleep, honey."

She blew out a breath. He understood. Bless him. "Thank you." She closed her eyes. Her mind raced for long moments. It was hard to avoid the flashes of hell embedded in her brain. But she forced herself to think about that kiss. So sweet and intense.

She let herself drift off, snuggled against his warm body, her only thoughts centered on his breathing, his lips, his hand holding hers...



*"Legs wider, slave. I shouldn't have to remind you of this. You need to do better unless you want to spend some time in the kennel. Maybe overnight this time, huh?"*

*Oleander's breath hitched, and she parted her legs wider, trying not to panic, whimper, or make unauthorized movements.*

*She hated these tests, these evenings upstairs where she was paraded around naked in front of a dozen disgusting men who came here to ogle and grope her.*

*Master J's voice came to her ear again. His breath was nasty. It reeked of bourbon or scotch or whatever that gross brown liquid was that clinked in his glass around the one cube of ice—exactly the way he liked it served.*

*She knew how he liked his alcohol. She'd personally poured it for him more times than she could count. He'd insisted. All the girls spent time learning how to tend bar properly for their buyers. It was one of the requirements. If they couldn't do it without shaking or spilling, they were punished.*

*Lately, they were punished for everything. It seemed like Master J was particularly edgy. Oleander thought something was about to happen. She was scared to death to find out what.*

*“That's better,” Master J sneered. “Shoulders back, tits high, and smile, little slave girl. You're so photogenic when you smile.”*

*The hardest thing she ever did in this hell was smile, especially for the fucking camera. However, she managed because not doing so made things worse. Tonight, she was blindfolded. Blindfold nights meant two things: there would be pictures, and there would be an increased level of fondling.*

*Oleander was the star tonight. Front and center in the middle of the giant living room where Master J liked to entertain men—potential buyers. He used those nights to show off his girls, forcing them to demonstrate their skills.*

*Oleander fought against the urge to cringe when something wet touched her nipple. Not just wet, cold. She knew it was his ice cube. The man derived perverted pleasure from teasing her nipples with ice, especially when she wasn't expecting it.*

*“Good girl. Show everyone how well-trained you are. Such a good little slave.” His voice crept closer as he leaned in to speak in her ear again. Vile man.*

*She shivered involuntarily as he trailed the ice cube down her belly and lower. It was so hard not to cry out or scream. Fight. Cuss. Kick him in the fucking face. But she knew better. She knew because she'd done all of that in the early days.*

*She'd been here almost a year now. She knew the repercussions for misbehaving. They were harsh and devious. If he was threatening the kennel tonight, he meant business.*

*Oleander hadn't been in the kennel for almost two weeks this time. She'd learned to play his games. She did what she had to do to stay sane.*

*The kennel didn't promote sanity. It was literally a cage like one would keep a dog. He made any girl who misbehaved climb inside, cuffed their wrists and ankles to the corners, and locked them in. Hours and hours in that position. Knees bent under her in a tight ball. Forehead on the cold metal floor. Master J was so wretched that he always left them there until long after they'd peed themselves. He found humor in their misery.*

*It was a type of solitary confinement. Any complaint or even a whimper would prolong their stay in the kennel. Oleander had spent more than her fair share of time restrained in one of those kennels. Enough to know she'd rather be right here, blindfolded and on display for everyone in the room to grope.*

*Oleander squeezed her eyes closed behind the mask, grateful for the coverage. It allowed her to at least react with her eyes in a way no one would notice.*

*When Master J found her clit, she lifted her heels slightly.*

*He chuckled. "That cold ice feels so good on your pussy, doesn't it, slave?"*

*"Yes, Sir." She knew better than to ignore his question.*

*The ice disappeared, but he wasn't done. He was just getting started. He pinched both nipples before cupping her breasts and flicking his thumbs over the distended tips.*

*It was maddening how he could make her horny. Humiliating. It was meant to be. After all, he needed everyone*

*in the room to believe the girls got aroused because they were inherently filthy slaves. They craved the depraved contact.*

*“This one is especially lovely, isn’t she, men?” he asked the room at large, his voice carrying in the opposite direction. “Like all my slaves, nothing has ever been inside her tight little cunt.”*

*“What happens when she bleeds?” someone joked. “Do you strap a pad under her cunt?”*

*Master J chuckled. “My girls don’t bleed. Their periods have been stopped with hormone injections.”*

*“Birth control?” another male voice asked.*

*“Yes. But don’t worry. If you want to impregnate a slave, you simply let it wear off. The shots are only good for three months.”*

*Oleander tried to tune out Master J’s droning voice. She hated him with every fiber of her being.*

*His lips came close to her ear again, forcing her to concentrate and not lean away from him. “A few of the men have paid to touch the goods, little slave. Be a good girl and stand very still for them. Show them how wet your little cunt gets.”*

*Bile rose in her throat, and she had to swallow it down and disassociate. It was the only way to survive. Pretend this wasn’t happening. Pretend she was somewhere else. Pretend the man touching her was her knight in shining armor instead of a slave trader. Pretend. Pretend. Pretend.*

*She could do it. She’d done it many times. It took skill though, because while she needed to go inside her head and ignore their touches, she also needed to get wet, aroused. If her pussy didn’t get wet, Master J would subject her to hours and hours of stimulant training.*

*His favorite position for her was bent over the padded bench. The man had some sort of substance he rubbed into her clit, making it tingle and beg for attention. He would torment the swollen nub for hours, keeping her on edge but never letting her experience orgasm.*

*Oleander breathed heavily as Master J set a hand on the small of her back and reached between her legs with the other. He dabbed her clit with the fucking stimulant before rubbing it in. She knew he did so discreetly so none of the men were aware that her arousal wouldn't be one hundred percent legitimate.*

*"That's a good girl. Show everyone what a horny little slut you are."*

*Oleander held her breath as she stood very still.*

*Master J disappeared, and another set of hands landed on her hips. The man was standing in front of her. Inches separating them. He ran his palms gently up her torso until he cupped her breasts. "Divine," he praised. "Spectacular. Her skin is like porcelain. Is her hair real?"*

*"Guaranteed," Master J confirmed from less than a foot away.*

*The man ran his fingers through the curls on one side of her head before leaning in to sniff her.*

*Oleander held very still, becoming a statue. Statues didn't care if people touched them. They never lost their form. Their expressions never changed. She was a statue.*

*"It's gorgeous. I can't believe it's real."*

*"Are you doubting me?" Master J growled. "I've had this slave in my care for a year. Her hair has never been dyed."*

*"Not doubting you. Don't get your feathers in a ruffle." He chuckled. "Just pointing out how rare the color is. What color are her eyes?"*

*"Blue. And you can look into the deep pools of them all you wish if you win the bid to buy her."*

*"Mmm." His hands came back to her breasts, stroking, teasing, making her nipples ache.*

*She hated how she reacted to their touch. Hated it with a passion. But she couldn't stop it.*



*His hands trailed lower, over her hips and then between her thighs.*

*“Make sure you keep your fingers out of her untouched cunt,” Master J warned. “You may stroke along her folds and touch her clit, but that’s it.”*

*“Mmm,” the man murmured again. He did as instructed, parting her folds, tapping into the wetness, and then using it to circle her clit.*

*Oleander gasped involuntarily as she rose onto her toes.*

*The man chuckled. “Exquisite. She’ll be worth every penny.”*

*“If you manage to win the bid for her,” another man said from her side. “You aren’t the only one interested.”*

*Oleander licked her dry lips, trying not to react.*

*The man flicked her clit, making her whimper.*

*“That’s enough,” Master J ordered. “The slaves aren’t permitted to orgasm.”*

*Oleander was teetering on the edge of release, a release she’d never known except in her head. Some days, she wished she’d been the sort who’d regularly masturbated and owned a vibrator. Maybe if she’d known what an orgasm felt like before she’d been abducted, she wouldn’t ache so badly. But like nearly everything in her life, hindsight was twenty-twenty.*

*She shifted her hips closer to the man, willing him to continue stroking her there, hating herself for wanting his touch.*

*Master J swatted his hand away, and Oleander screamed.*

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



Jagger gently shook Kally's shoulder. He didn't want to startle her, but she was having a nightmare. She'd been thrashing and moaning for a few minutes. He'd tried to hold her steady and wait it out, hoping it would fade away and she might not remember it, but then she screamed.

Her entire body changed as she continued to scream. She stiffened. She parted her legs almost a foot and flattened her hands on her thighs over her leggings. Her fingertips dug into her muscles.

When she arched her head back and lifted her chest off the bed, he really began to worry. It was almost like she was having a seizure, except he'd seen seizures before. This was different. It was a nightmare. She was trapped in it.

"Kalinda," he called out as he flattened his arm over both of hers, not wanting her to hurt herself. He didn't care if she ended up socking him in the eye, but he was worried she might injure herself the way she was thrashing around. "Kally," he called out louder.

Suddenly, her eyes bolted open. She squinted at the ceiling and then jerked her gaze to him. Crazy. Lost. Confused. She gasped and then started panting.

"Kally, it's me, Jagger. You're in my house. You're safe." He tried to hold her gaze, but she wasn't seeing him. She was seeing something else entirely.

Her eyes were wide with fear and frustration. Then she blinked several times and started violently shaking. He

recognized the moment she came back into herself.

She rolled to her side away from him and curled into a tight ball, pulling her knees high toward her chest and hugging her legs close with both hands. She rocked and whimpered.

“Honey...” He was at a loss. He had no skill in this arena. All he could do was touch her shoulder and reassure her with his words.

“It hurts,” she moaned almost imperceptibly.

“What hurts, honey? Tell me.”

She curled into herself tighter, scaring him. Her face pushed into the pillow, and she screamed again, this time awake. It had a different tone—frustration. The first scream had been more violent, murderous.

“I’m right here, honey. I haven’t moved,” he informed her as if this might placate her. He kept one hand on her shoulder, stroking gently but not touching her more than necessary. He got the feeling that every inch of her skin was crawling as if she’d been dreaming about being confined in a tank of scorpions.

It took several minutes for her breathing to slow and her rocking to ease. She didn’t move or look at him, but at least the worst seemed to have passed.

“What can I do, honey? Would you like me to get you some water? Run a bath? Leave you alone?”

Abruptly, she rolled to her back and faced him. Her legs were still pulled up tight, her arms around her shins. “I need to orgasm,” she blurted.

Jagger’s eyebrows must have shot clear off his face to the ceiling. That’s how it felt to him. He swallowed. Did she know what she’d just said?

She stretched out her legs, letting her hands slide up her thighs until she cupped them in front of her pussy. Her thighs were pressed tightly together. “I mean it. I know you think I’ve lost my mind, but that’s what I need.”

He licked his lips. Her eyes were wide and so sincere. He didn't want to insult her or make things worse. But what the fuck was he supposed to do here? "Kally...I think you're confused. You were dreaming."

She shook her head. "I'm not confused. I'm clear as day. I'm furious with myself for never masturbating. I was a little busy trying to stay alive. There was no way I would have touched myself in my mother's apartment and risk getting caught by one of her sleazy boyfriends. When I got to Vegas, I shared a house with three other girls. They already thought I was a freak. I didn't need to add to their fodder. Plus, I was working on my GED and then taking classes. I was dancing late at night and dropping into bed, exhausted. Masturbating wasn't on my radar."

Jagger wasn't breathing. He wasn't sure he would ever breathe again. Kalinda was dead serious. This was no laughing matter. He needed to let her talk, get this out, and then what? *Holy fuck.*

She pressed against her pelvis and pulled her knees up partway again, tipping her head back and emitting a frustrated mewl that startled him.

He realized whatever she'd been dreaming had left her very horny, and she was fighting the urge to rub her pussy. *Jesus. Fuck.*

Kally was still panting. "I should have found the time," she told the ceiling. "I might have endured their fucking groping fingers better if I had known."

"Okay. Um, would you like me to run you a bath? You could... I mean, like this morning. I interrupted you and felt like a fucking asshole. I won't do it again." *Though my cock is as hard as a fucking rock.*

She lifted her arms and tossed her forearms over her face. "I don't even know how," she muttered.

"Well, uh, I don't think it's difficult. You just touch yourself where it feels good until the pressure builds, and finally, you... I don't really know what exactly happens. I'm a

dude.” He was floundering here, and he wished he didn’t sound so idiotic. She needed him to pull his fucking shit together and help her.

She removed her arms and turned her head to stare at him.

He cleared his throat. *Jesus*. “From what I’ve heard, it’s like you feel yourself climbing toward a peak, and suddenly, you tip over the edge. Your, uh, vagina will clench in on itself in pulses. Something like that.”

She blinked.

*Mother of God*. How on earth...?

“They touched me,” she whispered.

He sucked in a breath and tried hard not to react. He knew this information. He’d heard about it from Gemma. But hearing it from Kalinda made him want to tear every man involved limb from limb.

He knew that would be a lot of men. He’d heard about the parties, parading the girls around naked, making them perform, tormenting them without letting them come.

His heart was cracking. Emotions welled up inside him. He couldn’t decide if he wanted to jump up and punch a hole in the wall, grab his weapons and go hunt the fucking bastards down, or cry for the precious soul staring up at him, willing him to help her fix this.

“I know,” he said. His damn hand shook as he reached for her cheek, not daring to touch her more than there.

She stared at him, brows furrowed, searching deep inside him.

*Fuck*.

She finally swallowed. “Please... You.”

He bit the inside of his cheek before he groaned. “I can’t do that to you, Kally. It’s so inappropriate. You’re confused. You’re—”

She shot upward to sit beside him and stared down at him. “Stop saying that. I’m not fucking confused. I’m broken. I’m

hurting. I'm probably nearly dead inside from shutting down over and over for a year to try to maintain my sanity. But I'm not confused. I'm asking you to touch me like it's supposed to be. I'm asking you to show me so I can erase that fucking nightmare and replace it with something tangible and real and kind. I know it's crazy. I'm clear on that. What I'm asking for is irrational and—”

She stopped herself and jerked away from him, scrambling to the side of the bed.

*Fuck.* He reached out and snagged her around the waist, hoping he wouldn't trigger her. He'd rather never do anything sudden that might scare her, but he needed her to not take off right now, scared and embarrassed.

Jagger sat upright and gently pulled her between his legs. He wrapped both arms around her from behind and rocked her, his chin on her shoulder. When she began to relax, he threaded their fingers together and held her.

“Please don't run away, honey,” he whispered. “Give me a second to think.”

She trembled in his arms. It broke his heart. He couldn't do this. He shouldn't. He had no business touching her intimately. As if this wasn't already intimate.

What would Damon say? Gemma? Diane? A psychologist? They would wallop him upside the head and read him the riot act.

“It's okay,” she breathed. “I get it. You don't see me that way.”

He stiffened. “Kally, no. That's not true. I've already told you how I feel about you. I want nothing more than to give you the moon, and that includes a million orgasms with my fingers, my mouth, my cock, and a variety of vibrators—whatever you want or need. It's yours. It will always be yours. But I just got you.”

Her chest rose and fell as she took deep breaths.

He sucked in a deep breath too. “I don't want to do anything that will make things worse for you or trigger you.

You need professional counseling. I probably do, too.”

“I don’t need professional counseling to have an orgasm, Jagger.”

He smiled against her neck and kissed her there. “Okay, that’s probably true. But I don’t want you to panic. I’d feel like an ass and kick myself into next week.”

She gripped him harder. “When I sleep, I dream of blindfolds and gross older men groping me. They touch me all over and never let me come. I wake up unsure if I wish they would have let me come or if I want to kick them in the balls.”

“That’s reasonable.”

She twisted her head around to meet his gaze. “Is it? Do you know how humiliating it is to get aroused against your will?”

He held back a growl. “No. I don’t. I can’t imagine it. I can’t think of anything worse. But it’s not your fault. You couldn’t help how your body reacted to the stimulation.”

“I’ve never touched my own clit for pleasure,” she murmured.

“Well, you should start doing so.” Who the fuck was he? He didn’t even know himself right now.

“I’m afraid I might panic. It’s been drilled into me so many times that it’s forbidden.”

“It’s not forbidden in my house. In fact, it’s encouraged.” He grinned against her shoulder again.

She sighed. “I get it.”

Whatever *it* was, he doubted she got it. “You get what, honey?”

“You can’t just touch me and make me come without reciprocation. It doesn’t work that way. You would need me to suck you off first or something.” She spun her head again. “I can do that. I know how. I’ve even given a blow job already.”

He flinched so violently he nearly jumped out of his skin. He needed her to face him so he could look her in the eye for

the next part of this conversation so he could be certain she understood him.

He scooted back so he was resting against the headboard and then turned her around so she was straddling his lap, facing him. Totally inappropriate but for a good cause.

He grabbed her hips. “Look at me, Kally.”

Her cheeks were flushed, but she met his gaze.

“First of all, let me clarify. The blowjob you gave was on the night of the sale, correct?”

She nodded. “I didn’t know that man wasn’t the real buyer. He pretended he was so he could pick me up. The man who’d bought me sent him in his stead, but he never told Master J that.”

Jagger’s blood was boiling again.

“The guy I killed...” She shuddered. “He told me he would make my life a living hell if I ever told the buyer my lips had been around his cock. It was comical since my life was already a living hell.”

Jagger held her gaze, trying not to lose his shit. The thought of her sucking that bastard’s filthy cock... Jesus.

Jagger drew in another cleansing breath. “I’ll try not to think about it,” he muttered. “The important thing is that I need you to know sex doesn’t work that way. Or it shouldn’t. It’s not tit for tat. I don’t need you to do anything for me, or to me, in order to earn something in return. *Ever.*”

She fidgeted with her hands in front of her. Her eyes were narrowed and untrusting.

“There are assholes in the world who take without giving. You’ve probably been exposed to more than your fair share. You saw your mom with them, probably most of the men who frequented the club where you danced, and then the scum of the earth who frequented Russo’s parties. But I’m not wired like that. I care far more about your pleasure than my own. I can and will make you come as often as you want without needing reciprocation. If, by some miracle, you decide to stay



in my life and bless me with your smile and your sweet heart forever, you will always be on the receiving end of sex far more than the giving end.”

She stared at him as if she didn't believe him, her eyes narrowing skeptically. Suddenly, she grabbed the hem of her sweater and pulled it over her head. She tossed it behind her without breaking their connection for more than a second.

Jagger swallowed hard. “Kally...” She was exquisite. Stunning. There weren't words. He'd known that, but seeing her like this... She took his breath away.

Her breasts were so fucking perfect. High and tight. Her skin was porcelain. Her nipples were pink and hard. He was trying not to look directly at them, but there was no avoiding her beauty.

She surprised him when she lifted her trembling hands to cup her breasts. She moaned as she cupped them and shuddered when she flicked her own nipples.

“I like the way you're looking at me,” she whispered.

He slid his hands up her back and leaned forward to lower her onto the mattress between his legs.

Lord, she was breathtaking. She didn't take her eyes off him as she slowly stroked her breasts and thumbed her nipples. Her legs remained wrapped around his waist as he settled her butt between his thighs.

Naked from the waist up, the only thing blocking his view of the rest of her body was her leggings, tight brown cotton that left nothing to the imagination.

Jagger gripped her thighs to steady himself.

She didn't need him. She could touch herself just fine. If he hadn't interrupted her this morning, she might have accomplished her goal, and they wouldn't be in this position now.

Except she didn't look away from him. She wanted to see him in the flesh instead of some asshole on the back of her eyelids.

He could give her this. He would. His cock was going to revolt, but he'd survive.

Her lips parted as she started panting. Still, she held his gaze. It was probably a good thing because he was better off with his eyes on hers rather than wandering down her body.

Her heels gripped his hips. Her thighs stiffened under his hands.

She licked her lips and cleared her throat.

He stopped whatever she was going to say with a shake of his head. "I've got you. Keep stroking your nipples."

She groaned from somewhere very deep and primal when he eased his hands higher until his thumbs touched her pussy.

"Jagger..."

That was the only word he wanted to hear from her lips. It meant she knew where she was and who she was with.

"Right here, honey." He knew she was wishing her pants would disappear, but that wasn't going to happen. He didn't have that kind of willpower. If he pulled these leggings and panties down her legs and spread her open like this, he would come in his jeans.

Jagger wasn't going to be the one having an orgasm this afternoon. It wasn't in the cards. This was for Kalinda. It was taboo and so very forbidden, but he couldn't deny her, and he wouldn't. Fuck the consequences.

What he could do was control his damn lust, keep his pants on, and make sure she understood what it meant to be treated like a princess.

Her breath hitched when he found her clit. Her hands were shaking on her breasts.

"Do whatever feels good, honey. Play with your nipples. I will never deny you that. Don't hold back. Rub, flick, pinch, whatever you need."

She gripped the little buds between her fingers and thumbs and twisted them, arching her chest at the same time. "Oh,

God...” she murmured.

It was impossible not to glance down and see what she was doing, but he didn't linger. He shifted his gaze back to hers and stared into the deep blue pools of her eyes.

He didn't need to look lower to know what to do between her legs. She was so wet that her arousal soaked the cotton and coated his fingertips. Taking his cues from her expression, he isolated that little nub with his fingers and rubbed it over the cotton.

Kally gasped as she lifted her hips off the mattress. A moment later, she dropped them and whimpered. “More.” She released her breasts and slid her hands down, pushing at the elastic of her leggings.

Jagger gritted his teeth. If she insisted on removing her pants... He wasn't even sure what would happen, but he didn't want to find out.

He opened his mouth to tell her to stop but then realized her goal when she slid a hand under the elastic and reached for her clit.

Jagger's breathing was ragged. His ears were ringing.

Kally's eyes rolled back when she found her clit. She gasped and then met his gaze again. Her fingers worked frantically between her legs.

He shifted his hands to the sides, stroking her inner thighs, pulling her labia apart, encouraging her with his touch. He considered giving her some instructions. If she were a submissive in his care at Roses and Thorns, he would be far more proactive, but he doubted Kally would ever be able to take orders. She needed to be in control.

Plus, this vixen in front of him didn't need any help. She knew where to touch. She knew how hard to stroke. She'd been tormented to the edge of sanity more times than he wanted to know.

She bit into her lower lip and released it. “Can I...”

He pressed her thighs wider. “You can do whatever feels good, honey. Thrust a finger inside you if you need it. Or gather the wetness and enter your bottom.”

It was hard to control his reactions. Damn, he wanted to watch. He wanted to strip these fucking leggings off, hold her open, and watch her ease a finger into her tight pussy. He would not.

“Ohhh...” The deep moan, combined with a glance down, told him she had pushed a finger into her channel.

He found himself jealous. He wished he could be the one taking her to this new place. But that’s not what she needed right now, plus it was on the far side of so very wrong.

Kally needed to know she could do it herself. She needed to know he would never stop her. He didn’t want her to ever be embarrassed about touching herself.

She reached deeper, grinding her palm against her clit. Maybe she added a finger to her channel. He held her legs and her gaze. “So fucking beautiful,” he whispered. “Let it go, honey. You don’t have to hold back.”

She was trembling again. “Jagger...”

He smiled at her. “Come for me, honey.”

Her breath hitched, and then she froze and let out a long low moan. Her ankles hugged his hips tighter. Her body visibly pulsed, jerking with the waves of her pleasure.

Her eyes were wide in wonder and awe and shock.

Finally, she relaxed into the bed, a smile forming. Her cheeks flushed, and dimples he hadn’t seen before appeared. She shifted her head to one side to look away. Her blond curls fanned out around her, making her look sweet and angelic.

Jagger gave a soft chuckle. “Now, you’re going to get modest on me?” he teased.

“I did that,” she whispered.

“Yeah, you did. It was fucking hot.” He wrapped his hand around her wrist and pulled her fingers from her pussy. When

he had them free, he lifted them to his face. He flattened her fingers on his lips and inhaled her scent.

*Fuck me.*

Before she could imagine what he might do and protest, he drew two of her fingers into his mouth and sucked. He held her gaze as he stroked her middle finger with his tongue.

Her chest rose and fell with her heavy breathing and she licked her lips. "Thank you."

He smiled. "You did all the work. All I did was watch."

"It was more than that. I needed you here. I needed to look at you."

He adjusted his body, bent forward, dropped his elbows along the sides of her shoulders, and kissed her. When he released her lips, he held her gaze again. "Single sexiest moment of my life."

She gave him another one of her smiles. It was brighter than the sun. It lit up the room. It made his chest tight and his cock hard.

Her smile did that. She might have been trained as a sex slave, but he would forever be a slave to her smile until he died.

## CHAPTER TWELVE



“Are you sure you have enough protection for Gemma?” Jagger asked Damon a few hours later. He’d fed Kally and managed to get her to relax on the couch. Eventually, he’d covered her with a blanket, and she’d fallen back asleep.

The woman hadn’t slept well in years. She probably needed to sleep for a month. He would make sure she did.

The problem was she liked him next to her, touching her, holding her. She struggled to settle if he stepped away. But she was asleep now, and he’d extricated himself from halfway under her to take the call when his phone had buzzed in his pocket.

“We’re leaving town, actually. That’s why I called. We need a change of scenery, and who knows how long this might last. You should come with us.”

Jagger leaned against the archway that led to the kitchen, trying not to wake Kally but not wanting her to panic if she awoke. He rubbed his temples. “That’s probably a bad idea. Our presence would put Gemma in more danger. No one is after her, specifically.”

Damon chuckled, but it wasn’t from humor. It was sardonic. “I’m sure whoever is the mastermind behind this human trafficking ring is about to have an aneurysm. He knows I’m involved in trying to apprehend him by now, and he knows Gemma is feeding information to the FBI. It was foolish for me to assume otherwise for the past month. That motherfucker is breathing down your neck, too. He left his

calling card when he changed the name in that chip to yours. It was a warning. We've put a wrench in his plans. You weren't the only one who upset his operation. He knows I'm a part of it, too. Don't fool yourself."

Jagger sighed. Damon was right. "Where are you going?"

"There's a place."

Jagger took a deep breath. Damon wouldn't tell him over the phone. It was too risky.

"Pack some shit. Plan for a long stay. Gemma will pack for Kalinda. I assume you've already dealt with your boss."

"Of course." Jagger rubbed his jaw. Damon knew him well. He wouldn't need a giant explanation about Jagger's intentions with Kalinda. They'd exchanged plenty of looks last night. Damon knew exactly how Jagger felt about this blond beauty who'd swept into his life and taken over.

"Good. I'll send transportation." Damon hung up.

Jagger stared at the phone for a moment. Was he really going to take Kally and go into hiding? Did he have another choice? Yes, his home was well guarded, and he had a state-of-the-art security system, but the FBI couldn't provide them with three men around the clock for long.

This could go on for weeks or months. Jagger was well aware he would probably end up losing his job. He didn't give a single fuck, and that alone was jarring. He loved his job. He'd intended to work for the FBI until retirement, but that was before.

He stared at Kalinda, who was still sleeping peacefully. She'd dropped in and taken over his heart in an instant. His priorities had shifted drastically.

This particular human trafficking ring was bigger than anything anyone could have expected. The mastermind was watching Jagger, waiting for him to fuck up. It sent a chill down his spine.

Jagger had told Kally she was safe here, but was she really? If her seller was powerful enough, he could drop in by

helicopter and do whatever the fuck he wanted. And there was no doubt the man was powerful. He'd been paid six million dollars a month ago for selling six well-trained sex slaves.

There was no way to know how many operations he had going at once. There could be dozens of men like Jovani Russo working for the kingpin. Training girls to service ruthless masters.

Jagger took a minute to readjust his mind frame. If he'd been thinking clearly in the past twenty hours, he would have realized Damon was right. Instead, Jagger had focused every ounce of his energy on Kalinda and what she needed to keep from falling apart.

They had to get out of town. Damon had intentionally been vague in case anyone had been listening in on their conversation. He hadn't given a single indication of where they were going, nor had he been specific about the time their transportation would arrive.

Jagger needed to kick himself into gear and get some shit done. That meant he needed to wake Kally up and tell her what was going on. He wished he could leave her sleeping. He hated the idea of disturbing her when she was finally peaceful, but the clock was ticking. She could sleep wherever they were going.

He shoved off the wall and headed toward the angel on his couch. Damn, she was gorgeous, even in her sleep. She hadn't paid much attention to her long curls since she'd arrived. He didn't figure her hair was high on her priority list today. She also hadn't worn makeup. Granted, he didn't have any, nor did she need it. She was spectacular without it.

She was on her side, her head on a pillow, her knees pulled up to her chest, and her arms wrapped around them. She often curled into a ball like this. He couldn't blame her after a year of sleeping naked and restrained on her back, spread eagle. The tight ball probably soothed her.

Jagger sat next to her and gently touched her hip. He was always afraid she would panic when he touched her. He also kept expecting her to get too warm. She was wearing the thick



sweater, leggings, and socks, plus she was tucked under the blanket.

She'd insisted she was always cold after a year of shivering. One more thing in the long list of things that broke his heart.

"Kally..."

She snuggled in deeper for a second, then bolted awake and sat upright so fast she had to be dizzy.

"I'm so sorry, honey. I didn't want to startle you or even wake you, but we're going to leave, and I need to go upstairs and pack some things. I didn't want you down here alone."

She rubbed her eyes. Several seconds went by. He'd given her a lot of information without waiting for her to fully wake up. Finally, she looked at him. "Leave?"

"Yes. With Damon and Gemma. They've secured a safer location."

She glanced around. "People are watching us here."

"Yes." He couldn't prove it, but he'd bet his last dollar they were being watched constantly. Someone was waiting for them to venture outside so they could make their move. He had no doubt this was true.

"Where are we going?"

"I have no idea. Damon wouldn't say over the phone. Probably for the best." He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "I've been friends with Damon since college. He's one of the best men I know. If he says he's found us someplace safe, I'm not going to doubt him."

"What about your job? What about Diane?"

He shrugged. "My job will sort itself out. I'm not worried. Diane will grumble, but she'll understand."

Kally drew her shoulders back and gave a nod. "Okay. Then we're going. What can I do?"

He smiled. Damn, she was strong. She had a lot of shit to work through, but deep inside, she was a fierce warrior.

“Come upstairs with me while I pack.”

He stood and took her hand.

She clasped onto him and let him lead her upstairs and into his bedroom. She climbed up on the bed, sat cross-legged in the middle, and hugged a pillow to her chest while she watched.

Kalinda was two people in one. Fragile, damaged, scared, and naïve on the outside. Strong, determined, smart, and fierce on the inside.

Jagger was head over heels for both sides of her.

When he set a suitcase on the bed and opened it, she glanced toward the bag of clothes Gemma had brought her. “I own nothing,” she muttered. She jerked her gaze back to Jagger. “When they arrested Master J, did they go through his house?”

“Every single inch. Yes.” Jagger dropped a pile of shirts in the suitcase.

“I guess they didn’t find my identification or damaged computer or anything, or else you would have known who I was when you found me.”

Jagger cupped her jaw. “No. Nothing. Nothing that would identify any of you. The place was wiped clean of anything like that. He must have gathered up any personal belongings when a new woman arrived and destroyed them. The only things we were able to recover were pictures and videos.”

She gasped, her eyes going wide. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. The man had fucking cameras on us all the time. And he took thousands of pictures.” She shuddered. “None of them match up with any missing person’s reports? Obviously not mine because I was never reported missing, but was this guy so careful that none of the women were ever reported missing?”

Jagger sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand. “He was so careful that he never included enough of anyone’s face to identify you.”

She flinched. “Right... I guess I knew that. I guess that should make me feel better. If pictures are floating all over the internet, at least no one knows who it is.”

Jagger nodded. It still made him feel sick thinking that bastard had filmed her and took so many fucking pictures, but at least random assholes all over the globe didn't know whose naked body they were looking at.

“Do you...” She tipped her head down. “Do you have them?”

“I have access to them, honey. I've combed through them, trying to find any that might have given us clues. I have not looked at them in the last few days. I won't look at any photos of you again.”

He would probably vomit if he looked at those pictures now that he knew one of the victims so well. It had been hard enough to look at Gemma's. He'd passed by those as quickly as he could when he'd worked on them.

He and a team of agents had spent hours separating the photos and videos by woman, hoping someday they might be able to use them to identify a victim, preferably alive. Dead was also a possibility everyone was aware of, but it hadn't figured as highly likely in any of their minds. Surely the buyer wouldn't pay a million dollars for a slave and then kill her and dump the body.

Dealing with those pictures had been one of the single most horrifying parts of Jagger's career. He couldn't unsee those images. They were embedded in his mind, along with the horror he knew every one of those women had lived through.

Her face paled. “So, you know. I mean everything. You know everything I've been through. Not just from Gemma telling you. You've seen the pics.”

He nodded and leaned closer to her. He'd been far more emotionally invested in this case than any other case he'd ever been involved in, even before he'd met Kalinda. Partly because his best friend's woman had been one of the victims,

but also because of the heinous nature of the crime—the tedious training of these women to ensure they would fall in line as the perfect slaves when they were sold. They weren't random girls picked off the streets and sold to the highest buyer. Someone way up the food chain had a lot of people working for him to orchestrate the careful selection and training of these particular girls. All of them presumably virgins. All of them young adults. They weren't children. So far, they seemed to be over the age of eighteen. Plus, they were all gorgeous and flawless. No buyer needed to see their faces to know they would be spectacular. It was guaranteed. And the kingpin was meticulous about keeping their faces hidden.

“Yes,” he admitted softly. “I'll never look at them again.”

She chewed on her lip.

“I don't think it would be beneficial for you to see them either. Most of the time, you were blindfolded or masked. If you only have the images in your head to go by, why add the pictures? But I'm not an expert. Maybe a counselor would advise you otherwise. I'm sure it would depend on a lot of factors. Everyone processes grief differently.”

She nodded. “I don't think I'd want to see them, but it's weird that they exist, and I've never once seen them.”

Kally unfolded her legs and crawled closer to him. She wrapped her arms around him and leaned her cheek against his chest. “You've seen me on display.”

He rubbed her back, a knot catching in his throat.

“You've seen me in that kennel. You've seen me getting bathed, kneeling for hours, standing in all those positions, strapped over that bench, and with my arms restrained to the ceiling and cuffed to the cot and—” She jerked her head back. “Was there a video of me giving Rinaldo Gustaf a blow job?”

His heart hurt for her. Everything hurt. “No. If there was video of that, he didn't save it. I don't think there was.”

She shuddered. “I hate that you've seen all of that. It's so horrifying.”

“I hate that you experienced it. That’s far more horrifying, honey. And it sucks that I’ve seen those pictures. It really and truly fucking sucks. Part of me wishes I could undo that and put someone else on the job of going through them, but then I realize as painful as those photos are, they’ve helped me better understand what you’ve been through. I’ll never be able to step into your shoes. You’ve survived the unimaginable. I can only empathize and hurt with you and help you in any way I can to get you through this stage so you can have a new life. A better life—one filled with everything good, clean, pretty, and sunny. One with smiles, laughter, and love.”

She dropped her cheek back against his chest and held on to him again. She didn’t need to say anything. He understood. He was choked up. She probably was, too.

Finally, she released him and leaned back. She wiped her tears. “Finish packing so we can meet up with Gemma and Damon.”

He kissed her forehead, stood, and moved around the room, packing a few weeks’ worth of clothes and toiletries. He hoped they were going somewhere with a washer and dryer. Surely, it would be a safehouse of some sort. The kind of place they wouldn’t need to leave. Well-stocked.

Usually, Jagger was the one on the planning side of safety. Today, Damon had handled this. It was for the best. The agency didn’t need to know where they were going. It would be safer all around if they did not. Not even Diane.

Several agents were working on this case. More would have been added today. They would be snooping around in things that could compromise the safety of others.

Jagger finished packing his belongings, added the things Gemma had brought her, and zipped up the suitcase. “Ready?”

She nodded and climbed off the bed to grab the tennis shoes Gemma had left her. As she slid her foot into one, she glanced at Jagger. “Clothes feel weird. Shoes are much weirder. Restrictive somehow.” She bent down, tied the laces, and took a few steps. “My feet are heavy.”

He rubbed his chin. She was trying to lighten the mood, but it wasn't funny that the shoes felt strange to her. It was insanity. The abuse she'd suffered was atrocious. He took a deep breath to control his anger and nodded toward the bedroom door. "Let's go, honey."

They had good timing. As soon as they got downstairs, the gate intercom buzzed. Jagger's phone vibrated in his pocket at the same time. There was a text from Damon letting him know their driver had arrived.

Jagger opened the gate and then the front door. He watched as the limo approached. It was undoubtedly armed and armored.

"I'm nervous," Kally whispered at his side.

He glanced at her and wrapped his arm around her. "I'd be concerned if you weren't." He was fucking nervous, too. He knew he would breathe easier when they got out of town and eliminated any possibility of being located. He turned toward the coat rack, rummaged through the options, and grabbed a warm jacket. It would be huge on Kally but better than nothing. It was cold out, and she hated being cold.

After helping her into it, he put another jacket on himself and zipped it up.

The limo pulled up to the front of the house. The driver got out, leaving the car running. He tipped his head as he approached and then extended a hand to Jagger. "Calvin Johnson. You must be Jagger."

"Yes."

Calvin nodded toward Kally. "Ma'am." He grabbed the suitcase from Jagger and turned back to the car.

Kally took a deep breath. "Let's do this."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



“You’re safe here. I promise,” Robert told Kally as she took a seat at the kitchen table.

Kally glanced at Robert’s wife, Ella, who was smiling as she set a huge pot of spaghetti on the table. “Trust me. Robert wouldn’t let me be here if it weren’t safe.”

Damon sat across from Kally. “She’s not kidding. Robert doesn’t fuck around with his wife’s safety. And neither do I.” He turned toward Gemma next to him and rubbed her back.

Gemma cocked her head toward him. “I’m not your wife.”

He shrugged. “Semantics.”

She rolled her eyes and looked at Kally. “Lord save us from overprotective men.”

Jagger sat next to Kally, but he was sideways on the chair, his legs parted so that her chair was practically touching his. He was glued to her side, and she wasn’t sorry.

She had at least brushed out her hair since she’d arrived, and had pulled it back in a low ponytail. Tendrils were escaping around her face, and Jagger liked to tuck them behind her ear or brush them out of her way often.

He did so now. “Robert is right. We took every precaution getting here. No one followed us. There were no bugs on the limo we took or on Damon’s SUV when we switched cars. No one is going to find us here.”

Damon pointed at Robert. “I didn’t even know you had this place.”

“That’s the idea. It wouldn’t make a very good safehouse if people knew about it. My father had properties scattered all over the area when he died. I sold off most of them, but I strategically kept a few. Even though we weren’t close, and I didn’t agree with much of anything my father did, he managed to instill in me a sense of suspicious mistrust in general, so I have safe places.”

“When did your father pass?” Kally asked.

“It’s been ten years.” Robert glanced at Damon. “Our fathers were friends. They died a week apart from each other.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” Kally glanced back and forth between the men. They were exchanging looks with Jagger. There was something they weren’t saying.

Ella grabbed Robert’s arm. “Everyone has to be starving. Let’s eat. You can bring Kalinda up to speed on your connection to this shitshow afterward.”

Robert nodded. “She’s right.”

Kally was beyond curious now. She had no idea what Ella was talking about. She’d just met Robert and Ella an hour ago when they’d arrived at this remote mountain home outside of Denver. Jagger had explained that Robert was ten years older than Damon and their fathers had been friends. She hadn’t realized his parents had also passed.

Kally took a deep breath. It seemed like every hour she learned more about her case. It was complicated. Was there a link to Robert?

Jagger rose and filled Kally’s plate. He was always serving her. In fact, Robert and Damon served Ella and Gemma, too. They weren’t like any men she’d ever met.

The spaghetti ended up distracting her like all meals had over the last day. After eating bland boring food for a year, everything was a delicacy—even the salad, which was loaded with raw vegetables and served with steaming garlic bread that made her mouth water before she picked it up.

After they finished eating, they all moved to the den and sat around a huge fireplace filled with the biggest fire she’d



ever seen inside a home.

Jagger led her to a spot closest to the flames and wrapped a blanket around her. He was so damn thoughtful, especially remembering that she was cold and shivering most of the time.

Jagger sat next to her, lifting her feet up to settle them on his lap.

Damon and Gemma sat across from them on the opposite side of the giant sectional. Robert and Ella sat in the middle section. Like the fireplace, Kally hadn't seen a sofa this large.

“Are you tired?” Jagger asked her. “You could go to bed if you'd rather shut down.”

She shook her head. “No. You obviously have a story to tell that involves me. Please tell it.”

Jagger nodded. He kept a hand on her shins over the blanket, rubbing her as if he might be able to warm her up. “Robert owns a chain of clubs called Roses and Thorns. Ten years ago, when Damon's and Robert's fathers died, the two of them reconnected. Damon joined Robert's club. So did I.”

“What kind of club?” Kally asked.

“A fetish club. A kink-friendly BDSM club. Not like the place where you were working, but an aboveboard club with rules and vetted membership. Everything in Roses and Thorns is safe, sane, and consensual—the basic tenants of the fetish community.”

She nodded. She'd heard of clubs like that, but she'd never been to one.

“Anyway, like I said, the club is called Roses and Thorns,” Jagger added. “And I assume the tattoo on your thigh matches the logo of Robert's club. Precisely.”

Kally gasped. She glanced at Robert. “Why?”

“We don't know,” Robert responded. “That's the million-dollar question.” He winced as soon as those words left his mouth, probably because Kally and Gemma had been sold for that price.

Kally brushed that off. She rubbed her inner thigh, shuddering.

Damon spoke next. “We suspect the tattoos are a message or a warning or a setup. Someone has a grievance with Robert’s father, or perhaps both of ours.”

“But your fathers are...gone,” she stated, trying not to sound harsh.

Damon shrugged. “Our fathers weren’t upstanding citizens. They were involved in the mob. Though we’ve never found evidence they were trafficking humans, they were dealing in drugs and arms. My suspicion is that they refused to be a part of human trafficking and were murdered for their non-compliance.”

Kally gasped. “They were murdered?”

“Not officially,” Jagger added. “Heart attack and stroke. But the coincidence is uncanny. So, yes, most likely they were killed.”

“That’s awful.” She pulled her legs off Jagger’s lap and folded them up against her chest. She was most comfortable when she was tucked up in a ball. Warmer. Less agitated. After spending a year of her life forced to expose herself all the time and to keep her hands away from her intimate parts, she just wanted to crawl into a tight hole and hibernate.

Kally set her chin on her knees, trying to process this information.

Jagger stayed next to her, his arm across the back of the couch, his fingers playing with a lock of her hair. Her toes were against his thigh even though she’d pulled her feet back. She liked the contact.

“So, what happens now?” she asked.

Jagger reached over to pat her leg. “Now, Damon, Robert, and I will set up a bit of a command center here in this safehouse and start digging so we can figure out who the kingpin is and why he’s using the Roses and Thorns logo that belongs to Robert.”

“Do you think you can find the other girls?” she asked.

“We won’t stop until we do.”

Kally glanced up at Jagger and searched his face. He was serious. This was his life’s work now. Damon’s too. Damon had been looking for Gemma for three years. It was clear that just because he’d found her didn’t mean he was done. These men were dedicated to making sure no more women were abducted and sold into sex slavery—at least not by the man using the Roses and Thorns logo.

“And you’re sure Master J doesn’t know more than he’s told you?” she asked.

Jagger shook his head. “We’re not sure of anything. It’s possible he knows more, but so far, we haven’t found any evidence to suggest he’s lying. Russo didn’t own that mansion you were kept in. Whoever does own it is really good at covering their tracks.”

Damon sighed. “It would be helpful if we could find the identity of at least some of the men who worked for Russo. The ‘trainers’ as they called themselves. But so far, we’ve had no luck.”

Kally glanced at Gemma. “You gave them descriptions.”

“As best I could, yes. But maybe it would help if you did, too. See if what we think matches up.”

“Good idea,” Jagger agreed. “I’ll get a sketch artist to do a zoom visit on a secure line.”

“I never saw any of their faces,” Kally confessed. “They always wore ski masks, but I can describe their builds, some tattoos, skin tones, and maybe voices.”

“That would be helpful, honey,” Jagger said softly. He patted her leg again. “You’re exhausted. Let’s get you to bed, okay?”

She nodded, but she hoped he didn’t mean that he intended to tuck her in somewhere and leave her.

He rose, helped remove the blanket from around her, then extended a hand while she unfolded and came to her feet.

She turned toward Robert and Ella. “Thank you so much for giving me a place to stay.”

“You’re so welcome,” Ella said with a smile. “We wouldn’t have it any other way. We’ll do everything we can to help.”

Jagger shook Robert’s hand and then Damon’s before leading her down the hall to the room where he’d put his suitcase when they’d first arrived. It was spacious and had its own attached bathroom. Not as amazing as the master bath in his house, but still ranking second best as far as luxurious bathrooms were concerned that she’d had access to in her lifetime.

Jagger shut and locked the bedroom door. Without a word, he dragged an armchair up against it. Obviously, it wouldn’t keep anyone out, but it would make a lot of noise if someone attempted to open the door.

Next, he checked all the windows, ensured they were locked, and closed all the blinds.

Kally relaxed as she realized he had no intention of sending her to another room. She eyed the suitcase, wondering if she should change into something else to sleep in. Last night, she’d slept in her clothes. Maybe she could do that again tonight. It was warmer, and she liked being fully covered.

Jagger stepped up to her and held out a folded garment. “Ella left this for you. Flannel pajamas.”

Kally took the PJs from him and held them against her. “That was nice of her. They feel soft and warm.”

He stroked her cheek. “Wear whatever is comfortable, but we can surely find something other than thick sweaters for you to sleep in.”

“Thank you. This will work.”

He stepped back and rubbed his neck.

She knew she made him uncomfortable with her ridiculous desire to always be less than a foot away from him. She couldn’t help it. “Can I change right here?”

He nodded. “I’ll just turn around, okay?”

“Sure.” Things between them were kind of awkward. He’d made it clear that he was interested in her. He’d also made it clear that he wouldn’t take advantage of her. She suspected he would not be pulling off her clothes and helping her orgasm again anytime soon.

She didn’t really give a shit if he saw her naked or even watched her pee, but she knew it was making him uncomfortable, so she promised herself she would suck it up and be braver.

When she was done changing, she tried to find the strength to keep up this brave routine. “I’m done. Do you mind if I use the bathroom but leave the door open?”

He turned around and cupped her face, tipping it back. His expression was serious. “I’ll do whatever you need me to do, Kally. I’m just trying hard not to violate you any more than you’ve already been violated. Touching you inappropriately, seeing you naked, watching you bathe or pee... Those things don’t make me uncomfortable, but they violate your privacy.”

She held his gaze. He was telling her the truth. “Okay.” She still wanted to be respectful of his feelings. He was already doing so much for her, and she knew she was half in love with him. She also knew that was irrational. She needed to take a step back before she got hurt.

They’d only known each other for twenty-four hours. Even though he’d shared his feelings, they’d met under very insane circumstances. She couldn’t expect him to feel deeply for her forever. It would fade as the days wore on.

Kally was going to be an emotional mess for weeks, months—maybe years. He didn’t need that kind of burden. Already, she was taking advantage of him.

If she were honest with herself, she would admit she probably didn’t know her own mind right now, either. Her adrenaline had been pumping high for most of the time she’d been conscious in the last day. She was stressed to the point of snapping.

As she stared at him, she found it hard to believe there would come a day when she would decide she didn't really like him all that much. It seemed unfeasible. However, she needed to think rationally and find the strength to stop leaning on him so hard.

For now, she could do this. Use the fucking bathroom without panicking. It didn't even have a window.

"I'll wait just outside the bathroom, facing away from you. How about that?"

She nodded. "Thank you." She missed his touch as soon as she turned to pad into the attached bath. It was lunacy how much she liked having him close. She was starved for human contact, and he offered it, so she took it.

It probably wasn't healthy. He knew that. That's why his brow was always furrowed in concern. She wasn't in a reasonable state of mind to make sound choices. All she knew was that when he was close, she felt safe. When he was not, she didn't.

She entered the bathroom, used the toilet, and washed her hands before calling out to him from the sink. "You can come in now."

He shuffled toward her and grabbed his toothbrush alongside her. They brushed in silence, rinsing and spitting before he grabbed the towel, wiped her lips, and then his.

The gesture was so kind and intimate. He was so damn nice. Was she delusional about that part, or could she possibly keep him? Only time would tell.

"Can you give me a minute?" he asked.

She nodded and stepped out. He had to use the toilet, too, after all. Insisting on standing next to him while *he* peed was beyond the pale, so she slid out of the room and flattened herself against the wall next to the door.

She looked all around, trembling. She hated this irrational fear. The bathroom was at least small and windowless. This room was large. Even though the windows were locked and on

the second story, that didn't mean someone couldn't use a ladder or even shoot through one with a bullet.

That thought made her slide down to the floor, where she sat on her butt against the wall and pulled her knees up to her chest. It was hard to imagine there would come a time when she would no longer feel this intense, constant fear. Months? Years? Would she still look over her shoulder every time she went anywhere?

What a joke. That would imply she might ever reach a point when she could even *go* anywhere. The drive from Jagger's house to this safe house had taken an hour. She'd spent most of that time in a panic. The worst part had been when they'd changed vehicles to get into Damon's car.

She understood the reasoning. They hadn't wanted the driver to know where they'd been going, but she'd hated the exposure anyway. The only thing that had kept her from totally losing her mind had been the fact she doubted that anyone who might follow her would kill her. They needed her alive to fulfill the contract the buyer had with the seller.

Maybe she was wrong about that, too. Maybe they would kill her just to get revenge for her escape. Or for revenge against the people helping her. Fuck, now that she knew about the meaning of the tattoo on her thigh, she realized whoever had made that decision knew what they were doing.

"Kally?"

She jerked her head back to look up at Jagger as he stepped out of the bathroom. "Shit. Sorry."

He crouched down in front of her. "It's okay." He stroked her forearm. "I understand. Let's get in bed."

"It's not fair of me to make you sleep with me. Nothing I'm doing is fair to you. You have a life. A job. I'm interrupting it. You might get fired. I'm asking you to do irrational things for me."

He scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. After depositing her in the middle, he turned off the lights and

climbed in next to her. He'd left the bathroom light on, bless him.

He pulled the covers over them and dragged her into his embrace from behind. "You're not interrupting my life. You're not going to get me fired. Nothing you're needing from me is irrational. And above all, I definitely didn't have a life before yesterday." He chuckled. "Now, I do."

"You're just being nice."

"I'm a nice guy." He kissed her neck. God, she loved when he did that. "I'm kind, decent, and caring. Most women don't like that."

She flinched. "Don't be silly."

He chuckled again. "It's true. In vanilla society, I'm known to be too nice."

"Vanilla?"

"Among regular people. Not at Roses and Thorns. The club."

"You're different when you're at the club?" She was shivering a bit, and Jagger—the nice man that he was—tucked the covers around her tighter and threaded his fingers with hers against her chest.

"When I'm dominating women, yes. Consensually, mind you." He gave her hand a squeeze. "People who belong to upstanding fetish clubs follow rules. Usually, Dominants and submissives make an arrangement ahead of time to spend some time together. It's called a scene. They agree on the terms, so no one is surprised."

"So, like spanking or stuff like that?"

"Yes. Maybe the sub likes restraints. Maybe she doesn't. Everyone is different. In a club where people might not know each other well, they discuss this up front."

"So, when you go there, you meet women and set up a time and then spank them?"

"Among other things, but yes, basically."



She shuddered. “I don’t think I could do that.”

“I doubt you could either. Not after what you’ve been through, but you might be surprised at what you’d be interested in if you knew all the types of options. I can’t begin to sense that from you after twenty-four hours and the trauma you’ve been through.”

“How often do you go there?” she whispered.

He lifted his head and leaned over her, making eye contact. “Never again. Certainly not before everyone who’s involved in this trafficking ring is apprehended, and never without you.”

She swallowed. “But…”

He shook his head. “Nope. No buts. All the buts left the room when I met you. I would never play with another woman without you present, watching, and giving your blessing—under any circumstances. It’s doubtful I would ever have any interest in doing so, even with your blessing. It would have to be something specific, like if Damon didn’t know how to use a flogger, and he asked me to do it for Gemma because it was something she wanted.”

“Does Damon know how to use a flogger?”

Jagger chuckled. “Definitely.”

“Oh.” There was so much she didn’t know about this man, his life, personality, and preferences. A part of her felt confident it didn’t matter. Part of her was worried it made all the difference.

“Try to sleep, honey.” He nuzzled her neck.

“It’s weird that I need you touching me,” she murmured. “I’ve never slept with anyone before. You make me feel secure.”

“I’m glad.” He kissed her temple. “Right now, that’s all that matters.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



*Two weeks later...*

“How’s your leg?” Gemma asked as she handed Kally a glass of soda.

Gemma tipped her head back from where she sat on the couch and smiled. “Not too bad.” Kally patted the inside of her thigh where the stitches were located. “Mostly, it itches.”

“Yeah. I remember that part.” Gemma sat next to her.

“I’m just glad that damn tattoo and the stupid chip are no longer part of my body. It’s worth a bit of temporary pain.”

“I agree.”

Kally took a long drink of the cola. “This tastes like heaven every time. I think I’ve developed a soda addiction.”

“For me, it was oatmeal cookies. I didn’t think I was ever going to be able to stop eating them. I’ve put on like ten pounds in cookie weight.”

Damon was wandering toward them, and he laughed before he leaned over the back of the couch and kissed Gemma. “You were too skinny anyway. Eat all the cookies you want.”

Gemma smiled up at him like he was a god.

Kally couldn’t blame her. The man loved her to pieces. He had apparently felt that way before she’d been abducted, and

he'd never given up for three years while he'd searched for her.

"I've never eaten so much in my life," Kally admitted before taking another drink of the sugary, caffeinated elixir.

Gemma giggled. "Thank goodness Ella is such an amazing cook."

"Hey, now," Damon joked. "I can cook."

She grinned again and grabbed his hand. "I'm learning."

So was Kally. She'd fended for herself for food most of her life, but she'd never had the resources to create anything interesting. She'd mostly lived off cheap boxed food, canned goods, and cereal. She was learning alongside Gemma, which was the most fun she'd ever had.

The two of them had been taught to prepare several different meals while they'd been in captivity. It had been part of their training, but neither of them had much interest in ever cooking anything they'd been forced to prepare again. They needed new menus.

Kally shifted her gaze to Jagger, who was sitting at the kitchen table across the great room. He and Robert were leaning over a laptop. The three men spent every waking hour trying to find the other women and figure out who the buyers and seller were.

Kally was worried. How long could Jagger possibly stay here without going to the office or the field? He'd insisted the answer was forever if that was what it took, but she couldn't imagine he could truly hide much longer.

It wasn't in his blood. He was restless. He sometimes paced at night when he thought she was sound asleep. He ran his hands through his hair.

Jagger said he didn't care about his job as much as he cared about solving this fucking crime and nailing the traffickers to the wall. He insisted he'd been on this track before he'd met her. That much she believed, but how much good would he be to the team if he got fired and no longer had access to the information?

Damon and Robert came from money. They appeared to have plenty of it and spent it freely. They weren't extravagant about anything, but they were never stressed about working.

Robert owned the chain of Roses and Thorns clubs, and they appeared to run themselves without his help. Damon had done nothing for the past ten years except embed himself in as many Italian mob families in the area as he could get away with.

Jagger hadn't come from money. He relied on himself. Kally had heard the men arguing quietly a few times about money. Kally had overheard enough to understand that it stressed Jagger out to lean on his friends for cash flow. He didn't like it.

He was caught in a position she could sense he hated, with his job hanging on by a thread, his finances in jeopardy, and Kally sucking the life out of him. The bottom line was that she was holding him back. She was needy and clingy. She spent the better part of every day following him around as discreetly as possible because she hated being apart from him.

Jagger knew it. He catered to her. He kept one eye on her at all times. He never said a word, but there were stress lines on his face. She was going to have to pull up her big-girl panties and go to a safe house somewhere else, so Jagger could move on with his life.

She was staring at him from the couch. The only reason she wasn't in his space was because he kept insisting she stay off her leg. It was ridiculous at this point since she'd had the tattoo and chip removed a week ago. The stitches were ready to be taken out. They weren't going to take the risk of her leaving the safehouse again for that procedure. Jagger could do it himself.

She'd asked him to do it last night and again this morning, but he'd told her to wait a bit longer. She just wanted them out. They were causing the itching, and the wound was totally healed.

Kally and Jagger had left Robert's safe house and driven to a clinic to have the tattoo and chip removed. She'd found the

strength to do so because she hated that fucking tattoo so much it had caused her more stress than leaving the property. Not just the tattoo but the chip.

Even though everyone had assured her it wasn't a tracking device, she hated that the seller had altered the data on it from a remote location and could do so again at any time.

Jagger had checked it several times with the electronic reader. Every time, it still said the same thing. She didn't care what that meant. She'd wanted the fucking thing out of her. So, she'd gone to a clinic. They'd taken the SUV, the most circuitous route imaginable, and had returned several hours later.

The incision hadn't been very large. There were only a few stitches, but the doctor had anesthetized her mostly to avoid her panicking during the procedure. Maybe a regular person could have tolerated the minor procedure with a local anesthetic, but not someone who'd spent the last year forced to expose her pussy to strangers.

Jagger, once again the rock in her universe, had assured her he would not leave her side for a single moment, and she assumed that had been true. She'd gone to sleep with her hand in his and awoken in the same position.

She took another sip of her soda. It was truly a slice of heaven. Her gaze remained on Jagger.

Ella came in from the kitchen. "Did I hear someone mention dinner? What should we make tonight?"

"Comfort food," Gemma declared. "I saw a homemade mac and cheese recipe on the counter. How about that?"

Ella's eyes lit up as she nodded. "God, that sounds delicious. Kally?"

Kally forced a smile. "It does." It really did. The thought of eating rich mac and cheese made her mouth water, but she was struggling to care about anything except talking to Jagger about the future. The future was now.

He glanced at her again, said something to Robert, who nodded, and headed her direction.

As he approached, Gemma got up and left with Damon. Ella wandered back to the kitchen to join Robert.

Jagger pulled a footstool up in front of her and sat facing her. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “Does the incision hurt?”

She shook her head. “No. It’s fine. Kind of itches. Nothing else.”

“What’s bothering you?” He reached forward and took one of her hands. “You’re restless over here.”

She glanced down at their connection and rubbed his knuckles. “I should go to a safehouse. A real one, I mean,” she stated quickly.

“What are you talking about? This is a safehouse. Why would we go somewhere else?”

She shook her head. “Not we, *me*.” She looked at him.

He lifted both brows. “What’s going on, Kally?”

She shrugged nonchalantly as if this was no big deal instead of what it really was—the biggest deal of her life.

“Talk to me,” he encouraged gently.

She drew in a breath. There wasn’t anything she could do to avoid this chat. It needed to happen. “I’m holding you back. If you didn’t have to worry about me, your job wouldn’t be in jeopardy, and you wouldn’t have to sit around babysitting me all the time.”

He stiffened, but his gaze never wavered. “Where is this coming from, Kally?”

“Nowhere. I’m just stating facts. You’re trapped here with me. It’s wearing on you. I can tell. I know you want to help me, and I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. I do. I couldn’t have survived without you. You’ve been my rock. But I need to stop being such a baby and do the right thing. I have to go to whatever safehouse Diane would like me to move to so you can go back to work.”

He stared at her for a long time, searching her eyes. Finally, he licked his lips. “This isn’t a flippant little tryst for me, Kally.” He didn’t sound angry. Just...concerned. “I’m not hanging around you because I feel sorry for you. I’m here because I want to be. I wouldn’t want to be in any other place. I’ve told you that. I meant it. I wasn’t just blowing hot air.”

“But—”

He shook his head and cut her off. “I know you see me pacing and frustrated and pulling my hair out, but it’s because I want to solve this case so you’ll be safe. It’s not because I’m tired of being near you. I’ll never tire of being near you. I’ll probably get panicky when you finally decide you don’t need me to smother you so much anymore.”

She frowned. “Your job...”

“My job hasn’t gone anywhere. I’m still on the payroll. In fact, Diane is trying to work something out so I can switch to more of a desk position, so I can still work on this case from behind the scenes. We have plenty of field agents working on this case. Sure, I’d love to be on the front line when they take down your buyer or your seller, but that’s because I’d like the satisfaction of watching such a menace to society go down. My feelings on this case have become personal. Even if I were to walk back into the office and get back in the field, I wouldn’t be able to make good choices. I’ve recused myself from that level of involvement.”

“She’s not going to fire you?”

He smirked. “Diane? No. She needs me and my expertise. I’m good with computers.” He sat up straighter and rubbed a hand down his face. “At least, that’s what I’ve always believed. Lately, I’ve been close to picking up the laptop and throwing it across the room.”

She winced. “Because of me.”

He shook his head. “No, honey, because I want to hack into those stupid chips and find the rest of the women.”

“Oh. Can you do that?”

He chuckled. "I'd like to think so, but it hasn't happened yet."

"You mean you want to see what information they hold so you can find the women?"

"That's the plan."

Jeez. He really was a computer genius. "I'm impressed."

He lifted his brows. "Again. Not yet. I haven't done it."

"You will." She reached out and took one of his hands. "Are you sure I'm not getting in your way?" she asked softly.

He scooted closer, cupped her face, and held her gaze. "The thought of you not being in my way makes my chest hurt. Are you tired of me?"

She gasped. "No."

"Then what do I need to do to convince you I'm never going to tire of you so you'll stop worrying?"

She swallowed and held his gaze. "For starters, you could take these stitches out. I would do it myself if I could get the right angle and see well enough."

"Done."

"After that, could you stop tiptoeing around me like I'm fragile? I love the way you hold me and how attentive you are, but I'm ready for more."

He lifted a brow. "More?"

"Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about, Jagger."

He slowly smiled. "Are you sure?"

She rolled her eyes. "Positive."

"Let's see what the incision looks like first. It might be too tender for what I have in mind."

She shook her head. "You're using that as an excuse. It's fully healed. Take them out, then shift your attention three inches to the right."



He moved so fast she was startled. One second, her soda was in her hand; the next second, it was whisked away and set on the end table. One second after that, she was scooped off the couch into his arms.

Jagger didn't say a word to anyone as he carried her from the room, up the stairs, and into the bedroom they'd been using for two weeks. He kicked the door closed but then took a moment to turn around and lock it.

After dropping her unceremoniously onto the mattress, he turned and headed for the bathroom. He was back seconds later with a medical kit in his hands. "Pants off, my impatient woman."

Jagger didn't wait for her to do the honors. He set the kit next to her, grabbed the elastic waist of her leggings, and hauled them down her legs, taking her socks with them.

She was breathing heavily, not because she was nervous but because she was excited. Was he finally going to have sex with her?

She didn't care much about the stupid stitches now, but she knew he did, so she angled her leg to splay outward.

He drew in a breath and stared at her, his gaze on her mound, not the incision. "Where did you get such sexy lace panties?"

She grinned. "Ella helped me order them. Do you like them?" She glanced down, reminding herself she was wearing the pale pink pair today. She'd woken up hopeful for a moment like this today.

"Lordy, woman. How could I not like them? How am I supposed to hold my hand steady enough to remove those stitches with that wet lace inches away from my fingers."

"It's not wet," she argued.

Jagger climbed onto the bed, knelt between her legs, and eased her thighs wider, spreading her open. He dragged his thumbs along the edges of the elastic close to her pussy before trailing a finger right down the middle over her clit. "Now, they are."

She blushed. God, she loved this man. She didn't care if that was unreasonable. She was desperate for him.

He drew a deep breath, released her, and reached for the medical kit. A moment later, he held an alcohol wipe and a special pair of scissors. "Don't move, honey. Stay still for me while I do this. I'm shaking enough for the both of us."

She kept her legs parted wide even if it was obscene and should embarrass her. She tamped that down. There was no reason to be embarrassed with Jagger. He'd seen her naked plenty of times. Granted, he never stared—probably out of self-preservation—but he'd seen every inch of her. It was impossible to avoid when living with a woman who was scared to be alone.

"I'm supposed to be the one shaking, remember? I don't know what to expect here. You're not the virgin."

He tore open the wipe and used it to gently dab along the incision, using his other palm to cover her pussy from his view. "Trust me, I'm more nervous than you."

"Why? It's just sex. You've done it before." She tipped her head to one side in confusion.

He wiped off the scissors next and glanced at her. "It will never be *just* anything with you, Kally. You mean something to me. You mean *everything* to me. Sex between us won't be flippant. So, yes, I'm stressed. For one thing, I don't ever want to hurt you, and I'm going to. For another thing, I want you to love it. I want to bring you to your knees. I want your eyes to roll back in your head, your mouth to fall open, and animalistic sounds no one can interpret to spill from your lips."

She shivered. "That's kind of dramatic. It's just sex."

He sighed before he bent over her and leaned down closer to look at the stitches. "Hold still for a minute so I can focus and at least not hurt you at the incision."

She held her breath and tipped her head back to stare at the ceiling. She didn't need to watch this part. She was, however,

surprised by how quickly he was done. Four snips, and he tossed everything on the end table.

He leaned closer over her thigh, holding it steady. “It looks really good. The scar will fade over time. It healed well.”

She reached for his head and threaded her fingers in his dark hair as he leaned closer and kissed the scar before rubbing his cleanly shaved cheek against her thigh.

She was panting as she responded. “No one but you will ever see it, Jagger. It doesn’t matter.”

He leaned forward and hovered over her, hands at her sides. “You’ll want it to be as invisible as possible to avoid the reminder.”

“I can hardly see that part of my body.”

Jagger ignored her, leaned back again, and ran his nose along her pussy over the lace and silk.

She arched her chest, suddenly feeling warm and overdressed. She needed to be naked. She needed him to be naked, too. While he made her panties even wetter by nuzzling her mound, she pulled her sweater over her head.

Jagger’s face lifted. He stared at her chest and smiled. “I haven’t seen you wearing a bra before.”

She shrugged. “I was hoping you would think it was sexy and maybe take your pants off.”

He rose onto his knees again and looked down at her, his eyes heated, his pupils dilated. “Very fucking sexy, but it also makes my cock hard when I know your amazing tits are uncovered beneath your sweaters.” He pulled his shirt over his head and quickly tossed it to the side, his gaze returning to her body as if he hated the momentary interruption.

When his fingers went to the front of his jeans, she licked her lips. Her panties were past soaked now. Her nipples were hard and needy. She ached to touch them.

This was it. It was finally happening. In a few minutes, she would never be a virgin again.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Jagger popped the button and lowered the zipper, but that was all. Next, he dropped his hands down on either side of her elbows and lowered nothing but his mouth to her chest. He kissed the spot between her breasts before dragging his nose along her cleavage.

Not that she had cleavage. She'd likely never have actual cleavage with breasts this small, but Jagger certainly didn't seem to care.

She gasped when he trailed his tongue along the edge of the lace and moaned when he reached under the edge with that tongue to flick her nipple. When he eased back, he met her gaze again. "Take it off for me, honey."

She reached for the clasp between her breasts, popped it, and let the cups fall to the sides.

"Touch yourself, Kally. Play with those nipples while I take off my jeans."

She'd touched herself for him before. She knew he liked it, but mostly he wanted her to know she had permission to touch herself any time. She hadn't done so since that day. She was never alone. It hadn't been possible. He would have seen her. Watched her. Maybe she should have.

Kally shrugged out of the bra and slid her hands up from her stomach to her breasts. As she circled her nipples, she watched his face. They hardened to stiff peaks while he licked his lips. It made her heart race.

Jagger slid off the bed and shrugged out of his jeans and underwear. He grabbed the elastic of her panties next and eased them down her body.

She didn't lower her gaze to his erection until he was between her legs again. She swallowed hard.

The only penis she'd ever actually been exposed to had been the one attached to Rinaldo Gustaf, whom she believed to be her buyer the night he came to the slave demonstration to pick her up. She'd been forced to kneel in front of him, take his disgusting cock in her mouth, and suck him off.

The action had been vile. She'd nearly gagged. She'd also been hyperventilating at the thought of spending the rest of her life kneeling between that fucking asshole's knees, sucking his gross dick. She'd been kind of glad for the blindfold that had prevented her from having to look at his cock.

Luckily, he hadn't been the buyer. He'd simply been the middleman. It had been his lucky day that Master J had forced all the girls to give a blow job to their new "owners" before they'd left the warehouse.

Kally shook the memory from her mind. It had no business here. But one thing stood out. That stubby cock hadn't been half the size of this one. Maybe that had been a blessing.

Kally held her breath as she jerked her gaze to Jagger's. "Uhh."

He chuckled and lowered to take her lips in a brief kiss before speaking against her mouth. "Deep breaths. No rush here."

"That's much larger than anything I was forced to practice sucking," she blurted out.

He flinched, his jaw tightening. "Honey, you will never, ever be forced to do anything again in this lifetime. The thought of you practicing sucking men with dildos makes my skin crawl. The way your eyes widened and you stiffened tells me you're thinking about that jackass Gustaf. I'm not him. Your mouth never needs to go anywhere near my cock. In fact, I might worry too much to ever let you try it."

She flinched. “Don’t you... I mean, don’t you want...” She couldn’t find the words.

He shook his head. “Blow jobs? Not even close to mandatory, Kally. My only concern here is making you feel so fucking good that your eyes roll back, and you can’t think. That’s all I’m ever going to care about. I’d die happy if I manage to make you love my mouth on your body.”

She swallowed. Her face heated. “Uh, you don’t have to do that.” She squirmed and flattened her hands on his chest. “Could you just, uh, do it? The anticipation is killing me.”

His brows shot up. “Hell no. I’m not going to just do it. I’m going to kiss you senseless, and then I’m going to kiss every inch of the rest of you before I start sucking and licking and tasting. After you’ve had a few orgasms and you think you can’t lift your arms or legs off the mattress, we’ll see if you still want me to stretch your pussy out.”

She couldn’t breathe. “Uhhh...” She hadn’t pictured it going quite like that. She’d imagined him lining his cock up with her entrance right about now and pushing into her.

Jagger lowered his mouth to hers again and kissed her in the slow sensual way he’d only done a few times before. He teased her lips with his before adding his tongue, coaxing her to open for him.

She was panting by the time their tongues touched, and she slid her hands down to his hips. She wasn’t sure if he wanted her to touch his erection yet, nor did she know how he might like it. She’d had dozens of training sessions where she’d been taught verbally how to pleasure a man, but since nothing from those lessons seemed true for Jagger, she wasn’t sure.

Most of her lessons had involved a rubber cock and balls. She’d spent countless hours kneeling in front of them, rolling the balls with her tongue, licking a line up the vein along the backside, sucking the dick into her throat.

Kally had learned to compartmentalize over time. It had been easier if she couldn’t think about what she was doing. Focus on something else, like a sunset at the beach, the sand

beneath her toes. She'd never been to the beach, nor had she watched a sunset with sand under her feet, but she'd used that image as something else to focus on while she'd been trained to please her future Master.

Kally stiffened as her mind wandered again to the feel of that rubber cock hitting the back of her throat as she'd tried to learn to accept it without gagging. She'd never mastered it. No matter how often the trainers had punished her for choking, she'd been horrible at it.

The most fear she'd ever felt had been the night of the ceremony when she'd been forced to service the man she'd thought was her new Master in front of all the trainers and Master J. She'd literally blown out a breath of relief when she'd licked along Gustaf's small cock and realized how small it had been. At least she'd been able to deep-throat him without his dick reaching her throat for real.

He'd grunted and groaned and enjoyed every moment of it. She'd feared she might vomit on his shoes and get punished.

Jagger released her mouth and lifted a few inches. His gaze came to hers. "Hey, honey. Where are you?"

She winced. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. It's okay. I know you're going to have issues. It's understandable. We'll work through all of them. I promise. I'll never do anything to you that triggers you. You'll never do anything to me that triggers you, either. If something doesn't feel right or make your toes curl, stop me."

"Okay," she whispered. She eased her hands up his lower back and the rise of his butt cheeks. Firm. Tight. Muscular. Also, nothing like the man she'd wrapped her mouth around.

"Can I suck your nipples?"

She flushed. "If you want to."

He smiled. "I'm going to want to do anything and everything to you that makes you moan and squirm. No matter what it is. I know the trainers fondled you, but did they use their mouths?"

She shook her head. Her face heated further. “They wore masks. Like ski masks with small mouth openings. Master J didn’t permit them to lick us anyway. He said it would push us too close to orgasm. He wanted us to feel the need but never give us release.” She shuddered hard.

Jagger drew in a deep breath. “I’ll never do that to you. I promise. I’ll never deny you an orgasm or make you wait. I’m going to suck on these sweet nipples. If you like it, I’m going to keep doing it. If you want more, I’ll give you more. Keep talking to me. Don’t let me do anything that makes you cringe.”

She gave a sharp nod. It was confusing how he wanted to play with her instead of having sex. She hadn’t realized men liked that. Or was he just being like this for her?

Jagger dropped down between her legs, his stomach against her heat as his lips came to her nipple. The flick of his tongue made her arch her chest and grab his shoulders. Her breathing picked up.

*Holy shit.* It felt so good. He did it again before he swirled his tongue around the sensitive tip and then sucked it gently into his mouth.

Kally moaned. She couldn’t stop herself. This was so very different from anything she’d ever experienced. It felt amazing. She wanted more.

“Yeah?” Jagger asked as his lips popped off her chest.

She nodded, perhaps a bit too vigorously. “Yeah,” she breathed out.

He switched nipples.

A tightness formed in her stomach. She’d felt it before. The time she’d made herself come while he’d watched. This was different. More intense. Maybe because she knew he was finally going to make love to her.

She squirmed and dug her fingertips into his shoulder as he flicked and sucked her nipples, switching back and forth until she couldn’t stand the torment any longer. “Please,” she begged.



He stopped and scooted farther down her body. He wasted no time parting her thighs and holding them wide so he could stare at her pussy. “Has anyone had their mouth here, honey?” His voice was soft and gentle.

She shook her head. She hadn’t expected this. It hadn’t been part of her training. No one had ever insinuated her Master would kiss her down there.

He kissed her folds reverently and then flicked his tongue over her clit.

“Jagger?” Her voice was shaky. She stiffened, gripping his shoulders tighter. *Holy...shit.*

“Is this okay, honey?” he whispered.

She nodded. Her head rolled back and forth.

A moment later, he sucked her clit into his mouth and flicked it with his tongue over and over.

She cried out. Her body tightened. The ball of need in her belly gripped harder. She’d endured a year of orgasm denial and torment, but nothing had come close to how badly she wanted to come right now.

He must have sensed it because he thrust his tongue into her and used his upper lip to press against her clit.

Kally screamed as the orgasm plowed through her. She couldn’t stop herself from reacting so violently. All the blood in her body had raced to center between her legs, and Jagger was turning her world upside down with his mouth.

The pulses against his lips made her body convulse. She couldn’t see. Her vision was clouded. Her ears were ringing. Her knees dropped limply, spread wide.

When he lifted his mouth, he dropped one more kiss on her mound. “Yeah?” His voice was smiling, if that was a thing. She couldn’t see his face yet, but she heard the relief and excitement in his tone.

She slowly smiled and nodded. “I...” Her voice cracked. She cleared her throat. “Is it always like that?”

“No. It will get better.” He climbed up her body and wiped his mouth on the sheets before he took her lips with his and kissed her deeply.

It was so heady the way he devoured her, the taste of her own arousal on his mouth.

She didn’t mind. She kind of liked it. In fact, she wanted to know what he tasted like, too.

By the time he stopped kissing her, she was recovered enough to stroke her hands up his back and into his hair. “I know you’re kidding,” she murmured.

He shook his head. “Nope. It will get better. I promise. You won’t be as shocked in the future, but you will have deeper, even more satisfying orgasms once you understand your body and its reactions better.”

She licked her lips. He couldn’t be serious.

“In a minute, you’re going to do that again, but this time I’m going to slide a finger into you.”

Her eyes widened. “Again?” That didn’t seem possible. She was a noodle, for one thing, and still trembling from the first orgasm.

He chuckled. “Absolutely. And you’re so fucking sexy when you come, by the way. I love how loud you screamed.”

The heat in her cheeks intensified as she lifted her head to glance at the door. “Shit. Do you think anyone heard me?”

He laughed again. “Maybe not in the house a mile from here, no.”

She swatted at him. “Don’t be silly.”

He grabbed her hand and kissed her fingers. “You’re loud. No one cares. I’m sure Ella and Gemma have loud sex, too.”

“I haven’t heard them.” She narrowed her gaze at him.

He shrugged. “Maybe they’ve been controlling themselves while we’ve been here.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better. I don’t want them to hear me.” Her voice squeaked with her irrational panic.

“Honey, no one cares. They won’t say a word.” He kissed her again before dropping to his hip alongside her.

She watched as he trailed his fingers down to circle her nipples and lower until he stroked her folds. “Sweetest pussy on earth. And you’ve been shaving.”

She pursed her lips until he stared at her. “Is that okay? I thought...”

He smiled. “Honey, you do whatever you want. It’s your body. If you want to shave your pussy, do it. If you don’t want to shave, don’t. I’ll find you just as sexy either way. If you want to masturbate alone, go for it. If you want me to watch, I’ll never turn you down. If you suddenly need my cock inside you, say the word, it’s yours. If you want my mouth on you instead, that’s what I’ll do.”

Tears welled up in the corners of her eyes.

He kissed her cheek. “I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“You’re just so...nice.”

He chuckled. “I told you I was nice.”

“No one’s ever been kind to me without wanting something in return.”

“Well, those days are over. You’ll never owe me anything.”

“Will you make love to me now?”

“After I make you come with my fingers. I want to stretch your pussy out a bit, honey.”

She inhaled slowly. The thought of him pushing his fingers into her made her shiver. “Do it.”

He smiled. “My pleasure.” He watched her face again while he let his fingers dance around her folds.

She lifted her outer leg and spread it wider for him. The knot was back in her belly. She wanted more. He hadn’t been

kidding. She craved another orgasm.

Half of what made her so intensely aroused was how he looked at her. He finally parted her folds with his fingers and played with her entrance.

“Jagger...” She grabbed his hand with hers, trying to urge him to enter her. Shamelessly begging.

He finally relented and pushed one finger slowly into her tight channel.

Her lips parted, but no sound came out. She couldn't hold his gaze. She tipped her head back and went inside her mind.

Panting, she arched her hips against his hand as if she could coax him deeper.

When he finally flattened his palm against her pussy, he bent his finger and stroked the top of her channel.

She gasped, gripping his wrist. “Jagger.”

“Feel good?”

“So good.”

“Can I add another finger?”

She nodded rapidly again.

He pulled the one almost out and entered her with two, taking his time, his gaze never wavering from her face.

The stretch was tight, intense. She understood now that his cock was going to be too much. But she wasn't stupid. She'd heard other women talking about what the first time had been like for them. She knew it would hurt but only the first time. At least, that's what she'd been told.

Jagger eased his fingers in and out, angling them so they dragged across the front of her channel. “God, you're beautiful. So flushed. Eyes wide with wonder. I'm fucking humbled that you would share this with me. I'll never take it for granted.”

It was hard to focus on his words. Humbled? Why? “Please...” she murmured without thinking. The tightness had

fully returned, the need making her want to arch and scream.

Jagger found her clit with his thumb and rubbed it while he thrust in and out of her. “That’s it. Let it feel good. Don’t think of anything except my fingers. My mouth on you. My body against yours. No one else.”

She whimpered as the pressure grew. She even lifted her hips as if that would help get her there. Why was he doing this? She hadn’t serviced him at all. Nothing about this experience resembled what she’d been taught to do with a man.

Her training had been all about her servicing a Master willingly with her mouth, her hands, and her cunt. Even her ass hadn’t been off limits. No one had mentioned a man settling down next to her like he had all the time in the world and making her see stars with his fingers without demanding something from her.

“*Jagger*,” she shouted.

He picked up the pace, thrusting harder, faster, deeper. His thumb rubbed her clit, and then he flattened his palm on her clit and ground down against her.

“Oh, God,” she screamed as she climbed rapidly to that peak she was growing to recognize. She fisted the sheets at her sides and arched her chest. “*Jagger*,” she yelled again as if he alone could make this pressure escape.

“Come, Kally. Let it go.”

At his words, she tipped right over the edge, shuddering violently as her channel gripped his fingers, and her clit pulsed against his palm. Stars filled her vision. She couldn’t breathe. All she could do was feel. And it was the best, most intense sensation in the world. Nothing compared.

She was panting, trying to get enough oxygen as she gradually came back to Earth.

Jagger eased his fingers out but continued to stroke her sensitive folds. “Single sexiest moment of my life,” he murmured in a deep voice. “You’re so fucking gorgeous.”

She finally managed to lick her lips and blink at him. “Are you going to fuck me now?”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Jagger shook his head, jarred by her description. He would never be *fucking* her.

She looked like she might cry.

“No. I’m going to make love to you. If that’s what you want. If you’d rather wait, that’s okay, too.” He wanted her to feel like she was always in control. She could always say no.

“Wait?” Her voice creaked. “Are you kidding?” She reached for his hip. “Please. Stop teasing me. I want to feel you inside me.”

“You have felt me inside you,” he teased, wanting to give her a moment to clear her head so he could be certain this was what she wanted. “My tongue and my fingers.”

She rolled her eyes. Sassy and bold. He loved it.

“Promise me you will only ever have sex with me because it feels right, and you’re craving it. Never do it for me.”

She nodded. “I’ve never wanted anything more. And I know what you’re doing. Thank you. It means a lot to me that you’re being so careful to make sure I don’t feel forced. I’ve never felt that way with you. You don’t have to be so careful. I’m not worried. In fact, I liked the way you held my legs open when you had your mouth on me.”

He never looked away while she spoke, making sure she was being honest. “Do you want to be on top of me so you can control how much you take and the speed?”

She shook her head. “No. I want you to be on top. I want you to thread your fingers with mine and hold them above my head.”

He lifted a brow. “Really?”

“Yes. Maybe it’s silly, but that’s how they do it in the movies. It always looks so sexy. I don’t mind you controlling things. I think I like it. I know you’ll never hurt me or force me. I want to feel the pressure of you on top of me.”

He hesitated and then rose and settled between her legs, his cock lodged at her entrance. He threaded his fingers with hers and held them exactly as she’d requested. “Like this?”

She nodded. “Yes.” Her voice was breathy. “Perfect. Except you have to put your cock inside me.”

He smiled. “Don’t rush me, woman. I’m memorizing this. It’s a big deal.”

She rolled her eyes adorably. “I’m impatient.”

“Good. I hope you always feel impatient for my cock. But take some deep breaths.”

She drew in a breath and let it out.

He kissed her before speaking again. “It’s going to be tight. It’s going to hurt. You’re not going to like it. I swear it won’t stay that way. But if you want me to stop at any time, say the word. We don’t have to do this now.”

“We’re not stopping. I know what to expect. I’ve heard other women talk about it. I’ll be fine.”

He inhaled deeply. He was a mix of emotions. On the one hand, there was nothing more precious than knowing he would be her first and teaching her all the pleasures of sex while watching her face. On the other hand, the last thing he ever wanted to do was cause her pain, and yet it was unavoidable.

He set his forehead against hers and prodded her entrance with the tip of his cock. He’d never been this fucking hard. He’d had to tell the small head to hold off a dozen times in the last hour.



Kally wiggled her hips, trying to arch against him.

He gritted his teeth as discreetly as possible and let the first inch or so slide into her.

She whimpered. “Yes...”

He pulled back out and gave her more. Not enough. Just a taste. A taste that teased his cock. If it could talk, it would be shouting at him.

Jagger retreated, leaving the tip at her entrance, watching her face.

“That feels so good. Do it, Jagger. Please.”

He breathed deeply as he slid in slightly farther, giving her another inch each time. He was nowhere near fully seated. He flexed his hands around her fingers, trying not to squeeze too tightly.

Her swollen lips were parted. She squirmed and arched and fought to get him deeper.

He pulled out and pushed back in again. He was going to get awarded for sainthood before this was over. The amount of restraint he was exerting was shocking.

“Jagger, do it,” she begged. “Stop teasing.”

He held her gaze, judged her to be serious, and thrust all the way to the hilt.

She gasped, eyes wide, no longer breathing.

He didn't look away, even though he hated that expression. She was his. His to hold during the best times and the hard times. This was unavoidably one of the difficult times.

She held her breath, not moving.

He'd never felt such a tight grip. His decision to fully impale her had been rash, but maybe it had been for the best. He kissed her open mouth and nuzzled her nose. “I'm sorry, honey.”

She shook her head. “Don't be sorry. Give me a second.”

“Take all the time you need.”

She was at least breathing now.

He kissed her face, neck, and shoulders. He wanted to say *I love you*, but he held it back. She wasn't ready for that. They'd discussed the L word before but in vague terms, not in the way he wanted to say it while he was inside her.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asked.

"No. I want you to move. Do it again."

He hesitated and then followed her instructions, easing almost out and then sliding back in just as deep. He was going to come any fucking second. She felt extraordinarily good. Better than anything he'd ever experienced. It wasn't just the tightness of her pussy. It was more. It was...

"Fuck," he muttered, stiffening.

"What?" She flinched under his expletive.

"I forgot the condom." He gripped her hands. "I'm so sorry. I should grab one."

She shook her head. "Don't you dare. Why do you need it? I'm on birth control. Are you worried I might get pregnant anyway? I would never force you to stay with me if—"

He cut her off. "Jesus, Kally." He shook her hands. "I wouldn't give a fuck if you got pregnant. I'm trying to be a gentleman. It was inconsiderate of me not to put on a condom and protect you. I don't give a fuck about your birth control. Do you not understand how I feel about you?"

He didn't mean to sound frustrated, but he really wanted her to grasp that this wasn't a short fling for him. She was it for him. He was never going to be done with her. The only way this ended was if she wanted to leave.

She blinked at him. "Protect me from what?"

His breath hitched. "Well, nothing. I haven't had sex in a long time, and I've been tested. I don't have any diseases or anything. It's just inconsiderate, like I said."

"Then you're protecting me from getting pregnant," she responded. "Don't these shots work pretty well?"

He shook his head, unable to keep himself from practically chuckling. Here they were, his cock deep inside her, having a misunderstanding of maximum proportions, and he needed her to see his meaning before he continued.

He kissed all over her face again, helping her relax. “I’d love to have a baby with you. Again, it’s your body. I’ll never tell you when or if you should have a baby. That’s not what I’m worried about, honey. I’m just saying a man shouldn’t lose his head and forget to wear a condom. It’s selfish.”

“You’re the least selfish person I’ve ever met,” she murmured. “Will you stop worrying about the condom? If you’re afraid I’ll get pregnant, stop and put one on. If you’re just being unnecessarily gentlemanly, stop it and fuck me. I’d really rather you not pull out. It doesn’t hurt anymore. I’d like to feel you pumping in and out of me. I feel so close to you this way.”

He licked his lips and searched her gaze. She was serious. “Yes, ma’am.”

She giggled, but only for a second because her giggle turned into a sexy moan as he eased out and thrust back in deep.

“Yes... Do that again.”

He obliged her, focusing on her glazed-over eyes to keep himself in check. He didn’t want to come too quickly, but his cock had been denied for so many long nights in bed with her that it was close to a revolt.

“Oh God, Jagger. That feels so good...” She lifted her hips in rhythm with his thrusts.

Without the condom, he was even more sensitive. He’d heard men talk about the difference. They hadn’t exaggerated. He would never want the barrier between him and this tight pussy now that he’d felt paradise.

Kally whimpered, her legs coming around his waist. “It never looks this sexy in the movies...” she muttered.

He loved how she could talk and analyze their lovemaking. He loved how he was blowing the doors off her

misconceptions, too. “The people on television don’t feel the way I feel about you, honey.”

She bit her lip and tipped back her head.

Jagger took it slow. If he moved too fast, he would come in a heartbeat. He wanted her to experience more than one minute of his cock this first time, especially since she seemed to be enjoying it more than he’d expected.

When he ground the base of his cock against her clit, she cried out.

“Damn, that’s hot, Kally. Do you want to rub your clit while I fill your pussy?”

She shook her head. “Can you do it?”

*Gladly.* “Of course.” He released one of her hands and slid his palm down, lifting his hips slightly to slip it between them. When he found her swollen nub, she gasped.

She gripped his other hand tighter but used her free hand to grab his shoulder. The force of her grip spoke volumes. “That...feels...so...good.”

Thank God. He really wanted her to come again. He wasn’t unrealistic. He’d considered it a longshot the first time he entered her, but she was writhing now, her greedy pussy gripping him tight. She moaned every time he moved and shuddered as he stroked her clit.

She was going to come.

“Faster,” she pleaded.

He smiled. He loved how bold she could be. He was so glad she could ask for what she needed. He had no idea if she meant his cock or his fingers, so he increased the pressure of his fingers and the speed of his thrusts.

She arched, her breathing coming heavier. Her eyes rolled back. Her fingers dug into his shoulder and his knuckles. And then she fucking cried out just as loud as before as her orgasm rippled through her sexy body, shaking both of them with the ferocity of the tremors.

Jagger couldn't hold back another second. Her reaction pushed him over the edge. He let his cock spill his seed deep inside her in the most intense and amazing orgasm of his life.

The first of many. The first of a lifetime of fucking hot orgasms inside this woman. At least he fucking hoped so.

As he eased his fingers out from between them, panting, trying to catch his breath, he couldn't stop the smile that spread across his face. He hoped she felt the same way, and he knew she did when she returned the grin before she sighed hard.

"You're crushing me," she whispered.

He quickly released her hand, set his elbows at her sides, and lifted the bulk of his weight off her. "Sorry."

She ran her hands up and down his back and gripped his ass. "They lied."

"Who lied?" He was still smiling. She was going to say something funny.

"Everyone."

"What did they lie about, honey?" He kissed her.

"That was the best thing I've ever felt in my life. It only hurt for like a second, and then the world suddenly had more color. All my senses heightened. I had no idea it would be like that."

Her eyes went wide, and she met his gaze. "Will it be like that again?"

"Nope. Better." God, she was precious.

She rolled her sassy eyes. "You're teasing."

"Nope. I'm serious. We barely know each other's likes and dislikes. As we learn what feels good, we'll improve on this every day."

"How could it feel better?" she asked, narrowing her gaze.

"Oh, it will. You'll see. I'll find out if you like my tongue inside you or against your clit. I'll learn exactly what parts of

your pussy make you squirm when I stroke your channel. I'll discover how you like your breasts sucked. Hard? Gently? Or maybe just tongued. And we haven't even gotten to your ass."

She gasped and clenched beneath him.

He chuckled.

"My, uh... Seriously?"

"I would never joke about anal." He kissed her again. "But again, I also would never do anything you haven't begged me to do."

"I don't see myself begging you to touch me there." She gripped his butt cheeks.

He shrugged. "You might. We'll see."

Her cheeks flushed darkly. So fucking adorable.

Her expression grew serious. "I don't want you to pull out." She held him tighter, her arms coming around his waist. "I feel so close to you like this. Closer than when you hold me."

"Yeah, that happens when I'm inside of you, honey," he teased. "But I can't hold myself aloft here much longer, and I don't want to crush you."

"Maybe when we go to bed, you can do it from behind me and then just stay inside," she suggested.

He couldn't stop grinning. "Gladly. Or..." He grabbed her waist and carefully rolled them to their sides so they were facing each other. The only reason he was able to keep his cock inside her was because he was still just as fucking hard. She felt too good for his erection to subside. One orgasm wasn't going to quench his thirst for her.

He doubted a million orgasms would be enough.

As he stroked her hair away from her forehead, he prayed he would get to keep her. She was so young, so vulnerable. She had her entire life in front of her. He needed to be prepared for a time when she might want to walk away.

He knew she felt attached to him and clung to him right now, but that wouldn't last forever. It wasn't sustainable. Like she'd said, she had some sort of hero complex right now.

He'd been the one to crouch in front of her and draw her out of her stupor that night in Gustaf's house. She thought of him as her protector. Her guardian. And he was. But how long would she need him like that?

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Kally couldn't control the fact that her cheeks felt heated all evening. She couldn't stop smiling, either. No one said a word, but she felt self-conscious because surely, they'd all heard her screaming.

Maybe it hadn't been as loud as what she'd heard in her head. But when she'd suggested that, Jagger had laughed. He'd also pulled her into his arms, kissed her senseless, and told her to never hold back because he liked her uninhibited side.

That had happened in the shower, the shower they'd taken together, the one where he'd washed every inch of her under the spray of water he'd insisted was scalding hot.

He'd humored her, as he always did, understanding that after a year of being washed with a fucking garden hose and cold water, she didn't think she could ever take a shower that was less than boiling again.

When he'd first picked up the soap and had begun to wash her, she'd stiffened, panic threatening to consume her. When she'd grabbed his arm, he'd set the soap down, pulled her gently against him, and stroked her back until she'd managed to breathe normally.

"Sorry," she'd muttered.

"No reason to be. I understand, honey."

"You're not them."



“No, but that doesn’t mean you won’t be triggered sometimes. If you want, I’ll keep my hands off you in the shower.”

Water had been running down between them as she’d tipped her head back. “No, I want you to do it. It’s not the same. I just needed to remind myself. My arms aren’t restrained to the ceiling. The water is warm. The soap smells like you. Your hands feel like heaven. I’m good.”

“Okay,” he’d whispered, “but stop me if you need. This isn’t a dealbreaker, Kally. Nothing is. Never. Just because you don’t like me washing you doesn’t mean you never will. And even if you do, it will still be okay.”

“Kally?”

She jerked her gaze up at the sound of Gemma’s voice.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I was just in my head.”

“I do that a lot. Sometimes, I get triggered by something. That’s the look you had,” Gemma said. The two of them were standing at the kitchen sink, rinsing dishes from dinner to load them in the dishwasher. The men had cooked tonight, so the women had agreed to clean up.

Kally swallowed. “Yes. Does it get easier?”

Gemma set the last plate in the dishwasher, shut the door, and dried her hands. She leaned a hip against the counter. “Yes. Every day. And when you start seeing a therapist, you’ll feel better faster. I promise. Dr. Langston is amazing. You could try her first. If she doesn’t work out, there are plenty of others.”

“I’ll set something up as soon as we can leave here. I’m sure it will be easier to see the same person who already knows our story.” She glanced around. “Do you think we’re ever going to be able to leave here?”

“I’m sure we will. The FBI will find the man who bought you soon.”

“What about the man who sold us? Don’t you think he’s just as pissed?”

Gemma sighed. “There is that, too.”

Kally crossed her arms. “It feels like he’s fucking with us, toying with us.”

“Who’s fucking with you?” Damon asked as he stepped into the kitchen. He pulled Gemma into his arms and held her back against his front.

“We were talking about whoever sold us.”

Damon kissed her neck. “We’ll catch him, baby. It might take a while, but we will get him.”

Gemma smiled at him, warmth in her eyes.

Kally loved the way he was with Gemma. He adored her. He rarely took his eyes off her. He touched her and held her every chance he got. She knew Jagger did the same thing, but it was different. Jagger and Kally hadn’t known each other before. They didn’t have history.

Gemma and Damon had fed a flame between them that had burned bright three years ago. Damon had been so obsessed with Gemma that he’d spent three years of his life looking for her, never giving up until he’d finally found her. And he’d bought her.

Kally fingered the front of her sweater at her chest. She wanted that. She wanted what Gemma had. She was jealous for no good reason because, for all intents and purposes, she had the same thing. Jagger did all the same things as Damon. Hell, so did Robert. The three men had been friends for many years. It wasn’t hard to imagine they all three treated their women similarly.

But was it real? It felt intense. It felt so good when he looked at her with that brooding gaze that made her shiver. It felt good the way he held her at night or rubbed her neck while she struggled to enter the bathroom alone. It felt good when he went in with her without complaining, turning his back so she could pee with moderate privacy.

But she couldn't believe it could be real. She'd only known him for two weeks. He'd insisted he'd felt strongly about her from the moment he'd met her. He'd dropped everything for her, taken her into his home, into his bed.

God, she was grateful and so very lucky. But it scared her, especially how much she leaned on him and how hard she'd fallen for him. It was impossible to imagine he would really be with her next month or next year.

Could she even trust her own feelings? Yes, definitely. But she was just some girl from the wrong side of the tracks. She'd never been someone important. She hadn't finished high school. She had nothing more than an associate's degree from a small community college. She'd been working as a dancer in a sleazy club where she'd made poor choices and had ended up kidnapped, trained as a sex slave, and sold. What did Jagger see in her?

She flinched when she looked up again. She hadn't realized she'd been so deep in her head that Damon and Gemma had left the kitchen. Jagger was standing in their place, one hand on the counter, brows furrowed. "Regrets?" he asked.

Kally frowned for a moment before realizing he was talking about sex. "No." She shook her head. "You?"

His eyes widened. He shuffled toward her. "Never. Never ever." He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against his chest. The house was quiet. Robert and Ella had gone to bed early. They were planning to head back to the city tomorrow. Ella had to get back to work. Robert needed to be present in his clubs. They had security. He rarely let Ella out of his sight.

Damon and Gemma must have headed to their room, too. Most of the lights were off.

"How long was I standing here?"

"A while. You were in your head. Thinking hard. I didn't want to disrupt you. Want to talk about it?"

Her mouth fell open. Maybe she should talk about it. Tell him her fears. He always chased them away, but she still worried in between. “You’re going to get tired of me.”

He didn’t groan or make light of her fears. Thank God. He shook his head and deliberately spoke. “No.” His hands trailed up her back until he threaded his fingers in her hair. “Never. I’ll never have regrets, and I’ll never tire of you. I’m trying not to smother you in case you tire of me. I don’t want you to feel like you owe me or you have to stay with me. You don’t. It would hurt, but I would let you go if you wanted to find yourself without me. If you wanted to go back to Vegas or your hometown, or you just wanted space, I would understand. I’m not saying I would let you walk out the door this minute or tomorrow because it wouldn’t be safe, but if you want to leave when this is over and your safety is no longer in question, I won’t stop you.”

She searched his gaze. Was he blowing hot air at her? “I must seem like a child to you. I don’t know things. I have half an education. I’m just a small-town girl, who was dancing in a club and got herself abducted.”

He lifted both brows. “You are not responsible for your abduction, honey. Stop thinking like that. You weren’t on a street corner waving a thumb. You were in your home in bed. You didn’t ask for this. You were working a job that paid good money to put yourself through school. I’d say you’re fucking smart and the hardest-working woman I know. I’m in awe of your strength. Most people would be curled up in a ball in the corner, catatonic after what you’ve been through. Understandably.”

“Wasn’t I, though? That’s how you found me.”

“For about five minutes while you processed what you’d done to save your life. And then you snapped out of it with a level of resilience that makes me believe you’re a stronger, better person than me.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Though he didn’t look like he was blowing hot air out of his ass. He never did. He didn’t even glance away.

He pressed her closer, set his forehead against hers, and whispered, “I knew you were mine so fast my head was spinning. You brought me to my knees. I’ve never wavered on that. Not once. Not for a second. I never will. And I’ll be happy to tell you that as often as you need if it helps you feel safe, secure, and loved. I will never grow tired of telling you how I feel. You may question me every day if you want—if that’s how often you need me to remind you that you’re mine.”

She was breathing shallowly. Her head was spinning. He made it seem so easy. He never wavered. It was as if he’d chased away all the bad things that had happened in her life and replaced them with so much good, light, and happiness that already twenty-two years of shit had been wiped out by two weeks of Jagger.

“Show me again?” she asked softly.

He gave her that slow sexy smile. “As often as you’d like.” In less than a second, he’d lifted her into his arms and carried her out of the kitchen, turning off lights as he went.

A minute later, they were back in the bedroom, door locked, chair in front of the door, bathroom light on, bedroom lights off. Because that’s the only way she could relax, and this amazing man knew what she needed and never stopped giving it to her.

He led her to the bed while he pulled her sweater over her head. “What happened to the pink lacy bra?” he teased.

She shrugged. “I don’t think I was the one who dressed myself after our shower. If you recall, I’m not wearing panties either.”

He grinned. “I have not forgotten, believe me.” He pulled her leggings down next before crouching in front of her to remove her socks and pants.

“How do I always end up naked, and you’re still fully clothed?”

“I’m getting there.” He took a step back. “Don’t move. Stand just like that while I make us equally naked.”

She felt self-conscious as he stared at her nudity. Probably a hundred men had stared at her naked body in the last year. Most of them had fucking touched her, violated her, and raped her with their eyes.

And yet, she never felt any of that humiliation when Jagger looked at her. She felt a very different kind of lust from him. The kind that accepted and cherished her mind as well as her body. The kind that would ask for consent before he set a single finger on her.

She had no reason to feel self-conscious. He wasn't a fucking rapist or a smarmy asshole who thought he could take whatever he wanted from her as if she were property instead of a human being. His equal.

She suddenly realized her self-consciousness came from someplace else. It wasn't from fear of being groped unwillingly. It wasn't from being forced to stand there on display while men scrutinized every detail about her as if she were an object—the size of her breasts, her nipples, her thighs, even her pussy lips.

No, this was a new sensation. A type of self-consciousness that came from watching his expression and waiting and praying she was enough for him. Were her breasts big enough? Were her nipples large enough? Was her butt too small? Was her hair too frizzy?

Because she wanted him to find her appealing every time he looked at her, just like he was doing right now. His gaze was penetrating and filled with desire.

“Why are you trembling, honey?” he asked as he dropped the last of his clothes and stalked closer. “It's me.” He stroked his hands up her biceps and cupped her neck, tipping her head back. “It's me, honey.”

“What if I get pregnant?” she blurted out.

“Then we'll have a baby. Do you want me to use a condom? I don't mind at all.”

She shook her head. “I mean, what if my body changes, and I get wrinkly, fat, and ugly.”

He narrowed his gaze. “You’ll always look beautiful to me. I don’t care if you get fat, pregnant, or wrinkly. Though I’ll be wrinkly long before you. Should I be worried you won’t find *me* attractive?” He lifted a brow.

She rolled her head like she always did when he said something outlandish. “You’ll just be sexier and more handsome. Distinguished. All the other girls will be jealous.”

“Why the double standard then? Can’t I find you sexier as you age? I will, you know. Someday, I really will get you pregnant, and I can’t wait to watch you grow with our child. You will glow. I know it. Your body will fill out, and you’ll worry constantly, and I’ll remind you just as often how fucking gorgeous you are.”

“You can see that far into the future?” she joked.

“Yes. And it’s not that far.”

She flinched. “How far are we talking? We just met.”

“The sooner I put a ring on that finger and knock you up, the sooner you’ll start to believe I’m serious and stop worrying your bottom lip all the time.”

She released the lip she hadn’t realized she was biting.

“Kalinda, I’m looking into your eyes. That’s where I see your soul. That’s where I see who you are inside. Your body is the icing on the cake. Your mind and heart matter more to me. I can see both of those. You wear them on your sleeve. And they bring me to my knees.”

She thought she understood him because she felt the same penetrating depth when she looked into his eyes, too.

“Do you want to put a T-shirt on and go to sleep?” he asked.

She widened her eyes. “No.”

“You sure? We don’t have to have sex again today. I bet you’re sore.”

“It’s the kind of sore that makes my heart race. I want to feel it again. Remind me that it wasn’t an illusion. Remind me

how good it felt when you were inside me. And then, remind me tomorrow morning and tomorrow afternoon and tomorrow night.”

He smiled. “As often as you’d like.”

“Will you do me one favor, though?”

“Anything.”

“Cover my mouth when I start to scream so I don’t have to walk into the kitchen tomorrow like I did tonight, worrying and wondering if everyone heard me.”

“You sure? I don’t want to trigger you.”

“Just my mouth. Just a reminder. Not my eyes or nose.”

“Okay. But only if you don’t panic and only until we’re no longer sharing a house with other people. All bets are off when I get you alone. I want to hear you scream. It makes my cock so hard.”

She flushed again. “Okay, let’s maybe not talk about it so much. It’s embarrassing.”

He chuckled while he turned the two of them around so his back was to the bed. He sat on the edge and shifted his weight backward until he was sitting upright, leaning against the headboard. He patted his lap. “Straddle me.”

She climbed up and over to him like a cat, slow and easy, because she loved the predatory look in his eyes as her breasts swayed. When she reached him, he snagged her around the waist and lifted her over his lap. It made her giggle.

“Tease,” he chastised, his eyes dancing. “That will work on me every time. Feel free to cat crawl toward me as often as you’d like.”

She wrapped her legs around his waist and scooted forward until her pussy was pressing against the length of his shaft. She gasped when she shifted her weight.

He smiled as he slid his hands down to the small of her back. “Feels good?”

She nodded.



“Do it again. Rub your pussy against my cock.”

She braced her ankles alongside his thighs, grabbed his shoulders, and rocked against him. It felt so naughty and so good. She grinned. “God, yes.”

His fingertips tightened on her back. “Do whatever feels good, Kally. Never hold back. It’s sexy as fuck. If you like it, do it more. If you don’t like something, stop it. If I do something you like, tell me. If I do something that makes you cringe, also tell me. Got it?”

“Mmm-hmm,” she managed as she slid against his cock. Her pussy was so wet she was soaking him, and she wasn’t embarrassed because he loved it and encouraged it. She realized he kept repeating the same things to her, but his words were reassuring.

Jagger reached his hands under her thighs, braced his fingers on both sides of her pussy, and parted her folds, holding her open.

She gasped. God, that felt good. As she rubbed faster, her breasts bounced. Anyone watching would assume she was riding him, but he wasn’t inside her yet.

“Does it feel good to you, too?” she asked.

“Fuck, yes. Honey, there is nothing you can do that won’t make me hard. Walk in a room. Smile. Toss your hair over your shoulders. Eat. Damn, I love watching you eat. It’s like a sensual artistic experience the way you moan around every bite.”

She lowered her gaze to his. “I do not.” She didn’t stop rocking against him.

He chuckled. “You do. But fuck, when you’re naked, I nearly choke, and when you’re pressed against me... Honey, there are no words. Rocking against my cock? A slice of pure heaven. If you keep that up, I will come between us without being inside you.”

“Mmm.”

For a moment, he wasn’t sure she’d fully heard him.

Suddenly, she rose a few inches, causing his dick to lodge at her entrance, and then she impaled herself on him. A long moan escaped her parted lips before she met his gaze, panting, and said, “We aren’t going to test that theory today.” She shot him a playful coy look.

He was struggling to form words. Finally, he licked his lips. “Apparently not.”

When she lifted almost off him and thrust back down, he groaned. *Jesus.*

“Does that feel good?” she asked, tossing his own question back at him.

“Never felt anything better,” he managed to murmur. He still had his hands under her thighs, but he wasn’t controlling her. He let her do whatever she wanted. Hell, she could do anything she wanted to him for the rest of her life.

She rode him at her pace, a smile of satisfaction on her lips. When she met his gaze, she held it while she released his shoulder with one hand, slid it between them, and found her clit.

He loved the way she gasped when she touched herself. He would never tire of watching her. Every inch of her was perfection, from her small pert breasts to her long blond curls dancing between them, to her sky-blue eyes, and her porcelain skin.

She was strong. He knew her trainers had included a significant amount of physical activity in the schedule so the slaves would have the stamina to service their Masters for hours. It made him cringe, but right now, it meant she wasn’t the least bit tired from using her thighs to ride him.

When she tossed her head back, her breasts lifted higher, the pink tips hard and so fucking gorgeous. Her breathing was ragged and increasing.

He kept his focus on her, the challenge to keep from coming too soon almost unbearable. The last thing he wanted to do was empty his seed into her before she cried out her own release.

Her fingers worked faster as she rocked back and forth, grinding down on his cock until she finally gasped as if surprised before stiffening every muscle and then shuddering as her release consumed her.

She cried out, as expected, and fucked him even harder as if she wanted to prolong the orgasm by adding to the friction. Her action caused his balls to draw up, and a moment later, he came harder than he ever remembered coming in his life.

Panting, he wrapped his arms around her tightly and pulled her against his chest. “Don’t move, honey.”

He wanted her right there for as long as she wouldn’t mind. Straddling his lap, his cock still mostly hard inside her, his come leaking out against the base of his dick. He could stay like this forever.

Finally, he cupped her face, brought her lips to his, and kissed her deeply, trying to convey all the emotion inside him with his hands, his tongue, and his lips.

He knew she doubted him, doubted that he’d want to stay by her side for eternity. All he could do was show her every day until she believed him.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



*A week later...*

Kally stepped silently into the kitchen, trying not to disturb Jagger and Damon, where they worked at the table. They'd turned this room into a command central because the table was the largest space in the house where they could work. They had several laptops and papers strewn all around them.

Damon didn't officially work for the FBI. He'd been an unpaid informant for years. He still was, but he was dedicated to putting an end to human trafficking, and he didn't give a fuck about money.

She got a glass of water and was just taking a sip when Jagger suddenly shouted, "Holy fuck." He lifted his head and beamed at Damon.

Kally almost dropped her glass. She set it on the counter and inched toward him, uncertain if he was indeed pleased or not.

Jagger tapped the screen. "I cracked all six chips."

Damon stood and moved closer. "No shit. That's huge."

Jagger glanced at Kally and wrapped his arm around her, pulling her to his side.

Gemma rushed into the room. "Did you find something?"

Damon nodded. "Can you open the chips?"

Jagger nodded. “I think so.” Although, he wasn’t touching the mouse. He glanced at Damon. “This could be huge.”

“Or it could be nothing,” Damon pointed out. “Should we call Diane?”

Jagger took a deep breath. Kally knew he was stressed. His hands were shaking. There was a chance that if he opened the other four chips, they would indicate who the other four buyers were. She knew that had been the primary thing he’d been working on for weeks.

“We can’t expect a windfall,” he pointed out. “I’m not convinced whoever designed these chips isn’t fucking with us. After all, there’s no way Kally’s said Property of Jagger Whitley until I happened upon the scene. We could end up on a wild goose chase.”

“Can the person who designed the chips tell you’ve opened them?” Damon asked.

“Yes. I’d say whoever it is, he’s watching everything I do behind the scenes. He’s probably getting a good laugh.”

Kally rubbed his neck. “Do it,” she encouraged.

Jagger lifted his hand to the mouse, jiggled it, and dragged the cursor to the row of six icons. The first two were open.

*Property of Damon Albertini and Property of Jagger Whitley.*

Taking a deep breath, Jagger clicked on the third one. It took a few seconds, and then all four of them collectively gasped.

“What the fuck?” Damon stated.

*Property of Roberto Moretti.*

“Who is Roberto Moretti?” Kally asked. “Do you know him?”

Jagger ran a hand over his face. He looked pale like he might vomit. “It’s Robert,” he finally muttered.

Gemma gasped. “Our Robert? Ella’s Robert? But his last name is Suthers.”

Damon leaned back in his chair. “It wasn’t always. He was born Roberto Moretti. His mother divorced his father when he was five. He changed his name to her maiden name, Suthers, because he didn’t want to have anything to do with his father.”

Gemma lowered into a chair next to Damon. “I don’t understand.”

Kally didn’t either, but she had no idea what to say.

“He’s fucking with us,” Jagger stated. He slammed a hand on the table, making everyone jump. “He’s fucking, fucking with us.” His voice was louder. “Fuck.”

He grabbed the mouse and clicked on all the rest of the icons. They all said the same thing:

*Property of Roberto Moretti.*

Damon stood and started pacing, hands on his hips. “It makes sense if you think about it. It goes with the fucking tattoos. For some reason, the seller wants to implicate Robert in this trafficking venture he has going.”

Jagger rubbed his chin, also obviously thinking. “Maybe we’ve been looking at this all wrong.”

Damon stopped pacing to look at him. “Go on.”

“You were shocked to find your name in the first chip. After all, the sale was supposed to have been anonymous, so how did the seller know who any of the buyers were, let alone who specifically bought Gemma?”

Damon stared at him, a brow lifted.

“Bear with me,” Jagger continued, “I wasn’t the buyer. That’s for sure. So, that means he changed whatever was on that chip to my name when I showed up. We have to assume both of them said Robert at some point.”

Damon frowned. “I don’t think he’s lurking in my bedroom, so how the fuck could he have known I found the

chip? What makes mine any different from the others?”

“He didn’t know you found it. He knew someone scanned it,” Jagger stated, tapping his lips.

“And when he got the hit, he had plenty of time to change the name. It took the FBI a few days to hack in. By then, he’d changed it from Robert to Damon. But how the fuck did he know who scanned it?”

Jagger’s spine stiffened. “IP Address. I was in your home when I scanned it and entered it into my computer. He could have traced the location of the ping.”

“So, this fucker is a computer genius in addition to being a slave trainer with human trafficking on the side?” Damon asked incredulously.

“Could it be more than one person?” Gemma suggested.

They were all tossing out ideas faster than Kally could process the responses. She felt like she was crawling through molasses in an effort to keep up.

“Maybe the seller isn’t a one-man operation,” Gemma continued.

Finally, Kally felt like she could contribute. “He’s definitely not a one-man operation. After all, Master J worked for him, and at least six trainers worked for *him*.”

Jagger nodded. “There could be others.”

“Including a computer hacker,” Damon reiterated.

“One who’s one step ahead of me,” Jagger growled.

“It’s his game,” Gemma pointed out. “You’re a pawn.”

Damon pointed at the computer. “Does it look like you suddenly found the other four and scanned them all at once?”

Jagger nodded. “Yes, but he’s smarter than that.”

“Or she,” Gemma pointed out.

“Or she,” Jagger agreed. “He or she is going to realize someone has cracked into his system.”

Kally stared absently at the screen. Suddenly, it flashed. She pointed at it. “Something’s happening.”

They all leaned in close. All six messages disappeared. A cursor appeared inside one of them.

“Holy fuck,” Damon stated. “He’s fucking onto us.”

Jagger’s grip around Kally tightened.

New words showed up inside one of the blank spaces.

*About time*

“Fuck,” Jagger shouted. “He’s talking to us.”

*Took you*

“Took you? What does that mean?” Gemma muttered.

*Long enough*

“Long enough?” Kally stated.

“It’s like a tweet,” Jagger informed them. “He has only a certain number of characters.”

*Stay tuned*

No one bothered to read that one aloud. Kally’s heart was racing. It seemed like it matched Jagger’s.

Jagger finally leaned back. “Either the seller is seriously fucking with us or...”

Damon nodded. “Or someone else is hacking in to give us information.”

“I like that idea a whole fuck of a lot better,” Jagger stated.

Kally did, too, especially if it meant finding the other women.

“I guess we’ll know when the messages change.”



At that moment, all six chips went blank.

“So, what do we do?” Gemma asked. “Watch them around the clock in case we get a hit?”

“Yep.” Jagger nodded. “The FBI will put a team on it.” He reached for his phone. “I need to call Diane.”

“Who’s going to call Robert?” Damon asked, groaning.

“I’ll do it after I call Diane.” Jagger put his phone to his ear.

Kally stared at the blank icons. It was hard to look away. It was hard to blink. It could be days or weeks before they got more information.

Jagger gave a quick summary to Diane and then hung up.

Kally glanced at him. Her mind was still racing. “Do you think when he changed them to Damon and Jagger, it was to get your attention?”

“Maybe. I hope. The thought that we’re being manipulated and fucked with makes my blood boil. Dozens of people are working on this. I sure as fuck don’t want to find out we’re chasing our tails.”

“We’ll know soon enough,” Damon stated.

“Not if we aren’t privy to the information until after each woman is found or rescued. Those women are living in a deep pit of hell. We need to pick up the pace.”

Kally flinched. He wasn’t wrong.

Jagger pulled her onto his lap and held her tight. “Sorry. That wasn’t necessary.”

“It’s the truth. Thank you for doing everything you can to rescue them.” She leaned her head against his shoulder.

“Can you possibly enter information, too?” Damon asked. “Can you send him messages?”

Jagger sat up straighter and reached around Kally, keeping her in his lap. “I don’t see why not.” He dragged the cursor

over to one and set it down. “Yep.” He glanced at Damon. “What should I say?” His hand was shaking.

“I don’t know. Jesus.” Damon chewed on his thumbnail. “We have no idea if we’re dealing with friend or foe yet. It’s a gamble.”

“Why would he praise us for hacking in if he wasn’t on our side?” Jagger pointed out. “He used our names to get our attention.”

“If it hadn’t happened to be the two of us, no one might ever have known about the chips at all.” Damon glanced at Gemma. “Actually, it was only because Gemma was having discomfort at the location of the chip. It’s like her body was rejecting it, reacting to it like an allergy. That’s random. He couldn’t have predicted that. Most people would never know the chip had been inserted.”

Jagger bent his head to look at Kally. “You had no idea, right?”

She shook her head. “None. I had no idea anything had been inserted in me. I just assumed it was the tattoo, nothing else.”

Damon cleared his throat. “So, the tattoo and the chip were meant to implicate Robert. Nothing else.”

“But how? Six random buyers could have gone a lifetime without ever knowing that the tattoo was a trademarked logo that belonged to Robert. Even a member of the club might not have noticed the resemblance or thought of it. It’s just a small rose tattoo. It’s only because you and I are close friends of Robert that we would notice.” Jagger sighed.

“Maybe it didn’t matter as long as none of us escaped or were killed or dumped.” Gemma’s voice trembled. “If anyone discovered our bodies, alive or dead, it wouldn’t blow back on Master J or whoever he worked for. It would blow back on Robert.”

“Why would someone want to implicate Robert?” Kally asked.

“For the same reason someone killed my father, Robert’s, and Gemma’s.” Damon growled again. “Vindictive motherfucker.”

“We are not our fathers,” Gemma stated.

“It’s obviously a long-held grudge. Which means we’re definitely dealing with someone who knew all of our fathers,” Damon muttered.

“Italian mafia,” Jagger agreed. “Could be anyone.”

“Probably located in the Denver area,” Damon added.

“That’s a lot of possibilities.” Gemma glanced at all of them. “Do you suppose he knew Damon would look for me when he took me?”

Damon grabbed her hand. “That’s farfetched. No one knew I was interested in you, including you.” He chuckled. “Certainly not your father or I would’ve been fired.”

“So, if your purchase was anonymous, along with everyone else’s...” Gemma tapped her lips. “Then it’s pure coincidence that you bought me and happened to recognize and know Robert’s trademark. Just his bad luck?”

“Seems that way.” Damon lifted her hand and rubbed her fingers against his cheek absently.

Kally smiled at how close the two of them were. They looked like they’d been together for years instead of weeks. Did she and Jagger look like that, too?

Considering the way he was absently stroking her hip with his fingertips, it was certainly possible. She still worried it wasn’t real. Or couldn’t last. They were living in a vacuum under the most stressful circumstances. *Nothing* was real. Wouldn’t that include their odd, fast-tracked relationship?

Jagger stiffened. He did that when he had a new thought. She was learning his body language. “If we start getting legit information through these chips, I’m going to be inclined to believe whoever is in charge doesn’t know someone is manipulating the chips.”

Damon sat up straighter. “The person controlling the chips is doing so behind his back?”

“Why not? Maybe he has a conscience. Or grew one. Or is under duress,” Jagger suggested.

“If he’s as good with computers as he seems, and he wants to help, why tease us? Why not just fucking tell us who the buyers were?” Damon asked.

“The only buyer he’s provided us with was you,” Jagger pointed out, “and we’re assuming he used the IP address to solve that one after I opened the chip. So, this guy doesn’t know the buyers.”

“Or he’s not telling us.” Gemma groaned. “It’s so frustrating.”

Kally jumped in her spot when letters started appearing on the screen. “Look.” She pointed at it. Jagger had been poised to type something, but he hadn’t done it yet.

*Oleander...*

“Oh, my God.” She jumped off Jagger’s lap.

*Reginald Greenhouse*

“Fuck.” Jagger also rose to stand. Both men scrambled to write the name down as fast as possible.

*Tracking IPs*

*Takes Time*

“Holy shit.” Gemma’s hand flew to her mouth. “He’s going to help us.”

*Be cautious*

*Educated guesses*

The screen flashed several times. In fifteen seconds, it all disappeared. Moments later, all six chips read:

*Roberto Moretti*

“He’s worried someone will see his messages. He’s changing them back,” Damon shouted.

“Appears that way.” Jagger lifted his phone again. He hit Diane’s name on the screen.

Kally scrambled backward. Stunned. Nervous. The adrenaline rush was powerful. She’d never met Reginald Greenhouse. She had no idea who he was. What she did know was the man had paid a million dollars to own her and keep her as a sex slave.

Something about knowing his name made her knees so weak they threatened to give out.

The room was spinning. She could hear Jagger’s voice as he spoke in rapid sentences to his boss. Damon was running around. Gemma had taken off from the room at a jog. What was happening?

Jagger caught her around the waist just before she would have gone down. She was going to faint. Blackness moved in from the edges of her vision. He tucked his phone against his ear and cradled her as he rushed from the room, heading for the stairs.

Kally was marginally aware of being carried up the stairs and deposited on the bed. He sat next to her and held her hand, still talking to Diane. His gaze was on her though, brow furrowed with concern.

Finally, he ended the call and stuffed the phone in his pocket. He leaned forward and set a hand on either side of her. “Look at me, Kally.”

She felt frantic. She was struggling to breathe. But she met his gaze.

“Good girl. Deep inhale.”

She tried. It was hard.

“Eyes on me, honey. Breathe.”

She finally drew in a full breath and let it back out.

He nodded. “Can you focus?”

“I think so.”

“Okay. Diane is getting an address. A team is preparing to head that way. I need to be with them.”

Her eyes shot wide. “You—” She cut herself off and slammed her lips together. She couldn’t tell him not to go. She couldn’t tell him she would die inside if he left her. She needed to pull her shit together.

“I’m not leaving you here. It’s out of the question. I don’t know how safe we are here.”

She pushed to sitting, nodding. Perhaps it was unreasonable, but the thought of going with him felt much safer than being left behind.

“Shoes. Coats. Got it?”

She nodded, shoved off the bed, and ran toward the closet to grab tennis shoes. She’d hardly worn shoes at all so far, but she could do it.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



Jagger grabbed Kally's hand as she finished tying the laces and rushed her down the stairs.

Gemma and Damon were at the back door. Damon was strapping a gun across his chest.

Kally gasped. When she glanced at Jagger, he was eyeing her closely. He had also added guns to his wardrobe. She couldn't take her gaze off the holsters and didn't until they were concealed under his jacket.

He grabbed her coat next and held it open. As soon as he had her zipped up, he took her chin and met her gaze. "It's just a precaution, honey. Hopefully, we won't need to draw weapons."

Right. Of course. He was an FBI agent. What did she expect?

Five minutes later, they were in Damon's SUV. Jagger was in the back with Kally. Gemma was in front with Damon.

Damon drove fast. He concentrated hard, never taking his eyes off the windy road as they descended the mountain.

Jagger squeezed Kally's hand. "When we get there, Damon's going to park away from the destination. I'll go in on foot. You'll stay in the car with Damon and Gemma. Got it?"

She nodded, inhaling sharply.

His phone vibrated, and he leaned on one hip to tug it out of his pocket. "Diane, update?" He glanced at Damon.

“Ten minutes.”

Jagger relayed that information to Diane. He listened, occasionally responded with one or two words, and hung up. “A team is all set up around the perimeter. They do believe he’s in the house.”

“House?” Damon let out a low whistle. “Judging by the homes in this area, I’m not sure I’d call this a house. More like an estate for the uber-rich, who have enough money to own slaves without anyone being the wiser.”

Kally trembled. She tucked both her hands under her thighs to keep from shaking.

A few minutes later, Damon pulled the SUV over. He put it in park and twisted around to face Jagger. “Third residence up on the right. I don’t see a soul.”

“I should hope not. My team wouldn’t be very good if you could see them.”

Damon smirked. “You have enough firearms on you? There’s a Glock strapped under the seat in front of you.”

“I’m good. Thanks.” Jagger turned to Kally, cupped her face, and kissed her. “You’ll be safe here.”

“Will *you*?” she asked. He was the one heading into the middle of a takedown armed to the teeth.

“Absolutely.” He smiled at her, winked, and then quietly opened the car door and stepped out. He didn’t look back as he shut the door.

He moved so fast to get out of sight that Kally had no idea where he was within seconds. She twisted around in every direction.

“Don’t worry,” Damon soothed. “He’s damn good at his job. He’ll be fine.”

She didn’t care how good he was at his job. He was about to go to the door of a man who’d spent a million dollars for her. He was putting his life on the line for her.



Breathing heavily, she stared in the direction of the residence Damon had indicated. Third one up on the right. If she hadn't killed Rinaldo Gustaf, she would be inside that residence right now. A slave. A sex slave. By now, she would have been raped by God only knew how many people. If she'd fought, she might even be dead by now.

And yet, Jagger had come to her rescue. He hadn't let anything happen to her. He'd promised. And now, he was running into danger. For her.

Gemma twisted around, brows furrowed. "Deep breaths, Kally."

She nodded but realized she wasn't breathing, and she had a death grip on the door handle.

Gemma turned toward Damon. "Maybe we should back up a few houses."

"No," Kally exclaimed. "I want to stay." She needed to see. If there was anything to see, she needed to be here.

Her hands were sweating, and her mouth was dry. If she didn't start breathing, she was going to hyperventilate.

Two men came out of nowhere and walked up to the front door of the house. Neither of them was Jagger. They knocked. A minute later, the door opened. At first, Kally couldn't see who it was, and then a small, older woman stepped onto the porch. She shook her head.

The men lifted their badges.

The woman took a step back and turned around.

One of the men pointed toward the street.

The woman hesitated and then rushed in the direction he'd indicated.

A car pulled up. Someone got out. A younger woman. She spoke to the older lady before opening the back door and helping her get into the car.

A moment later, gunfire rang out. One shot, and then two.

Kally nearly jumped out of her skin. She'd never been so scared in her life. If anything happened to Jagger...

She'd thought the night she'd emptied six rounds in Gustaf's direction had been the lowest point in her life, but she'd been wrong. This was so much worse. Worrying about someone she loved was far more stressful than worrying about her own welfare.

Instinct had her bending down to find the gun Damon had mentioned under the seat. Neither he nor Gemma was paying attention to her. She patted around until her hand landed on the gun, and then she slipped it free.

It felt heavy, like the weight of her emotions. She was breathing erratically. She knew she wasn't thinking rationally but couldn't help it. In her mind, she pictured Jagger possibly shot somewhere. Bleeding. What if he needed her? What if everyone else was too busy to help him? What if he died while she sat here in this fucking car?

Kally yanked open the door, jumped from the SUV, and took off running toward the residence. She could hear Damon shout at her, but she didn't look back. She kept running. No one was at the front of the house anymore. The front door stood open.

She would have run straight into the home without hesitation, but suddenly, two people emerged. The guy on the left was the agent who had entered with his partner. She didn't recognize the man on the right, but he had to be her buyer. He had that look. That sick fucked-up snarl of the uber-rich, who believed they could take whatever they wanted from society without batting an eye.

The agent had a hold on the man's arm. *Reginald Greenhouse*. His arms were restrained at his back with some sort of zip tie. One second, he was being escorted toward the street where three vehicles had come out of nowhere to skid to a stop. The next second, he spun hard and elbowed the agent in the chin.

The agent stumbled backward. The man started running around the side of the house, arms awkward at his back.

Screams filled the air as the agent righted himself and went after the man. Two more agents ran out of the house, and one came from behind.

Kally knew she was crazed with adrenaline and fierce anger, but she didn't care. She didn't want that fucker to get away, and she still hadn't seen Jagger. If he'd been hit...

She ran toward the man, lifting her gun.

"Kally, stop. Lower the gun." The shout came from behind her. Damon.

She ignored him.

The man glanced over his shoulder, his eyes widening as he spotted her. To him, she probably looked like an insane vigilante. Or maybe, he recognized her for who she was. It wasn't likely, but possible. He'd never seen her face. Just her naked body.

The man gasped, still stumbling backward. "It's you. How the fuck...?"

Kally's arm shook as she kept the gun aimed at her buyer. When her hair blew forward, she realized that's how he'd identified her—her distinctive blond curls.

"Kally!" Damon again? She wasn't sure.

"Stop!" she shouted at her buyer as he turned to keep running. When the man didn't stop, she shot the gun into the air.

The man stumbled and ducked, not realizing she hadn't shot at him. She would though, if he didn't fucking stop.

Everyone froze at the sound of her gunfire.

The man was surrounded by agents. All of them were now several yards away from him, but they were spread in an arch around him. He had nowhere to go.

Kally was gasping for breath, her hand shaking, the weapon focused in the direction of the motherfucker who thought he could fucking buy her and use her body for his pleasure.

Rage like she'd never felt before consumed her. She could just shoot him. Right now. Shoot every round in the gun. She'd done it before. Some of the bullets would hit their target.

He would never be able to hurt another woman again.

Her arms shook as she held the gun up, using both hands as she aimed at him. She was peripherally aware of the other agents not advancing any closer, probably because they didn't want to get in her line of fire.

"Kally." The calm voice came from her right, and she jerked her gaze in that direction at the sound of Jagger's voice, hardly believing it could be him.

It was though. He was walking slowly toward her. "Honey, lower the gun."

She shook her head and turned her gaze back to her target. She was relieved Jagger wasn't dead, but this asshole shouldn't be alive. "I can't let him live, Jagger," she insisted.

"Kally. Look at me."

She shook her head again, not shifting her gaze toward him this time. She didn't want to see the disappointment in his face.

He continued to approach. "You don't want to do this, honey. He's caught. Let the authorities take him in."

She could hear sirens in the distance. Police were coming.

"He fucking bought me," she shouted. "How many women has he fucking raped? How many women has he hurt? How many women has he groped and treated like they weren't humans? I can't let him do it to anyone else."

"He won't, Kally. I promise." Jagger was only a few feet away now. "He won't, honey," he repeated. "He's never going to see the light of day again. You don't want to do this. It will fuck with your mind."

A weird, sardonic laugh filled the air. It was hers. "My mind is already fucked, Jagger. I already killed a man. I can do it again."

“You’re right, but you don’t have to. The authorities will take care of him. You don’t want this responsibility, honey. Trust me.”

Emotions overwhelmed her, and tears started running down her face. She was shaking violently now. Her vision was blurring. The motherfucker stared at her with wide eyes. It looked like he’d peed himself. Good. Fuck him.

“Kally, lower the gun, honey. Please. Do it for me.” Jagger was so close now. He could reach out and swat the gun out of her hand if he wanted.

She was grateful that he didn’t. He was letting her make this choice. Sort of. She wasn’t sure why.

Time stood still while she took a long deep breath, finally lowering the gun and turning to hand it to Jagger.

Jagger immediately handed it to another outstretched hand, and she realized Damon had been right behind her. They wouldn’t have let her do anything foolish.

Kally’s legs gave out, and she dropped to her knees before setting her hands on the ground in front of her. She heaved through great sobs. Hysterical tears that wouldn’t be stopped. A year’s worth of pent-up anger and hatred.

She’d cried many times in the past few weeks. She’d even cried while she’d been in captivity. But nothing like this. Her entire body shook, jerking from the overwhelming pain. She’d lost so much. She’d lost not just time but a piece of herself. Her innocence. Her pride. Her dignity. Her self-worth. She’d lost the woman she’d been, who’d worked so hard to make it in this world. A woman who’d worked long hours to put herself through school and had done everything to create a better life for herself.

All of that was gone. Stolen from her by men who didn’t see her as a human being. Men who thought they could own her and control her and rape her. Men like the fucking son of a bitch currently being escorted to an awaiting police car.

Kally dropped to her elbows, sobbing harder, only marginally aware that Jagger was with her. His hand was on

her back. He had her. But did he?

She was a fucking wreck. She'd been brave for so many days, pushing through the pain, tamping it down, trying so hard to reassimilate into life.

She'd fallen in love. She'd had sex. She'd experienced true acceptance. But inside, she was hurting, and she didn't think she'd ever be whole again. She'd never be the girl she'd been a year ago. That girl had died that night. She was gone. In her wake was a shell of a human who'd been called Oleander for over a year. An empty, shallow body that had shut down emotionally in order to survive.

Jagger rolled her toward him, cradled her in his arms, and lifted her off the ground. He moved away from the scene. She was barely aware, but she thought he was heading toward the SUV.

Sure enough, a minute later, he slid into the back seat, still holding her. He rocked her against him, his hands splayed on her back. He pressed her face against his chest. And rocked.

He didn't say a word.

Kally cried. Hard. Loud awful sobs that shook her frame. Her nose was running, and torrents of tears were trailing down her cheeks.

Jagger's jacket was open, and he let her snot and tears soak into his shirt. He didn't try to placate her. He simply held her.

It seemed like hours before her tears slowed down and reduced to intermittent sobs, sniffles, and hiccups. She fisted his shirt in her hand. "You should've let them arrest me that night," she whispered. It was the oddest thing to say, but it slipped out of her subconscious.

"No. You don't belong in jail, honey. You've done nothing wrong."

She tipped her head back and met his gaze. "I have now."

He shook his head. "No, you haven't. I have. I never should've brought you here. No one blames you for the rage you feel toward a man who bought you like cattle."

“I could’ve shot him.”

“But you didn’t. You stopped yourself.”

She sobbed again. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

“Because I’m in love with you, and I’m always going to be here for you no matter what happens. Some days are harder than others. Today is one of those days, but I will never turn away from you. Never.”

More tears fell as she blinked at him. How could he still feel that way?

“You’re hurting. You’ll be hurting for a long time. It’s natural. I would be concerned if you weren’t. Reginald Greenhouse can never get to you again. You’re free. We’ll get you in counseling, and you can start working through the pain.”

“You should drop me off at the hospital and leave me.” Why wouldn’t he? She was too much work.

“Nope. That’s not going to happen. You’re going to come home with me. I’m going to fill the tub with hot water, and we’re going to soak in it until we turn into prunes.”

How could he make a joke right now? He was still holding her so close. He never looked away.

“I’m sorry, honey. I failed you on so many levels. I won’t always make the best choices, but I’ll always try. When I fuck up, I’ll fix it.”

She narrowed her gaze. “How did you fail me?”

“I misjudged how much anger was pent-up inside you. I should’ve known. I should’ve either gotten you in to the counselor or brought her to you by now. I never should’ve brought you here, that’s for sure. My mistake.”

She closed her eyes and leaned into his chest again. She wasn’t sure she trusted him to truly be here for her forever, but she would absorb his kindness and his offer of help for now. Exhaustion sucked her down, threatening to knock her out.

Jagger leaned out the door. “We can go now.”

She'd forgotten about Damon and Gemma. They must have been waiting next to the SUV, giving her some semblance of privacy for her stupid breakdown.

Neither of them said a word as they climbed into the front seat. The doors closed. The engine started.

As Damon pulled away from the curb, Kally kept her eyes closed. She didn't need to see another second of the scene around her. Not the house or the cop cars or the agents, and certainly not the man who'd bought her, if he was still around.

She couldn't face anyone, including Jagger. Her mind seemed to shut down, and so did her body.



## CHAPTER TWENTY



*A week later...*

Kally was looking at her phone as she came down the stairs, heading aimlessly for the kitchen. Jagger had gotten her the latest version of the best smartphone in existence a few days ago, and so far, she'd been addicted to learning how to use it and playing the dozen word games she'd loaded onto it.

When she stepped into the kitchen, something in the air caught her eye, and she lifted her gaze and lowered the phone. It wasn't just one something. It was a lot of somethings. Balloons. A dozen of them. They were hovering above the table, long strings extending down to a weighted clip that sat on the table.

Jagger was at the stove, but he quickly turned toward her and smiled.

“Uh, what are the balloons for?”

“You.” He came toward her.

“Why?”

“We're celebrating.”

She frowned. “What are we celebrating?”

“Five days of you gradually increasing your independence.”

She furrowed her brow further. “What?”

“It’s been five days since you started spending time in another room without me. Today, you made it an hour.”

She chuckled. “I think you can blame the phone.” She held it up between them. “I was playing a game and lost track of time.”

He shook his head. “The phone isn’t responsible. You couldn’t have done that until you started meeting with Dr. Langston.” He wrapped his arms around her, snagged the phone from her, and set it on the counter.

“Am I grounded?” she joked.

He laughed. “Hardly. I like to see you focused and interested in something. It’s good for you. I just want to hold you a minute.”

“So, we’re celebrating the fact that I haven’t been clinging to you so hard you’re suffocating?”

He rolled his eyes. “No. We’re celebrating the fact that you’re getting braver and learning to trust that I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“You keep saying that, but whoever arranged my abduction and sold me is still out there.”

“This is true. I can’t guarantee he won’t one day decide to come for you, but I think it’s highly unlikely.”

She sighed. “You’re so confident.”

“Well, he has no reason to. For one thing, he got his money. It’s not his problem the buyer sent someone else to collect you, and you outsmarted them both. Whoever the seller is, he doesn’t give a fuck what happened after he collected his money. He’s certainly not giving it back.”

She knew Jagger was right. He’d explained this before, but she still worried.

“We found out another thing too. When the authorities dug through Reginald Greenhouse’s home, they found out he’d been traveling on business in the Middle East for two months at the time of the auction. That’s why Rinaldo Gustaf collected

you in his stead and told you your owner was coming from out of the country.”

“So, he hadn’t planned to take me out of the country,” she mused out loud.

“No. He definitely planned to keep you in that house where we arrested him. The entire basement was set up to receive you.” Jagger shuddered.

“I don’t want to know about that, do I?”

“No. But there’s more. I haven’t told you this yet.”

“What?” she asked, her curiosity piqued.

“We got another cryptic message from whoever is controlling the information in the chips.”

“Oh?” She lifted her brows, leaning back to see Jagger’s face better.

He nodded. “I feel more confident that whoever is sending the messages is trying to help. I don’t think he’s simply fucking with us. He has no reason to. Why would he work so hard to rescue six women from sex slavery and then send us a trickle of information at a time? He knows the other four women are being held somewhere. The clock is ticking. I think he’s working his ass off to get answers as fast as he can. If he’s having to delve through random emails every day until he gets a match, that could take weeks. If he’s working alone and doesn’t have the ability to do so full-time, it could take even longer.”

She tipped her head to one side. “It’s hard to trust him.”

“I know, honey. I struggle, too. But the message we got earlier leads me to believe the seller doesn’t even know you’ve been rescued. Neither you nor Gemma. I’m betting once the transaction was made, he never looked back.”

“Then who’s sending the messages?”

Jagger shrugged. “He’s definitely a highly trained techy. I bet he works for the seller, but he’s developed a conscience.”

She slowly nodded. “You really think I’m safe?”

“Confident. I’m not saying you should head outside and go for a jog alone. But I think you’re as safe as any other person in my gated community.”

She shuddered. “I was never a jogger, and there’s not a chance in hell I’m ever going to so much as go for a walk down the street alone. That was stolen from me.”

She’d had three sessions with Dr. Carol Langston this week. Every other day. She had a long way to go before she would be anywhere close to resembling the woman she’d been a year ago. She was also learning that it was okay. That woman was mostly gone. The woman in her place would come out stronger and happier.

The happy part was the most important. Kally smiled at Jagger. He did that to her. Made her smile. He did it because it was impossible not to love him. He was her rock. Her new foundation. After the nearly disastrous breakdown she’d suffered last week, she knew he meant every word he’d said. He was still here. He wasn’t going anywhere.

“I love you,” she blurted out before she could lose the courage.

Jagger’s smile lit up his face. “I love you, too. So very much.”

“I believe you.” She finally did. After all, anyone who could traipse through hell with her like Jagger had and still be at her side holding her had to be the real deal.

He set his forehead against hers and ran his hands up her back. A wicked sexy grin spread across his face. “No bra again today?”

She giggled. “It would seem you don’t really care for them.”

He wiggled his brows. “I don’t. It’s much easier to get you naked when I don’t have to fuss with the clasp on a bra. Do you know how many types of fasteners those damn things have? And then there are front and back hooks. It’s like a minefield. So much easier if you just skip them all together.”

Kally laughed.

“Now, that’s a sound I want to hear every day for the rest of my life.” He leaned in and kissed her neck before tickling his day-old beard against her skin. “Do it again.”

She giggled as she tried to pull away from him. “Jagger...”

“Oh yeah. I like that sound, too.” He nodded over his shoulder. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?” she asked as he led her back toward the stairs she’d come down a few minutes ago.

“To bed.” He spun around. “Unless you don’t think you can make it that far. I’m okay with sex on the kitchen table, the steps, or the hallway.”

She giggled yet again. “I’m kind of a fan of your bed. I bet we can make it there before we lose all control.”

But losing control was half the fun, and the way he was looking at her right now suggested perhaps she should try it his way. Maybe the bedroom was overrated.

As soon as they hit the stairs, he grabbed her around the waist, spun her around, and set her butt on the third step. He leaned over her and dropped his elbows on the step next to her head. “Say it again.”

“Say what? I like your bed?” she teased.

He kissed her and then nibbled a path to her ear. After he nipped her earlobe, he whispered, “Say it again, honey.”

“I love you.” The words were breathless. Powerful. She meant them to her soul. She loved him so much it hurt. In fact, with each passing day, she’d grown to realize that without the hell and hardship she’d been through for the past year, she would never have met this amazingly sexy man who was now her entire world. A life without him was inconceivable. For the first time in her life, she could honestly say she was a lucky woman.

“God, I love the sound of that. Say it again, please.”

“I love you, Jagger. I love you.” She cupped his face and held his gaze. It was getting easier. “I love you.”

He drew in a long breath and then dropped his lips to hers. Yeah, they were going to end up having sex on the stairs and probably on the landing, but she didn't care. She didn't even care if she got a rug burn on her back. It would be worth every second.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I hope you've enjoyed *Oleander*. The Roses and Thorns series will have six full-length novels. Each novel will stand alone, but they will be more enjoyable if read in order. Each of the other five women has a story to tell. Stay tuned for Jasmine's story, coming January, 2024.

### **Roses and Thorns:**

[Marigold](#)

[Oleander](#)

[Jasmine](#)

[Tulip](#)

Daffodil

Lily

To learn more about Gemma and Damon, they have a novella called *Gemma's Release* in the [Bite of Pain](#) anthology published by Black Collar Press. It released in October, 2023.

If you want to know more about Robert and Ella, they are featured in a novella called *Roses and Thorns* which is published in my anthology: [Where Alphas Dominate](#).

Other side characters from Roses and Thorns who will make appearances in this series are Boyd and Macy. They have a novella called *Ruined* in [Black Light: Roulette Finale](#).

## ALSO BY BECCA JAMESON

### **Danger Bluff:**

Rocco

Hawking

Kestrel

Magnus

Phoenix

Caesar

### **Roses and Thorns:**

Marigold

Oleander

Jasmine

Tulip

Daffodil

Lily

Bite of Pain Anthology: Gemma's Release

### **Shadowridge Guardians:**

Steele by Pepper North

Kade by Kate Oliver

Atlas by Becca Jameson

Doc by Kate Oliver

Gabriel by Becca Jameson

Talon by Pepper North

### **Blossom Ridge:**

Starting Over

Finding Peace

Building Trust

Feeling Brave

Embracing Joy

Accepting Love

Blossom Ridge Box Set One

Blossom Ridge Box Set Two

### **The Wanderers:**

Sanctuary

Refuge

Harbor

Shelter



Hideout

Haven

The Wanderers Box Set One

The Wanderers Box Set Two

**Surrender:**

Raising Lucy

Teaching Abby

Leaving Roman

Choosing Kellen

Pleasing Josie

Honoring Hudson

Nurturing Britney

Charming Colton

Convincing Leah

Rewarding Avery

Impressing Brett

Guiding Cassandra

Surrender Box Set One

Surrender Box Set Two

Surrender Box Set Three

**Open Skies:**

Layover

Redeye

Nonstop

Standby

Takeoff

Jetway

Open Skies Box Set One

Open Skies Box Set Two

**Shadow SEALs:**

Shadow in the Desert

Shadow in the Darkness

**Holt Agency:**

Rescued by Becca Jameson

Unchained by KaLyn Cooper

Protected by Becca Jameson

Liberated by KaLyn Cooper

Defended by Becca Jameson

Unrestrained by KaLyn Cooper

**Delta Team Three (Special Forces: Operation Alpha):**

Destiny's Delta

**Canyon Springs:**

Caleb's Mate

Hunter's Mate

**Corked and Tapped:**

Volume One: Friday Night

Volume Two: Company Party

Volume Three: The Holidays

**Project DEEP:**

Reviving Emily

Reviving Trish

Reviving Dade

Reviving Zeke

Reviving Graham

Reviving Bianca

Reviving Olivia

Project DEEP Box Set One

Project DEEP Box Set Two

**SEALs in Paradise:**

Hot SEAL, Red Wine

Hot SEAL, Australian Nights

Hot SEAL, Cold Feet

Hot SEAL, April's Fool

Hot SEAL, Brown-Eyed Girl

**Dark Falls:**

Dark Nightmares

**Club Zodiac:**

Training Sasha

Obeying Rowen

Collaring Brooke

Mastering Rayne

Trusting Aaron

Claiming London

Sharing Charlotte

Taming Rex

Tempting Elizabeth

Club Zodiac Box Set One

Club Zodiac Box Set Two

Club Zodiac Box Set Three

**The Art of Kink:**

Pose

Paint

Sculpt

**Arcadian Bears:**

Grizzly Mountain

Grizzly Beginning

Grizzly Secret

Grizzly Promise

Grizzly Survival

Grizzly Perfection

Arcadian Bears Box Set One

Arcadian Bears Box Set Two

**Sleeper SEALs:**

Saving Zola

**Spring Training:**

Catching Zia

Catching Lily

Catching Ava

Spring Training Box Set

**The Underground series:**

Force

Clinch

Guard

Submit

Thrust

Torque

The Underground Box Set One

The Underground Box Set Two

**Wolf Masters series:**

Kara's Wolves

Lindsey's Wolves

Jessica's Wolves

Alyssa's Wolves

Tessa's Wolf

Rebecca's Wolves

Melinda's Wolves

Laurie's Wolves

Amanda's Wolves

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Bound to be Tamed

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Tarnished

Dominated

Completed

Redeemed

Abandoned

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**Durham Wolves series:**

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**Stand Alone Books:**

Blind with Love

Guarding the Truth

Out of the Smoke

Abducting His Mate

Wolf Trinity

Frostbitten

A Princess for Cale/A Princess for Cain

Severed Dreams

Where Alphas Dominate

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Becca Jameson is a USA Today best-selling author of over 140 books. She is well-known for her Wolf Masters series, her Fight Club series, and her Surrender series.

She currently lives in Houston, Texas, with her husband. Two grown kids pop in every once in a while too! She is loving this journey and has dabbled in a variety of genres, including paranormal, sports romance, military, reverse harem, dark romance, suspense, dystopian, and BDSM.

A total night owl, Becca writes late at night, sequestering herself in her office with a glass of red wine and a bar of dark chocolate, her fingers flying across the keyboard as her characters weave their own stories.

During the day—which never starts before ten in the morning!—she can be found walking, running errands, or reading in her favorite hammock chair!

*...where Alphas dominate...*

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