



*Out of*  
**LOVE**

**RUTH  
CARDELLLO**

**NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR**

*Out of*  
**LOVE**

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**LOVE**

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*This book is dedicated to my friend Chrissy.  
She's independent, intelligent, and kind—just like the women  
I love to write about.*



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DON'T MISS A THING!

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# CHAPTER ONE

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## SCOTT

“Mr. Rehoboth?” a male voice asked from the door of my twin brother Jesse’s office. I froze.

Jesse’s earlier instructions echoed in my head. *“Don’t leave my apartment. Don’t answer the door. No one knows about you, and for now, that’s how I want it to stay.”*

How *he* wanted it . . . yep, that summed up Jesse.

I’d agreed to his plan when it had consisted of us stepping into each other’s lives for a few hours. That deal ended for me when he began to change the terms. I should have said no to the whole idea, but I’d gone along with it for the same reason I’d agreed to meet up with Jesse again and again—I wanted to like him.

*Wanted to.*

We weren’t there yet.

Separated at birth, we’d been unaware of each other’s existence until a few months ago, when he’d seen a photo of me in an online article and contacted me. No shit, this was his first text: This is Jesse Rehoboth. There’s a chance we may be biological twins. I’ve arranged for a DNA test to verify. Do not contact me before you have the results.

He included the address of a local clinic along with a test identification number.

I responded: Is this a joke?

He didn’t answer, which at the time was confusing but became less so the more time I spent with him. Jesse didn’t waste time on things he didn’t consider important, and that’s what I would have been to him had the test not come back as a perfect match.

Thank God for my parents. I’d always known I was adopted, so the

possibility of having a sibling hadn't shocked me, but a twin? They were as surprised by Jesse's existence as I was . . . and excited. My mother instantly viewed Jesse as another child to love.

I didn't tell her the truth—that he had no interest in meeting her. I lied to her because that's what a person does when the truth would gut someone they love. I used the fact that Jesse's adoptive mother had also left him early in his life to fabricate a softer side of my brother. He wasn't a complete dick, unable to spare five minutes of his time for one of the most kindhearted women on the planet. No, in my telling of it, he was a man with a hard outer shell that he used to protect the child in him that had never fully healed from being abandoned twice.

For my parents, I held to that lie so fiercely I half believed it myself. Each time he asked to see me, I'd go, only to be reminded of why it was much more likely that he was just a dick. I always left seeing him feeling like I'd just interviewed for a job he'd already decided I wasn't qualified for.

I accepted responsibility for some of our discord. I could have shared more, spoken of my interests beyond farming, but he was so damn condescending. Almost as bad as his older brother, Thane. Now, there was a man who couldn't have many friends. He was about as much fun as a rusted lunch box and even more judgmental than Jesse . . . if that was possible.

When I told Jesse that Steadman Oil had made repeated offers to purchase my family's farm, I didn't expect him to be all that interested in the subject. There was a surprising shift in his attitude. Suddenly we were brothers and therefore on the same team. United. Loyal. No one would take my farm, not on his watch. He and Thane would do whatever was necessary to fend off this threat.

*What?*

My role? Step aside for a few hours and let them handle Steadman Oil.

I could have said no—in fact, I did decline his offer more than once, but he was adamant that this was something he needed to do. In his conviction I'd glimpsed a Jesse I could like. Not the overbearing, go-away-while-I-handle-this-for-you side. I could live without that. No, it was the emotion in his voice when he said that this mattered to him because I did. That was the first time I felt we might become family after all.

He was definitely broken, but my father had taught me that *irreparable* usually meant a person lacked the commitment to fix something. An old tractor? It could almost always be salvaged, but like everything else it

required persistence and ingenuity.

My relationship with Jesse was strained, yet did it have to remain so? I could have dismissed the whole switch-lives-for-a-day plan but decided to find the value in it. Stepping into Jesse's life could give me a better understanding of why he was the way he was. I couldn't change him, but I hoped to improve my opinion of him. We were twins. We had to have something in common.

Anything.

So there I was, hair freshly cut the way Jesse wore his, in one of his expensive suits, passing myself off as him at his workplace while hoping I wasn't making a monumental mistake.

"Sir?"

I slowly turned on my heel. The man was about my father's age, soft around the middle, with the air of someone who spent most of his time at a desk. I didn't smile, because my guess was that Jesse wouldn't in that situation. "Yes?" He couldn't know I'd heard him the first time. I looked him directly in the eye because Jesse would have. I inhaled sharply and waited.

"I was told you would be out of the office today." He gave me a long look.

I narrowed my eyes.

He swallowed visibly.

*Yep, my brother is a real charmer.* In a harsh tone, I said, "I was hoping for uninterrupted office time."

He nodded slowly. "So, if anyone asks, you're not here?"

"Precisely." I flexed my shoulders. "Even Thane . . ."

"He's out of the office today."

"Good." As the man lingered in the doorway, a thought occurred to me. "Oh, and I'm having issues with my phone. If you need me, knock, but don't call."

"Whenever my smartphone updates, my son has to fix it for me. I swear it's a ploy to get you to upgrade. My last phone suddenly started asking if I wanted to call 911 when I turned it on."

Normally I would have laughed or shared a similar story. I couldn't imagine Jesse doing either, so I cleared my throat and said, "Fascinating. Close the door behind you."

# CHAPTER TWO

---

## MONICA

“I shouldn’t be long,” I told my driver as I straightened after exiting the car. Taking a deep breath, I smoothed my hands down the sides of my skirt. Some things were best handled in person. Phone conversations didn’t pack the same punch.

My father taught me that.

Walt Bellerwood was undeniably a genius, but that alone didn’t guarantee success. Born to a working-class family in South Boston, my father fought for everything he had, and what he had was a foothold in the industries that were shaping the future. Our family name was synonymous with cutting-edge technology in everything from water desalination to rocket design. My father never settled for the status quo, demanded perfection from anyone he worked with, and held himself to that same standard.

He didn’t make mistakes. He didn’t fail.

I didn’t either.

As the lead researcher on the development of his vision of a residential space station, I’d been in the mix from concept to near completion. So when I’d received an email from Jesse Rehoboth, the owner of an HVAC company my father had contracted to design our life-support system, suggesting that I should double-check some of the data I’d sent him, I saw red.

Did Rehoboth believe I couldn’t see what he was doing? He wanted to divert scrutiny to my work because the deadline for producing his plans was looming and he was stalling. Thankfully he’d sent his request to me and not my father, or I’d be eyeball deep in redoing tests we’d already performed.

I was no one’s scapegoat. That was something I would make crystal clear to the man who had the audacity to end his email with instructions for me not to contact him until I had confirmed my data.

Who the hell did he think he was?

I strode into the office building and informed the security desk that I was there to see Jesse Rehoboth. One of the guards gave me an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry, Mr. Rehoboth is out of the office today.”

“My name is Monica *Bellerwood*.” My last name hung in the air, and the guard exchanged a quick look with the man next to him. The contract my father had offered Rehoboth’s company was still all over the news. I took a deep breath and waited.

The guard made a call upstairs. “There’s someone here to see Mr. Rehoboth. I understand, but it’s *Monica Bellerwood*.” His eyes darted to my face, then away. “Yes, I’m sure. Of course. I’ll escort her up.” He stood after ending the call. “Mr. Rehoboth will see you.”

“Thank you.” My tone was polite, if cool. It wasn’t the guard’s fault his employer was an ass.

He led the way to an elevator, and we stepped in. On the way up, he cleared his throat, then said, “A residential space station. I know it’s real and all, but I kind of thought we’d have hovercraft before we got to that point.”

I kept my gaze forward. “Hovercrafts have been brought to market. Some are aquatic, some utilize magnets. Currently there is no future in them because they’re not yet cost effective.”

“But they sure would be fun.”

I arched an eyebrow. The world didn’t need more modes of entertainment; it needed solutions for issues like overpopulation, food shortages, and climate change. Fun? Who above the age of five had time for that?

The elevator door opened, and we stepped out. I hadn’t met Jesse Rehoboth in person, but we’d videoconferenced, and the man who met me at the elevator was certainly not him. He’d sent his assistant, to prove how unimportant he considered me. Raised by someone who dominated all around him, I had little tolerance for the manipulative techniques people use to maintain the upper hand in situations. If Jesse Rehoboth thought making me wait would prove he was someone important, I would quickly school him on how ineffective I found that method.

The man who greeted me was out of breath, as if he’d sprinted to me. He didn’t come across as a leader. There was a softness to him and a calmness. Just a gatekeeper.

He led the way to a sitting area outside of an office. “Ms. Bellerwood,



Mr. Rehoboth wasn't expecting to see anyone today. I haven't had a chance to inform him of your arrival. Would you like a water or a tea while you wait?"

"No," I said succinctly. "I would like to *not* wait."

"Give me just a moment. I'm sure he'll be right out."

"I'll announce myself. Is he in his office?"

The guard next to me made a not-so-subtle motion that the other man should make a call. The older man's expression turned pained. His voice was a little strangled when he said, "I believe so."

Only because I felt bad for putting the older man in a situation he clearly wasn't comfortable being in, I winked and said, "Just tell him I was a royal bitch and ignored your instructions. When I'm done with him, he'll believe you."

"Oh, I would never—"

He was still sputtering when I walked past him and opened the door to Rehoboth's office. Head held high, I stepped inside and closed the door behind me.

The man who hastily rose to his feet behind his desk looked . . . guilty? His cheeks flushed like he'd been caught perusing porn.

But holy hell, he was gorgeous. Hold-my-purse-while-I-fan-my-face-and-wipe-drool-from-my-chin level of good looking. How had that not been obvious during our video calls? Videos and lighting could be deceiving, but in this case the camera hadn't prepared me at all for the effect he'd have on my senses. Had he gotten a tan? Spent more time in the gym? Doused himself in pheromones? Physical attraction was one thing, but Jesse Rehoboth packed a sexual punch that temporarily made it difficult for me to remember why I was there. "Mr. Rehoboth?" I inwardly groaned at the question. We'd spoken only a handful of times but certainly enough to recognize each other.

"Who else would be in my office?" His question was just condescending enough that my head cleared somewhat. *Yes, that's him.* He came out from behind his desk, and my body began to hum. There was no spark of recognition in his expression, but there was something else. As much as I didn't want to be attracted to him, it was exciting to see the feeling might have been mutual.

Not that it would change anything. He knew who I was—pretending he didn't was strategic. I squared my shoulders and looked him in the eye. He sure as hell wouldn't have done this to my father. "Monica Bellerwood."

“Oh yes.” His expression closed. “What can I do for you?”

My cheeks heated as several intimate possibilities hit me like a sucker punch. I didn’t want to imagine how his hands would feel running over my bare skin, but I did. Striving to conceal where my thoughts had wandered, I ground out, “I’m here to address your email.”

His lips pressed together briefly. “By all means.”

He didn’t offer me a seat, but I didn’t expect him to. Men like him didn’t play nice. Even my father had called him arrogant. So why work with him? Because at that moment he was the best in his field, and that was all my father had time for.

Arrogant was not my type, nor was inconsiderate or self-absorbed. Too well I knew how little someone had to offer anyone when they were their own biggest fan. “I will not be sending over new data because our testing has been extensive and your implication that our numbers might be flawed is insulting.”

“I do often come across as rude.”

My head snapped back. I hadn’t expected him to agree. “But you don’t care? You should. I’m certain space station contracts don’t come along often . . . if ever for a company of your size.”

There was a glint of humor in his eyes when he responded. “Size matters, but I’d argue skill level is equally important.”

My gaze automatically dropped to the front of his trousers, and my cheeks flushed. I quickly raised my gaze to meet his again and told myself I needed to shut this down. *Before I give him the upper hand and reveal that I’m not immune to his charm.* “Oh, how cute, a sexual innuendo. Is that a deflection? Are you hoping my next words won’t be a demand to see the status of *your* work?”

His eyebrows rose, and his lips curled in a surprisingly boyish smile that took my breath away. He leaned closer with a twinkle in his eyes. “Wait, are you saying you want me to show you mine because I asked you to show me yours?”

*Juvenile and transparent. Not sexy. So why is the idea of meeting him halfway and tasting those delicious-looking lips of his so tempting?* My hands clenched at my sides. I hadn’t worked in a male-dominated industry without being propositioned, but Rehoboth was different. The sizzle between us was not only unwelcome but dangerous as hell. A person could have their good judgment clouded by something like this. And me? It would be the kind of

mistake that could cost me everything. “What are you hiding, Mr. Rehoboth? Because offending me would be foolish.”

For just an instant his smile faltered. Good. He needed to know I wouldn't be easy to manipulate. “Just trying to lighten the mood.”

I glared back, as irritated with myself as I was with him. If I hadn't known better, I might have believed he was sincere and likable. My father did an extensive background check on anyone he worked with, so there wasn't much about Rehoboth I didn't know. He wasn't known for being nice or socially active or doing much of anything outside of work. Jesse Rehoboth didn't waste time on philanthropy, hobbies, or even friends. He might have been good looking, but he was a one-dimensional, money-chasing egomaniac. “Do I look amused?”

He shook his head once. “No. You don't.”

“Then let's return to why I'm here. You were hired for a specific part of the project. I initially entertained your request for additional information because I'm a team player.”

“I can see that.” He had the gall to look amused.

“Save your jokes for someone who has time for them.” My eyes narrowed. “I do not work for you, Mr. Rehoboth. I do not report to you. I shared that data out of courtesy, but from this point on you will be provided with only the information that is vital to the completion of your project. And in the future I will not respond to any email written in the tone of the one you sent. Is that clear?”

“Crystal.” I didn't expect him to cower at my tone, but his easy smile was infuriating. Worse? His voice did funny things to my ability to remember why I was there.

I needed to stay focused. “The only part you got right was contacting me rather than bothering my father. He has no patience for nonsense.”

His expression turned more serious. He cocked his head slightly to the side and stepped closer. “It can't be easy working for someone like that, especially if he's your father.”

It wasn't, but I'd never admit that. I stood there, forcing my breathing to remain even as he came to a stop so close that I got a whiff of a subtle, temptingly masculine cologne. No. No, someone like him was *not* allowed to turn me on.

He scratched at one side of his jaw. “Clarify one thing for me. You drove all the way over here just to tell me that my email offended you to the

point of not wanting to answer it?”

Put like that, it sounded ridiculous. I didn't *do* ridiculous. “No. I came here to . . .”

In the pause while I chose my next words, he asked, “To?”

My response was a gurgled growl of frustration. Nothing was going as I'd planned, and that was something else that was out of the norm for me. I was a keep-to-the-plan kind of person. Spontaneity was for those who hadn't taken the time to chart a better course.

What I wasn't used to was my body wanting something that was in direct opposition to what my brain did. Rehoboth was a work associate at best. He also had the potential to cause real trouble for me with my father. This was a fire I needed to put out—on more than one level.

“You're obviously upset.” He studied my face for a long moment, then leaned in. “You and I . . . we've never . . . there's no history between us, right?”

My breath caught in my throat. A sharp burst of yearning tore through me. Between gritted teeth, I answered, “Since this is the first time we've met in person, how would we possibly have a ‘history’?” I splayed a hand between us. “And in case you're wondering, I could never be interested in someone like you.”

When he didn't respond at first, I started to wonder if I'd misconstrued what he'd said. Then, in a deep voice that belonged in a bedroom rather than an office, he asked, “What is it you don't like?”

I met his gaze, doing my best to ignore the wild thudding of my heart and a desire to flick my tongue across my bottom lip. “I'm too polite to say.”

“I find that hard to believe.” The slow smile that spread across his face started in his eyes. I fought to not like him. “And I'm curious.”

*Fine.* “You're arrogant, rude, condescending . . . the only thing you care about is your company.” God, I could have been describing my father. How could I find him attractive?

He didn't seem bothered by my assessment. “I can see how I could come across that way, but I'd like to think there's more to me.” He straightened and rattled off a phone number. “Feel free to call me anytime.”

“About the project.” I cringed as soon as the words were out of my mouth. Of course he was referring to the project.

His lips twisted in that damn sexy smile again. “Or whatever.”

*No.* This was headed exactly where it shouldn't. I voiced my thoughts

aloud. "I'm not doing this."

His cocked eyebrow was a challenge that was sexy as all hell. "Not doing what? Communicating with me about the course of the project? Is there someone else I should contact instead?"

"No," I said quickly. Now he was trying to keep me off-balance, and it was working. I needed to regain control of the situation. "I'm your point of contact."

"Great." His eyes were dark and mesmerizing. "Are we good?"

"Good?"

"Do you feel better?"

His tone held none of the sarcasm I would have expected. "This isn't about how I *feel*, Mr. Rehoboth. This is work."

"If that were true, you would have answered my email with a scathing one of your own. Instead you came to see me."

My lips pressed together in frustration. I wanted to respond with something that would demonstrate how wrong he was, but he was right. "Because face to face has more impact."

That damn smile of his returned. What was he so happy about? "It sure does."

I sucked in an audible breath. He was definitely flirting with me. I didn't consider myself beautiful, but I had a healthy enough self-image. I worked out, wore just enough makeup to cover the dark circles that late nights at the office frequently left me with, and had my clothing tailored to fit me. It wasn't inconceivable that he might actually be attracted to me, but getting involved with him in any way would be a very, very bad idea.

"Any chance you're hungry?" he asked.

"No," I answered without giving myself a chance to consider if I was or not.

"Thirsty?"

I hadn't expected this playful side of him. Another woman might have laughed off his offers or flirted back and accepted. Instead, I simply stood there, looking up at him, frozen in place by the intensity of the moment. When I finally spoke, it was in a strangled voice. "I can't."

"Because you're seeing someone?"

"No."

"No, that's not the reason, or no, you're not seeing someone?"

"My private life is none of your business, Mr. Rehoboth."

“You’re right.” He walked over to the door of his office and opened it. “I hope I didn’t offend you.”

Not sure what exactly had just happened, I found myself saying, “You didn’t.”

We made our way to the elevator, where he pressed the call button.

“Monica?”

I paused and turned toward him. “Yes.”

“I’m glad you came by.”

The elevator arrived, so I stepped inside. I didn’t know what to say, so I said, “I hope we understand each other now.”

“I’m sure we don’t, but I hope we see each other again soon.”

The door closed, and I sagged against the back wall.

No.

Absolutely not.

I brought my hands to my warm cheeks.

Had I just been played?

The elevator opened to the lobby, and I stepped out, running a hand over my hair from temple to bun. All was still perfectly in place. It was only my thoughts that were a tangled mess.

I should have shut him down as soon as he started to flirt. Instead I’d nearly given in to the temptation of him. I didn’t make mistakes like that. I was careful, methodical.

For just a moment, in the solitude of the elevator, I wished I were the kind of person who said yes instead of no. I let my mind fill with steamy images of what might have been if I wasn’t me and he wasn’t Jesse Rebooth.

# CHAPTER THREE

---

## SCOTT

I was smiling as I closed the door to Jesse's office. There were beautiful women in my hometown, and I'd dated a good number of them, but I would have been hard pressed to remember the name of any of them just then.

First, that tight little bun and conservative dress suit? Some women bared all, thinking that was the secret to exciting a man, but the opposite was often true. Monica Bellerwood was deliciously uptight—the kind of challenge male fantasies spring from. Add a hint of sadness in her eyes, and I was ready to follow her right out the door.

I'd flirted with her in an attempt to make her smile. I was used to people feeling at ease with me. In high school I'd been voted "Most likely to make you smile."

In general, women found me attractive, and when I was younger, I may have indulged in the benefit of that a bit too much. With age comes the realization that quality matters over quantity. Monica was quality—smart, confident, beautiful. How smart? She was overseeing the development of a space station.

Let that one sink in.

Still, I probably shouldn't have asked her out.

*Scott, did you stay hidden in my apartment as instructed?*

*Not exactly. I used facial recognition to access your computer at your office, read over your notes on your latest project, then flirted with the daughter of your biggest client. Practically the same thing.*

I jumped as my phone buzzed. *Jesse*. I glanced around the room. He wouldn't have a camera in his own office, would he? In the age of technology, anything was possible.

Squaring my shoulders, I decided to face the storm head-on and began

with what mattered to *me*. “How are the animals?”

His tone was impatient. “Fine, I guess. Just as you said he would, one of your employees—LJ—came by last night while I was out. I left him a note to skip this morning so I wouldn’t have to deal with him. This plan only works if no one knows about our switch . . . but I should probably feed the animals.”

*You think?* “I’m coming back.”

“No. The rep from the oil company has already been here and is returning shortly. I’ll have what I need soon, and then you can return.”

I wasn’t worried about the oil rep, because I had no intention of selling. Steadman Oil could make a hundred offers, each better than the last, and I wouldn’t accept. The farm was my home. “What do you think the rep will give you?”

“Information.”

Considering Jesse’s lack of social skills, I did wonder if that involved involuntary containment. “Do I want to know what’s going on at my farm?”

“Nothing illegal. I bend the law. I don’t break it.”

I made a pained sound. When I’d agreed to his plan, I hadn’t thought about how it might affect those who relied on me. It was midday, and the animals hadn’t been fed? “I don’t like this.”

“Do you have a better plan?” He didn’t give me a chance to answer. “Before you say you do, let me assure you that you don’t. Waiting and hoping isn’t a plan.”

“I’m glad I don’t have to pretend to be you, because you’re an asshole.” Okay, I was technically pretending to be him, but not fully true to character. Especially not with Monica. He didn’t know it and likely wouldn’t want to hear it, but I’d probably just saved his deal.

“Maybe, but I’ll also be the reason you won’t lose.” That attitude would have sent Monica through the roof. He really was lucky I’d been him that day. Jesse continued, “Although she said this offer is even better. It’s a term lease. If the amount is high enough, are you sure you want to turn it down? Eventually it will all revert back to you, *and* you’ll have cash in hand.”

My focus returned to the reason for our switch. There was a time when I would have considered such an offer. A few years back my mother’s health had wavered and my father had asked me to step up with the running of the farm. I’d always done my share of the manual-labor side of it, but suddenly I was paying the bills and negotiating sale prices for our crops. It was then that I’d realized, especially with my mother’s mounting medical bills, there



wasn't much financial security in my parents' future if we continued the way we were.

They'd given me a solid and loving childhood. I wanted to care for them as they aged as well as they had always cared for me. What could I do that didn't cost money or take me away from the farm? I began to educate myself online, taking every free course I could until I found something that clicked for me. Science, the study of genetics and DNA in particular. I couldn't learn enough about it.

Then one day an idea came to me while I was watching a special on ground fires that talked about how organic soil horizons could smolder for years. I wondered if organic matter could be modified to decay in alternating layers, and if it could, what could be done with the layer that didn't decay? When a plant dies, the nutrition in its cells is essentially locked inside until detritivores and fungi break a plant down. Add bacteria to the mix, and that's the beginning of a food chain. I wondered if instead of locking nutrients in, a layer of the plant's dead cells could keep working, acting like nutrient sponges. I started experimenting with bean plants.

Bean seeds contain starch for the emerging plant. During germination, water triggers the release of plant hormones, stimulating the breakdown of that starch into glucose, required for plant growth. The changes I experimented with added additional cells to the inside of the seed coat. Those cells released a set of hormones with instructions for the seed to absorb nutrients and store them in layers rather than feed the embryonic shoot. These cells stayed active even after the seed was processed, allowing the substance to continue to absorb nutrients, but then became inactive during the animal digestive process.

Essentially, I'd created a bean that could be harvested and processed into a paste that could be infused with vitamins and nutrients and would revert to its original organic matter postdigestion.

It just tasted bad. I hadn't figured out that part yet.

There was also the small issue of how flammable it was. Predigestion, the entire plant was highly combustible—with a slow, extremely hot burn. It was a side effect that made the paste a possible alternative fuel source.

I was confident that in time I'd figure out the best use for the bean. What I hadn't counted on was the cost I was already paying for my discovery. A while back, when I'd shared what I was working on with one of my best friends, Remy, he'd broken into my lab and stolen samples of the

beans and full-grown plants. It had since come to my attention that he was out there peddling both to anyone who would listen. Thankfully I hadn't told him how I was modifying the beans. I hadn't told anyone.

He'd thought it might have something to do with the soil. Steadman Oil appeared to believe the same thing, which was why they were so eager to get their hands on our farmland.

"I'm not selling or leasing the land—no matter what they offer."

"That's all I need to know," Jesse answered.

He didn't know about Remy, my lab, or that LJ wasn't just barn help. I felt a little guilty about sending Jesse in blind, but none of that would have mattered had he stuck to the original plan. "You do need to feed the animals, though. All of them. Do you have a pen and piece of paper? I'll walk you through what to do."

"No, but how complicated could it be?"

*I bet he hasn't even gone in the barn yet.* "I'll stay on the phone while you feed."

"That won't work. The rep is returning to help. I need to look like I know what I'm doing."

*What?* "Hold on, your plan is to have the oil rep do barn chores with you? And you don't think that will give away that you're not me?"

"She's beautiful but doesn't appear all that bright."

Oh no, his tone was telling. I'd just met a woman who made me feel the way he sounded. And what had I done? I'd not asked her out but gave her my number. Mine. Because I wanted to see her again. As if anything good could come from hooking up with a woman I'd met while pretending to be someone else. It was beyond stupid, but Monica had scrambled my brain and sent a good amount of my blood rushing south. If the oil rep was having the same effect on Jesse, we might have a problem. "How beautiful?"

His pause gave me time to worry. "Temptingly so."

"Don't sign anything."

"Stop worrying. I've got everything under control." With that, Jesse ended the call.

*Shit. Shit. Shit.* The situation required reinforcements. I called LJ, the man Jesse assumed worked for me. Leo Jarcisco? The founder and CEO of G-Force TechMods? As if I could afford even a brief consult with someone like him.

My savings had come primarily from my other side hustle, repairing

lawnmowers. No, I couldn't afford to hire a billionaire to clean my barn and care for my animals.

LJ answered on the second ring. "Scott, I expected you back by now."

"I expected to be back. Unfortunately Jesse needs more time. Steadman Oil's rep was there this morning and is returning to help him with the barn chores."

"That's . . . odd."

"Definitely. I don't care about the rep, and I know Jesse thinks he's helping, but he hasn't done a thing in the barn yet. He doesn't know how to care for animals. Could you head over there and make sure everyone is fed? If he's going to have a shot at pretending to be me, you should probably label the bins with directions."

"O-kay."

"And try to watch that he does it right."

"I'll do my best."

"I appreciate that, thanks."

"I'm confused, though. Why would he want the rep to help him in the barn?"

"I don't know. He said something about her being beautiful."

"Gotcha." In a more serious tone, he said, "I hope your brother knows what he's doing."

"He does," I said, even though I wasn't confident that either of us did anymore.

"I'll stick around. Make sure nothing goes wrong here."

"Thanks, LJ."

"So, are you sick of his apartment yet?"

"Not yet."

"You went out, didn't you?" He knew me too well.

"You could say that."

He laughed. "I'm imagining you in a suit, pretending to be your brother. Tell me you went to his office. I would have."

I walked over to Jesse's desk and sank back into the expensive leather chair behind it. "I'm there now."

"No."

"Yes."

"And?"

"I don't feel so special anymore. I thought he was an ass just to me, but

it appears he's like that with everyone."

"Try not to mess up his company too much."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. I'm not going to *do* anything. I'm just looking around. Completely harmless field trip. Well, mostly harmless."

"What's her name?"

"Goodbye, LJ. Thanks again." I ended the call and dropped my phone into the pocket of my jacket.

I wanted to believe the best about everyone, but lately there were too many coincidences. LJ had purchased land that abutted mine around the same time that Remy had taken off. I had no proof that the overlapping of those two events meant they had anything to do with each other, but it was odd timing.

From the first time LJ had wandered up the driveway of my family's farm to introduce himself, LJ had been nothing but nice to both me and my parents. He'd presented himself as a man looking for a healthy lifestyle during his retirement years. He'd left out the part about being a billionaire and that he was still running one of the country's largest tech companies.

Did he think I wouldn't figure out who he was?

I didn't run around bragging about my work, so people took me at face value—the son of a farmer. Simple. Uneducated.

What people like LJ didn't understand was that farming was its own PhD program. Farmers were hardworking innovators, resilient, tenacious. Unlike people in other jobs, a farmer couldn't quit and move on if he had a bad season. Land that was passed down to the next generation was both a gift and a hefty responsibility.

I'd never told LJ I knew who he was.

When he'd offered to help care for the animals, I accepted the help. Over time we'd become friends, and, whether out of pride or because I needed someone I could talk to about it, I eventually told him about my basement lab. I didn't tell him everything. I wasn't that foolish.

Surprisingly, he wasn't shocked by my work. He also was incredibly supportive. We brainstormed how to make bean mash look like a meat substitute. My lab's specialized 3D printer was not only his idea but also a gift from him.

My beans could now pass for a variety of uncooked meats, but that didn't make them taste better or burn differently. He didn't know how to fix those issues either.

I considered LJ a friend, but I didn't trust him completely. He claimed to enjoy doing barn chores and that his contributions to my research were completely altruistic. He got along well with my parents and credited them for helping him finally find peace.

Good, right? Then I discovered he was attempting to grow my beans on his land to "help" me determine if the soil was indeed the cause of the bean mutation. *Right.*

Soon afterward, he bought an RV for my parents so they could travel the country because they'd been so kind to him. Their absence meant I relied on him more when it came to taking care of the farm. He claimed the cameras he'd set up around our property allowed him to watch over the animals when I went anywhere overnight. He was either the kindest, most helpful neighbor we'd ever had or he was circling my discovery, biding his time.

I hated second-guessing people's motivations. I'd thought Remy and I would be friends for life. If I hadn't seen video of him leaving the property the night my lab was broken into, I wouldn't have believed him capable of stealing from me. His betrayal cut deep. To me, he died that night.

If I was honest with myself, searching Jesse's computer files had been to reassure myself that he didn't know about my beans. I needed to believe what he'd said about the loyalty between brothers. Thank God I'd found nothing.

I hadn't seen anything related to the email he'd sent Monica about errors in her data, but I wasn't looking for that. I tapped my fingers on Jesse's desk. Life had been easier when all I'd been was a farmer. I prided myself on being honest and straightforward. No one was after our land, and unless someone was in need of thirty-year-old tractors that required constant fixing, we didn't own anything worth stealing.

I missed those days.

I checked the time on a clock on the wall and swore. Thane, the guy who'd taken it upon himself to be my babysitter, would likely be looking for me. I did one more hunt through Jesse's computer, read over his emails, and memorized names. I'd need them if tomorrow came and Jesse wanted to squat in my life for another day. An image of Monica flitted through my thoughts.

*I hope he does.*

# CHAPTER FOUR

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## MONICA

Late that evening, I was feeling more settled. Despite my belief that Rehoboth's data challenge was a smoke screen, I'd gone over the reports again. I'd also personally visited several of our research offices and demanded immediate updates on their progress and testing. Surprise check-ins ensured people didn't have time to cover sloppy work. What I'd found, however, was that the teams, their designs, and their data were right on track.

I was running on a treadmill in the private gym attached to my office when a security guard entered with my aunt Bibi and her best friend, Deja. "I told you she'd be here," my aunt announced.

Deja waved a hand dismissively. "How do you think she stays so fit?" With a side glance toward the muscular guard at her side, she added, "You don't see a body like that on many women with a brain like hers. She's the whole package."

"And she can cook," my aunt added with a huge smile. "I taught her myself. Do you like meat pie? I don't know if I'd let her fall for a man who didn't."

The guard could not have looked less comfortable with the conversation. I met the guard's gaze and said, "You can go. Thank you."

He nodded and fled. Smart man. Had he stayed to flirt, he likely would have been replaced within hours. My father had eyes and ears everywhere and could be a little . . . overprotective . . . when it came to me. Aunt Bibi said it was proof that you could take the man out of South Boston but you couldn't take South Boston out of the man. For a visionary, my father had a surprising number of old-fashioned views on family. My mother had chosen caring for my father and me over a career.

She'd lived and loved so intensely I sometimes wondered if she knew

her life would be cut short. I was eleven when she died suddenly from ovarian cancer only weeks after it was discovered. That was also the year I got my menstrual cycle and became invisible to my father. Those last two events were unrelated, but when added onto the loss of my mother, they had made for a hellish year.

If it wasn't for Aunt Bibi, I don't know that I would have survived that time in my life. Once a week she had dragged me out of my father's mansion to her apartment in South Boston. Together we cooked, laughed, shared stories of my mom, cried, and sometimes lost our tempers with each other . . . but no matter how my visit went, she always came back to pick me up the next week.

She and Deja had been friends for most of their lives. They were each other's ride-or-die besties. Something Aunt Bibi often told me I needed—along with so many other things she felt I should make time for.

I paused the treadmill and wiped my face with a fresh towel before stepping away from it. "What are you two doing here?" I walked closer. "I'd hug you, but I'm drenched."

That had never stopped Aunt Bibi or her friend from hugging me, and it didn't that time. "Deja's nephew is in town. We're having dinner with him tomorrow night. We're hoping you'll come."

Deja wiggled her eyebrows. "He's all grown up. Tall. Dark. Handsome. And he works on Wall Street. He owns an apartment in New York and just bought his mother a new car. You could do much worse."

I slung my towel around the back of my neck and forced a smile. "If I were looking for a man—and to be clear, I am not—I would take you up on that offer. I remember him." Successful in New York? I was happy for him. It had been years since I'd seen him, but I had only good memories of him. "He was always nice to me. Very polite."

"Of course he was," Deja said with a chuckle. "I'd beat his ass if he wasn't."

I laughed at that. There was no doubt in my mind that she would. Neither of these women would ever hit anyone, but there were times when I'd raised my voice to my aunt and something in her eye said she could. I never tested her past that point, no matter how upset I got. And over time I came to understand that it never was her that I got so angry with anyway, but cancer didn't have a face I could yell at.

As my head began to pound, I rubbed at one of my temples. Aunt Bibi

searched my face. “Something wrong, baby?”

“Just tired. Long day.”

“Go shower. We’ll feed you, and you can tell us all about it.”

Even as I shook my head, she began to usher me toward the bathroom attached to the gym. “No arguments. Make it quick too. Deja and I aren’t as young as we used to be. She gets grumpy now when her blood sugar dips.”

“Did you just call me *old*?” Deja wagged a finger at Aunt Bibi. “Next time we’re at the beach, I’ll ask some young men to compare our asses. I bet you fifty bucks mine is holding up better than yours.”

“Please don’t do that. Do you really want that plastered all over the internet?” Laughter gurgled in my throat.

“I sure as hell do—as long as I win,” Deja tossed back without hesitation. Aunt Bibi cackled. This was how they were, how they’d always been, and there was a warm comfort to that.

All my resistance fell away. “I’ll be quick. Try not to get into any trouble while I’m gone.”

My aunt rolled her eyes. “One day you’re changing their diapers, the next they’re lecturing you on behavior. Monica, what you need to learn is that just the right amount of trouble is what keeps life interesting.”

“You got that right,” Deja interjected.

“Oh Lord.” I headed into the bathroom and stripped for the shower. If I was looking for trouble, it would be as easy to find as calling the phone number that was etched in my memory. I’d tried to use work to block him from my thoughts, but it didn’t help that he was the reason I’d felt compelled to double-check everyone’s progress.

I soaped my hair, then turned beneath the spray, hating how vividly I could see him in my mind. Beyond being intelligent, having more muscles than any man needed, and having that nice strong jaw, he wasn’t my type.

Okay, I like intelligence in a partner.

And no woman minded a few muscles.

He was too good looking, though. And too cocky.

If he was bold enough to come on to the daughter of his biggest client, he probably chased every woman in his building. I’d seen that type before. Give some men a little money and power, and they thought they were God’s gift to women.

My father might have had his faults, but he would never make anyone in his employment feel uncomfortable like that. Not that I was employed by



Rehoboth. It was actually the opposite. Still, flirting with me had been inappropriate.

I paused.

*I need to stop thinking about him.*

Turning the dial to cold didn't help, but it did make me more irritated with him. He'd just ruined a perfectly good shower.

After cutting the water and toweling off, I quickly dried my hair and dressed. Did I have time for makeup? I looked tired, but that was nothing new. And I'd never hear the end of the lecture if I made Aunt Bibi wait too long. In the end I did a quick swipe of concealer and rushed back to meet Deja and her.

A short time later the three of us entered a restaurant a block from my office. It was more of a bar than a restaurant and wouldn't have been my first choice, but Aunt Bibi knew the owner. He'd grown up in her neighborhood, and that meant no one else in the area would get her money. Not that I'd let her pay, but that wasn't the point.

We were being led to a table when Donny, the owner of the restaurant, saw her and called out her name. "Beatrice, if you'd tell me when you'll be here, I'd make up something special for you."

She held out her arms, and the two hugged. "If you make it ahead of time, how special could it be?"

Donny was well over six feet, in his midsixties, and still built like a bouncer. After releasing my aunt, he hugged Deja and then me. Aunt Bibi said he'd been a boxer before she encouraged him to follow his other passion—cooking. His large nose was crooked, as if broken too often to sit straight.

According to Deja they'd dated, but it was a topic that was best not discussed. Whatever had gone on between them, they'd both married other people. Both divorced and remained single afterward.

Donny stepped back from me and smiled. "You get prettier every time I see you, Monica. When are you going to bring a man by to meet me? You must have one."

I opened my mouth to answer, but my aunt spoke before I had a chance to. "She doesn't have time for men; she's building a space ship."

"Station," I corrected, then regretted saying anything when she shot me *the* warning look. Respect. And humility. If I ever got too big for my britches, Aunt Bibi was right there to trim my ego down, and I loved her more for it. My mother had been the same, even with my father. "Sorry."

The smile Donny turned on my aunt was all charm. “Not all men are a waste of time. Some can even cook.”

My aunt didn’t appear impressed. “I cook. Talk to me when you can do something I can’t do for myself.”

Deja coughed on a laugh. “I could think of at least one, but do we really want to go there sober? Donny, bring us a round of shots.”

“Not for me,” I said, but Donny was already walking away. As soon as the hostess seated us at a table and retreated, I looked at Deja. “You know I don’t drink during the week.”

“One shot is medicinal,” Aunt Bibi protested. “Two is drinking. Three is a party.”

Deja added, “Four, and I hit the dance floor. Five, and you bes’ pray I’m alive . . .”

“Because six led to sex and hopefully seven to heaven, unless eight made him not that great,” Aunt Bibi continued.

Deja chuckled. “Nine, and who cares if he wasn’t fine?”

I shook my head but finished it for them. “Ten is when you swear you’ll never drink again.” They both laughed and looked pleased I knew the ending. As if I could forget it. I’m pretty sure Aunt Bibi taught the rhyme to me as a jump rope song when I was little.

“Don’t worry,” my aunt said with a supportive hand over mine. “I’m the bad influence your father can’t fire.”

Donny arrived with four clear shots on a tray. After handing us each one, he said, “To my three favorite ladies.”

We raised our glasses and upended the shots. The vodka burned its way down. A moment later, my aunt asked, “Donny, what did the doctor say about your hand?”

Donny shrugged. “He said I’m old.”

She leaned toward him. “If that’s all he said, he’s a horrible doctor. Go get a second opinion.”

“I’m fine, Beatrice.” He flexed his hand. “Numb is better than pain.”

My aunt sat back. “Stubborn.”

“Bossy.”

“Rude.”

Donny smiled. “Only when you earn it.” He glanced around the table at us. “Would you like menus, or would you allow me to make you what I know you’ll love?”

Deja said, "Surprise us. Everything you make is wonderful."

"Don't feed his ego," my aunt said. "It's large enough."

"It is large, but a gentleman never brags."

Deja laughed, I smiled behind my hand, and my aunt rolled her eyes. When she spoke, though, she sounded amused. "Go make us something, Donny, and no hovering tonight. I need to talk to my niece."

He waved his hands in mock apology. "Of course." Before he left, he leaned down near my ear and said, "If the talk is to nag you about finding a man, place your fork upside down near your plate."

"So you can rescue me?" I joked.

He brought a hand to his chest. "No, so I'll know I'm right. I often am, she just won't admit it."

"I'm not in this," I answered with a smile.

"Smart," Deja said after Donny was out of earshot.

My aunt placed her napkin on her lap with flair. "Now, Monica, start talking. You look exhausted. I'd love to hear it's due to a man, but my guess is it's the space station. I haven't seen you in weeks. I don't know the last time you took a vacation. What you're doing is amazing, but are you sure it's worth the cost?"

I looked away. "There is no man and no cost to working like I do. A project of this size requires dedication. I can rest when it's completed."

"You've been saying that for years. You're not getting any younger."

I turned my fork tines down next to my plate, and my aunt's mouth rounded. "You wouldn't. Donny would never let me live it down."

"I would." I turned it back over. "And he'd be right to. You're worried about nothing. Now can we talk about something else? Anything else? I'm perfectly happy with my life the way it is."

Pursing her lips, my aunt said, "Are you sure you can't slip away tomorrow for a quick dinner?"

I brought my hand over my fork again as a not-so-subtle reminder to close that subject, then turned to Deja. "How is your sister? Did she come up with your nephew? How is she doing?"

After that, dinner went too fast. Donny joined us for dessert and another round of shots. Whatever had gone on between them, somehow they'd remained friends, and I loved seeing them together.

By the time I was walking my aunt and Deja to the car I'd called for them, I felt better about everything in general. She had a way of bringing me

back from the edge. After she slid into the back seat of the car, she lowered the window and held out a hand for me to take. “Monica, you know I only nag you because I love you. All I want for you is to be happy.”

I took her hand. “I know. I love you too.” I couldn’t look her in the eye as I said, “I *am* happy. I love what I do.”

Her hand tightened on mine. “Do you?” After releasing my hand, she said, “Good night, baby. If I don’t see you at my door soon—”

“You will. I’ve just been busy. Once I get ahead, I’ll come by.”

She shook her head slowly. “Life is what happens while you rush around planning to do it better. Right now, baby, that’s all we have. Make every moment count.” With that she raised the window again, and the car pulled away.

A short time later, as I let myself into my apartment, I was still thinking about what she’d said. I’d let too long go between visits. I hadn’t meant to. One week blended into the next. There was always more work than I could get done by the end of the day, and that left me feeling like taking time for myself was irresponsible.

I needed to schedule her back in, though. The last thing I wanted to do was disappoint someone who had always been so good to me. “*Right now, baby, that’s all we have.*”

I froze. Was she ill?

*No. She’d tell me.*

*At least I think she would.*

*She was referring to my nonexistent love life. That’s all.*

*I can’t start worrying about something she didn’t even say.*

I thought about the doubt she’d expressed when I’d told her I was happy. *I have a life many people would envy.* Living alone meant I could come and go as I pleased.

Sure, I didn’t have friends, but I was part of something that was more important than a social life.

*The only reason I don’t have a lover is because I don’t want one.* Lovers were more trouble than they were worth. Many of the men I met wanted to be with me only because I was a Bellerwood. Those who didn’t ran as soon as my father challenged them.

Sex was overrated in a world with vibrators.

I walked across my apartment, shedding my shoes as I did. I couldn’t imagine Rehoboth cowering before my father. He also hadn’t tried to use me

to win my father's attention. He hadn't needed to.

His number echoed in my head. What would he think if I called him? Would he want to come over if I did?

My heart raced from the possibility that he might. As I changed for bed, I realized it had been years since I'd had sex . . . the same amount of time since the last vacation I'd taken.

Even if Rehoboth was good in bed, it didn't matter. He worked for my father, which meant he was off limits.

*Now is not the time to think about this, anyway.*

*Sorry, Aunt Bibi, some things do need to wait until after this project is done.*

*I can't lose focus, not when we're so close to making history.*

I paused while brushing my teeth and wondered why my aunt wanted me to be with someone when she herself intended to die single. And what had happened between her and Donny? If she could, would she go back in time? Would she change anything?

The last thought I had before I fell asleep was unexpected. I wished I'd asked my mother how she had known my father was the man for her.

# CHAPTER FIVE

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## SCOTT

The next morning, I exited the bathroom while toweling off my hair. Another day in the life of Jesse Rehoboth. He needed more time. I didn't ask why, because my gut told me it was for the same reason I wasn't upset to be given another day as him—we'd both met someone worth sticking around for.

LJ had called as well and confirmed that he would be helping Jesse care for the animals. One less concern.

I wish he hadn't followed that by saying the rep from the oil company wasn't just beautiful, she was also a chemist—a skill set too convenient to be a coincidence. Steadman Oil wanted the secret to the beans, and they were getting bolder.

LJ said he had warned Jesse to keep her out of the house. He added he doubted Jesse would follow his advice. *That's not good.* My lab was locked, the key hidden, and I'd left the first part of the basement as it had always been to discourage people from uncovering my lab. If someone peered down there, they'd see only laundry machines and old shelving. They'd have to know to walk through that area and unlock another door to find my lab.

There was no reason for Jesse to show her my basement—unless he already knew about my lab and was on Steadman's payroll. No, Jesse was wealthy; he wouldn't take bribe money. Was there a chance the chemist / oil rep was actually on Jesse's payroll? That would mean he knew about my discovery. If so, for how long? Long enough to set the situation up?

It was a dark rabbit hole to go down.

And implausible. Did I really believe that my biological twin had stumbled onto my secret and then hatched a complex plot to steal my work?

A chemist? Why did he have to be interested in someone who was clearly sent to steal from me?

I lowered my towel as I walked out of the bedroom and heard “For God’s sake, put some clothes on.”

“First time seeing a naked man?” I could have brought my towel around to cover myself faster, but Thane was entertaining to mess with. “Rich people don’t have public showers in school?”

With a sound of disgust, he said, “I could have been the house staff or the cook.”

“Wouldn’t they knock?” I secured a towel around my waist. “If not, whatever they see is on them.”

“They’re accustomed to no one being here during the day. I’ll tell them not to come until Jesse returns.” He took out his phone and sent a message.

“Do you know when that will be? Because what I agreed to is no longer clear.”

“He assures me he’ll be back by tonight. I’m not confident he will be.” He rubbed a hand across his forehead. “Get dressed, then we’ll talk.”

I shrugged and headed back into Jesse’s bedroom. When I emerged a few minutes later, I was in one of his suits.

Thane pocketed his phone and stood as I approached. “Did you get a haircut?”

I decided to play dumb. “A haircut?”

“Your hair was longer yesterday. Now it looks just like Jesse’s.”

“I was bored, so I went out.” I walked past Thane to the kitchen and hunted until I found a coffee machine.

“We told you not to go anywhere.”

I located fresh coffee beans and a grinder. “You want some coffee?”

“No. And why are you in a suit?”

I paused and ran a hand down one of its lapels. “Nice, isn’t it? Not my usual style, but I didn’t bring a change of clothes with me because . . . oh yes . . . the switch was supposed to be for a couple of hours, not days.”

Thane sighed. Not too much he could say to that. “Just tell me you didn’t talk to anyone while you were out.”

“It would have been difficult to get my hair cut without telling the stylist what I wanted.”

With a nod, Thane took a seat at the kitchen island. “I’ll take that coffee. I have a feeling I’m going to need it.”

I held off saying more until the coffee had brewed, then poured two cups and placed one in front of him. I stared him down until he thanked me.

Prior to meeting Thane two days ago, I'd felt a little put out that Jesse hadn't already introduced me to him or their father. I understood that decision better now. Outside of being related to Jesse, we had nothing in common.

Thane looked down at his mug for a moment, then met my gaze. "Leo Jarcisco helps you out at your barn?"

"LJ." I calmly took a swig of my coffee.

He searched my face. "Do you understand who he is or why that seems unbelievable?"

Just how dumb did Thane and Jesse think I was? "He ran a computer company." There, let him wonder if I realized how big of a deal LJ was in that industry.

"Runs. He's still CEO."

"Oh yes," I said as if it didn't matter. "Must be an easy job, since he spends so much time at my farm."

Thane opened his mouth, then closed it and stalled by downing some of his coffee before asking, "Is there a reason someone like him would be interested in your farm?"

I raised and lowered a shoulder. "He says he's learning to appreciate a quieter life."

"And you believe that?"

I wasn't ready to share my doubts with Thane. "When he first bought the property next door, he was really uptight—kept offering me business advice, but all I needed was more help with the barn. We're friends, and I get the impression he hasn't had many of those."

Thane's quick blink was a tell that he was holding back from saying something. "I realize you don't know me well, Scott, but I want you to know that I'm on your side."

I wanted to believe that. "Are there sides in this?"

He sighed again. "I hope not. Jesse is usually levelheaded. He really does simply want to save your farm."

I cocked my head to one side. "What makes you so certain I'm close to losing it?" The insult he didn't voice was still there in his eyes. It removed all guilt I might have felt about screwing with him. "Oh, and I flooded the bathroom. That damn shower shoots water sideways. Should I tell someone?"

"Holy shit. How bad?" He sprinted off to check.

When he returned, he looked annoyed, and it was a struggle to not laugh. I hadn't flooded anything. "The floor is fine."



I shrugged and hid my smile in my mug. “Must not have been as bad as I thought. Sometimes things are not as they first appear.”

He gave me a long look. “I should go. I have a busy day.”

“Do you ever get sick of spending all your time at the office?”

“Lately, it feels like I spend more time in my car than the office. The list of potential clients has grown exponentially since we landed Bellerwood.”

“So it’s a big deal.”

“A *very* big deal—life changing.”

That was hard to believe. What did they need that they didn’t already have? “Weren’t you born rich?”

“I don’t actually know how or where I was born. I was adopted, just like Jesse.”

“And me.”

“Yes.”

The irony. “Looks like we have something in common after all.”

“I suppose.” His eyebrows rose and fell.

“Have you ever looked for your biological parents?”

He made a face. “Jesse and I debated if we should. The potential that it might uncover something unsavory outweighs whatever satisfaction might be gleaned from the experience.”

That was a lot of words when he could have simply said, “I’m too afraid to.” We had that in common as well. I let out an audible breath. “I’ve never looked because I’m worried that the search would upset my parents.”

A hint of a smile stretched his lips. “They’re good people?”

“The best.”

He nodded. “We were lucky as well. Our father has always been strict but fair. And he taught us how to be a family. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for Jesse. He’d say the same for me. Neither of us would likely win a ‘most charming’ award, but we have your back.”

In that moment I saw in Thane a sincerity that made me believe he might just see me as family as well. It made me feel both guilty about having sneaked into Jesse’s office the day before and convinced I should do it again.

With Jesse off playing me and Thane courting new clients, neither of them was likely to be following up on whatever issue Jesse had suspected was wrong with Bellerwood’s data. If I found his original email and somehow gained access to the data she’d shared with him, I could determine whether the data actually was flawed. I had nothing but time on my hands—

and I was already in a suit.

The more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea. This would be my way of watching out for them the same way they were for me.

Thane put his mug in the sink, then checked his watch. “You have my number if you need me. Don’t go anywhere.”

“Where would I go?”

He shook his head. “I have no idea, but don’t.”

I looked back at him and made no promises.

# CHAPTER SIX

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## MONICA

My phone vibrated to announce a new message. In my office.

On my way. I closed out of the email I was working on and rushed down the hallway. My father didn't like to be kept waiting. With a pained expression, I waved to his secretary, straightened my skirt, and took a deep breath. I'd completely forgotten that my father had said he wanted to see me that afternoon.

I didn't make mistakes like that. My chin was high as I entered my father's office. He didn't accept excuses, so I didn't offer any. It was better to simply move on. "Dad."

He turned from looking out the window to face me. "How is Beatrice?"

I took the seat in front of his desk. "Same as always. She brought Deja to see me. The three of us had dinner at Donny's restaurant. It was great to see them." I knew he already knew everything I was saying, but it was easier to pretend he didn't. The constant surveillance was just one of many topics we avoided.

"Good." He moved so he could view the screen of his computer. "Now tell me why I don't have a working life-support system for the crew to test."

"The design is still in progress, but Rehoboth is on schedule." *I hope.*

My father turned his computer screen so I could see an online article. "Eden is now projecting they will launch before we do. That cannot happen. There's no glory for second place in this race. We are either leading the way or we aren't. Which are we?"

I clenched my hands on my lap. "Leading." Eden was another proposed residential space station in the works that was being created by my father's largest competitor, Tatum Stillcourt. Aunt Bibi called their rivalry a "billionaire pissing contest," but my father took it seriously. According to my

aunt, they had a history. No one said exactly what that meant.

“Find out how far along Rehoboth is and what’s holding him back. Move his timeline up. And make sure it’s as innovative as he claimed it would be. First *and best*—anything less, and we might as well not be in the game.”

Game? I highly doubted that my father saw any of this as one. “I’ll speak to him today.”

“Consider this top priority.” My father’s tone lowered an octave.

I rose to my feet. “He’ll deliver early.”

My father’s expression softened. “Good.”

I nodded and paused before asking, “Would you like to meet again before the rocket test on Friday?”

“Is there a reason we need to?”

“No. No. Just checking.”

“If I need you, I’ll tell you.”

“Of course.” I walked to the door.

Just before I left, he said, “Nice work yesterday. Unannounced check-ins with the team leaders are a good way to keep them on their toes.”

I smiled. “Thanks, Dad.”

He turned away again.

After closing his office door behind me, I texted my driver while making my way back to my office. What I had to say to Rehoboth didn’t belong in an email or a text. I’d need to drive over to see him again, but before I did, I needed to collect my thoughts.

Eden’s life-support system was based on a well-tested, if possibly outdated, process. Rehoboth had proposed new technology that he was designing specifically for our project. All computer simulations backed his research, but if my father needed the system early, he would have to produce something more concrete.

In the bathroom next to my office, I took a moment to freshen my makeup and check my hair. Everything was perfectly in place—except the expression in my eyes. The conversation I was about to have with Rehoboth wouldn’t be an easy one, and that was the only reason it needed to be done in person.

Not because I wanted to see him again.

That excited sparkle in my eyes? It had to go. I practiced a frown.

Memories of our first in-person meeting had my cheeks flushing. For a

moment I was standing in front of him again, less than a foot between us, heart racing. He was leaning closer, his mouth hovering above mine, and I was saying yes instead of no.

I squared my shoulders and gave myself a stern look in the mirror. *Okay, so I find him attractive. All that means is I'm human. Temptation is inconvenient but not uncommon. Only the weak give in to it.*

*And I am not weak.*

*This time I'll make it clear to him from the start that I'm in control and all business.* I typed in Rehoboth's number and wrote: On my way to your office. I'll be there in thirty.

Really? That's great. I'm here.

*Not great—business.* Have your latest designs ready to show me.

Okay.

Okay? Few things were that easy. I shook my head and collected my purse. Despite the impression I'd given him the other day, he was about to discover why my father trusted me to head his space station project.

*Time to light a fire on that arrogant ass's . . . ass.*

*Whatever.*

# CHAPTER SEVEN

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## SCOTT

*Monica is on her way over to see Jesse's designs.*

*I should probably call him. Or, at least, Thane.*

*Of course, then I'd need to explain why she has my number and why I'm at Jesse's office for a second day in a row.*

When my phone buzzed, I thought for sure it would be a text from one of them—which would double as a message from the universe that I needed to come clean. *Good, just LJ.*

We have a problem.

What kind of problem?

The oil rep is here looking for you. The fake you. I don't like this.

Was she in the house?

No, not yet. I'm blocking the door.

Where's Jesse?

I don't know.

*That's not good.* The key to the lab is in the junk drawer in the kitchen. I stuck it in a Band-Aid box. If you're worried, grab it out of there. I doubt either of them is going to break down a door to look around.

Will do. Should I detain her?

*What?* Please don't.

She's not leaving with any soil.

It wouldn't matter if she did, but I wasn't about to share that. I'll call Jesse.

As I prepared to do just that, there was a knock on the office door. I looked from the phone to the door and back. It was too soon to be Monica.

"Come," I said loud enough for the person on the other side of the door to hear.

It was the same older man who had checked in with me the day before. George Lindy, Jesse's office manager. This time, though, he appeared . . . sick? Sad? Something was off. "I thought you should know that Carmichael called. His system was down. I know we're phasing out our smaller clients, but he was with us for so long, I sent a tech out. It's all fixed. Normally I wouldn't bother you with this, but he was so grateful he said he'd send over something today in appreciation."

"Thank you for the heads-up."

George nodded and began to retreat. Before he could, I called out his name and asked, "Did something happen?"

He shook his head. "Nothing I need to bring to work."

Forgetting to ask myself what Jesse would have done, I closed the distance between us. "Tell me."

He cleared his throat, and for a moment I thought he wouldn't. Then he said, "As you know, my sister is on hospice care. Her cat has been staying with me. I knew there was something wrong with its eyes. They were red and watery. I took it to the vet. They just called. It has uveitis in both eyes." He cleared his throat and blinked a few times. "I don't know anything about cats, and I'm already trying to balance work and caring for my sister. I don't—I don't know what I should do. They said there's a treatment for it, some kind of lotion that may work. They also said it's advanced and very painful. If I want, they're willing to euthanize the cat." He wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. "I don't want that, but I couldn't even catch the damn cat to bring him to the vet. I had to have the neighbor help me." His hands shook at his sides. "I'm sorry, sir, I'm sure you don't want to hear this."

I stepped closer. My heart broke for all involved. There wasn't anything I could do about his sister, but I could certainly help with the cat. "I've treated cats with this condition before. It can be tricky to get the medicine in. I could take him for a few days. Return him once he's doing better."

"I couldn't—"

"Obviously, only if you're comfortable with me caring for him."

"Of course I would be." George's mouth dropped open. "I don't know what to say. This is so unexpected."

I would have done it for anyone, but I'd also read over George's emails. He was a dedicated employee and a valuable asset to Jesse's company. "Call the vet. Have them contact me. I'll pick up—what's his name?"

"Squiggles."

"I'll collect Squiggles and the medication." I took out my phone. "I'm using this phone temporarily." I sent him the number for it, grateful I had a memory for details. "I'll text you a photo of him as soon as he's settled in so you can show your sister."

George's whole face crumpled as he nodded. "That would be wonderful, Mr. Rehoboth."

I placed a hand on his shoulder. "George, work is important, but what you're dealing with—that's what really matters. Take the rest of the day off. Go see your sister. In fact, have you considered taking family leave?"

His eyes rounded. "When I asked about it, I was told it wasn't an option until after the Bellerwood project was completed."

I inhaled sharply. "Did my—did I say that?"

"No, I spoke to human resources."

"I'm sure that was a misunderstanding, and one I sincerely apologize for. Put in for the time off you need. We'll manage."

He stood straighter. "I've hired a nurse part-time. If I could do half days . . . I would like to still be part of this project."

"Done. I'll call down to HR."

Looking a bit shell shocked, George walked to the door of my office and said, "Thank you, Mr. Rehoboth. Thank you so much."

I waved him away because, had I spoken, my voice would have betrayed how the exchange had affected me. I remembered, too well, how my mother's health issues had shaken my family to the core. Hospice was for those who were beyond treatment, those in need of pain management during the last stage of their lives. No bean discovery or space station was more



important than him being there for his sister at that time.

I needed to believe that Jesse hadn't known George's situation. He might have been self-centered and arrogant, but I refused to believe he was that coldhearted.

Alone in my office, I reflected on how easy it was to get distracted by things that, at the end of life, wouldn't matter. I thought about Remy and wondered if I'd given up on our friendship too easily. I should have confronted him. Over the past few years, though, he'd been getting into more and more trouble with the law. I hadn't called the police when I caught Remy stealing from me. I thought that made me a good friend.

What more should I have done? I didn't know.

Maybe ask him the tough question: Why?

My thoughts were interrupted by a call from LJ. Shit, I'd almost forgotten he was dealing with the oil rep. "LJ, everything okay?"

"Not exactly. Your brother is all worked up. I'm hoping you can talk some sense into him." He switched to speakerphone.

"Jesse?" I called to him.

In an irritated tone, Jesse asked, "Did you ask LJ to get something for you from your house?"

"Yes. He texted me when he saw the oil rep at the farm without you."

"What did you ask him to retrieve? Your key to the basement?"

"Why would you—you haven't been down there, have you?"

"No. What are you hiding, Scott?"

LJ interjected, "This is getting messy, Scott. I told you it might. You need to come back."

Life was messy. This was just what happened when people kept secrets from each other. I wasn't ready to share the secret to my beans, but I no longer saw a reason to hide my lab from Jesse. It was time for him to see I wasn't just a farmer. "Show him the basement, LJ."

Lowering his voice, LJ said, "I don't think that's smart. The fewer people who know, the better."

"What the hell are you into, Scott?" Jesse demanded.

This was difficult, but it wasn't hospice difficult. We needed to find a better footing with each other. "Jesse is my twin brother. He's not just someone who walked in off the street. I trusted you, LJ, and have never regretted it. Give him the key and a tour."

"Only if he apologizes to me," LJ muttered.

I could only imagine Jesse's face when he said, "Seriously?"

LJ continued as if he were lecturing a child. "I've been nothing but nice to you. You practically threatened to off me. I believe that warrants an apology."

True to form, Jesse growled, "Give me the fucking key."

"You get more bees with honey—"

"I don't want a bee, I want answers. Scott, this isn't how I was hoping we'd have this conversation, but if you're doing something illegal, it ends today. And before you tell me you can't leave it behind, there is always a way out. You're not alone."

There he was—the Jesse I could call my brother. And he wasn't walking away even when he thought I was breaking the law. "LJ, do you see what I mean? He's in my corner, just like you always have been."

LJ agreed. "Okay, let's do this. Come on, Jesse. Prepare to have your mind blown. I'll call you later, Scott."

The call ended, and I let out a long breath. I should have said something about Monica wanting to see his designs, but the day was already complicated enough. I used the phone on Jesse's desk to call downstairs to inform them that George would be working half days until further notice. They didn't ask questions, and I wasn't surprised. There were perks to being Jesse.

When I returned to sitting at Jesse's desk, I reread the texts from Monica. My knowledge of air filtration systems was limited to the air conditioner I stuck in my bedroom window each summer, but I couldn't imagine Jesse giving her full access to his work.

Continuing to pretend to be Jesse had the potential to blow up in my face. The sensible thing to do would be to call him back and tell him everything. My guess was that his response would be to immediately switch back . . . which I would have been happy to do . . . before I met Monica.

The truth was that seeing her again felt more important than anything else. There'd been something in her expression, something in the way she'd spoken, that had kept me up all night.

I kept going over our brief meeting. She'd gone to great effort to convince me that she was important. Did that mean she didn't feel that she was?

She came across as aggressive, but that was a common defense mechanism. My farm was full of animals who had been in survival mode for

so long that they'd initially had difficulty recognizing a kind hand. Now most greeted me at the gate and called to me when I walked away. Trust took time.

People in my town joked that I was a sucker, taking in unwanted animals. Getting involved had placed me in uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous situations, but I didn't regret advocating for any of the animals I'd saved.

The same kind of people who would mock me for taking in so many animals would have probably advised me to not get involved in George's life. I might have physically looked like Jesse, but there had to be differences that would be apparent to someone who worked closely with him. Still, how could I not offer to help with Squiggles? Even if it exposed me. Squiggles shouldn't be put asleep simply because his family was in crisis.

I thought about Jesse and wondered what he would have said had George shared the story of Squiggles with him. Having spent a few days in his pristine apartment, I could say with reasonable certainty that he wouldn't have offered to bring the cat home with him. LJ said the farm was having a good effect on Jesse. *I hope so.*

How my twin and I could have started in the same womb and become such different people was beyond me.

*Mom and Dad probably had a lot to do with it.*

They'd taught me the value of not just hard work but compassion as well. My father joked that they'd perhaps done too well on the second part. I'd become a vegetarian early, something my steak-loving father lamented.

He would be the ultimate judge of whether or not my plant-based meats could ever replace the real thing. The market was full of substitutes already, but none as delicious as a NY strip or as nutrient rich as mine could be. With its long shelf life, lack of requirement for refrigeration, and its potential for becoming a near-perfect food, my beans were animals' best hope for getting off the dinner plate.

Slaughterhouses closed? Check.

World hunger eradicated? Check.

It was possible, and I was so close I could almost taste it.

There was a knock on my door. "Come," I called out.

The door opened. "Ms. Bellerwood is here to see you," a young woman said tentatively.

*Monica.* I rose to my feet. "Send her in." *She's going to ask to see the designs. Think.*

Monica entered my office looking even more beautiful than she had the day before. With her hair still in a tight little bun, she was rocking a dress suit very similar to the one she'd worn the day before but this time in blue. I said the first thing that came to my head. "Do you have that outfit in every color?"

Her face flushed, and she snapped, "Do *you* have designs to show me?"

"Of course," I said to stall. I hadn't meant to offend her. "It's a beautiful suit."

"When a man walks into a room, do you comment on his attire?" she challenged.

"No." You know, in that light, I could see her point. "Let's start over. Have a seat." *I can do this. All I have to do is find a way to get her out of the office.*

She took a deep breath. I tried not to notice how that swelled her breasts beneath her silk shirt. I'd thought our attraction had been mutual, but the cold in her eyes hinted otherwise. *My bad.* "Mr. Rehoboth, I am not a person who likes games, so let's not play any. I'm here to see how close you are to having a working system. That's it."

"It'll take me a moment to pull the files up."

She sat down in one of the chairs in front of Jesse's desk. When she crossed one of her amazing legs over the other, I found it difficult to concentrate. From what I understood about the deal, Jesse had plenty of time. I sat down in front of Jesse's computer and pretended to type something. "Has something changed that I should be aware of?"

"Do you have something to show me?"

I kept typing on random keys. "I do, but why the sudden pressure to see them this early on? You accepted my proposal. My performance record is solid. What has you doubting I can deliver?" I searched her face. "Or is this about something else?" I was in a tough spot and grasping, but was there something she was holding back? Was she in some kind of trouble?

I shook my head. Even if she was, I wouldn't be in her life long enough to do much about it. Her eyes narrowed. *She's not happy with me.*

*Or Jesse.*

*Yeah, this would be the wrong time to tell her I'm not him.*

As I continued to fake type, an idea came to me. "I forgot that my brother Thane has been working on a piece of it. I hope he sent me the latest version." I opened Jesse's email and pretended to search for something. "He didn't, and darn it, he's out of the office today."

“Mr. Rehoboth,” she said impatiently.

My phone rang. I raised a finger and answered it. The woman on the phone said, “Hello, Mr. Rehoboth, this is Countryside Animal Clinic. Mr. Squiggles is ready to go home. We have care instructions for you and medication we’ll be sending home. When would you be able to pick him up?”

“Right now?” I asked and earned a glare from Monica.

The woman on the phone said, “We’re open until seven, if you need to pick him up after work.”

“I understand.” I looked Monica in the eye and said, “Of course I’ll come immediately.”

“No need to. He’s sedated and fine. There’s no rush.”

“I understand the urgency. Give me the address, and I’ll be right there.” After she did, I ended the call and stood. “Unfortunately, something has come up that requires my immediate attention. Either Thane or I will contact you tomorrow.” I started toward the door. “I’ll walk you out.”

She rose to her feet as well. “No.”

Normally the tone of her voice would have stopped me in my tracks. *She’s good. Schoolteacher / drill sergeant good.* On any other day, under almost any other circumstances, I would have tried to appease her in some way, but there was nothing I could say that wouldn’t make the situation worse. “Yes.”

“Unacceptable.”

“Unavoidable.”

Temper visibly rising, she strode across the room to stand just in front of me. I’d like to claim I wasn’t turned on by that move, but I’m a guy, and she was stunning. I was smart enough to keep my mouth shut, though.

But—*damn.*

Between gritted teeth, she said, “You’re treading on thin ice, Mr. Rehoboth. You do not want to deal with my father instead of me.”

That was true for more reasons than I cared to admit. I let out a slow breath. “Unfortunately there actually is a situation that requires my attention. If you’d like to accompany me while I handle it, you’re welcome to.”

Her chest rose and fell again as she held my gaze; then she checked her watch. “I have the time, so lead the way.”

*Really?* I hadn’t expected that. Even though it wasn’t for the reason I’d hoped, the idea of spending more time with her had my heart pounding. I

held the door open for her to go through.

She didn't smile, so I didn't either. If looks could kill, I would have been dead at her feet, but there was also a sexual tension between us that was too strong to be one sided. I leaned a little closer to test if I was right. Her eyes dilated, and she audibly caught her breath.

*Double damn.*

Why couldn't I have met her anywhere else and under any other circumstances?

"Let's do this."

She stepped out of my office first, and we walked side by side to the elevator. "Hey, I finally got you to go out with me," I joked and earned another glare. Her cheeks flushed, though, which I took as a sign that she wasn't completely immune to my charms.

We didn't talk on the ride down. I shot a few glances her way, but she kept her gaze fixed on the closed elevator door.

Tough crowd.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

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## MONICA

Seated in the back of Rehoboth's car, I sent a text off to my own driver to inform him that I was going with Rehoboth to a meeting but would contact him when I returned. As our car pulled out into traffic, I returned my phone to my purse and looked straight ahead.

"You're braver than I am," Rehoboth said.

I glanced his way. "Why is that?"

"You didn't even ask where we're going."

I hadn't, and that wasn't like me, but the problem with being around Rehoboth was that he was able to get under my skin and wind me up to the point where I acted impulsively. I should definitely have known where we were headed, but his comment about finally getting me to go out with him had thrown me for a loop.

This wasn't a date, but getting into a car with him and having all his attention focused on me had my engines revving like it was one. I told myself I was being foolish, but how good it felt to be with him was outweighing my common sense.

Before I had a chance to respond, he added, "It's nice to know you trust me."

"It's not like I had much of a choice." My voice was husky and strained.

His eyebrows drew together, and he leaned closer. "There's always a choice."

The concern in his voice made me uncomfortable. I wanted to turn toward him more and bask in the warmth of his gaze. Instead I panicked and said, "What I trust is your instinct for self-preservation. Every move I make is monitored. If anything ever happened to me, the consequences would be immediate and deadly."

*Because that's how to turn on a man: scare the pants off him.*

"Monitored?" He didn't sound scared.

I met his gaze briefly and pointed to the car behind us. "Being a Bellerwood means I have my own private security detail."

He glanced over his shoulder at the black SUV tailing us. "Not a very subtle one."

I shrugged. "They don't have to be. I know they're there." *They're always there.*

"How do you feel about that?"

I froze. No one had ever asked me that before. I didn't allow even myself that luxury. "I don't have feelings one way or another about them."

"It can't be easy to be watched all the time. Do you ever take off and hide from them?"

"Never."

"Do you ever want to?"

I clasped my hands on my lap and looked away. "No."

His breath caressed my cheek. "Admit it, you've been tempted to."

I was fighting a temptation, but not that one. It would have been so easy, too easy, to turn toward him, meet him halfway, and see if kissing him was as good as I was fantasizing it would be. I had to put a stop to this before I did just that. "Mr. Rehoboth, I don't mix business with pleasure."

He sat back. "At least you admit it would be pleasure."

My head snapped around, and his smile took my breath away. There was nothing beyond that moment, our connection, and a throbbing desire I was losing a battle to.

He searched my face for a long moment, then said, "I shouldn't joke with you like that. Especially since you're not attracted to me."

"I'm not *not* attracted to you." *Did that just come out of my mouth?* I brought a hand to my forehead and kept my gaze firmly on what was outside of the car. "You're an attractive man, but—"

"Hey, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I'll stop." His voice was deeper than before. "I keep saying stupid shit, hoping to get you to smile."

I lowered my hand and squared my shoulders. "I'm not uncomfortable."

He sighed. "I am. This is torture."

I turned slightly so I could see his expression. There was such sincerity in his eyes that I wasn't sure how to respond.



In a gentle tone, he said, “I’m not perfect. I make mistakes, sometimes even do things that are hard to defend, but I’m trying to do this right.”

“Effort is irrelevant if you’re unsuccessful.” The conversation had turned so real I retreated behind something my father had said to me hundreds of times.

He shook his head. “Success is subjective, and intention matters.”

“Not in the end. If you take up walking to lose weight but don’t watch for traffic and get hit by a car, you’re still dead, whether your intention was to lose weight or be careless.” *That went dark fast. Well, the good news is that if he was ever attracted to me, I’m killing that off right now too.*

He took a moment to respond. “You don’t believe what’s in a person’s heart matters most?”

“How can it?” I chose the safest, most clinical rebuttal. “It’s impossible to know what’s in another person’s heart or head. Until technology allows otherwise, we’re forced to accept what people claim is there.”

God, he had the most beautiful eyes. Despite what I knew about his character, I would have sworn he was allowing me to look right into his soul. “You’re right—and wrong. I’d argue that it does matter why people do what they do.”

*Okay, I’ll bite.* “So, Mr. Rehoboth, why do you do what you do?”

“Out of love—usually.” His expression was so serious I almost believed him.

I had to remind myself who I was talking to. If Jesse Rehoboth had love for anyone, it was himself. This? It was most likely all to distract me from the reason I’d gone to his office. “Cute.”

His eyebrows drew together in a frown. “Why do *you* do what you do?”

“Responsibility. Dedication. Loyalty.”

“But not because you love it.”

“I’m an adult; I don’t have time to ask myself how I feel about anything.”

“Because you’re so important.”

That stung. I swallowed hard. “Because my father’s space station project is. This will be his legacy.”

“His? Not yours?”

In frustration I threw my hands up in the air. “What are you digging for, Rehoboth? What is this? Are you testing me? Hoping to find a weakness? You won’t. I’m only here because I’m mildly interested in what is so urgent

you were willing to risk my wrath.”

“Your *wrath*?”

My hands clenched at my sides when he laughed. Did he think he was the first man to laugh at me? Being the daughter of a powerful man had always meant I could work twice as hard as the person next to me and still be considered only as good. If I hadn’t grown a thick skin early, I might have believed the many who said nepotism was the only reason I had the position I did at Bellerwood. Nothing, not my many degrees, not the countless solo all-nighters, would ever be enough to prove to them that I was more than just my father’s daughter. *So, laugh away, Rehoboth. You can’t hurt me.*

In what was likely a response to my expression, Rehoboth raised both hands in surrender. “I’m sorry, I’ve just never heard anyone use *wrath* in a serious tone. It’s so—so—comic-book-villain-ish.”

I let out a slow breath and counted in my head. “What?”

“Comic books? Superheroes and villains. Good stuff if you follow the right story lines.” His tone wasn’t condescending. It was almost as if he didn’t realize how offensive his comment had been. Once again he was talking as if we were friends having a conversation about our side interests.

“I know what a comic book is.” I waved a hand between us. “What is this? What are you doing?”

He held my gaze and shrugged. “Trying to get to know you.”

“Why?” I demanded even as my heart skipped a beat. My body knew why; it was my head that needed to hear him say it.

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “Why does any man want to get to know any woman?”

Still, I said what I had to: “No.”

His smile widened. “I hear you loud and clear. All business—no pleasure.”

We sat for a moment, simply looking into each other’s eyes. I reminded myself of why I was there. Business. There was no room for anything else.

It didn’t matter if he liked me. It didn’t matter if I liked him. Being with him would put everything I’d worked for at risk. “Mr. Rehoboth, you and I don’t need to be friends, but we do need to come to an understanding. We’re not designing a flower vase. We’re building something that needs to sustain life with little to no support from outside sources. We mess up, and people die. I’m not the type of person who cuts loose and gets silly. I don’t have a great sense of humor or even a stellar personality. However, it doesn’t matter

if you like me as long as we both do our jobs.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?”

He nodded slowly. “I think so. But I’m not the asshole you think I am. At least, not today.”

Our car pulled into a parking lot, and the driver announced, “Countryside Animal Clinic.”

Rehoboth let himself out, then extended a hand to me. I took it and was surprised by the rough strength of him. Most of the men I knew had soft, smooth hands. Many had their nails manicured on a regular basis. His hands were calloused and tan like someone who did manual labor and spent time outdoors. None of that fit what I knew about him.

I may have held on too long because he bent closer and asked, “Everything okay?”

After quickly dropping his hand, I cleared my throat and looked around. “A veterinary clinic? I wasn’t aware you had animals.” I paused there and gave myself a swift mental kick. He didn’t need to know that I’d gone back and reread his background check, practically memorizing it.

His smile was easy and friendly. “I can guarantee you there’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

A promise? A warning? I wasn’t sure. “Why are we here?”

“To pick up a cat named Squiggles.”

I searched his face. “*Squiggles*? That’s what you named your cat?” Was he joking?

“He’s not mine.” He gave me another of those long gaze-into-my-soul-if-you-doubt-me looks. “He belongs to the sister of one of my employees. The owner is unfortunately on hospice care. My employee is already struggling to care for her, so I offered to help out with the cat—at least until Mr. Squiggles is healthy enough to return to him.”

I swayed back onto my heels. No. He wouldn’t do that. “You want me to believe you’re here to pick up a sick cat you offered to care for—for an employee? That’s what required your immediate attention?”

He gave me an odd look. “I don’t need you to believe me, but if you don’t mind, we will also stop quickly at a store so I can buy a litter box and some food for him.”

This had to be some sort of game. Nothing else made sense. “If you think you can distract me with a cat—”

“Although I’d love to stand here and reassure you that my offering to care for Squiggles has nothing to do with you, he’s sitting in a metal cage, wondering why he was abandoned. Once he’s settled in at my place, marking my rugs, we can circle back to your low opinion of my character.”

“You’re serious.”

“Completely. That little feline is probably angry as hell right now. He doesn’t know that his human is making tough choices out of love for him. All he knows is that she sent him away to a man who also sent him away. I fully expect him to express his displeasure on my carpets—at least until he realizes I’m there to help him.”

Nothing he was saying fit with what I knew about him. It was also alien to how I normally looked at things. Who in their right mind would be okay with an animal destroying their rugs? I needed to let this play out. “Lead the way.”

*There’d better actually be a cat.*

*And designs. Yes, those matter more.*

*Focus.*

# CHAPTER NINE

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SCOTT

When I'd agreed to switch places with Jesse, I didn't know what to expect, but it wasn't that I'd find myself feeling protective of a woman who wanted nothing to do with me—or my brother. The universe sure had a twisted sense of humor.

She'd pretty much admitted she found me attractive. She definitely pushed all the right buttons on me, but—and this was a big *but*—I wanted to help her as much as I wanted to fuck her.

Maybe more. Every time she gave me one of those super-serious sad looks, I wanted to pull her to my chest for a hug. I'm not sure I'd ever met a woman who needed one more. I doubted she'd appreciate the comparison, but she was beginning to remind me of Big Bo, an aged draft horse I'd once adopted.

His owner had contacted me with a story that I'd found difficult to believe at first. The man had raised the shire from a colt and used him to plow his fields. He'd tried to retire the horse when the work became too much for him, but Big Bo couldn't handle seeing his job done by the new horse the man had purchased. If he was in a pasture, he would break down all fencing between him and his owner. If he was confined to the barn, he would refuse to eat or drink. The man was getting ready to put the horse down but wanted to give him a chance at life elsewhere.

The feed alone for such an animal was expensive, but add the vet bills that come with age, and the man was afraid the horse would end up auctioned and sold for slaughter if the wrong person took him. I went to see the shire at the man's farm, and it was just as he'd said. The way that horse had always earned praise from his owner was through hard work. He didn't know anything else and because of that didn't want anything else. It had always

been just him and his owner, and out of love for him that horse would have plowed his fields until it killed him.

I trailered the shire to a friend's farm with huge fields and a small herd of Belgians of various ages. Big Bo towered over those horses, and he had no patience for any of them. Every time we tried to mix them, there was a fight, and more than once we'd had the vet out afterward. Big Bo had never socialized with other horses, and there were rules of engagement he didn't understand. Too big, too angry—we almost gave up on him.

Then, one day, I went to check on him, and he was running with the herd, tail up in the air, the fire of freedom in his eyes. Not the alpha, not the outcast. He'd found his place in the herd. I may have wiped a tear from my cheek that day.

It was still one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen and worth all the extra work I'd done at my friend's farm in exchange for his board. After that, Big Bo mellowed and became the mascot of my friend's farm. He learned to enjoy children and treats. My friend taught him to pull a small wagon for hayrides, and Big Bo discovered he was more than he'd imagined for himself. His life was full of people who adored him, and if he had an off day and couldn't perform his duties, it didn't change how special everyone thought he was.

Monica was plowing her father's field without allowing herself to have a life outside of that responsibility. It made me sad that she didn't seem aware that love shouldn't require that kind of sacrifice.

I wanted to help her as I had Big Bo, but it didn't work that way with people. She wasn't mine to save, and I wasn't the man she thought I was.

"There *is* a cat, right?" she asked impatiently, snapping my attention back to the present.

"Squiggles. Yes, there is." I started walking toward the entrance of the clinic. She fell into step beside me, then walked through the door I held open for her.

We approached the reception desk. I gave my name.

"The bill has already been paid. Would you like me to go over how to use the ointment?" the receptionist asked.

I nodded, and she described a process I was familiar with. "Thank you, I'm confident we can do this. I've treated a cat with uveitis before."

"Oh, good," the woman said. "Then let me go get him."

A moment later the woman returned with a bag of medicine and a

carrier that contained a hissing orange cat. I accepted both. “Is there anything else I should know?”

“We always have a vet on call, so please feel free to contact us if you have any concerns. Mr. Squiggles was sleeping peacefully. He was not happy that I woke him. Although he wasn’t very happy when he arrived either.”

“All understandable, and I’ll see what I can do about that as well,” I promised, then turned to Monica and held up the crate. “Squiggles.” The cat hissed again.

“Lovely,” Monica said in a dry tone.

I tipped my head to one side at her tone. She sounded angry. I didn’t know her well enough to know if that was a defense mechanism or if she actually didn’t care about the cat. I hoped it was the former. “He’ll come around.”

We made our way back out to the car. I climbed in and placed the crate at my side.

She returned to her previous spot, making sure to leave room between herself and the crate. I had to ask, “Do you have any animals?”

“No.”

“Ever want one?”

“No.”

*Okay then.* She definitely wasn’t the woman for me. “I’ve always had animals in my life. In fact, some of my best friends have had four legs.”

She shot me a quick look. “That’s—unexpected.”

“What I appreciate the most about animals is that they don’t get lost in the bullshit. They don’t care about your history or your plans. All that matters to them is who you are when you’re with them.”

A shadow fell over her face. For a moment she appeared lost in her thoughts. I waited, hoping for her to open up to me even the littlest bit—and she did. Tentatively, as if it were something she hadn’t done in a long time. “I misspoke. We did have a dog when I was very young. Paddington. My mother used to joke that he was her therapist as well as her pet.”

I turned to better see her face. “What happened to him?”

She didn’t answer at first. Her expression became strained, and she clasped her hands on her lap, this time so tightly I felt her pain. “He died. She said we’d replace him, but—”

“But?”

Monica looked out the window as she answered. “Her cancer was

discovered soon after he died, and it took her swiftly. There wasn't time, and without her there was no need for a puppy."

*That's not true.* My chest tightened. Despite her matter-of-fact tone, Monica had obviously been devastated by the loss of her mother and pet. How had her father not seen that? "I'm sorry to hear about your mother."

She inhaled slowly. "It was a long time ago."

"Old wounds can be as painful as new ones."

Turning so her eyes met mine again, she said, "It's not something I normally talk about."

"I'm honored you felt you could share it with me."

She searched my face. "I don't understand you."

Not surprising. Comforting her, though, meant more to me than keeping up a pretense. "I'm just a man taking each day as it comes and trying to be the best version of me I can be as I do." I reached out and laid a hand over her clenched ones. "What about you?"

Her hands shook beneath mine, but she didn't look away. "I guess you could say that I'm just a woman living the only way I know how to."

I gave her hands a gentle squeeze without speaking, then ended the contact because she didn't yet appear comfortable with it. This was the most honest exchange we'd had, and I didn't want to say or do anything that would make her withdraw again.

She added, "I'm aware that I can come across as . . ."

"As?" I wanted to see her through her own eyes.

"Cold. Demanding. Uptight."

My heart broke wide open for her in that moment. "That's not how I see you."

Her eyes shone with emotion. "Please don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't say something nice because you feel like you have to. I'm not lacking in confidence." She cleared her throat. "My point was that how I feel about something isn't always apparent. I think it's very nice of you to take care of your employee's cat."

*She likes animals. What she doesn't like is how they remind her of what she lost and maybe how they open her to loving and losing again.* The more I learned about her, the more I understood the walls she'd built to protect herself.

I wanted to help her tear them down, brick by brick. "When we get back



to my apartment, would you like to come in and help me try to put Squiggles's ointment in? It can be a two-person job."

She looked uncertain. "I don't know anything about cats."

I smiled. "You don't have to. All you have to do is help me hold him."

A hint of a smile pulled at her lips. "I could probably do that."

"I'll show you how to swaddle him in a towel." I took a moment to simply enjoy looking down into her beautiful eyes. "He won't be grateful for the treatment, but regardless of what he thinks of us at first, our intentions are good."

She gave me an odd look. "You really care about animals, don't you?"

"I do. I'm also a vegetarian—because I'm pretty much a sucker for all animals." I searched her face.

"I suppose if I tell you I eat meat, you'll lecture me about how horrible of a person I am."

"No, but I may introduce you to a cow. Sit in a field once with a cow napping with its head on your lap, and you'll never crave another steak."

Her forehead creased. "When are you ever on a farm?"

Shit. It was too easy to forget I was supposed to be Jesse. I hated to lie, so I held to as much truth as I could. "I spent some time on one when I was a child." Okay, it was all my time, but whatever. "It's not a cow's fault they were born delicious. Don't even get me started on how unfair life is for pigs. If God was going to make everything taste better wrapped in bacon, you'd think he'd at least make pigs dumb. They're actually smarter than dogs. I'd love to one day develop a substance that tastes so good the decision to become a vegetarian would be a no-brainer."

She smiled. "First finish designing a working life-support system for our space station, then worry about changing the world's eating habits."

Was that a joke? She did have a sense of humor. "Good plan."

Her expression turned more serious. "Did you rush me out of your office today because your designs aren't complete?"

I found it impossible to lie to her, so I said nothing.

She continued, "No one expects them to be. I realize I'm asking you for something ahead of schedule." She took a deep breath. "However, we will be moving the completion date up. If you're unable to meet the new deadline, your contract with us will likely be nullified. We made sure we had the option put in the contract."

*That's not good.* "How much are you moving the timeline up?"

“We’re still determining that. By months, probably, but I’ve been asked to see how far along you are and assist you with getting your project where it needs to be.”

“Okay, so I have a little time.”

“You do, but not much.”

“Give me a week or so to get a presentation together.” *Or for Jesse to. He’ll have to be back by then.*

She sighed. “That’s fair, I suppose. I’ll want full access.”

“That won’t be a problem.” *I hope.*

I’d never felt so conflicted. On one hand I knew I had to tell Jesse what was going on. On the other hand, there was Monica and how much I didn’t want this to be the last time I saw her.

# CHAPTER TEN

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## MONICA

Not only had I left Rehoboth's office without a clear idea of how far along his designs were, but somehow I'd ended up helping him carry a bag of cat litter to his apartment. It didn't feel real, but there I was.

As we stepped into the elevator, Rehoboth turned to me with a smile and said, "The elevator goes right to my apartment and opens with facial recognition. How cool is that?"

I shifted the heavy bag in my arms. "It's a fairly common technology."

He pushed the button for his floor and looked into the screen that scanned his features. "Right. It wouldn't be a big deal to someone like you." After a pause, he smiled and asked, "Have you ever tried to mess with it? Make funny faces at it to see if it will still recognize you?"

"I can't say that I have."

"You'll have to try it sometime. It's entertaining."

"I'm sure it is." Odd for him to be entertained by a technology he used daily, but I was getting used to not understanding Rehoboth. His enthusiasm for something as simple as facial recognition was . . . endearing? Sweet? Definitely confusing.

It also made me wonder about how long it had been since I'd shown that kind of excitement about anything I was working on. I couldn't remember. That realization made me a little sad.

The elevator opened to an apartment that fit Jesse Rehoboth's profile exactly. Huge. Modern. Immaculate. It was similar to my own, which, for some reason, was disappointing.

Cat crate in one hand, a bag with a litter pan, plastic dishes, cat food, and medicine in the other, Rehoboth led the way to a guest bathroom. "Let's start him off in here. He'll have room to move around, but we can still catch

him to treat him. Give me a moment to set it up.” He placed the crate outside the bathroom door, went inside the bathroom, then returned a moment later.

The closer he came to me, the more I forgot the reasons we couldn’t be together. His broad chest filled my field of vision. The scent of him was subtle but heady enough to have me leaning in. I raised my eyes to meet his gaze and got lost in how the heat that was washing through me was reflected there. I forgot my father, the space station, how wrong getting involved in anyone related to the project would be for me. The yearning was almost too strong to be denied. I swayed toward him.

When he reached for me, the bag of litter I’d been holding hit the floor.

“Whoops,” he said, breaking our connection as he bent to retrieve it. “Don’t worry, it didn’t spill.”

Shaking my head, I took a step back. He’d been reaching for the litter—not me. *I shouldn’t be here.*

Rehoboth disappeared again into the bathroom, then returned for the cat. This time he closed the door behind himself, giving me a reprieve from his presence. I lightly slapped my cheeks in an attempt to wake myself up. *You’re smarter than this.*

After hastily exiting the bathroom and closing the door behind him, Rehoboth let out a breath of relief. “We’ll give him a little time to settle in before we try to treat him. He is one pissed-off kitty.”

I nodded.

He sniffed the sleeve of his jacket, then made a face. “Do you mind if I change? Nothing lingers more than the smell of dust from poured litter. Give me the smell of a barn over that any day.”

“Sure.” *Yes, that’s what I needed to regain my composure . . . to imagine you undressing in the next room.*

He waved toward the couches in the living room. “Make yourself at home. I’ll be quick.”

“Take your time,” I said in a slightly strangled voice. As he walked away, I tried not to stare at him like a starving person watching a delicious meal being pushed out of reach.

Alone, I wandered the living room, looking for insight into the man who had me thoroughly confused. There were awards, trophies, a few photos of him with his father and his brother, Thane. Nothing unexpected. I picked up one of the frames to take a closer look. Some people claimed everything about a family could be discerned from their photos. This one portrayed three

men standing shoulder to shoulder in solidarity. Their father stood straight and tall—a proud man. Both Jesse and Thane mirrored his stance.

Were they as close as they seemed? How did Rehoboth feel about being adopted? I'd always considered my father's background checks thorough, but I realized then how very limited they were. Rehoboth's file contained names, dates, his achievements, and his failures. It didn't reveal how he felt about any of it.

If spending time with Rehoboth that day had shown me anything, it was that he had unexpected sides to him. He wasn't just goal driven and successful. He was also a gentle and attentive companion, the kind of person who cared for sick animals in his spare time. Getting to know all sides of him was becoming an addiction. I looked down at the photo in my hand and wondered what else I didn't know about him.

"That's better," Rehoboth said as he returned.

I set the photo back on the shelf with a clatter and turned to face him. Although he'd changed suits, it was the same style from before, just a different shade. "Do you have that outfit in every color?" The comment flew out of my mouth before I'd put much thought into if it should.

He smiled. "Funny. And a little snarky. I like it."

I repeated the word slowly. "Snarky. Not sure that's a compliment."

"It's meant to be." He moved to stand close enough that I had to tilt my head back to look up at him. "I have a feeling there's more to you than you let most people see."

"I was thinking the same thing about you."

His eyes darkened, and he looked away briefly. After a moment he asked, "Would you like a drink?"

I should have declined. It wasn't even noon, but as my aunt would say, one shot was medicinal. A smile curled the corners of my mouth as the rest of Aunt Bibi's little poem played in my head. "I'd love one."

He walked past the bar and disappeared into a kitchenette before returning with two glasses of ice water. "Normally I'd offer you a beer, but apparently I don't drink it." As he made his way toward me, he paused near a liquor cabinet. "Oh, that's where he—I keep the good stuff. I'll have to remember that."

It was an odd thing to say. I opened my mouth to ask him how he could be surprised by what was stocked in his own home but forgot to when his hand brushed against mine as he handed me my glass. There was no rational

reason why that simple touch should have felt as good as it did, but it did.

How had I not felt this way for anyone before him?

He tipped his face closer and said, “This might be a little out of left field, but since you know a lot about technology, my guess is that you’ll know the answer.”

“Okay.” I took a gulp of water. Was this where he would try to pump me for classified information about my father’s work? *Please don’t be that guy.*

“Is *analprint* one word or two?”

I nearly spat water out as I coughed, laughed, then choked in quick succession. It took me a moment to settle, and my voice was still a croak when I asked, “What?”

He thumbed in the direction of the bedroom. “I have a really high-tech toilet. You probably have the same one. It analyzes my . . . deposits . . . then sends my phone updates on my health. It took a little getting used to, and I’m still not entirely sure I like the idea of it having that kind of photo of me on file, but that’s the image it uses to distinguish one user from another. Anyway, *fingerprint* is one word. I’ve looked *analprint* up online, and it’s written both ways. If I’m going to talk about my toilet’s technology with any real authority, I should at least know if *analprint* is one word or two.”

The ridiculousness of the question tickled my funny bone, and I flashed him a huge smile. “Finally, a topic worthy of real research.”

“Thank you.” He leaned in until his face was within inches of mine. “You have a beautiful smile.”

I sucked in a breath. I felt beautiful when he looked at me that way. “So do you.”

He brought a hand up to caress my cheek. His voice turned deliciously breathless when he said, “I like you, Monica Bellerwood.”

I swayed toward him, my lips parting in anticipation of his kiss. “I like you too.”

Our moment was interrupted by the sound of something crashing in the bathroom. Rehoboth made a face. “We should check on him.”

Neither of us moved. “We should.”

He ran a thumb lightly across my bottom lip. “I wish . . .”

“What?” A kaleidoscope of carnal wishes danced through my head. If we were thinking the same thing, I was in real trouble because I was ready to deal with whatever consequences came from being with him. “Jesse—”

“Exactly.” His hand dropped away. “I can’t do this. I’m not currently . . . available.”

His words slammed into me. He wasn’t married—my father wouldn’t have missed something like that. Embarrassment replaced desire. Anger rushed in as well. I stepped back from him. “I suppose I should thank you for being honest.”

He made a pained face. “I hate how complicated this is.”

I raised a hand. “It’s not.” I took another step back. Distance. I needed distance. “There is obviously an attraction between us, but that only means we’re healthy adults. It means nothing.”

He stepped toward me. “I handled this badly.”

I put several feet between us. “You didn’t, because *nothing* happened.” I put my glass down on a counter and walked toward the door with my head high. “Have your designs ready to show me ASAP.”

“I’m sorry. Monica—”

“Goodbye, Mr. Rehoboth.” I turned, opened the door, and fled.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

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## SCOTT

Later that evening I was sitting on Jesse's couch, doing shots of a variety of his liquors. Squiggles was perched on the back of a nearby chair, judging me silently. I'd treated his eyes, then decided not to confine him to the bathroom again after I heard him shredding the wallpaper in there.

I wasn't a big drinker and never drank alone, but I was feeling pretty shitty about how things had gone with Monica. I'd come close to telling her everything but held back out of loyalty to Jesse. I didn't want to be the reason he lost his Bellerwood contract.

I also didn't want to be the reason Monica looked at me like I'd announced I enjoy kicking puppies. I'd wanted to chase after her, but unless I was willing to tell her the truth, all that would have done was confuse her more.

Soon after she'd left, Jesse called and said he needed at least another week, maybe two, as me. He claimed he was following up on some issues he'd found there, but I knew it had more to do with Crystal Holmes, the oil rep. According to LJ, he was smitten with her.

*Perfect.*

*I'm sure that'll unfuck this situation.*

*Nothing makes sense anymore.* I downed another shot.

*You know what? Have my fucking life for a while, Jesse. It's not like returning to it is what I want right now, anyway.* I downed a shot of some liquor I'd never heard of and wondered what was wrong with plain old whiskey.

I picked up another fancy unopened cognac bottle and wondered if I'd find peace at the bottom of that one. After pouring myself a glass, I raised it toward Squiggles. "To shitty no-win situations."



Squiggles turned his attention to cleaning himself, which I took as a clear commentary on my situation. “Gotcha. No one likes a whiner. You’re the one with real problems. Sorry about your eyes. Don’t worry, you’ll feel better in a couple of days. Me? I might be stuck here for weeks.” Squiggles moved on to cleaning his balls, and I nodded. “You’re right, I’ll shut up now.”

I did another shot, and the room spun a little. *Does Jesse’s toilet also analyze vomit?*

I thought that was the funniest joke. Squiggles didn’t. “I didn’t ask to come here, you know.” My speech slurred as I leaned forward toward the cat. “I knew switching with Jesse would be a mistake. I didn’t mean to hurt Monica. All I wanted to do was see her smile.”

I sighed. “I miss my farm and all my little rescue buddies. If it doesn’t work with you and George, you can come live with me there. We’re our own little island of misfits, but I’m happy there.” Squiggles paused to look at me. Did he doubt me? “You can depend on me. I’m res-res-responsible.” It was a tough word to say as my brain fogged.

That was all Squiggles could handle of me. He retreated to the bathroom and his crate. I sat back with a groan.

“What the hell are you doing?” Thane demanded.

Rather than looking up, I poured myself another shot. “Settling into life as Jesse. He needs a few more weeks. Cheers.”

Thane began to gather the bottles from in front of me and returned them to the bar across the room. “Alcohol has never made a situation better.”

“Maybe not, but all I’m hoping for is a good old-fashioned pass out.” I poured one last shot before he took that bottle from me as well.

“I wasn’t aware you had a drinking problem.”

“I wasn’t aware you were a judgmental douche, but here we are.” I waved the shot glass in the air. “Actually, I knew that about you from the get-go—get-go. You don’t hide it well.”

Thane inhaled deeply and made a face. “What do I smell?”

I turned my head and sniffed my armpit. “Not me.”

He looked around. “Did you get an animal?”

I brought my lips together and made a raspberry before answering. “Can I plead the fifth? Isn’t that what people say in court when answering a question that might incinerate them?”

“Incriminate?”

“Yeah, that’s it. I don’t want to be incriminated or incinerated.” I laughed at my own joke. “Poor *in*. Why are all the words that start with it so bad? What did it ever do to anyone? Inflexible. Indifferent. Incorrect. Insane. Life isn’t fair, not even for prefixes.”

“You’re not making any sense.”

I waved a hand at him. “That’s because you’re *in*-sensitive.” I laughed again, probably much harder than my joke called for.

Thane started walking around the apartment, swearing.

By the time he returned, I’d gone down a prefix rabbit hole. “I was wrong. Ingenious. Innovative. Incredible.” All the words I would have used to describe Monica. “*In* might come across as grouchy, but on the *inside* it just wants to be loved.” *Inside. I should be a fucking comedian.*

Clarity came to me in that muddle of thoughts—my attraction to Monica wasn’t about what was on the outside. Sure, she was beautiful, but there was more to her than she let the world see. I wanted to meet that Monica.

Returning to stand over me, Thane accused, “You went out. I told you not to.”

I rose unsteadily to my feet and waved a finger at him. “I didn’t break any laws. This is not a prison. You’re not my jailer. I’m not going to sit here for weeks, twiddling my thumbs up my ass until he returns. Not going to happen.” I swayed as the room spun again.

“Easy there,” Thane said. “And you’re right, this is not what you agreed to, but he’s trying to help you.”

“No, he’s trying to get laid.”

“That too,” Thane said with a sigh, moving to take the seat across from the couch.

I plopped onto the couch. “I didn’t even need his help . . . or yours. I had everything under control. Now it’s all a mess. I used to pride myself on being honest. I’ve become a big fat liar—even to a woman I think I could care about.”

“Hang on, what?” Thane sat forward. “Is this someone you knew before?”

“No, we just met.”

“When? How? Where did you go?”

Too many questions. I didn’t bother to try to answer them. Instead, I said, “She’s amazing, Thane. Sure, she hisses more than Squiggles and

definitely has issues, but I feel in my soul that I could make her happy.” I pounded my chest. “In my soul, Thane.”

“Oh boy.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Who is this woman?”

Even drunk I wasn’t dumb enough to volunteer that information. “Doesn’t matter. I tried not to like her, but she’s so damn smart. I love smart women. So sexy. And sweet. I think. She just hides it under layers and layers of—”

“Does she know you’re not Jesse?”

“No. She believes every fucking lie I tell her.” I made a sad face. “I’m a horrible person.”

“Not horrible but not smart. At least, not about this.”

“She thinks I’m dating someone because I told her I’m not available. I couldn’t let her fall for me while I’m Jesse. And she’s already falling.” I remembered the look she gave just before she dropped the kitty litter. A woman doesn’t look at a man that way unless she’s thinking what he’s thinking. “I don’t want to lie to her anymore.”

“You can’t tell her the truth. Not yet. She could expose us.”

He was right; it wasn’t all about me. I grimaced. “Even if she likes me, she doesn’t know me. She thinks I’m rich and successful. How do I tell her I’m just a farmer?”

“I know about your basement lab. I’d say you’re a lot more than *just* a farmer.”

“Want to hear something crazy?”

“I’m sure I don’t.”

“I feel really bad about how things went with Mon—my friend. I thought I could spend a little time with her, cheer her up, and it would be harmless. Now she thinks I’m a cheater. She looked so hurt. I’m not used to feeling guilty about anything. I’m the good guy.”

Thane gave me a long look. “Oh my God, you and Jesse do sound the same.”

I groaned. “Are you trying to make me feel worse?”

“No. So, I take it you and this woman are over?”

I nodded. “Yep. Done. *Finito*. Finished.” My stomach gurgled in warning, but I ignored it. “She wants something I can’t give her.”

“Not yet, anyway. Let Jesse finish his role as you, then we’ll announce your existence, and you can worry about meeting whoever you want to.”

It was more complicated than Thane knew, but I didn’t see how telling

him would help. “This isn’t about wanting a date for Friday night. She’s—special.”

“Scott, I can’t stress this enough: no one knows about you. No one *can* know, not right now.”

I thought about the deadline Monica had given me. “She wants to see me again. She was pretty adamant about it.”

“Scott—”

“I won’t lie to her again.”

“What you need to do, Scott, is find something else to think about. Read a good book. Binge-watch some movies. This will be over before you know it.”

I rolled my eyes. “Easy for you to say.”

“What if I brought you some of your research? You could work on it here.”

I shook my head despite how it made the room spin. “I can’t do experiments here. The bean paste is highly flammable. My lab is set up to handle that. You don’t want me accidentally burning down this building.”

“Right.”

It was then that I remembered the reason Monica had originally gone to Jesse’s office. What if Jesse had actually discovered an error back before his other head started doing all the thinking for him? It was partially my fault he hadn’t followed up on it. If I found the error, I could give the information to Thane and help Jesse and Monica at the same time.

If I saved her project, she’d have to forgive me for how we’d met. Oh yes, this was definitely better than an I’m-sorry-I-was-pretending-to-be-my-brother bouquet. “Give me access to your Bellerwood air filtration system files.”

“Not going to happen. That’s highly classified information.”

“Oh, like the contents of my basement that you and Jesse have no problem discussing?” I pointed to my chest, then his. “Trust goes both ways, Thane.”

“I’ve got a better idea. How about a vacation? Tell me where you want to go, and we’ll make it happen. Don’t look at this as being trapped here; think of it as being free to go anywhere. For a few weeks you won’t have any responsibilities.”

After a slow blink, I asked, “Just how stupid do you think I am?”

He sighed. “I don’t—”

“You do, but at the same time you won’t give me the opportunity to prove that I’m more than who you’ve”—I hiccuped—“decided I am. What are you so afraid of? That you’ll discover I’m smarter than both of you, even though I didn’t have the same fancy education?”

His expression was more insulting than his next words. “I’m not doubting your intelligence, but these are highly specialized designs based on research that isn’t in the public domain yet. Most of it would probably—”

“Be over my head? Then what’s the risk? I promise I won’t put crayon marks all over them.” I stood, swayed a little, but planted my feet. “Or tell me you really don’t consider me one of you, and let’s end this game now.”

He ran a hand through his hair and rose to his feet as well. “You’re drunk.”

I was, but that wasn’t the point. “You know I’m right.” I fought to not slur my rebuttal.

“I’d have to discuss it with Jesse.”

“Do you really believe the space project is his priority right now? If it were, he’d be here, wouldn’t he?”

“Why do you want to see the plans?”

“You were right. I do need something to think about. What’s the worst thing that could happen? I realize you’re right and they make no sense to me?”

He nodded. “I suppose I could give you limited access.”

I smiled. I was confident that I could shift any access he gave me to full access.

He continued, “I do understand how this must be frustrating for you. Perhaps helping with the project would be good for you—and who knows, maybe even us.”

“Your confidence in my abilities is—”

“In my defense, you still don’t understand how the shower works.”

I leaned toward him and gave his shoulder a smack. “Never once did you consider that I might be fucking with you?”

His expression was priceless. He hadn’t. Pride is its own weakness, or so my father always said. There was likely a lot Thane didn’t see because of it.

I touched a hand to my stomach. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have mixed too many alcohols. I’m not feeling so good.”

As I started to walk away, Thane stepped into my path. “I’ll bring you

some files, but you need to stay hidden. Tell me you understand that.”

My stomach churned. “I’m done talking.”

He remained in my way. “I don’t know if you’ll remember this conversation, but do not go anywhere without telling me. Don’t talk to anyone as Jesse.”

“Thane—” I went to push past him.

He put a hand on my shoulder to stop me. “Say you understand.”

“I—” The rest of what I was going to say was lost as I began to projectile vomit on the floor, on his shoes, and over the bottom half of his legs.

“Holy fuck,” Thane said before adding a litany of profanity.

I would have apologized, but a second wave of nausea hit me, and I rushed to the bathroom instead.

*I did try to warn him.*

I must have napped hugging the toilet, because when I surfaced from the bathroom, Thane was gone and the rug had been cleaned. I went to the bedroom, still fully clothed, and sank down onto the bed.

Squiggles perched on the top of the headboard he’d made into a scratching post and looked down at me in quiet judgment. I kicked off my shoes and closed my eyes to block him out. As far as making good choices went, he wasn’t doing any better than I was. Sleep came almost instantly.

The next morning, sporting one hell of a hangover, I rolled out of bed and into the shower. *And this is why I stick to beer.*

As I made my way to the kitchen to hunt down something to eat, I noticed a laptop that hadn’t been there the day before. I checked my phone and saw a message from Thane.

Drink plenty of fluids. The files you requested are on the laptop.  
The password is my birthday. Good luck.

*Ha. Ha.*

Despite my pounding head, it took me about two minutes to find the date of his birth online on a public records site. If that small hurdle was a test, it didn’t say much for his opinion of my abilities. Did he imagine my discovery with the beans was something I’d simply stumbled onto the same way even a broken clock is correct twice a day?

*Whatever.*

I settled my stomach with some toast, treated Squiggles's eyes, then sent George a photo of him sleeping on a chair in the sunshine. A gratitude-filled text from George came in almost immediately.

I wrote back: Working on something outside the office. Please direct ALL requests to speak to me to Thane. He's taking the lead for now.

In disgust, I tossed my phone to the side. I wanted to call Monica and explain that I wasn't an asshole, but lately I'd felt like one. Prior to the switch, my goals and my motivation had been clear.

I wasn't sure what the fuck I was doing anymore. LJ said spending time in my life was bringing out a good side of Jesse. Was spending time in his doing the opposite for me? I didn't want to do anything that might cost Thane and/or Jesse the Bellerwood contract, but I also hated the expression in Monica's eyes when she'd left. She was disappointed.

I'd done that.

I wouldn't lie to her again. That meant, though, that I needed to avoid her until I could come clean.

It was an impossible situation, so I did the only thing I could—I settled myself onto the couch with the laptop and began to go over the files Thane had given me access to and then files he hadn't. Could have been the twin thing, but when a file wasn't unlocked with facial recognition, Jesse's passwords were easy enough to guess. Every last one of them was about winning.

If being at the farm was helping him grow, it didn't feel right to rush him. *Take your time, Jesse. Come back as less of a douche.*

As I dug in, I tried to retrace Jesse's digital steps and see the information through his eyes. I encountered a lot of data I didn't understand. Especially when I stumbled across multiple reports Monica had sent Jesse. Part of me wondered if Thane's assumption that it would be beyond my ability to understand had been correct.

I paused as my mother's advice echoed in my thoughts. "*You become good at what you put effort into, so be careful where you put your focus because, like driving a car, where you look is where you will go.*"

No wonder I was frustrated. I was trying to see things through Jesse's eyes when I should have been looking at them through mine.

*Whatever I don't know can be learned.*

*Every problem has a solution.*

Like it was a hard-to-fix tractor, I would find the issue with the data if I

was patient and thorough. *Jesse, what did you see that everyone else missed?*  
The answer was there, and I was determined to find it.



# CHAPTER TWELVE

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## MONICA

My ego was still smarting the next morning. I tried to push Rehoboth and the mistake I'd almost made the night before out of my head, but like a boomerang, it kept returning to sideswipe me.

What did I think . . . that he'd invited me up to his apartment to seduce me? How could I have been so stupid? I played the day over and over in my head and cringed each time because it was glaringly obvious that when it came to Rehoboth, I was easily manipulated.

He hadn't wanted to show me his plans, and he hadn't. Once again, with very little effort on his part, he'd won.

I'd just completed a large sweep of unannounced check-ins on some of the world's leading researchers, and not one of them had blocked me from seeing their work. Rehoboth was my kryptonite. I'd gone in with a clear objective. I'd been professional but firm. Hell, I'd even made it clear to him that our contract with him was dissolvable.

I closed the door to my office and then the blinds. By now my father would know that I'd gone with Rehoboth to his apartment. I had no defense for it.

Honesty would definitely not be the best policy in this case. *Dad, I haven't had sex in so long, and you know what lust does to the brain . . .*

Yeah. No. My father would likely fire me on the spot.

I walked over to the exercise mirror beside my treadmill and looked at my reflection there. I thought back to something Rehoboth had asked that I couldn't shake.

*"Why do you do what you do?"*

*"Responsibility. Dedication. Loyalty."*

*"But not because you love it."*

*“I’m an adult; I don’t have time to ask myself how I feel about anything.”*

*“Because you’re so important.”*

*“Because my father’s space station project is. This will be his legacy.”*

*“His? Not yours?”*

That had stung as well. Bellerwood was my father’s company. The space station was his dream. We’d never talked about me ever taking it or the company over. That didn’t mean I didn’t love my job.

*I do, don’t I?*

I slapped a hand down on the surface of my desk. *Get out of my head, Rehoboth.*

*I will not let you ruin this for me.*

*I am not the kind of woman who needs a man to validate or protect me.*

I sat in my chair and spun it so I was facing the window behind it. What was it about watching Rehoboth care for a sick cat that had me off-balance? I imagined sitting on Rehoboth’s lap, cuddled to his chest, wrapped in the warmth of his arms, and hated whatever it was in me that yearned for that experience.

*I could tell my father I don’t want to work with Rehoboth, but he would want to know why. He’d also see that as a failure on my part.*

*I wish . . .*

There was no positive to wishing things were different. Prayers were also a waste of time. I’d lost faith in both early on.

Alone in my office, I asked myself what it was that I would want if I allowed myself to. The answer shook me.

*Sometimes I don’t want to be a Bellerwood.*

*I want a normal life—one with friends, a life outside of work.*

*I could afford anything I wanted. So why do I feel like I have nothing?*

I wasn’t an animal person, but I’d wanted to stay and learn how to care for Squiggles. Why? I looked deeper.

*Why am I suddenly feeling so—needy?* For just a few minutes I hadn’t wanted to be independent. I wanted to lean, trust, soak in someone else’s strength.

Not just anyone’s—Rehoboth’s.

I’d always gravitated toward math and science because I needed my questions to have answers. I trusted what I could see and prove and not much else. Facts over feelings.

Rehoboth had me all spun around and confused. I wasn't even calling him by his first name because it didn't fit him. I'd come to that undefendable decision based on a feeling.

I wasn't the type to base my decisions on something that subjective, and I didn't know what to do with how intensely I didn't want to call him Jesse.

Equally disconcerting was how much I wanted to rewind to when I was in his apartment. Given another chance, I wouldn't retreat. I'd ask all the questions that had haunted me since I'd bolted out of there.

What had he meant by *unavailable*?

Who was she?

Did he love her?

Thankfully I had no reason to see him again until he had plans to show me. He'd asked for extra time to do so, and that was actually a good sign. It meant, regardless of how everything else had gone, that he'd taken news of a shortened production time seriously.

At least I'd done something right.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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## SCOTT

As I rode up the elevator of Jesse's office building more than a week later with Squiggles in a carrier, I did ask myself if returning there was wise. George had said he was at the office that morning, and I was tired of trying to avoid everyone.

The latest updates from LJ had been positive. Being on my farm was working magic on my brother. He looked happy, the animals loved him, and things seemed to be working out with his Crystal—the oil rep. LJ was optimistic that Jesse would soon tell her who he was and the switch would come to an end.

I was ready for it to, but I also wanted to dig just a little deeper into something I'd found in Jesse's files. Some changes Jesse had considered making to the designs based on Bellerwood's data didn't add up. I didn't know much about air filtration, but I'd spent the last few years learning everything I could about the stability of fuel sources and how they responded to different levels of oxygen. I'd need access to the files I'd seen on Jesse's office computer, the ones that included Bellerwood's older specs, to confirm my suspicion that someone at Bellerwood was doctoring numbers.

I hadn't said anything to Thane or Jesse about it yet, because all I had was a hunch. If I found proof, I was determined to handle it in a way that wouldn't cause trouble for Monica. I didn't believe for a moment that she knew about it. My goal was to help her as well as my family, not pull a pin from a grenade and toss it between them. All problems had solutions, and I had yet to confirm that there even was a problem.

I looked down at Squiggles in the carrier and admitted that the problem could be me. I couldn't get Monica out of my head. She was the last thing I thought about before I went to sleep and the first thing I thought about when I

woke up. Was my desire to find a way to help her nothing more than me looking for a way to see her again?

*Sure, I lied to you.*

*And avoided you.*

*But, look, I just found something that'll save the space project.*

I stumbled as I stepped out of the elevator. *Or destroy it. Whoops.*

"Mr. Rehoboth," George called to me as he approached. When he came to a stop beside me, he looked at the carrier warily.

I held Squiggles up. "No hissing. You'll still have to put ointment in his eyes, but the vet thinks you caught it in time. They're no longer inflamed, and his sight shouldn't be impacted much. I think you'll find that he's a much happier cat now that he's not in constant pain."

George accepted the crate from me gingerly. "I don't know how to begin to thank you."

I pocketed my hands and rocked back onto my heels. "How is your sister?"

His lips pressed together before he answered, "Same."

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged and his eyes turned watery. "I've done a lot of praying, but at this point, I don't know what to pray for anymore."

All I could do in that moment was repeat something my parents had said when I'd asked them hard questions and hope their words might bring him comfort. "I don't have the answers, but you're not alone. You will weather this storm, and I'm here for you when you need someone."

"Who are you?" George asked in a tight voice.

There was a realness to the moment that didn't allow for a lie. I said, "I'm who I need to be for now."

He looked me over. "You're not an alien or something, are you?"

I laughed. "No, I can honestly say that I'm one hundred percent human."

"Where is Jesse Rehoboth? Because you are not him."

I probably should have lied, but if anyone deserved the truth, it was someone who was dealing with as much as George was. "My brother is off being me, convinced I need saving and sure he can handle the situation better than I could."

"Sounds about right." He gave me another long look. "I had no idea he had a twin."

“It was news to both of us as well.”

George nodded. “What are you doing here?”

LJ would say I was too trusting, but I’d argue that a life without trust isn’t one worth living. Everything I knew about George supported my belief that he was a loyal employee and a good person. I needed an ally like that. “Trying to help Jesse. Following a hunch. I could use your help.”

“Help?”

“Come into my office . . . *his* office . . . and I’ll show you a discrepancy I believe I found in some data. Jesse suspected it. It might mean nothing, but . . .”

“What data?”

I lowered my voice. “Bellerwood’s.”

His eyes narrowed. “Why wouldn’t you take this to your brother?”

I cleared my throat. “I’m not supposed to be here, and”—if I were going to be completely honest—“and I’d like to prove something to myself and to my brother. If I’m right, helping him solve this issue will put us on equal footing. If I’m wrong, I’d rather he doesn’t know. He already doesn’t have the highest opinion of me.”

George gave me another long look. “How do you have access to the data at all?”

“Thane.” I raised a hand. “He knows who I am, but he doesn’t know what I’m looking for. He only shared some of the files with me to keep me quiet while Jesse saves my farm.”

“Your farm?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’m here until noon.”

I nodded but had to ask, “You sure you want to go down this rabbit hole?”

“I’m not promising anything, but I’m already involved.”

We went into the office and closed the door behind us, and I told him almost everything. It felt good to be honest. I left out the process involved in modifying the beans, but I felt that without insight into what I was working on, he wouldn’t see me as capable of understanding the Bellerwood project.

Hell, I still wasn’t sure I did.

George’s reactions as I brought him up to speed revealed a lot about why he’d remained employed at my brother’s company for as long as he had. Nothing shocked him. “A basement lab? No kidding.” “A food source or a

fuel—interesting.” “Monica Bellerwood? That complicates things.”

*You think?*

Pacing the office, I finally reached the part where Monica thought I was with someone else and Thane was attempting to placate me with the files. George let out a whistle, then said, “Show me what you found.”

I halted and turned toward him. It was amazing enough that he even believed me, but involving him further? “Jesse won’t be happy when he learns what I’ve been doing. You could get in trouble over this, and I don’t want that.”

“What’s your real name?”

“Scott.”

“Well, Scott, I’m not afraid of trouble—not anymore. When I think about everything I gave up to be where I am, I have to ask myself if it was worth it. I’ve invested enough money to retire comfortably, very comfortably. My sister has a closet full of designer clothing she thought was important and homes scattered around the world, yet no one but me at her bedside. When my sister passes, I’ll be alone as well. This is not who I wanted to be, and I’m done going along to get along. I might even retire.”

I tried to wrap my head around that. “So, why offer to help at all?”

“You gave me time with my sister that I wouldn’t have allowed myself. I didn’t know how much that would mean to both of us. Whatever you need, I’m in.”

He sounded a bit like LJ in that moment, and I was reminded of how lucky I was to have been raised by two of the most loving, down-to-earth people on the planet. I might have been doubting myself recently, but I was far from questioning the path my life was on.

I loved my farm and all the critters on it. I did want to secure a steady enough income to care for my parents as they aged, but there wasn’t much else about Jesse’s life I’d miss.

Except Monica.

I smiled as I imagined her at my farm in cutoff jeans and a plaid shirt knotted in front, hair flying free in the wind. My quick fantasy expanded to include giving her a ride on my tractor, then on me beneath the shade of one of our tall oak trees.

“Scott? The data?”

George pulled me reluctantly back to reality. “Sorry. Right.”

With Squiggles’s carrier occupying one end of Jesse’s desk, I used

facial recognition to unlock the computer screen. “For my own research purposes, I’ve put a significant amount of time into learning about how oxygen affects the burn rates of fuels, and something didn’t seem right in Jesse’s plans.”

“You think your brother’s designs are faulty?”

“No, I think someone at Bellerwood is fudging their numbers—and potentially sabotaging the space station.”

“Sabotage—that’s a strong allegation.”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense. Only Bellerwood’s competition would benefit from that station exploding. If I’m right, someone wants that to happen and the project to fail. If we find out who, we can stop that.”

“For your brother’s sake.”

“And—”

“Ah.” He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. “This is the kind of stuff people get killed over.”

That sent a chill down my back. Up to that point I’d been thinking about this in terms of saving the space station for the benefit of Monica as well as Jesse. I hadn’t taken into account that I might be putting anyone in danger. “Then we really can’t say anything yet because I could be wrong.” I gave George another look. “If you’ve changed your mind and want out—I get it. And as far as anyone will ever know, we never had this conversation.”

He pulled a chair up beside mine. “No. I’m in. But if we do save the space station, I want a good retirement package and—”

“And?”

“And an invite to the wedding.”

I coughed at that. “That’s not why I’m doing this.”

“Right. I was young once and did some stupid things over a woman I loved.”

I almost assured him this wasn’t about Monica, but instead I asked, “What happened to her?”

He sighed. “She didn’t choose me.” Then he took a seat beside me. “But then I never saved her father’s company . . .”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that, so I focused on opening the files I thought we should start with. After I did, I said, “Do you know where that woman is now?”

“No. Lost track of her years ago.”

“You might want to look her up. She could be single again.” I glanced



at Squiggles. “And you never know, she might love cats.”

Squiggles began to purr, which I took as a sign that none of this was as crazy as it felt. I believed that people came into each other’s lives for a reason. George was at a crossroads in his life, and maybe I was the nudge he needed. “Whether we save the space station or not, I want you to promise me something.”

He cocked a cautious eyebrow.

“Call that woman, and if things work out—have a vegetarian option available for me at *your* wedding.”

“You’re a little crazy, aren’t you?”

“More than a little.” I gave his shoulder a pat and assured him, “George, once you get to know me, you’ll see that I do nothing halfway.”

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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## SCOTT

Hours later, hands linked behind my head, leaning back in Jesse's chair, I propped my feet up on the corner of his desk and sighed. *I did it. I found the error.*

*And it was a whopper.*

Well, George and I found it, but that didn't take away from how good it felt to have figured it out. The recommended oxygen levels for the space station had been changed—even in the fuel storage areas. If I hadn't done extensive study on what affected how combustible materials were, I wouldn't have recognized the minor adjustment as a catalyst for a major explosion.

But I had.

I sighed happily. An applause track played in my head as I fantasized walking through the space station while being thanked by Thane and Jesse for making it possible.

*No need to thank me. It was nothing. Really, I'm sure you would have figured it out eventually.*

"Well, don't you look pleased with yourself," a male voice said from the doorway.

I dropped my feet to the floor and straightened behind the desk. *Jesse's father. Shit.* "Hi, Dad." I rose to my feet. "This is a surprise."

"I'm sure it is." He walked farther into the room, his eyes never leaving mine. "I haven't seen you in a while, so I decided to drop by where I knew you'd be."

I loosened a tie that was suddenly tight around my neck. "That's . . . great."

"How's the Bellerwood project coming along?"

"Good. Good. In fact, I just—" I stopped there. I didn't know how much

Jesse shared with his father. “Ate,” I added lamely.

“Sounds like a productive morning.” He frowned and continued to look me right in the eye. “Anything new? Something you’d like to share?”

“No.” I shifted from one foot to the other like a much younger me had when sent to see the principal. I’d never been a good liar. I rubbed a hand over the back of my neck and swallowed hard. “Nothing that comes to mind.”

His eyes narrowed. “Have you taken up a new outdoor hobby?” With his hand he drew a circle around his face. “You’re looking quite tan.”

A knock on the doorframe behind him announced the return of George. “Mr. Rehoboth, I just learned you were here. Could I get you something? A coffee? A water?”

Jesse’s father shook his head. “No, thank you, I’m just visiting with *my son.*”

The way he said the last two words made George look as uncomfortable as I felt. He looked from Jesse’s father to me and back. “Well, I’ll be in my office if either of you need me.”

“Thanks, George,” I said. “Were you able to cancel that meeting for me?”

“The meeting?”

I gave him a pointed look. “Yes, you know, the one that’s starting right now that I should be in instead of here with my dad.”

“Oh,” George said with a nod. “I wasn’t able to cancel it, sadly. They’re all waiting for you in conference room two. Do you want me to tell them to start without you?”

“No,” I said hastily. “I’m sure my father understands how busy things can get here. Always running off to a meeting about . . . updates and stuff.”

Jesse’s father nodded slowly. “I understand more than you know, but we can talk about that another time. You wouldn’t want to be late for your meeting with . . . who are you meeting with?”

“People,” I croaked out. *He knows. I’m, like, 99 percent positive he does.* I could have just broken character then and told him about the switch, but there was a minuscule chance that he didn’t know, and I wasn’t going to out myself. I walked to the door of the office. The switch would soon be over, anyway. As soon as I told Thane about the error I’d found, Jesse would probably drop everything and come back.

*And I’ll be free to return to my life.* That thought should have brought me more joy than it did.

George walked Jesse's father out, then returned. "He knows."

I nodded. "Hard to fool a dad. I'm surprised he didn't straight-out call me on it."

"He's too cunning for that. He plays the long game and always to win. He knows you know. He'll let you sweat about it and watch what you do."

I sighed. "Not such a long game. I need to tell Jesse and Thane about what we found."

"I've been thinking. I not sure you should do that—not yet."

"They need to know so they can modify the plans."

"Yes, but that doesn't really solve the problem, does it?" It took me a moment to follow his thinking. "Because it doesn't tell us who wants the space station to fail. For all you know, it could be Monica."

"No."

"You yourself said that she has issues with her father. Children have done worse to their parents for less."

I shook my head. "Not her."

"It's nice that you have faith in her, but does her father? You told me you're trying to help her, but something like this will cast a wide net of doubt. Are you prepared to put her through that?"

I hadn't thought of that. "I could tell Thane to keep what we found between us until we find out who is responsible."

George rolled his eyes to the side. "I've known your brothers a lot longer than you have. I'm only telling you this because I like you—they won't listen. They don't respect you. Not yet. Bring them something as small as a data discrepancy, and they might not even believe you. If you want to be one of them, you need to handle this the way they would . . . on your own and without consideration for how they may or may not feel about your decisions."

"That's not how I—"

"Do you want to be one of them?"

"I do."

"Do you want to prove to Monica that you're good enough to be with her?"

"Yes."

"Then stop looking so damn guilty. Take no prisoners. Make no apologies. We'll find the bastard who is trying to sabotage the space station, and when we do, you'll see that the only way to win is to take bold action."

Although I'd bought into what he'd said about needing more information before saying anything that might cast doubt on Monica, I wasn't sure George's pep talk was all for me. "Did you look up the woman you told me about?"

"I did." His eyes looked a little panicked.

"And?"

"She's divorced and living in Pennsylvania."

"So you're going to call her."

"Yes, right after we find the saboteur."

*I get it. He needs a win first.* I clapped a hand on his shoulder. *I could use a win myself.*

"You think Papa Rehoboth will tell Jesse and Thane that he saw me here?"

"Absolutely."

"They won't be happy with me."

"But you won't let that stop you because they wouldn't."

He had a point. "And if they ask what I'm doing at the office?"

"Tell them you like pretending to be Jesse. Use the way they underestimate you to your advantage."

*Like he has. Oh, George, you're a smart one.* "I don't have a company or employees yet, but if I ever do and you ever want a job, George, you're in."

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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## MONICA

Angry and confused, I found myself at the door of Aunt Bibi's apartment. I raised my hand to knock but hesitated. Not since I was much younger and navigating the loss of my mother had I felt so lost.

It made no sense. I'd done nothing wrong. In fact, after a short period of uncertainty, I'd done everything right. All I had to do was stay the course.

My hand was still raised and poised when the door opened and Aunt Bibi exclaimed, "Monica! I was just thinking about you. I was going to meet Deja for dinner, but something told me to cancel. Now it all makes sense."

"I'm glad something does," I grumbled but returned the hug she gave me.

She held on to my upper arms and studied my expression. "Something's wrong."

"No. Maybe."

The smile she gave me reminded me of one my mother had given me when I'd gone to her room after a nightmare. "Well, come on in. Together we'll sort it out."

I followed her into her apartment, hung my coat near the door, next to hers, and stepped out of my shoes, as she'd raised me to. "There's nothing *wrong*. I just—"

"Get over here." She took a place on her couch and patted the spot next to her.

I sat beside her and linked an arm through hers as I had so many times in the past. When I laid my head on her shoulder, I could easily have been fifteen again, asking why none of the boys in my school found me attractive. She'd always told me that meant I was too good for them. I hadn't believed it but felt better because she did. "So I might be having a nervous breakdown.

Nothing makes sense anymore.”

She kissed the top of my head. “Oh, honey, here we call that Tuesday.”

I gave her arm a squeeze. “I’m serious.”

“I know. Talk.”

I raised my head for a moment. “There’s a man, but before you get excited, he doesn’t mean anything to me.”

Her eyes twinkled. “Understood. What is the name of this unimportant man?”

“Jesse Rehoboth.” The fact that his name still didn’t sound right to me was another red flag. “Dad contracted his company to build the life-support system for the space station.”

“A workplace romance.”

“No romance.” I rushed to add, “There’s nothing like that between us. Nothing.”

“Okay.”

“My confusion is purely work related.”

She nodded.

“He’s so—so frustrating. Every time I think I know his motivation, he does something completely opposite and leaves me even more confused.”

“I like him already.”

I shook my head. “You shouldn’t. He’s arrogant. Rude. Self-serving.” I thought about his employee’s cat and added, “And a master at creating the illusion that there’s more to him than that.”

“Does he also happen to be good looking?”

I sighed and laid my head back on her shoulder. “Oh yes.”

She gave my arm a pat. “So there *is* a little something there.”

“Maybe, but I can’t let it affect my work.” I told her about the email he’d sent me that had inspired my initial stomp over to his office and how easily he’d turned me around and sent me on my way. “I may have misjudged him.”

“How?”

“I’m not used to being wrong.”

“Well, you are human, baby.”

“I know I’m not perfect,” I said a bit defensively.

“Hey, hey, you forgot to hang that ‘too proud to have real talk’ attitude right out there with your coat. You know we don’t do that here.”

“Sorry. You’re right.” Her words cut away at the protective wall that I’d

instinctively thrown up. “He scares me, Aunt Bibi. He’s bringing out this side of me I don’t like.”

“What side is that?”

“I can’t get him out of my head.” I told her about how my father had asked me to evaluate Rehoboth’s progress on his project and how that had somehow led to me helping him move his employee’s cat into his apartment and mooning over him. “So, there I am, in his apartment, and things start heating up. And what does he do? He announces he’s not *available*. What does that even mean?”

“Did you ask him?”

I sighed. “No. I bolted out of there.”

She gave my arm another pat. “And now you wish you hadn’t.”

“I’m not even positive he was really attracted to me. His goal might have been to get me out of the office because his designs weren’t ready.”

“That’s a possibility.”

“I broke down and called him, only to hear a recorded message instructing me to direct all communication to his brother, Thane. I contacted his office staff and was told the same.”

“Oh boy.”

“He was clearly avoiding me, which I decided meant he had nothing to show me and was indeed stalling for time. So I called his brother, and guess what?”

“What?”

“Their designs are impressive. His timeline can easily be moved up. There was no reason for him to stall.”

“Strange.”

“Hang on, because it gets weirder. You know I’m the type to face things head-on. Nothing actually happened between us. If he’s with someone, that’s none of my business, but we do need to have a working relationship.”

“I agree.”

“So I went to his office today to see him.”

“Oh.” Aunt Bibi said less when she wasn’t sure what to say. I couldn’t blame her; I was stumped by my behavior as well.

“I was told he wasn’t there, but I would bet my life that it was him I saw going into one of the elevators. I told his office manager that I’d seen him, and he gave me that big dumb look people use when they’re lying and said I must have seen someone else.”



“He might feel guilty, even though nothing happened.”

“I get that, but don’t hide from me.” I raised my head. “It’s making me crazy. I found his old phone number and called him.”

“No.”

“Yes.” I covered my face with my hands, then met her gaze. “And he answered. I kept things professional. I didn’t mention anything about the cat, how he’d been avoiding me, nothing personal. I asked about his designs, and he answered all of my questions.”

“That’s good, right?”

“It should be.” I laced my fingers together and brought my hands up to my mouth. “But something wasn’t right. I mean, it was his voice, but it wasn’t him.” I shook my head slowly. “You’ll think this is crazy, but when I hear his voice, I kind of . . . melt. But not that time. Nothing.”

“Maybe you’re over him.”

“I don’t think so. I’m still attracted to the version of him I have in my head. If there was any hint of it being plausible, I would say there has to be two of him.”

“Oh, honey.”

“It gets worse. I’ve driven by his apartment building twice today, hoping I’d run into him. I need to know if this is all in my imagination. I need to hear him speak and confirm what is probably the craziest theory. I don’t do things like this. Aunt Bibi, you need to tell me if you’ve noticed other signs of me becoming unstable.”

She turned and took both of my hands in hers. “You are the least unstable person I know, Monica. If your gut is telling you that something is not right—”

“I trust facts, not feelings.”

“And I trust my niece. You are the most intelligent person I’ve ever met—outside of your father.”

“Which isn’t insulting because Dad is undeniably a genius.”

Aunt Bibi gave my hands a squeeze. “You shouldn’t be insulted at all. You’re not your father, and you wouldn’t want to be. He’s so lost in his head, he can’t see what’s in front of him. That’s not you. You’re the best of who he is with enough of your mother in you that you want more. You can say whatever you want, but I know you, baby, and you’ve always wanted a family. You used to have imaginary friends and pets.”

She wasn’t selling me on my mental state. “That would be because I

didn't have either in real life."

"Your father kept you sheltered after your mother died. I understood why. He didn't want to lose you too. But it wasn't good for you. By the time you returned to school, you were so withdrawn."

I blinked back tears that took me by surprise. "I love you for always seeing the best in a situation, but if my father was afraid of losing me back then, he sure showed that in a strange way. I remember a lot of tutors and travel, but I don't recall seeing much of him. And when I did see him, he wasn't happy. Not with me. Not with anything I did."

Aunt Bibi sighed. "People aren't at their best when they're scared. When I was your age, I often confused anger with fear. Anger is the shield we hide behind when we can't admit we're afraid and hurting." She gave me a quick hug. "You, child, have a strong and well-polished shield. But maybe it's time to lower it and start living again."

"I have a good life."

She met my gaze and simply waited.

I continued, "Okay, yes, sometimes I wish I had someone, but there isn't room for much of a social life with my work schedule."

"Then make room, baby."

"Dad—"

"Would survive."

I wiped at the corners of my eyes. "Work is the only place . . ." *he sees me.*

Aunt Bibi pulled me to her for a hug. I clung to her for a moment. She didn't deny what I didn't need to say. "I don't have all the answers, Monica, but if you think you need to work for your father to be part of his life . . . you're wrong. Be yourself. Follow *your* heart. A father's love is stronger than you think."

I smiled and hugged her tightly. "Thank you for being someone I can be myself with."

"Always." She straightened and tucked a loose hair back into my bun. "And when it comes to finding a man, don't ever choose someone you can't be yourself with. It's never worth it."

There was a shadow of sadness in her eyes that had me asking, "Is that what you did?"

At first I wasn't sure she'd answer my question, but then she said, "Your mother and I grew up with very little. Your father took her out of our

neighborhood early, and I thought I wanted what she had. That perfect little house in the suburbs and a husband with a good job. I walked away from someone who loved me for a chance at that life. And I was miserable because in the end it doesn't matter where you live if you're with the wrong person. I don't regret many things, but I do regret breaking the heart of the one person who knew the real me and loved me anyway."

*Donny. Of course.* Their friendship made sense now.

I swallowed hard. "Have you ever—it's not too late."

Her smile told me this conversation was coming to an end. "That boat sailed a long time ago. There's too much history now. But you—there's still time for you to get it right."

Was there? I shared another scary truth. "What if I don't know who the real me is?"

"Then you find someone who will cheer you on as you go on that journey."

I laid my hand over hers. "I'm an adult. I don't need a cheerleader."

She leaned forward and kissed my cheek. "Everyone needs someone on their side who believes in them. You're no different. Wanting that person isn't a weakness. It takes real strength to allow yourself to be vulnerable enough to let someone in."

"Careful, if I figure out how to do that, I may just come back and push you to do the same."

She stood. "On that note, would you like some tea?"

I nodded. "Sure."

"And a shot of whiskey?"

I smiled. "Absolutely."

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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## SCOTT

I stood on the porch of my farm on Saturday, breathing in the familiar aroma of home. The long week had culminated in a day I just wanted to be over. When I'd received a call from Jesse telling me that he needed to meet with the whole family, I was expecting it to be to announce that the switch was officially over.

I hadn't expected my brother's announcement to be that he and Crystal, a.k.a. the oil rep, were serious, and that meant that the rest of us were somehow supposed to all get on the same team. Art Steadman, the owner of the oil company that had come for my farm, also happened to be Crystal's uncle, and Jesse expected me to believe that meant he was now willing to help protect my research.

Research that was supposed to remain a secret but that apparently everyone knew about. Toss into the mix that my old friend Remy had tried to kill Jesse, while thinking he was me, for the beans. What I'd seen as a solution to my family's issues was a curse.

Never in my life had I been the type to look over my shoulder and think people might be plotting against me, but there was no denying that Jesse had removed me from my farm, had me watched by both Thane and their father, had my old friend arrested, partnered with the very people trying to take my farm, and most recently had invited members of the Romano family to my farm under the guise of building a prosthetic leg for my duck, Alphonse.

And I was supposed to accept all of that as normal.

Jesse claimed Remy's father, a man who'd gone missing years ago, was actually buried in my friend's basement. I still couldn't wrap my head around that. If it turned out to be true, maybe all the other crazy shit was true as well.

Honestly, I had no fucking idea who or what to believe anymore.

My father joined me on the porch. "I figured you'd be out here," he said.

Some level of relief flooded in. No matter the storm, my parents were a safe, sane harbor. I nodded without turning away from the view of the barn. "It's as strange to be back as it was to be away for so long."

"You look good in a suit," he said. "It takes getting used to, but you'll probably be wearing one a lot from now on."

I made a noncommittal sound. "I'm not going anywhere, Dad. This is my home."

"Jesse said you asked to continue the switch for a few more weeks. Is that because of the woman you're not comfortable sharing the name of?"

My father was too good of a man for me to ever lie to. "Yes and no. More yes than no."

"You've never been secretive about a woman before. She's not married, is she?"

"No, she's not married."

"You know we'll accept anyone you choose as a partner. All we care about is your happiness."

"I know, Dad. And I'm grateful for that."

"But?"

"But it's complicated. Her father is one of Jesse's clients." I cleared my throat. "And she still believes I'm Jesse."

I stole a look at my father. He looked just as concerned as I'd known he would be. "Oh, Scott, do you really think that's a good idea?"

"I'm sure it's not, but that doesn't change how I feel." I'd hoped to have resolved the data issue already but had discovered that sleuthing wasn't as easy as they made it look on television. Following leads took time.

"And how is that?"

Despite how upside down my life was, wanting to see her again had remained a constant. Not just see her but also to protect her. I'd stopped caring if anyone would be grateful or angry or respect me more. All that mattered was that Monica wouldn't take the fall for what I knew wasn't her fault and that I would soon finally be able to tell her the truth. Although I hadn't allowed myself to contact her, she'd been in my thoughts every single day. "She could be the one, Dad."

My father brought a hand up to rub his chin. "She might not feel that way once she realizes you've been lying to her."

My shoulders slumped a little. “I can’t do much about that until I resolve a couple of separate issues.” The more time I’d had to think about it, the more I’d understood how right George had been. There was also a risk that if what we’d uncovered so far became public knowledge, it could seriously damage Bellerwood’s reputation and stock value. I wanted to give Monica enough information to handle the situation in house.

My father put his hand on my back. “Whatever you’re worried about, whatever you’ve done, you’re not alone. Tell me what you need.”

No one could have asked for a better father. It was time to come clean on a couple of fronts. I straightened and turned to face him. Time away had given me a new perspective on my life. Regardless of what happened with Monica, parts of my life would remain the same; parts couldn’t. It was time to have another tough conversation with my father. “When I stepped into Jesse’s life, I thought it would be for a day. I love my life here, but there has always been a side of me that didn’t quite fit.”

“I’m not sure what you’re trying to tell me.”

“I’ve been thinking about what Jesse said about Remy. Remy buried his father in his basement? I couldn’t wrap my head around that at first. How could there have been so much I didn’t know about him? Then I realized I’ve kept a good portion of myself a secret even from you and Mom.”

My father’s expression turned sympathetic. “I’ve seen your lab, Scott. I thought you were tinkering down there with plants, but what you’re working on could change the world. You’re so lucky LJ and Jesse were here to help you protect it.”

“Lucky? I wish it were that simple. LJ has been trying to re-create growing the beans elsewhere. Jesse brought not only Steadman’s niece but Steadman himself to the farm. I’d like to believe that the Romanos built a prosthetic leg for Alphonse because they care about ducks, but that also gave them access to the farm. It’s all a little too convenient to be believable.”

“You think your brother would try to steal your discovery?”

“I haven’t known him long enough to know if he would or wouldn’t.”

My father sighed. “Either way, you’ll need someone on your side. If Remy put your beans out there for people to buy, someone else will come for a soil sample. You can’t hide anymore.”

“They can test the soil all they want. The ‘secret ingredient’ is a viral vector.” As I explained the process to my father, his eyes glazed over a little.

“I’m not sure I understand everything you just said, but couldn’t your

vector or whatever be stolen as well?”

“Not easily. I cultivate a small batch for every crop, and I’ve been careful to not record enough about it that anyone could replicate it. For now, I’m the only one who can make more.”

“This is crazy. You didn’t even go to college.”

“Not all learning happens in a classroom. I read—a lot. And the internet has allowed me to take whatever classes I wanted to. You’d be surprised what you can learn if you put in the time.”

My father shook his head back and forth. “I had no idea. I thought you wanted to be a farmer.”

I turned so I was leaning back against the railing. “I do. Nothing has changed, Dad. I love being here, being your son, giving misfit animals a soft place to land.”

“Being my son? Why do you say that like you’ve thought of not? You’re our miracle, Scott.”

“And you and Mom are mine. I’d never wondered who my birth parents were until I met Jesse and stepped into his life.”

My father swallowed visibly. “Did you find them?”

“No, but I have some leads. I wanted to see where they led as Jesse. I didn’t want anyone coming here and upsetting Mom.”

“We never hid that you were adopted. We always wanted you to know, and Mom and I always knew that one day you would have questions. We kept a file of paperwork for you for when you did. I’ll give it to you before you leave.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

My father took a seat on a sliding chair. “I’ll need time to process all this, but there’s still a lot I don’t understand. Why didn’t you ever tell us what you were studying? Why the secret lab?”

That was complicated as well. And the reason wasn’t something I was proud of. He was my father, would always be my father, but there was a small part of me that always felt the sting of being unwanted by my biological parents. I didn’t talk about it, but a part of me would always wonder why they hadn’t kept me, would always wonder how similar I was to the son my adoptive parents, Ryan and Jill, might have had. “I tried to tell you about my beans in the beginning, but you thought I was wasting my time, and I—I wanted to be the son you would have had if you’d had your own.”

“Now stop right there. You are the son I had. You are my own. I don’t

ask myself if you would have been any different had you come to us in another way. You did come to us, and that's all that has ever mattered."

The door to the porch opened, and my mother came out to sit beside my father. "What did I miss? If it's about your lady friend, I hope that's not the reason you look so glum. What's her name?"

They deserved the truth—all of it. "Monica Bellerwood."

"Bellerwood?" My father scratched at the back of his neck. "Why does that name sound so familiar?"

I pocketed my hands. "Monica's father is Walt Bellerwood. His company contracted Jesse's to build the air system for his space station project."

"How exciting," my mother said.

"Jesse's biggest client." My father's mouth rounded. "And she still thinks Scott is Jesse."

My mother's eyes widened. "Oh, that's not good."

"Sounds like he got himself in a real pickle of a situation." My father put his arm around my mother's shoulders. "Do you want to talk about it?"

I did and I didn't. In all the world, though, there wasn't anyone I trusted more than my parents. "I don't know where to start."

My mother gave my father's leg a pat. "Start at the beginning. I want to know all about this woman. I have a feeling we'll be meeting her real soon."

"I hope so. I've gotten myself into some sticky situations in the past, but things always worked out for the best. Remember when I was fourteen and I borrowed old man Silvester's ATV?"

My mother let out an audible breath. "Oh, we do. The only reason he didn't call the police was because I'd just helped his family adopt a puppy from the shelter and he didn't want to move his seat at church."

"It burst into flames while I was on it because it had a contaminated brake master cylinder that caused brake drag and a fuel leak. I was not only able to put the fire out before it reached the gas tank, but I also fixed both the leak and the faulty caliper before returning it."

"I remember. His grandson was angry that day because he'd wanted to ride the ATV and couldn't because you had it." My father nodded. "It was difficult to justify grounding you when you probably saved that child's life."

I smiled. "You still grounded me."

He laughed. "Of course. You took something that wasn't yours. But watching you do extra chores for a week wasn't easy."



I laughed along, then sobered and looked back and forth between my parents. “Do you believe in fate? That sometimes we are put in certain situations because we’re meant to affect them?”

My mother laid her head on my father’s shoulder. “I do. When I found out I couldn’t conceive a child, I was devastated—then you came along. And once, when you were not even three years old yet, you looked at me and said you were glad you’d chosen us. I asked you what you meant, and you said up in heaven you told God we were the parents you wanted.” Her eyes shone with tears. “I’ve never forgotten that because a whole lot of things needed to happen for you to end up with us, and whether you call that a miracle or fate, you made me a believer in both that day.”

I pushed off the railing and pulled my mother in for a tight hug. “I’ve always had impeccable taste.”

She hugged me back, then gave my shoulder a light tap. “Now tell me about this Monica Bellerwood. Could you imagine her living here?”

That rocked me back onto my heels. “I have no idea. There’s a lot I don’t know about her.”

“Well then,” my father said, “I’d hold off thinking she might be ‘the one.’”

I hooked my thumbs into the belt of my fancy trousers and challenged, “How long did it take for you to know Mom was the one?”

“I hate that he’s always right lately.” My father looked across at my mother and sighed. “I miss when my word was law and you both cowered before me.”

That earned him a laugh from both my mother and me. She linked her arm with his again. “Scott, quick, call the doctor, your father’s memory seems to be failing.”

He hugged her to his chest and kissed her on the forehead. “Work with me, woman. We’re a team, remember?”

She wrapped her arms around his waist, went up on her tiptoes, and gave him a sweet kiss before saying, “Listen to your father, Scott. It’s important to show the elderly proper respect.”

“Elderly?” my father growled playfully. “Do I need to prove just how young I still am?”

*Oh boy.* “Should I go out for a while?” I asked with humor.

My father chuckled. My mother turned in his arms to face me. “No, stay. We do want to hear all about what’s been going on, but keep in mind

that it's already seven. You know me, I'll be asleep by eight thirty. So . . ."

*No, I do not want to think about what that means.* "I'll make it quick."

"Please," my father said with a smile and a wink.

Even as I groaned over his comment, I was happy for them. This was what I wanted for myself—not just a lover but a best friend. My parents genuinely enjoyed each other. Could I have that with Monica? Maybe. Maybe not. But there was only one way to find out.

So I told my parents about Monica: the reasons I wanted to see her again as well as the reasons why it might not make sense to. I didn't hold back anything—not even when it came to what I thought I'd uncovered.

When I finally finished, neither of my parents said anything for several minutes. When he did speak, my father's tone was cautious. "I see a lot of ways this could go very wrong."

I nodded. "I know."

My mother added, "I don't agree with keeping secrets or lying about who you are, but I can see how the truth now might blow up."

My father said, "You should tell Jesse and Thane what's going on."

"I will. Soon." I leaned against the railing of the porch.

My mother tapped a hand on my father's arm. "And Monica needs to not only be told the truth, but she needs to understand that the switch wasn't something you did as a joke. Especially if you think she has any feelings for you at all, she'll be embarrassed."

"I don't know how you'll get her to trust anything you say after you drop the twin bomb on her," my father said.

I came to a decision right then. "I need to tell her the truth, the whole truth."

My parents exchanged a look, both made pained faces, and my mother said, "No matter what happens, we love you."

I appreciated that, but it wasn't exactly a vote of confidence.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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## MONICA

Late one evening, I was running on my office gym treadmill when my phone vibrated from an incoming text. I slowed my speed to a fast walk and checked my messages.

Busy? It was Rehoboth. I hit the stop button on my treadmill and hopped off. He'd used the number he'd given me that day in his office.

I wiped a towel across my face. What could he want? After weeks of hearing nothing from him, why contact me now? I irritated myself by acknowledging part of me hoped he'd missed me. *Really?* Much more likely, he had a work-related question. What do you need?

To talk. In person.

Cryptic and somehow exciting. My heart started racing. I'll be at my office most of tomorrow.

Somewhere more private.

That stole the breath from me. I hadn't shared any new data with him. What is this regarding?

Meet me for a drink at Celona's Bar in Brookline 8 pm.

A drink? A snippet of one of our earlier conversations came back to me. "I like you, Monica Bellerwood." I remembered how close we'd come to kissing before he said, "I'm not currently . . . available."

Had he remedied that situation? Despite how much I hadn't enjoyed hearing that he was with someone else, time had allowed me to appreciate the honesty of his admission. If being in a relationship was the reason he'd pulled away, didn't that speak to having strength of character? *I should at least hear him out.*

Tonight?

Yes.

I checked the time. He wanted to meet in less than an hour. Not possible. I could throw myself together for Aunt Bibi, but Rehoboth? Not that quickly, especially allowing for travel time.

If I said no, though, I'd spend the night wondering what he would have told me.

Pride kicked in as well. I didn't want him to think all he had to do was snap his fingers and I'd come running.

I texted back: 8:30 at Pepromene.

Donny's restaurant. That would not only give me time to shower and make myself presentable, but it would also bring him onto my turf. My father considered that place secure enough that I wouldn't be watched there.

Perfect. See you then.

I put my phone to the side and strode off to the shower. Beneath the cooling spray, I thought about what Aunt Bibi had said about it taking strength to allow oneself to be vulnerable with another person. I could already feel my defenses clicking into place as I prepared to meet Rehoboth.

What's the definition of crazy? Doing what you've always done and expecting a different result? After dressing and drying my hair, I reached for my makeup bag, then hesitated. Makeup was about hiding my flaws—about maintaining the illusion of perfection.

If Rehoboth wanted to meet me about his designs, he wouldn't care how I looked.

And if he was seeking me out because he was finally free to explore his attraction to me, then I wanted him to see *me*. Not the confident, powerful

woman who pretended I had everything I could ever want. No, I was ready to be honest with myself and with him that I didn't have all the answers and that I was seeking a partner who I could go on that journey with.

*God, I hope he doesn't want to see me about something work related.*

A short time later, my face still bare, I walked into Donny's restaurant. Donny saw me enter and called out my name as he approached. "Monica, all by yourself tonight?" His hug nearly lifted me off my feet.

"I'm meeting someone."

"A man?"

I stepped back and wagged a finger at him. "A work associate."

He brought a hand to his chest. "Of course, but is there a potential for more?"

"I don't know." I scanned the room. "But do you have a table off to the side?"

His smile was pure trouble. "If I didn't, I would throw someone to the curb for you. Luckily I have the perfect spot for a first date." He led me to a table that was set off from the others and partially hidden behind large plants.

"It's not a date," I protested, but he was already leading the way to the table. Instead of sitting immediately, I stood there thinking about how sad it was that Aunt Bibi and Donny had never gotten back together. "My aunt still loves you," I blurted out.

His smile became tender. "I know."

I searched his face. "Do you still have feelings for her?"

"I have always loved Beatrice, and I suspect I always will."

"Then—then why . . ."

He took a moment before answering. "Love isn't always pretty, Monica. It wasn't enough to keep us honest with each other, kind, or even forgiving. It took years and a marriage to someone else for me to realize I had failed Beatrice every bit as much as she'd failed me. Sometimes love doesn't conquer all."

His words echoed what I'd believed since my mother's death. I reached out and took his hand in mine. "I don't want to believe that." For my aunt, for my relationship with my father, for my own sanity. "I refuse to believe it. Aunt Bibi gave me a good lecture on how I won't ever find a true partner until I'm willing to let myself be vulnerable. Do I need to give you both the same lecture?"

His eyes darkened. "Too much was said . . . and too much time has gone

by. I can't ask her to take another chance on me."

I let his hand drop. "Then you'll never know what would have happened if you had." A movement caught my attention. *Rehoboth*. "He's here."

Donny pulled out a chair. "You sit. I'll bring him over."

I sat only because I felt it would have been rude not to, but it didn't feel right. I could have met Rehoboth halfway or at least flagged him over. I was not looking for royal treatment or to play hard to get. I wanted a real conversation and to know if anything I'd felt had been reciprocal.

My senses became heightened and my breathing shallow when Rehoboth began to approach the table, making me rise to my feet as if pulled. My mind might have been spinning with questions, but my body welcomed him like a lover returning after a long separation.

I hadn't known until just then that it was possible to crave someone's touch.

"I hope you haven't been waiting long." His easy smile brought heat to my cheeks and an answering smile to my face.

I swallowed hard. "No. You're right on time."

He stepped closer, and I breathed in the scent of soap and him. "It's good to see you again, Monica."

I kept my response to a nod. He leaned closer—so close it was tempting to throw my arms around his neck and pull his mouth down to mine. Crazy, right? It didn't feel crazy.

"Thank you for meeting me on such short notice."

I nodded again and slid back into my seat. "Your call was unexpected." I took a deep breath and a risk. "But not unwelcome."

He sat across from me. "That's good. I wasn't sure how you'd react to hearing from me after that day at my place."

"We have spoken since."

"Of course." He looked away, then back.

Had he forgotten? That didn't seem possible. Not if he felt anything like I did. I started to lose myself in circular questions but called it to a quick halt. I was looking for issues when there probably wasn't one. If this had any chance of working, I needed to stop hiding and let it play out.

A waitress interrupted to deliver two shots of whiskey and news from the kitchen that Donny would make a special dish for us. Rehoboth nodded toward the shot glasses. "I like this place already, but I can't. The last time wasn't pretty. What about a beer?"

“The owner is a friend.” I turned to the waitress. “When you come back, bring two beers, and please ask Donny to make the dish a vegetarian one.”

“You got it,” the waitress answered before heading off to relay the request.

After she left, Rehoboth said, “You remembered.” He reached across the table and caressed the top of my hand briefly. “Thank you.”

I fought to keep my breathing normal and to not reveal how that simple touch had sent a wave of desire through me. Our eyes met and held. He certainly didn’t look like a man who’d come to tell me he wasn’t interested in me. I could have responded with something witty or dismissing, but I didn’t want to look back and regret that I hadn’t given us a chance to be—us. “It’s probably that image you put in my head of you on a farm with a cow resting its head on your lap.”

His smile faded a little. “I hate that we met the way we did. There was so much of it I’m sure I didn’t handle right, but I do like you, and I’m hoping we can find a way through this.”

“Why did you ask to see me in person?” I squared my shoulders and held his gaze. Fear would not hold me back—not this time. “Was it to tell me you’re no longer ‘not available’?”

“That’s part of it. You’re all I’ve thought about for weeks.” He shifted in his seat. “This isn’t easy. I planned out what I wanted to say, but now that I’m here, I’m not sure where to start.”

It was a painfully awkward moment, two people looking across a chasm at each other, wondering if getting to the same side was even possible. I thought about Aunt Bibi and Donny. It didn’t have to be that way. If I was strong enough to allow myself to be vulnerable, maybe it wouldn’t be.

He said, “There’s something I have to tell you.”

Be brave. “Me too.”

“I should go first.”

“No, let me. If I don’t, I’ll lose my courage. You’re all I’ve thought about for weeks as well.” I downed my shot, letting the burn add to my resolution, then said in a rush, “But I need to be honest: I’m not good at relationships. Never have been. I could bore you with all the reasons why: lost my mother early, daddy issues, possibly some OCD. The bottom line is that I have a difficult time trusting people . . . especially men. I tend to overthink things. It has stopped me from having meaningful relationships with men and women alike. Work has been my life. I don’t have a partner or

friends. I don't have pets or hobbies. For a while I told myself that was enough, but it's not. I want to have a normal life and be just like everyone else. If I have come across as cold, it's because I was scared." I stopped there to breathe.

He was frozen in his seat, his mouth partially open as if he wanted to say something but had been shocked into silence. After blinking a few times quickly, he shook his head and looked so uncomfortable I began to question if I'd misread the situation.

He'd said I was all he'd thought about for weeks. What if it hadn't been a declaration of being attracted to me? Could he have meant it in another way?

Or maybe I shouldn't have vomited out how I felt like that? Had I really just announced that I had daddy issues? No wonder he was gauging where the exits were. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I thought you might feel—"

He stood, leaned across the table, cupped my chin, and kissed me. It was the kind of kiss a woman might wait her whole life for. Hungry. Impatient. A little angry. When it ended and he sat back, we were both breathing heavily, and I felt shattered in the most amazing way. "That's how I feel."

I brought a hand to my lips. "Me too."

He returned to his seat and ran a hand through his hair. "I'm not who you think I am."

"I'm not either," I said. "In fact, I've only recently realized I need to figure out if I want to continue to work for my father, and if I don't, what that'll mean."

"Monica, my name isn't Jesse."

I heard what he said, but it didn't make sense. "You mean you prefer a nickname?"

He placed his hands flat on the table. "There's no easy way to say this, so I'm just going to—"

Our waitress reappeared then with two beers. On her heels there was Donny with a tray. The waitress gave us each our drink, then left. Donny placed a plate of fried tomato wedges between us. "Tomato fritters flavored with dill, parsley, and oregano. They are good on their own, or try the dip. It's spicy, but a little kick now and then is what keeps things interesting, isn't it?"



“Donny, this is Jesse Rehoboth.” I may have imagined it, but I thought Rehoboth cringed at my introduction. “Jesse, Donny is family by choice, if not by blood.”

“I didn’t catch his name on the way in.” Standing over us, he addressed Rehoboth. “It’s a pleasure to meet someone Monica cares enough about to bring here.”

“Donny.” I said his name in reprimand. “I come here all the time.”

Donny spread his hands in the air. “But never with a man.” He leaned down until he was nose to nose with Rehoboth. “Perhaps because she knows I would hunt down anyone who ever disappointed her.”

Rehoboth loosened his tie. “I’ll do my best not to.”

“You do that,” Donny said in a low tone before his smile returned and he added, “I’m making an eggplant moussaka for you. It’ll take a little time to bake, but anything worthwhile is worth taking slow. Wouldn’t you agree, Mr. Rehoboth?”

“Now that’s something we can agree on,” Rehoboth answered.

Alone with Rehoboth again after Donny left the table, I said, “Sorry about that. He sometimes forgets that I’m a grown woman.”

Rehoboth and I shared a long look. Everything else fell away until there was only us and our attraction to each other. He leaned forward to touch my hand, then sat back and cleared his throat. “Monica.”

“Yes?” I said breathlessly.

“My name is Scott Millville. Jesse Rehoboth is my twin brother. I’m the one you met at his office. It was me the day with Squiggles at his apartment. We didn’t do it to be funny or with the intention of hurting anyone. We—”

“Is this your idea of a joke?” The room spun as my mind raced to make sense of what he’d said.

“I wish it were.”

In that moment, that horrible, mortifying moment, everything that hadn’t made sense began to, and everything that had made sense felt like it might never again. My chair fell back as I jumped to my feet.

He reached for my hand and took hold of it. “Please. Sit. Give me a chance to explain.”

I may have been in shock, but I didn’t pull my hand from his. I just stood there, going through everything we’d said to each other, every time I’d felt something wasn’t right, how I’d felt uncomfortable calling him Jesse. “Your name is Scott.”

“Yes.”

“You’ve been lying to me—for weeks.”

He grimaced. “Technically, I’ve been avoiding you so I wouldn’t have to lie to you.”

My jaw dropped, then my temper rose. “You think that’s better?” I tore my hand from his. “And before you bother to answer that, I should warn you that I doubt I could believe a word you say now.” My hand went to my lips. How had I been such a fool?

“I couldn’t tell you earlier.”

My head shook back and forth in denial. “Where is Jesse Rehoboth?”

“Please sit back down.”

I grabbed the shot glass he’d left untouched and downed it, then made a face at the two tall glasses of beer. “I was going to pretend to like beer for you.”

“Don’t ever pretend to be anything or anyone you’re not. Trust me, it’s awful. This—you and me—we weren’t supposed to happen this way. I’m so sorry we did.”

He looked sincere, but I didn’t believe him. “What do you expect me to say?”

His hand raised in my direction, then fell to his side. “I don’t expect anything, but I’m hoping that if you hear me out . . .”

It was tempting to throw one of those beers in his face and storm out. I was embarrassed and angry, but the side of me that relied on facts and data wanted whatever information he was willing to provide. Stiff as a board, I righted my seat, sat, and between gritted teeth, I said, “Fine. You have five minutes to convince me that I shouldn’t call my father and let him handle you. I’m sure he won’t appreciate your subterfuge.”

“Do what you need to, but then you risk this blowing up on both of us. Before you say anything to him, you should—”

“Are you threatening me?” Fury welled within me. “That’s a quick change of gears. So much for ‘liking’ me.”

He wiped a hand down his face. “I am not explaining this well. I did mention none of this was done lightly, correct?”

My chest rose and fell as I thought about how pathetic I must have sounded a few minutes ago. “You make me sick.”

Donny appeared at our table again, this time looking concerned. “What’s going on here? Are you okay, Monica?”

Tears welled in my eyes. I didn't see a way out of this that would leave me feeling anything but devastated. "I am not, but I'll survive. I always do."

Without warning, Donny spun and landed a punch square on Scott's face, sending him crashing back over his chair. I expected a full-out fight to ensue as Scott rose to his feet. Apparently others did as well because the restaurant fell silent.

After wiping some blood from above his lip, Scott touched the bridge of his nose. "Yeah, broken, but I probably deserved that." Donny raised his fist again. Scott didn't back away. Rather than looking scared, he seemed sad. "I should have gone first."

I put a hand on Donny's arm. "Don't. He's not worth it."

Donny's hand remained fisted. "But you are."

Scott stood there like a big idiot, waiting for another punch. "I *am* sorry, and I wasn't pretending, not when it came to anything that mattered."

"I don't believe you."

"That's fair, but there are still things you need to know. Things we can't discuss here." He nodded toward people who had begun filming with their phone cameras.

Donny shot those patrons a glare. "I have a very good memory for faces." One by one, the cameras were put away, and people began to talk again. Then he turned to me and asked, "Do you want me to throw him out?"

I met Scott's gaze and hated that my heart still raced as it did. "No. I can handle this." There were still too many people watching, too many ears turned our way. I sent a text to my driver to meet me out front. "I'm sorry to leave before our meal, Donny. And put some ice on that hand."

"Coming?" I asked Scott, but I turned and walked away before he had a chance to answer. I didn't ask for ice for Scott's nose. He didn't deserve any. Without waiting to see if Scott was following, I walked out of the restaurant.

My driver pulled up. I slid in and threw back, "Get in if you actually do have anything left to say."

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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## SCOTT

*Well, that went well.*

I stepped through the car door Monica's driver held open and sat back as he closed it behind me. The silence in the car was heavy.

Through the intercom the driver asked, "Where to, Miss Bellerwood?"

"Loop the area. I can't imagine this will take long, and I may ask you to pull over to let one of us out."

My guess was she was referring to me. I ran my hands down my thighs and tapped my fingers on my knees. In general women didn't make me nervous, but most women liked me. They didn't get angry with me, and if they did, I couldn't remember any staying that way for long.

I checked the bridge of my nose with a thumb. It was swollen, but possibly not broken. I couldn't hate a man for protecting Monica, though. It actually made me like him.

Monica was upset again . . . and once again it was my fault.

Somewhere along the way, Monica had learned that she would get hurt if she lowered her defenses. I hated that I'd just provided her with an experience that supported that prediction. There were certainly less complicated women, but I wasn't going anywhere—at least not until she told me to. What she'd shared about wanting a normal life and being scared . . . that had touched my heart and confirmed that my instincts about her had been correct.

She might not want me, but she needed me . . . or someone like me. She'd mentioned issues with her father and the loss of her mother. It was clear that she regretted telling me as much as she had, but if we somehow worked out, I would look back at that moment as when I knew she was a woman I could have a real partnership with. What she saw as weaknesses I

saw as the kind of scars that give a person inner strength and true compassion for others.

I glanced at her, then away. If the look on her face was anything to go by, she was not thinking what I was. Still, I'd apologized and explained as much as she'd been willing to hear out. To hear more, she'd need to give me a sign that she wanted to.

In a tight voice, she said, "I'm surprised you're not spouting excuses."

I turned and met her gaze. "Is that what you want?"

"No." Her hands were clasped together so tightly her knuckles were white. I kept my breathing even and calm. People thought they were evolved far beyond animals, but so many of their behaviors were the same. As her adrenaline subsided, Monica would naturally look for confirmation that her assessment of the situation had been correct, and she'd snap at me again. It's why an animal will charge at a person and retreat, only to charge again.

*Three. Two. One.*

"If you think you can threaten me, my father, or his company, you're delusional. Even here, we may look like we're alone, but if I raised my voice, you'd find out how very not alone we are."

How sad to have to live that way. Did it make her feel safe or the opposite? I breathed in again before responding in a neutral voice, "I didn't threaten you, your father, or his company. I wouldn't. I do have information I believe you would want to know before he does, but once I relay it to you, my part in this is done. Unless you want me to remain involved."

"After you exit this car today, what I want is to never see you again."

Did she mean that? Only time would tell. Without responding, I turned back to look straight ahead.

Neither of us spoke for several minutes. With a near growl of frustration, she said, "I know even less about you than I thought I did."

I turned to face her again. Everything about her body language was closed off and tense. If she hadn't shown me a glimpse of who she was beneath that, I wouldn't have felt at all connected to her in that moment. She wanted something from me, but I didn't know how to give it to her. "What do you want to know?"

"Why would you and Jesse Rehoboth risk switching places when his company had just signed a life-changing contract?"

"Not everything is about money. My brother"—I paused as I shifted through my own questions about Jesse's motivation—"is a complicated

person. I'd like to think he suggested it because he wanted to help and thought he could fix my life in hours." Irony brought a smile to my lips. "Once he got in there, though, he realized that not all that appears broken is."

"You don't trust him?"

"I'm trying. You may think I don't understand how you feel right now, but I do. It's hard to trust people when their actions could be taken either way."

She shook her head. "Can lying be taken another way?"

"I don't know. Maybe you'd be a fool to forgive me for that, but there is something I need to tell you. Do you remember when Jesse asked you to double-check your data?"

"Yes, and I did."

"Against the findings of your team or outside numbers?"

"We test everything extensively in house. Our work is highly classified. Even the teams are not given full access to what others are working on."

"Except for the life-support system. You outsourced that." Interesting. "How do you know if it'll mesh with the final product?"

She didn't immediately answer, but then said calmly, "We do computer simulations, run the numbers, have a specific team that tests each component as it is completed. The results are reported back to the designers."

"So to manipulate the data someone would only have to be on that test team."

"The data is sound."

"Would you bet your life on that? How about the lives of the people you send up to that space station? I believe that someone wants your station to fail and they intend to use the air filtration system to cause an in-space explosion."

"If your brother is so concerned about our testing procedures, why isn't he here to question me himself?"

Just above a mumble, I admitted, "I haven't told him my theory yet."

"Of course." Her tone was thick with sarcasm. "That makes complete sense. You wouldn't want to share that kind of information with the person who is responsible for designing the system."

"I'll admit it sounds far fetched, but considering what you've told me about your father . . ."

"Don't go there. Don't you dare bring him into this."

"I'm trying to help you. I didn't say anything because I needed more

proof than I've been able to find."

"Wait. Do you have *any* proof?"

I told her about a double order of some of the fuel cells along with inconsistent dates for when the oxygen-level testing had been done. "The oxygen level suggested would set up a dangerous chemical cocktail in the fuel storage area and one that, unless you build in a sufficient explosion containment system, could easily take out the life-support system of your station. The original oxygen specs were correct. You need to find who is responsible for changing them. That's your mole."

She scanned my face. "And what is it you do for a living, Mr. Millville?"

My shoulders slumped because I knew I'd lose all credibility with my next words. "I'm a bean farmer and run an unofficial animal rescue."

Her arms folded across her chest as she let that one steep. Neither of us spoke for an uncomfortably long time. "I think I've heard about as much as I can stomach." She touched a button on the armrest on her side. "Please stop the car." The car pulled over to the side of the road. "Goodbye, Mr. Millville. Tell your brother I'll be in contact soon. As far as you're concerned, it would be best if we never crossed paths again."

The car door opened behind me, but I didn't immediately get out. "I'm sorry how this played out, but I'm not sorry we met. Now that you know what to look out for, there's no reason for me to stay in Jesse's life. I'll be returning to my farm. You're welcome to visit."

Her mouth rounded before she snapped, "That'll never happen."

I smiled. "Never say never. Go find your mole. Save your father's company. Then come see me."

"Are you certifiably insane?"

I leaned closer but knew she wasn't ready for the kiss I would have loved to give her. "I'm worse." I pinched an inch of air. "I'm a little bit in love with you already and in general more optimistic than most situations call for, so I still think we could work out. I also tend to believe that people come into each other's lives for a reason. I had no idea what I was doing in Jesse's life until you and I met. I'd love it if we were destined to be something more to each other, but maybe all I was meant to do was help you see what otherwise would have stayed hidden. Either way, I don't regret anything." I touched my sore nose. "Not even this."

"Get out," she said.

I did and stepped back for the driver to close the door. A moment later I pocketed my hands as I watched the car pull away. I had no idea where I was, but I'd felt lost pretty much from the day I'd left my farm.

It was time to go home. Monica was as fierce as she was brilliant. Now that she knew what to look for, I had no doubt she'd find and remove the person responsible.

Still, I didn't feel comfortable sending Monica into that mix alone. I no longer agreed with George on some points. I needed to tell Jesse and Thane everything ASAP. They'd know how to protect her.

Would they believe me?

I'd make sure they did.

I headed off in a direction I hoped would lead back to somewhere familiar. As I walked, I replayed the last month and owned up to the role I'd played in how messed up things had become. I'd wanted people to see me, the real me, but how could they when that wasn't what I'd shown them?

Jesse and Thane's father had taken me golfing after meeting up with me at the office. I'd fed into his low opinion of me by pretending I didn't understand the game.

I paused. Monica and I had even more in common than I'd realized. For my father I'd tried to be the person I thought he needed me to be.

I'd rescued so many critters; it was time to rescue myself. No more pretending to be someone I wasn't—on a much deeper level than simply switching back with Jesse.

Loyalty and trust were just words until they were tested. I would tell Jesse and Thane the truth. The whole truth: how I felt about Monica, what I'd tried to do for her, and the secret of my beans. If that backfired . . . I'd work through it.

With that, I took out my phone and called Jesse. He didn't pick up. I called Thane next. As soon as he answered, I said, "Thane, we need to talk."

With my attention on what his answer would be, I missed a dip in the sidewalk and tripped. Out of nowhere I felt a sudden pressure on my left shoulder, like a rock had popped up and hit me. It was enough to keep me off-balance, and as I headed quickly toward the cement, I thought, *Not my face again*. Time slowed, and I rolled just before making contact, but the impact was still enough to knock the air out of me and leave me temporarily dazed.

My phone must have flown out of my hand because in the distance I



could hear Thane calling my name.

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

---

## MONICA

I was embarrassed and angry, but neither was the main reason I'd thrown Scott out of the car. He'd shaken me to the core.

*"I'm a little bit in love with you already and in general more optimistic than most situations call for, so I still think we could work out."*

It had been too much.

Unbelievable.

Yet I'd wanted it to be true so much that the pain of knowing it couldn't be had been unbearable. As we'd driven away, my mind had raced with the insanity of it all. A twin? How had that been missed during Jesse Rehoboth's background check?

Scott was clearly disturbed and a pathological liar. His brother's recent actions left his judgment and motivation in question as well.

*"Now that you know what to look out for, there's no reason for me to stay in Jesse's life. I'll be returning to my farm. You're welcome to visit anytime."*

*His farm? He hadn't even tried to come up with lies that made sense.*

*"Go find your mole. Save your father's company. Then come see me."*

Completely delusional. Not that I would have believed anything he said after learning that he wasn't who he'd claimed to be—but a farmer? Really?

Sure, why not? It was completely plausible that Jesse Rehoboth's twin was a farmer. Not. If that were true and Scott did run an animal rescue, someone like that wouldn't be perusing top secret files and researching discrepancies in Jesse's designs. When things don't make sense, they usually aren't true.

I remembered how good Scott had been with the cat. Okay, there was some evidence that he was good with animals. Maybe he did run his own

rescue. I could believe that much.

With a sigh I acknowledged that I had to know how much, if anything, of what he'd said was true. "Turn the car around," I told my driver.

"Back to where we left your friend?"

I almost said he wasn't my friend, but I wasn't in the mood to try to explain to anyone what he was. We hadn't gotten far, so neither had Scott. I spotted him walking on the opposite side of the road and lowered my window in preparation.

He stumbled; then there was a pop, like someone had thrown a small firecracker to the ground. Scott spun as he fell forward, and I screamed without making a sound. My driver hit the brakes and began to back up, but I threw the door of the car open and began to run.

I hadn't made it more than a few feet before my driver had me by the arm and turned to shelter me behind his body. Meanwhile he used the radio in his ear to call to the team behind us for backup.

I used the distraction of his need to update the others to rip my arm free of his hold and make it to Scott's side. His eyes were open, but his chest was covered with blood. "I tripped," he said, moving to sit up.

"You've been shot." My voice was hoarse. Prior to that moment I would have said I remained levelheaded during a crisis, but the idea of losing him sent me into an emotional tailspin. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. I wasn't supposed to lose another person I cared about—and not like this. It was hard to think, hard to breathe.

"Shot?" He looked down at his shoulder. "Oh, shit." How was he so calm when I felt as if I were being gutted?

In a heartbeat we were surrounded by security, who were holding up large ballistic blankets and shields, using both those and their bodies to encircle and shelter me. My driver ordered, "She's secure. Check the perimeter and call for an ambulance."

It felt like a scene from a movie and equally unreal. Scott's blood, however, was very real. My driver bent to check his wound. "It's just his shoulder."

"Oh, just my shoulder. I'll shake it off." Scott winced and made an attempt at a smile. "I know you're pissed, but you didn't shoot me, did you?"

Shaking my head, I sank to my knees beside him. "Of course not." I looked around at my security team frantically. "How do we stop the bleeding? Should we apply pressure?"

My driver shed his jacket. When he seemed about to treat Scott himself, I offered to. He said, “Press this to the wounds. The shot went clear through, so it’ll bleed out both sides. He was lucky, though. ETA on the ambulance is two minutes. He’ll live.”

“A fellow optimist,” Scott joked with a moan. “I’m not feeling very lucky, though.” Still seated, he swayed a bit.

I held the jacket against the front and back of Scott’s shoulder, softly at first, then with more pressure. A siren announced help was arriving. He really wasn’t going to die. “This doesn’t mean I forgive you.” I don’t know why I said that. It felt ridiculous the moment it came out of my mouth.

The color was leaving his face. “I can’t worry about that right now. I’m too busy reevaluating all of my life choices and hoping I don’t get called to a light.”

“You’re going to be fine,” I assured him.

“My brother hurt himself worse when he shot his leg practicing a quick draw,” my driver said.

I sent him a glare, and he straightened. For once, I was grateful my father was paranoid about our safety. The ambulance pulled over.

One of the men called out that the shooter was no longer in the area. The suspect was on the run and being pursued. Several police cars pulled up as well as a line of black SUVs.

I was moved off to the side while Scott’s shirt was cut from him. Impressive as the sight of his muscular chest was, I was too busy praying he’d be okay to spare it more than a glance. The EMTs assessed his wound, applied a bandage, then moved him onto a gurney.

As Scott was being wheeled to the ambulance, a police officer walked beside him, asking questions. Cutting that exchange short, the EMTs lifted Scott into the back of the ambulance. I met Scott’s gaze and took a step toward him before stopping myself. I didn’t belong in the ambulance with him.

The police officer approached me. “Miss Bellerwood?”

“That’s me,” I said without looking away from the ambulance as its doors were closed and it pulled away from the curb.

“I need to ask you a few questions.”

My security team flanked me, and Jackson, a senior member of my father’s security team, stepped between us. “Miss Bellerwood has had a shock. Everything that happened here was witnessed by her security detail.

She and Mr. Rehoboth had a disagreement after meeting for dinner. He left the vehicle. Miss Bellerwood returned to ensure he made it home safely and arrived on the scene in time to see Mr. Rehoboth get shot. The shooter was spotted driving off in a gray sedan.” He said the make and model, then the license plate. “We are currently following them at a distance, and GPS tracking puts them on Glenn Street.”

“Is that correct, Miss Bellerwood?” the officer asked me.

I opened my mouth to say it was, except for his name, but caught a glimpse of the blood on my hands and felt suddenly dizzy. “I’m sorry, I need a minute. I should sit down.”

The police didn’t know who Scott was? Should they? What if Scott went into surgery with no one knowing?

My father wouldn’t let much, if any, of what had happened hit the news, but some of my father’s advice came to me then: *If you don’t know what to say, say nothing.*

The truth about Scott’s identity would instantly take a situation that was already out of control to a whole new level.

*Had the real target been his brother?*

Jackson put his hand on my arm. “Miss Bellerwood will fully cooperate with your investigation after she has been seen by her doctor.” He handed the man his card. “We will contact you.”

The officer looked like he might say more but was pulled aside by another officer. When he returned, he said, “We’ve been told to stand down. The shooter is en route to the station. Is there anything else you need before we go?”

“No, thank you, Officers,” Jackson said, then walked me to the car, where I shakily took a seat in the back.

My driver opened the divider and said, “Your father—”

“Is he coming?” I asked in a rush.

“Asked that you go to his office after you’ve been checked.”

Really? My body began to shake, and I blinked back tears. “Tell him to fuck off.”

“I’ll—I’ll tell him that you—”

“I’ll tell him myself.” I fumbled to find my phone in my purse, which I’d left on the back seat of the car. Before I had a chance to locate it, I heard my aunt Bibi calling out my name.

She appeared beside the open door of my car and crouched down so her

face was level with mine. Donny was behind her. “Oh, baby, are you okay?”

I brought a hand to my mouth and burst into tears.

“Are you hurt?” she asked me, then the men standing around my car. “Is she hurt?”

I collected myself enough to say, “I wasn’t the one who was shot. Scott was.”

“Who is Scott?” She glanced back at Donny, who shrugged.

That brought a fresh wave of tears. Completely overwhelmed, I shook my head and waved a hand between us. “I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore.” After wiping at my cheeks, I asked, “How are you here?”

Aunt Bibi scooted onto the seat with me, then gave me a tight hug. “I’ve bribed your security team for years with homemade cookies—not to know where you were but to always know when you need me.”

I got all ugly-face teary again. “What would I do without you?”

“You’d continue to be the strong, independent woman you’ve always been . . . and hopefully remember to pay this kind of love forward. I’m only doing for you what your mother always did for me. She knew how to make a person feel loved.” When Aunt Bibi saw the blood on my hands, she reached into her purse, pulled out wet wipes, and then proceeded to clean me as if I were a child. I let her. In that moment being cared for felt right.

“You brought Donny,” I said once I’d calmed.

“He was with me. He came by to apologize for punching your boyfriend. How in the world did things go from the two of you fighting to you being with—Scott?”

I let out a shaky breath. “Remember I told you I felt like there were two Jesse Rehoboths? There were. Scott is his twin brother.”

“Okay then. And he’s the one who gives you the—melts?”

I sniffed loudly. “Yes. He shouldn’t, though. Everything I thought I knew about him was a lie. He even told me some wild tale about there being an issue with the oxygen levels we had planned for the space station. He claimed someone was trying to sabotage the project.”

“And then someone shot him. Sounds like he might have been onto something.”

I sniffed again. “I believe you missed the part where he was lying to me the whole time. He and his brother switched places. I can’t trust anything he says.”

“Well, you did say he told you he was unavailable. Was that about a

woman or the lies?”

“I don’t know. I think the lies—but for all I know, it could have been both.” Tears welled in my eyes again. “When I heard a pop, then saw him fall to the ground, I thought—I thought he was going to die.”

She took one of my hands between both of hers. “And?”

“And it felt like a piece of me would die along with him. It doesn’t make sense. I hardly know him, and what I do know is batshit crazy. That doesn’t change, though, that I was so afraid I’d lose him. I don’t understand.”

My aunt looked on with love in her eyes. “Things often don’t make sense when it comes to matters of the heart. You care about this man. Of course it upset you to see him hurt.”

“He said he’s a little bit in love with me already and that he can see us working out.”

“Well, now I don’t have to ask you how you think he feels toward you.”

I looked beyond her and met Donny’s gaze. “Regardless of how people *feel*, sometimes things don’t work out.”

Donny must have heard me because he bent into the car. “Don’t say that, Monica. It sounds like what a man would say if he was too much of a coward to tell the woman he loves that if she ever gave him another chance, he would never let her down again.”

Aunt Bibi turned to face him. “You never let me down, Donny. I let you down. I was young and stupid.”

“I was jealous and angry. I would give anything to go back and not have said any of what I did—”

She raised a hand to his cheek. “I gave as good as I got. For a while I was so ashamed. I never should have left you. It was easier to blame you than to admit that I’d made a mistake. By the time I was honest with myself, we’d already both married other people and called a truce. I didn’t think you’d ever want to open that door again.”

“Oh, Beatrice, you’re the only woman I have ever loved. The only one I will ever love.”

Aunt Bibi turned to me and quickly said, “I’ll be right back.”

I nodded, tears in my own eyes but this time happy ones.

Right there, in the middle of the street and surrounded by security, my aunt threw her arms around the neck of her boxer/chef and kissed him so passionately I didn’t know if I should look away, close the door, or offer them a ride to a hotel.

It could have been all the tension leaving me, but I started to laugh. Aunt Bibi broke off from kissing Donny, continued to hold one of his hands in hers, and reached for me with her other.

“You don’t have to stay with me.” I gave her hand a squeeze, let it go, then blinked back the rest of my tears. “I bet you two have a lot to talk about. I’m going to—I’m going to . . .”

“Follow your heart.” She turned and hugged Donny. When he looked down at her, I saw all the love he’d been holding back.

He held her tight against him. “Like we should have.” He glanced over at me. “Monica, you should have a friend shot more often. It woke me up to how fragile life can be and how much I didn’t want to waste what I have left.”

“That’s—sweet?” I said with some humor. “I can say, though, that there’s nothing about today I’d like to repeat.”

Aunt Bibi turned back to face me. “Don’t do what you think you should, Monica. Do what you want to.”

I let that percolate in my head for a moment. “I want to go to the hospital to make sure he’s okay. Then I want to ask him about a hundred questions.”

“So go.”

I quickly looked at my driver and caught him listening. His face reddened. “I could take you now. I told your father you’re not feeling well enough to see him tonight.”

“That was a wise translation.”

“Your doctor is ready for you at his office.”

I shook my head. “I wasn’t hurt. I’m fine.” I met Donny’s gaze, then my aunt’s. Their happy ending made sense. I couldn’t see how one was possible for me, though. I blurted out, “Scott runs an animal rescue.” As if that might sway them to tell me not to go to the hospital.

My aunt smiled. “That’s perfect. You love animals.”

“I don’t . . .” A memory came back to me of the puppy that had died just before my mother, the one I’d always longed to replace. I’d buried that longing so deep over the years, but it came back strong and undeniable. “I do. I always have.”

“I know, baby,” Aunt Bibi said with a smile, “and despite what you told me about this Scott of yours, I think you should give Scott a chance. There’s a light in your eyes I haven’t seen in a very long time.”



Because I'd always been real with Aunt Bibi, I admitted, "It's not just in my eyes. I feel like parts of me are coming back to life. Maybe, as Donny said, a good brush with death is a good thing."

"Death isn't what you're hoping to brush up against," my aunt said, then winked.

I rolled my eyes skyward. "Donny, get her out of here."

"Will do," Donny said, then bent one more time to eye level and said, "If you need anything—"

I motioned toward the men all around the car. "I'll be fine."

"Call when you leave the hospital," Aunt Bibi said just before she and Donny closed the car door, and they began to walk away.

Alone again with my driver, I said, "Find out which hospital they took my friend to."

"Already did." He named the hospital. Then, through the open partition between us, the driver held out a phone to me. "This was found on the ground. The men thought you'd want to have it rather than hand it over to the police. Whoever your friend was calling thought his name was Scott."

"Thank you." I took the phone and searched it for the last number dialed. Thane Rehoboth. I raised the barrier between my driver and me and hit redial.

"Scott, what the hell happened? I heard a shot, then sirens. Are you okay?"

I took a deep breath and decided to face this head-on. "Scott's okay, but he's been shot. I'm on the way to—" I said the name of the hospital. "He was rushed there with a gunshot wound to the shoulder."

"Who is this?"

"Monica Bellerwood."

"Who shot him?"

"I don't have that information yet, but a suspect has been apprehended. He'll be in police custody soon. I'm heading over to the hospital, if you'd like to meet me there."

"On my way." After a pause he said, "So, you know everything?"

I laughed, because things still felt absurd. "We can talk at the hospital." With that, I ended the call and collapsed against the back of my seat as my driver sped through traffic.

*Well, even if I am crazy, the rest of the world appears to be as well.*

I was still on the way to the hospital when my phone rang with a call

from my father. I was tempted to not pick up, but that would only escalate his reaction to what I already knew he wouldn't handle well.

His first reaction would be to keep the entire incident out of the news. That meant his damage control machine would already be in full swing. People were either receiving hush money or being intimidated into forgetting what they had seen.

More than once I'd thought it would probably be easier for me to kill someone and get away with it than it would for me to be in a healthy relationship with a man. Despite being in the news for his achievements, when it came to his personal life and mine, my father was careful to keep both private.

For me, private had often meant nonexistent.

More than a little angry with him for not coming to me when I'd needed him, I answered the phone and said, "Unless you're calling to ask me how I'm doing, I don't want to talk to you."

"Why didn't you tell me you're dating Jesse Rehoboth?"

It didn't surprise me that he'd ignored what I'd said. I was used to it. "Because I'm not."

"I heard about how you went home with him. You're a grown woman, and while I realize you have needs—"

"Stop. I'm not doing this."

"A public argument with him? Sloppy. And in the age of cell phone cameras, difficult to contain."

"I'm sorry I made extra work for you."

As if he'd missed the sarcasm in my tone, he answered, "This isn't about being sorry, it's about being careful. What do you know about why someone would have shot Rehoboth?"

I opened my mouth to tell him that Jesse hadn't been shot but snapped my teeth back together and took a moment to think. There was little chance of keeping the switch a secret from my father, but I knew the order and timing of the disclosure of information mattered. Too much too soon and I'd lose full control of the situation. "I believe the shooter has been apprehended. I'm sure we'll know more soon." *Should I say something? I have to.* "There is a slim chance that the shooting might be related to some of the data I sent over to Rehoboth for his system. I'll need to check the numbers and redo a few tests, but I want to cross off the possibility that any errors might have been deliberate."

“You’ve found errors in the data you reported?”

His harsh tone stung. “The errors have not yet been confirmed, but since the possibility that they may exist has been brought to my attention, it’s something that I’ll look into tomorrow.”

“You should be looking into it now.”

I took a deep breath. “Dad, I just saw someone I care about get shot. I am going to the hospital to make sure he’s okay. After I’m assured that he will be, I intend to go home and have a long bath and probably a glass or two of wine. The question of if there is or isn’t a problem with the data will have to wait until the morning.”

“Not good enough. Your lack of understanding of priorities is—disappointing.”

One of my hands fisted on my lap as the other clenched my phone tighter. “So. Is. Yours.” With that I hung up and stuffed my phone deep within my purse again.

I was still shaking when I stepped out of the car and was met by some of my security team. I was escorted through a back entrance of the hospital up an elevator to the lounge of a medical suite.

Jackson was there to greet me. “Your father has ensured that this situation is being handled under the radar. If word gets out that Rehoboth is here at all, we’ve prepared a statement that he had an allergic reaction to shellfish.”

Of course. Anything less might shine a bad light on my father’s association with Rehoboth. Perhaps witnessing a nearly deadly shooting had set me off-balance, but I looked Jackson in the eye and said, “Is your loyalty to my father or to me?”

His expression revealed nothing. “I’m loyal to a paycheck.”

I didn’t like his answer, but I appreciated the honesty. “Then make your team and yourself scarce until this is over because you don’t want to lie to my father or cross me. Neither will end well for you.”

He nodded and withdrew from the lounge. I’m sure he didn’t like my threat, but at least we understood each other.

A member of the medical staff came out to tell me that Jesse Rehoboth was in surgery. I sent up a little prayer that not knowing his true identity wouldn’t affect the outcome. The thought that it might had my stomach twisting with uncertainty.

Thane Rehoboth walked into the room looking worried. I gave him the

update I'd just received.

For several long minutes neither of us said anything.

Eventually, he motioned toward one of the couches. "Take a seat. Sounds like we'll be here a while."

"I'm only here to make sure he's okay," I said after I sat.

Thane remained standing. "What the hell happened?"

Thane was Scott's family. I didn't see a reason to conceal the truth from him. I told him that Scott and I had met for a meal but left off the part where I stupidly threw myself at Scott while still thinking he was Jesse. I said we argued when Scott disclosed the truth about who he was and how that led to me leaving him on the side of the road. "I had no idea he was in any danger. I'd circled back to check on him when I saw him get shot."

After pressing his lips together and giving me a long look, Thane said, "I believe you. Thank you for arranging for his care and for going back for him. You saved his life."

I didn't know what to say. I could have corrected him, saying that the care at the hospital had been arranged by my father, but that didn't seem important in the moment.

Thane ran his hand through his hair. "Do you have any idea why someone would shoot him? Did it appear to be a robbery?"

I wiped my hands across my face before answering. "Scott told me something that I didn't believe at all when he said it but that I intend to look into tomorrow." I recounted everything Scott had said, along with his suspicion that the error was an attempt to sabotage the station.

"That's why Scott wanted to look at the designs," Thane said. "He's a lot more intelligent than he lets on."

"Your brother Jesse initially detected a problem."

"That doesn't surprise me, nor does Scott's determination to figure out if it was real." He gave me an odd look. "He cares about you."

I shook my head, dismissing the memory of Scott telling me he was a little in love already. "This isn't about me."

"For Scott it is."

Thane's words hung in the air. I looked away.

Thane added, "You're the reason he didn't want to switch back."

Tears filled my eyes. I fought to keep my composure. "There's no need to make up lies to sway me. I haven't told my father about the switch, and I don't know that I will. Send Jesse off somewhere to 'recuperate,' and my

father might never know. If it turns out that we have a problem in our research department, that's what will occupy my father's attention, anyway. Whatever stupid game your brothers were playing won't matter in the scheme of things."

"You wouldn't be here if you believed that."

"I saw him get shot. I would care about anyone I saw that happen to."

"Okay."

"I don't even have to see him when he wakes up. There were things I thought I needed to know, but since it's unlikely that I'll see him again after this, I don't suppose they matter much either."

Another lull in conversation dragged on until Thane said, "I could answer your questions."

I held my breath for a moment, then clasped my hands on my lap. I did want to know, but would Thane be any more honest than Scott had been? "Is he really a farmer?"

"He is."

"With an animal rescue?"

"Oh yes. And it smells just as bad as you imagine it would."

And then the question that had been circling in my head. "Why did he and Jesse switch?"

Thane sat down on the couch beside me. "That was Jesse's idea. He and Scott grew up unaware that they had a twin. Finding out about each other was a shock."

He told me that Jesse had been shown a photo of Scott from an online article about how Scott had built a prosthetic leg for an injured duck. It sounded as crazy as everything else that had been going on lately, and that made it believable. "So, they discover they're twins and what . . . want to see if they can pass for each other?"

"Not exactly. There was an oil company interested in buying Scott's farm. He'd already turned them down, but they were persistent. Jesse believed that he could resolve that situation if he pretended to be Scott for a few hours and met with the rep the oil company was sending with a new proposal. Essentially he told Scott to step aside and let him handle things."

"I have read that large corporations are snapping up farmland, and I can imagine Jesse being that arrogant."

"Things got a little complicated when Jesse met the oil rep and then fell in love with her."

My eyes rounded at that. “He did what?”

“Her name is Crystal, and her uncle is Art Steadman, the owner of the oil company that was trying to purchase Jesse’s land. It’s complicated and makes sense only if you believe people have no control over who they fall for.”

I almost said something in response to that but decided to keep my own thoughts on that matter to myself—at least until I figured out how to regain control of my own emotions.

A member of the medical staff came out to tell us everything was going well. There was some muscular damage, but the bullet hadn’t hit a bone or an organ. Scott had lost a lot of blood, and surgery would take a while longer, but he was stable and should have a full recovery with some scarring. The final closure would be performed by a plastic surgeon who had been called in.

“We do have a question regarding an injury to his face. Is the bruising from the pavement?”

Looking neither the staff member nor Thane in the eye, I said, “Some could be, but he also received a punch to the nose earlier in the day.”

“I’ll relay that information and come back when he’s in recovery.”

“How long do you think that might be?” Thane asked.

The staff member started walking toward the door that led to where Scott was being treated. “Hard to say, but my guess is an hour or so.”

Once we were alone again, Thane asked, “Was it you or your security?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Who punched him? You?”

“No, I would never hit anyone.” I almost smiled at the question. “My aunt’s boyfriend was a boxer, though, and he was concerned when he saw me arguing with Scott.”

“Finding out the truth couldn’t have been a fun conversation.”

I looked away. “It wasn’t.”

We fell back into silence.

I didn’t ask more questions because I was still digesting the answers I’d been given. I tried to think of a motivation Thane might have for lying and couldn’t. I was verging on emotional exhaustion, though, so I didn’t completely trust my judgment in the matter.

I brought a hand up to rub at my eyes as I remembered how I’d spoken to my father before hanging up on him. There’d be a price to pay for both

impulsive actions.

*He's going to rake me over the coals.*

*If I allow him to.*

I tried to remember the last time I'd stood up to him. It had been so long . . . maybe even back before my mother had died. *God, I hate hospitals and death.*

I thought about the path my life had taken since I'd lost my mother and how it was not at all how I'd imagined it would be. I'd convinced myself that my father's work was important, and it was—to him. More important than I would ever be.

*What do I do with that?*

*Who would I have been had my mother lived?*

*Who do I want to be now?*

There had to be more to life than waking up alone, going to bed alone, having no one outside of Aunt Bibi to call when I had something to celebrate. She was right when she said I used to dream of a family of my own. Would thinking that something like that might still be possible for me only lead to more disappointment?

I wiped at the corner of one of my eyes. *What makes me think I could find anything meaningful with a man I have nothing in common with and who has done little more than lie to me?*

The memory of watching him fall to the ground in a pool of his own blood sent a shudder through my body. I felt connected to Scott, but would I have felt the same for anyone I'd seen almost die? I didn't know.

Eyes closed, I hugged my arms around myself and leaned forward. *I don't know if anyone is listening up there. Mom. God. Whoever. Maybe there's nothing on the other side, but if anyone is there, could you send me a sign? Anything?*

Thane gave my back an awkward pat. "Everything's going to be okay."

He didn't sound certain of that, and I took that as proof that no one would send me a sign, because there was nothing on the other side. This was all we had, and I needed to stop thinking my life was meant to be different than it was. I'd never gone to bed hungry or been afraid I wouldn't have a roof over my head. Maybe my father was right and I had my priorities all wrong.

The outer door of the lounge opened, and an older woman came in, holding the hand of a man. "Thane, thank God. How is Scott? Is he still in

surgery?”

Jesse entered with a ball cap and glasses and his arm around a woman I guessed was Crystal Holmes. The two of them, along with the older couple, huddled around Thane. Although I couldn't hear all that Thane was saying, it sounded like a retelling of the shooting followed by an update on the surgery. My whole body tensed, and I started thinking it would be better for everyone if I sneaked out before they noticed me.

When I stood, the older woman spotted me and rushed over. “Monica?” I froze.

She stopped less than a foot away, effectively blocking my path to flee. “Yes?” I said in the calmest voice I could muster.

“I'm Jill—Scott's mother.” Her eyes shone with tears. “I just want to thank you for saving Scott's life.” She brought a shaky hand to her mouth. “I don't know what I would do if I ever lost him.”

*Okay, so we're not going to address how he was there only because I'd thrown him out of the car? Not sure if that makes me feel better or worse.* “All I did was stay with him until the ambulance arrived. Anyone would have done the same.”

She reached out and took one of my hands in hers. I didn't pull free, even though the act had me feeling even more cornered. “When Scott told us that he was coming back to tell you everything, I was so afraid you wouldn't be able to forgive him, but here you are.”

I swallowed hard. “Yes. Here I am.”

“Do you mind if I hug you?”

“Oh, I don't—” My refusal fell away as she pulled me to her with Aunt Bibi enthusiasm. She was a complete stranger. I should have hated her embrace, but I didn't. For a moment I was enveloped in a mother's love, and it was so beautiful I nearly burst into tears.

She started apologizing as soon as she released me. “I'm sorry. I can't hug *him* right now, and I'm just so grateful to you.”

“You shouldn't be.” *Really, you shouldn't be. If I had kept my calm and not left him there . . .*

“So this is Monica,” the older man said. “Ryan. Scott's father. We've heard a lot about you.”

I braced myself for a hug from him that didn't come, but his smile was warm and welcoming. “You have?”

“So much so that when we were told that Scott had been shot, we



worried that you'd done it."

"No, we didn't." Jill slapped his arm. "Tell her you're joking."

Ryan put an arm around his wife. "Sorry. I make bad jokes when I'm nervous."

Had everything he'd said been a joke or real concern that I might have tried to murder his son? I didn't know, but I remembered the jokes Scott had made while waiting for the ambulance and said, "Your son does the same thing."

The smile on Ryan's face was full of such pride I envied Scott a little. Had I ever done anything my father had been that proud of? I didn't think so.

Jesse brought Crystal over and introduced her to me. Then he added, "I'm impressed that you're here. You're handling hearing about the switch better than Crystal did."

Her mouth rounded, and she wagged a finger at him. "First, you have no idea how she is or isn't handling the news. She can't exactly yell at a man who has just been shot. Second, even if that was a joke, read the room. She's done in."

I nodded. "It *has* been a long day."

Crystal leaned forward. "And now you're here with all of us, probably feeling a little overwhelmed. All I can say is that despite how you met Scott and how confusing everything must seem right now . . . he is a good guy with amazing parents. Jesse and Thane are still working on building a relationship with Scott, but everyone went into this with the best of intentions."

"Excuse me," a male voice said, "Mr. Rehoboth is out of surgery. Would anyone like to sit with him while he wakes?"

Jill called out that she would. She took her husband's hand, and together they made their way without hesitation out of the room.

Crystal placed a hand lightly on my arm. "You could go as well."

I shook my head. "I don't belong in there."

"Yet," Crystal said with a smile before dropping her hand and turning her attention back to Jesse. "I don't know about anyone else, but my stomach is a mess. Do you think you could order something light to nibble on?"

"Good idea," Thane said.

Jesse met my gaze and looked about to ask me something before he seemed to change his mind. "It might be a while. Why don't you all sit back down? I'll handle everything."

I raised a hand. "You might want Thane to. My security team is

downstairs, my father doesn't know about the switch, and your disguise sucks."

"Gotcha," Jesse said before snapping his fingers. "Thane, order us some food."

With a roll of his eyes and a grumble, Thane walked away. Crystal sat down on one of the couches, then waved for me to join her.

"Is there anyone you'd like to be here with you?" she asked.

I shook my head. Aunt Bibi would come if I asked her to, but she and Donny were in a fragile place. They needed to talk things out. I didn't want to interrupt that. I sat on the same couch as Crystal but on the opposite side. "So, you work for your uncle's oil company?"

"Not really," Crystal said with a smile. "That's what Jesse thought when he first met me. I'm actually a flavorist with my own lab. Delivering the new proposal to Scott was a favor I did for my uncle."

"Interesting."

She nodded. "Although I don't know exactly how you feel, I did have a scare with Jesse as well. Scott's friend Remy was trying to steal some soil and—"

"Crystal," Jesse said in an urgent tone. "That's more than we should probably discuss until we know more about . . ."

Crystal looked from him to me and back. "Oh, sorry, of course. I can't keep up with what people do and don't know."

*That doesn't sound good.*

*Why would someone want to steal the soil from Scott's farm?*

*And what is Scott still hiding?*

I was too tired to ask about something I wasn't sure I wanted the answer to. I thought I needed to stay to cross-examine Scott, but I'd already had some of my questions answered. If digging deeper held the possibility of discovering something worse, it could wait another day. "I should probably go."

"Don't," Crystal said. "I'd love to hear about what you do and anything you'd like to share about how you met Scott. Please. It'll help pass the time, and I'd love to get to know you."

I exchanged a look with Jesse, a man who on the outside shared so many physical characteristics with Scott and yet somehow was not attractive to me. A little devil in me brought a slight smile to my lips. "I work for my father. I'm the lead researcher/developer on his space station project. And

Jesse is actually the reason I met Scott in person. He wrote me an email that was so condescending, I felt I had to address it in person.”

Crystal’s eyes lit with humor. “Do tell.”

Jesse took a seat next to Crystal. “Emails are tough. Tone can be misinterpreted.”

Right or wrong, I admit it was a little fun to stick it to Jesse. I took out my phone. “I could show you the email.”

Crystal laughed. “Jesse, just apologize.” Then she gave me a conspiratorial look. “He can get a smidge full of himself now and then, but we’re working on it.”

“Is that how it is?” Jesse countered, but he looked more amused than bothered by her comment.

“It was condescending,” I said.

He cleared his throat and crossed his legs at the ankle. “I have been known to be too direct. If I offended you, I do apologize.” Then he looked at Crystal. “It’ll be a whole lot easier if we consider each other a blank slate and move forward without revisiting the past. If I have to go back and apologize to everyone I’ve ever offended, that’s going to get tedious and insincere fast.”

My mouth dropped open.

Crystal laughed again and laced her hand with his. “Understood. We’ll start fresh.” She looked my way and smiled. “He talks big and bad, but you should see him with Molly, the miniature cow at Scott’s place. He’s a big softie.”

*What is it with these men and cows?*

“Hey, that’s confidential. Next you’ll be telling her I want chickens for the barn we’re building at our new place.”

“He does. He likes collecting the eggs.”

I tried to imagine that and couldn’t. Crystal pulled up a photo of Jesse in jeans and a plaid shirt, holding a chicken tucked beneath one arm and an egg in his other hand.

I started laughing. Crystal and Jesse joined in, and suddenly I didn’t feel so much like an outsider.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

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## SCOTT

I began to wake. My still-fogged brain flooded with memories from just before I was shot. I was back in the restaurant, where Monica was earnestly telling me why she had trouble opening up to people. I was in the car with her again, hearing her tell me to get out and wishing I knew what to say to convince her that I was on her side. I was on the ground, looking up at her as she held a jacket to my wounds and wondering how it was possible to fall even more in love with someone while in so much physical pain.

It took a moment to figure out where I was. I remembered not knowing how to react when the EMTs thought I was Jesse. I decided to not correct them. I remembered being surprised that rich people don't arrive at the hospital the same way normal people do. A dispatcher had radioed the ambulance and instructed them to avoid the usual entrance. Still on a gurney, I was whisked through a side door, down a long hallway to an elevator, then up to a private medical suite. Not room.

I hadn't known those existed.

I didn't have time to appreciate it, though, because there was a blur of medical staff. Someone told me to start counting backward. From what number? That was my last thought before everything went black.

A hand closed around mine. "Scott?" My eyes fluttered, then opened.

I croaked, "Mom."

Her smile was teary. "He's back with us."

"I told you he'd be fine," my father said in a hoarse voice.

"Did they—did they take the bullet out?" I asked.

My mother ran her other hand over my forehead. "No need, it went clear through you. You lost a lot of blood, but they sewed you up and say you'll be fine."

I nodded—not a good choice, because it made my head pound. “Did they catch who shot me?”

My mother looked over her shoulder, then back down at me. “There’ll be time later to talk about that. Your brothers are here. Now that you’re awake, we’ll step out and let them in.”

“My brothers?” As far as I knew, I had one. “I’m not a triplet, am I?”

My mother chuckled at that. “Jesse and Thane. Thane has been here the whole time. Jesse brought Dad and me. They both love you.”

“They’re here. Good.” *I guess.* Even though I wasn’t ready for the conversation I needed to have with them.

From behind her, my father added, “LJ said he’ll be by later. He’s watching the farm in case we need to stay the night.”

“Tell him I appreciate that.”

My mother gave my hand a final squeeze. “We’ll be just outside with your girlfriend. I don’t think she was prepared to meet Dad and me this way, but I can see what you like in her. I gave her the biggest hug. I hope that won’t scare her off.”

“Monica is here?” I moved to sit up.

“Easy, son.” My father put a hand on my good shoulder and blocked me gently. “She’s not going anywhere. You’ll see her too.”

I settled back onto a pillow. “How long has she been here?”

“She was here before we arrived,” my mother answered. “She and your brothers were a little tense around each other at first, but Jesse brought Crystal, and they seem to have a lot in common. You know, since Crystal thought Jesse was you in the beginning.”

“That’s nice.” I closed my eyes as the topic temporarily became too much for me to process, and I drifted partially away again. I heard my mother tell Jesse and Thane that I was waking and that they could come in. Then I heard my father warn them to hold off any important conversations until later. *Thank you, Dad.*

When I opened my eyes again, Jesse was standing on one side of my hospital bed and Thane on the other. Thane was the first to speak. “You scared the shit out of me, Scott. Don’t ever do that again.”

“I’ll try not to,” I joked just above a whisper.

Jesse looked at the bag leading to my IV, then down at me. “First I almost get killed while pretending to be you, then you get shot while pretending to be me. It’s official—switching lives with a twin is dangerous.”

I tried to laugh at that, but what came out was more of a groan. “Yeah, let’s not do this again.”

After a pause, Thane said, “I had an interesting conversation with Monica Bellerwood. I don’t know if you were shot because of what Jesse found or because you looked into it further. I spoke to someone at the station. Bellerwood hired a lawyer for the shooter.”

“Wait. What? Why would he do that?”

“Who knows, but my guess is that he doesn’t want the crime to go public. If it does, Bellerwood loses control of the situation. The shooter is a known hit man. With a lawyer, Bellerwood can convince him to flip on who hired him and accept an unofficial form of witness protection. Done this way, the shooter will look like he snitched even if he doesn’t, and he knows that will make him a dead man if he’s mixed with the prison population.”

“He’ll talk,” Jesse said. “Bellerwood will be out for blood. Someone came for his baby.”

“Monica.”

Jesse made a face. “His space station. When Bellerwood catches wind of the possibility that his competitor might have something to do with the reason ‘I’ was shot—well, it’ll be a game changer.”

“How would he . . .” I blinked several times, trying to clear my head. “Does he know about the switch?”

“Not yet. But he does know about what you uncovered.” Thane put a hand on Jesse’s arm. “We can talk more about this later. All you need to do is heal, Scott. We’ll handle everything else.”

Jesse nodded, then leaned closer to me and growled, “Bellerwood’s daughter? Really?”

In a moment of clarity, I parried, “Steadman’s niece? Really?”

Thane laughed. “Who says you two have nothing in common? There’s definitely a strong resemblance, and I’m not talking about facial features.”

“Are you taking his side?” Jesse accused, but there was humor in his tone.

“There are no sides when it comes to family,” Thane answered smoothly.

“I’m going to remember this,” Jesse continued, but with a smile. “If we discover you have a twin, too, don’t expect me to have your back.”

“I’ll take that risk,” Thane answered, then looked down at me again. “Should we send Monica in?”

The hand I brought up to my face still didn't feel entirely like my own. "Yes." I did want to see her, although not like I was. She was there, though, and that said something, didn't it? Unless she was hoping I was on life support and that she'd have an opportunity to unplug me. I laughed without humor at that idea. "I'm still a little numb, so this is as good of a time as any."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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## MONICA

It wasn't easy to stay and wait for my turn to see Scott, especially once his parents returned and sent Thane and Jesse in to see him. It helped that Crystal remained by my side. When I'd impulsively decided to come to the hospital, I hadn't expected to enjoy any part of the experience. I certainly didn't expect to meet someone I felt would make a good friend.

Crystal was not only well educated and extremely intelligent, but she was compassionate, kind, and funny as hell. She was also in the unique position of being able to say she understood what it was like to have feelings for a man, only to discover he wasn't who he'd claimed to be.

When she said it had taken her a while to trust Jesse but that she was glad she'd stuck around to work things out, I believed her. She had the glow of a woman in love. I was afraid to hope for the same for me. Scott wasn't Jesse.

Then I remembered some of the differences in their characters and thought, *Thank God.*

Not that Jesse wasn't a good man. He seemed to genuinely care about his family, and I didn't dislike who he was when he was with Crystal, but I wouldn't want his type for myself.

What was I looking for? I didn't know. *I suppose that's something else I'll figure out on my journey to find myself.*

As I watched Scott's father comfort his mother, I strained to remember what my parents had been like together. I remembered my mother getting impatient with my father now and then. To her, family should always take top priority.

A memory came back to me of an argument they'd had when he'd chosen to work late rather than meet with my soon-to-be teacher. It was an



early memory. My mother and I had gone to kindergarten orientation, but he called and said he couldn't make it. When we got home, she sent me to my room, but I hid around the corner within hearing range.

She said, "I love you, but I was disappointed today, and so was Monica. We both wanted you there, and you should have been."

"I wanted to go, but something came up."

She didn't raise her voice, but there was firmness in what she said rather than her usual gentle style. "There will always be something that will seem more important, but you missed a big memory today. You missed seeing your daughter meet her first teacher. And you robbed her of the memory of having you there when she did."

"I'm sorry," my father said.

"Don't apologize. Do better. Be the father your daughter deserves—the man I fell in love with. None of your success matters to me if you forget to be that."

I inhaled a shaky breath. *I miss you, Mom. So much it hurts.*

Scott's mother came over to sit at my other side. "He's still groggy, but he's going to be okay."

I nodded. There wouldn't be any benefit to telling her I wasn't breaking down about her son. He was a large part of why I was confused, but I was a mess before he'd been shot.

She laid a hand on my arm. "I am so glad you're here."

She meant it, and her easy acceptance of me sent my emotions into a tailspin. I glanced at Crystal, who gave me a supportive smile. These were the kind of people I'd always longed to have in my life. Honestly, the hope rising within me scared the hell out of me.

Thane and Jesse reentered the lounge. Thane said, "He's asking for you, Monica."

I rose to my feet and began to cross the room.

Jesse stepped into my path. "Monica."

"Yes?"

"Don't go in there unless you feel something for him."

Crystal came to Jesse's side and linked her hand with his. "She does, Jesse. Or she wouldn't be here."

Jesse ran his free hand through his hair. "I don't want to see Scott hurt."

Crystal raised a hand to cup a side of his face. "They need to figure it out on their own. Just like we did." Then she turned to me and smiled again.

“See what I mean? Total softie.”

I briefly returned her smile. In that moment I understood what she saw in Jesse. Yes, he was arrogant and rude, but he was also loyal and protective.

“What I feel is somewhat responsible. If I hadn’t left him—”

“Don’t go down that road,” Jesse said abruptly. “If you’re looking to blame anyone, I’m the one who convinced him to pretend to be me.”

Thane interjected, “Or we could put the blame on the person who shot him.”

“That sounds like a much better choice.” Crystal moved closer to hug him. His arms went around her.

I was still trying to wrap my head around everything that had happened that day, and the feelings I had for Scott were a jumbled mess. Still, I was where I wanted to be, and I couldn’t imagine leaving until I was certain he was okay. “I’m not sure what I’m doing here, but I don’t want to see Scott hurt either.”

With his arm still around Crystal, Jesse moved out of my way. “Then what are you waiting for? Go on in.”

I hesitated for a moment, then walked through the open door. Someone closed it behind me. Scott’s bed was raised to a mostly seated position. He had an IV in one arm, was dressed in a hospital gown, and had a blanket over him up to his waist. My heart raced as I approached slowly, stopping on the opposite side of his bed from his IV. “How—how do you feel?”

“Tired. A little foggy. They gave me something to help with the pain.”

I stepped closer. “I want to apologize for leaving you as I did. I’m so sorry about what happened.”

“It wasn’t your fault.” He grimaced. “Even if it had been a random shooting—which no one thinks it was—there was no way you could have known what would happen.”

“No, but I should have had my driver bring you back to your office or apartment.”

“Jesse’s.”

“Yes.” I looked away.

“Hey.”

I reluctantly met his gaze again.

He continued, “I only said that to remind you that your anger was justified. You were just starting to trust me, and I sideswiped you with the whole I’m-not-who-you-think-I-am twin thing.”

“I wasn’t even aware that was a thing,” I said to lighten the mood.

He smiled. “It shouldn’t be. So, I’m sorry too.”

I nodded and shifted from one foot to the other. “What you said about the oxygen level being wrong . . . if you’re right . . . and I’m not saying you are . . . but if you are, then you potentially saved a lot of lives. If no one had caught it—”

“You would have.”

I hugged my purse to my side. “Maybe. I’d like to think so. I should have caught it right away. When I was confirming the testing, though, I didn’t account for the possibility that someone might lie. Regardless of what we find, that was a significant mistake on my part.”

“We all make mistakes, and this one was found early enough for you to rectify.”

“Not everyone will see it that way.”

“The only one who has to is you.” He held out his hand toward me, and I froze. “Do not let yourself be defined by what others think of you.”

Tentatively I placed my hand in his and savored the warmth of his touch. “Why do I feel that you’re telling me something you’ve had to tell yourself?”

“Because you’re one smart cookie.” His hand tightened on mine. There was an intimacy to the moment. I felt more connected to him than I had with any man—even after sex. It made me glad I’d been brave enough to come and scared me enough that part of me wanted to bolt out of the room. “I don’t have the mental capacity to really go into it now, but I’ve pretended to be someone I’m not—before I ever knew I had a twin. I hid parts of myself from my parents and Jesse because I was . . . afraid, I guess. It took stepping out of my life and meeting you for me to see that I couldn’t have the relationships I wanted to have with my family until I showed them who I really am. Which is tough because I’m still figuring that out.”

What he said struck a chord in me. “I’m so good at hiding who I am—I don’t even know what I’m hiding anymore. What I do know is that the journey to find out is likely going to cost me everything I’ve worked for.”

He searched my face. “Personally or professionally?”

I tried to infuse some humor into my tone. “Both. I hung up on my father earlier. I’ve never done that before. If I did accept erroneous data and followed that up by telling him off, I will probably lose my position as his lead researcher and as his daughter.”

“You’re serious.”

I let out a breath. “My father is not exactly a forgiving man.”

“Then don’t be sorry.”

I cocked my head to the side at that. “What are you saying?”

“If he wants the glory, he needs to accept the responsibility. Who hired the independent research team?”

“He did.”

“Who decided to outsource the life-support system?”

“He did.”

“Exactly. And why did you hang up on him?”

My hand shook in his. “I was upset after you’d been shot, and I wanted him to want to be with me.” I blinked back tears. “He told me my priorities were all wrong. I told him his were.”

“And how did that feel?” Scott pulled me a little closer.

I leaned against the side of his bed. “Wonderful and horrible at the same time.”

“That’s how telling you I wasn’t Jesse felt, but it had to be said, because —”

“You couldn’t pretend to be your brother forever.”

He tugged me a little closer. “Not with you. It was important that you knew the real me.”

I bent closer and searched his face. All I saw there was sincerity and desire. Desire? How could that be? Wasn’t he in pain? I gave in to an impulse, closed the distance between us, and brushed my lips lightly across his.

He released my hand, moving his up to cup the back of my head and leverage me closer. As the kiss deepened, my body came alive for his. I ran my tongue over his lower lip, loving that his tongue eagerly entwined with mine. Quickly our kiss turned more heated, and I became lost in the feel and taste of him. A part of me noticed that he released my hair from its bun, but I was too focused on the need he was fanning inside me to care.

“Oh, that’s not something we need to treat,” a male voice said from the door.

I whipped around, hair flying wildly as I did.

The staff member pointed to the heart monitor, which showed Scott’s increased heart rate and was sounding an alarm. He crept closer and hit a button on the machine to reset it. “I’m not saying it would be deadly, but you

might want to take it easy for twenty-four hours. Mr. Rehoboth did lose a significant amount of blood. At the very least you might find the experience—disappointing.”

All of my embarrassment faded away when I met Scott’s gaze and saw how close to laughing he was. “Thanks for the warning,” I said with humor.

The staff member left without saying more.

Scott wiggled his eyebrows. “He did say it wouldn’t be deadly.”

“Just disappointing,” I answered with a smile.

“Ouch.”

We both laughed, then he said, “If it did kill me, that wouldn’t be such a bad way to go.”

I shook my head. “Oh no, you’re not dying and leaving me to explain to your parents how it happened.”

As if on cue, his mother’s head popped through the door. “Everything okay? We were scared when we saw someone rush in.”

Scott took my hand in his again, then pointed to the machine on his other side. “The heart monitor went off.”

“Oh no,” she said, then smiled. “*Oh.*”

“How is he?” his father asked from behind her.

Chuckling, she blocked him from entering. “Better than expected. We’ll come back later.”

I was smiling as the door closed. Once it had, I turned back to Scott, and my breath caught in my throat. The way he was looking at me—it was the way I’d always dreamed a man might. Could this be real?

*I mean, he is drugged.*

I wiggled my hand out of his. “I should go.”

“Monica.”

I gave my purse a pat as if checking if it was still there. “Yes?”

“I like you.”

This time I believed him. “I like you too.”

“I don’t know how long I’ll be here, but when I get out, I’ll be heading back to my farm.”

That made sense.

He continued, “But I’d like to see you.”

“I’d like that.” I cleared my throat. “Well, you have my number.”

“I do.”

“If they keep you through tomorrow, tell me. If they do, I’ll come back

after work.”

“Monica, come here.”

His tone sent a wave of desire through me. “I’m sure your family wants to—”

“One more kiss before you go.”

My breathing was erratic as I stepped back to his bedside as if being pulled there. The increased beeping from the heart monitor could easily have reflected what was going on with my heart as well. “We shouldn’t. You’ll set off the alarm again.”

“And?”

He was right. Okay, so the risk I was taking was that he might be so drugged that he wouldn’t remember any of this the next day, but I couldn’t resist him. I craved his kiss in a way that made rational thought impossible.

This time I tossed my purse onto the chair beside his bed and placed a hand on either side of his head, then bent in such a way that my breasts rested lightly on his chest. “One kiss.”

“Then you’d better make it count.”

I did. I kissed him with all the desire pulsing through me. His mouth met mine just as eagerly. As the alarm sounded again, he dug his hands through my hair, effectively holding me there as he deepened the kiss.

For a moment I felt I might touch heaven.

I shifted my arm, which encountered the long tube from his IV, and he gasped. I apologized and tried to pull away, but he held on to my arms. “This was worth getting shot for.”

I looked down into his eyes and felt that he was laying his soul open for me to see. The intensity of the moment was almost too much to bear, so I joked, “It’s always about sex with a man.”

“This is about a lot more than sex, but I’ll take that too.” He set me back gently. “Just give me a day to heal.”

A big smile spread across my face. “Only one day?”

“Like I said—I’m optimistic.” The expression in his eyes turned tender. “But I’ll wait as long as you need. I’m not going anywhere.”

Feeling a little dazed, I turned to pick up my purse, then flipped my hair over my shoulder. Chin high, hair loose and past my shoulders, I walked away, heart monitor sounding an alarm, hoping I hadn’t just made another enormous miscalculation. At the door, I stopped and said, “You’d better remember this tomorrow.”

I didn't wait to hear his response, since I couldn't be sure that what he said wasn't being affected by whatever they had him on. I'd have to wait and see what he said when he called . . . if he called. No one in the lounge mentioned that I'd looked less disheveled going in to see Scott than I did as I emerged, and that made me like them even more.

I didn't give them a chance to inquire about why Scott's heart monitor alarm was sounding again. They knew.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SCOTT

I woke the next morning with a throbbing shoulder but refused the more potent pain medication. I'd had some interesting dreams. In one of them, I shared Skittles with a talking gummy bear and a couple who were more realistic but still a little off. I also had some tantalizing memories that I wanted to confirm of kissing Monica, which I was pretty certain had happened.

A nurse came in to remove my IV and monitors as well as change my bandages. She gave me instructions for how to avoid getting my bandages wet while I showered and asked if anyone would be caring for me when I was released.

"My mom, probably," I said with a smile.

"No wife?" she asked with a side glance.

I chuckled. "No, but there is someone special in my life." I smiled at memories of the way Monica had rubbed herself against me as she kissed me a second time. "At least, I hope so."

She smiled. "She wouldn't happen to be the reason your chart says your heart rate was temporarily elevated yesterday, would she?"

"Her name is Monica, and I sure hope so. As long as I didn't dream her visit."

"Would it make you feel better to know that not only did a beautiful young woman visit you, but talk of how she kept setting off your heart monitor has made you a bit of celebrity in the break room?" Her expression turned nervous. "I probably shouldn't have shared that, Mr. Rehoboth. No one is saying anything bad. We just don't get many gunshot wounds with happy endings."

Although it was tempting to correct her about my name, I knew I



couldn't. It seemed, though, that Thane had missed a few with those handy-dandy NDA forms he'd said he'd had the medical staff sign. Still, her heart seemed to be in the right place. "I won't say a word if you don't."

Her smile returned. "I appreciate that. The doctor will be in shortly for one last check before you're released. Is there anything you need before then?"

I looked around my bed until I located my phone. "No. I'm good. Thank you."

As soon as she left, I picked up my phone and held my breath. I could text. Many in my generation would have, but I wanted to hear Monica's voice. My call went directly to her voice mail, and I hung up without leaving a message.

*Dammit. I should have prepared better.*

*Now if I text, it might come across as too aggressive.*

I weighed my options. Why was I acting like she might not be interested? Hell, what did I need for her to do? Hold up a sign? The way she'd kissed me had been clear enough.

I wasn't used to feeling nervous about how to talk to a woman, but I'd already done enough to confuse Monica. I wanted to be clear without coming on too strong. She seemed to be in a tough place. I wanted to support her, be her friend, without being slotted as only that. For men that could be a fine line to walk.

I typed: Thinking of you. Then deleted it. Too formal.

I imagined what Jesse would type and wrote: Me. You. My place. Laughed and deleted that as well. That wasn't me, and I doubted it was what she'd want.

What would she want?

The real me.

I scrolled through my photos until I came across one of my farmhouse with the barn in the background. I snapped that picture because the sky behind it had caught my attention. It was one of those perfect days when I looked up, saw all my critters happy in their paddocks, and was grateful for all I had. I chose the photo, then wrote beneath it: This is my farm. I'll be heading back there tonight. I can't wait to show it to you soon. The small cow on the left is Molly. Jesse and Crystal are adopting her and her emotional support donkey. The duck waddling toward the camera is Alphonse. He is the official mascot of my barn and has never let his

prosthetic leg slow him down a bit. That porch is where I spend most of my evenings, reading or visiting with friends. Tip: if you do come for a visit, bring an extra set of shoes that you can designate as your “barn shoes.” The farm is every bit as messy, smelly, chaotic as you would think by looking at it, but I love it.

Then I hit Send.

The message remained unread by her for long enough that I placed my phone aside and readied myself to go home. Being with a farmer might not be something she was interested in. There wasn't much about her pristine outfits and perfectly manicured appearance that implied she would be, but I was done pretending with her.

Now all I could do was wait. The next move had to be hers.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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## MONICA

“There you are.”

My father’s voice jolted me awake from where I’d meant to rest my head for a moment the night before—my desk at work. I brought a hand up to rub my eyes.

“Why didn’t you answer my text?” he boomed.

Still groggy from sleep, I shook my head and looked around until I located my phone. When I tapped the screen, it stayed black. “It’s dead. I must have forgotten to charge it last night.”

“If I didn’t have someone reporting your whereabouts, I would have been worried.” What might have been said with concern came across as an accusation—one I wasn’t awake enough to have the patience to entertain.

“I found the source of the erroneous data.” It had taken me most of the night, but after scouring every report filed and test performed as well as invoices for materials, I was confident that I’d zeroed in on the person responsible. My investigation had included a late-night visit to the human resources file room. Old school in many ways, my father believed that the only way to keep confidential information private was to keep it off a server. I often wondered what the first flight crew would think when he sent actual paperwork up with them on how to run the space station.

“I’m working on the shooter, but so far he’s not talking. He will. Someone hired him. He’s a professional, but I’ll break him.”

“I have a good guess about who hired him.” I pushed a personnel file across my desk toward my father. “I uncovered who manipulated the reports. He was on the independent research team.”

After whipping the file open and reading it over, my father growled, “Who?”

I rose to my feet. “His name is James Miller. Different last name, but I took what we knew about him and did a little social media searching. His mother is Stillcourt’s sister. He must have somehow figured out that Sc—Rehoboth was questioning his data.”

“Bloody hell. How did that get by you?”

“Me? Me. Right.” Of course he would place the blame on me. I waited for crushing guilt to descend, but it didn’t. Scott was right: he needed to take responsibility for the role he’d played in this. I ran a hand through my still loose and now tangled hair. “This one is on you, Dad. You hired him.” It felt freeing to stand up for myself.

“Watch your tone, Monica.”

“Don’t speak to me like I’m a child. I’m not.” I moved to sit on the corner of my desk and looked my father in the eye. “I am your lead researcher who just located an issue that you brought into the mix. Is it even possible for you to acknowledge when I do something well?”

“You’re exhausted. Go home. We’ll talk about this tomorrow. Be at my office at eight.”

No. The word rose from within me until I said it aloud. “No. I’m done.”

“I just said you’re free to go home.”

I pushed off the desk and rose to my full height. Odd that something I’d feared for so long now felt like the right path. “Dad, I mean I’m done working here. When I leave today, I won’t be coming back.”

“Nonsense.”

“I’ll never be as important to you as your work is, and I’m tired of trying to be.” I blinked back tears and advanced on him. “You’re my father—not my boss anymore, not someone who should have so much control over my life. Stop having me followed. Stop thinking you can dictate who I see and what is or isn’t safe for me. When I say I’m done, I mean with everything.”

His angry expression and lack of reassurance was expected but still hurt.

I shook my head, grabbed my purse and phone, then strode past him to the door of my office.

“If you walk out of here—”

“You’ll fire me? I just quit.”

He didn’t chase after me, but he also didn’t finish his threat, so I felt that on some level I’d won. I was severing what I saw as my last connection

to him, and it felt empowering.

*My dreams are as important as his.* How sad that it had taken me so long to give myself permission to say that.

*He probably won't even miss me.* Now that my father knew that his competitor was the one trying to sabotage his space station, he'd go all out to destroy him. I wasn't interested in being a casualty of that war.

I downloaded a car service app and arranged for my own transportation home. When the ride came, I took one last look at my father's building. A security vehicle pulled out behind the ride I'd hired, and I sighed. Breaking free would be a process, but I'd taken the first step.

As I turned forward again, I reflected on my confidence that my father wouldn't try to stop me from leaving. I hated disappointing my father. Who would we become to each other now? I had no idea. All I was certain of was that I wanted to move forward and not back.

A short time later, back at my apartment, I walked into my closet after taking a shower and sighed. In my head I heard Scott asking me, "Do you have that outfit in every color?"

I did.

I also had an assortment of similar dress suits, all in dark, solid colors that were meant to immediately announce that I was someone to be taken seriously. Another section of my closet was filled with high-profile evening attire. Expensive. Tailored to fit me perfectly. Nothing so revealing that it would attract unwanted attention or so bland that I would be easily forgotten.

Costumes—that's what they were. I stood there in just a towel, wondering how I'd ever thought they'd be enough.

Once I was back in the bedroom, my phone beeped with an incoming message. I was so distracted when I got home that I almost forgot to put it on the charger. I padded over to it and sank to the edge of my bed when I saw Scott had sent me a text.

I studied the photo he'd included, read the words he'd written below, then went back to look over the photo again.

This is my farm. I'll be heading back there tonight. It wasn't the industrial type I'd imagined. The house was a stereotypical farmhouse with a large porch that wrapped around two sides of it. It needed to be painted as much as the barn behind it did. Yet somehow it was inviting and beautiful.

I can't wait to show it to you soon. I read that sentence about five times. There was no reason for him to say that unless he meant it. *Can I go*

now?

The small cow on the left is Molly. Jesse and Crystal are adopting her and her emotional support donkey. I did a double take at that. Jesse and Crystal had mentioned the cow as well as the fact that Jesse wanted chickens for their new place. I'd thought they were joking, but this made it sound real.

The duck waddling toward the camera is Alphonse. He is the official mascot of my barn and has never let his prosthetic leg slow him down a bit. I zoomed in on the duck and smiled. He did indeed have one prosthetic leg and an attitude that said he didn't allow it to slow him down.

These were Scott's rescue animals. This was real.

That porch is where I spend most of my evenings, reading or visiting with friends. I could see that. Scott had an easy smile, and people would be drawn to someone like him. I let myself fantasize about curling up next to him on that swing and savoring the night air while he read. I'd never allowed myself that kind of downtime. Could I be that person? How long would that be enough?

Tip: if you do come for a visit, bring an extra set of shoes that you can designate as your "barn shoes." The farm is every bit as messy, smelly, chaotic as you would think by looking at it, but I love it. *Barn shoes? I'd need a whole new wardrobe.*

*What the hell am I thinking?* I tossed my phone to the side. *I'm a city person—to the bone. I don't like bugs or snakes or whatever else hangs out in tall grass. I wouldn't last one hour on a real farm.*

*Unless I wanted to.*

*No, I'm not going from changing myself to please one man to doing the same for another.*

I reread his message. Nowhere in it did it sound like he was telling me that I needed to change. The mention of barn shoes was probably in case I stepped in manure.

*Manure.* That would take some getting used to being around. *I should save us both some time and explain to him that although I find him attractive, we are too different to ever have anything meaningful.*

I stood up and paced my bedroom. I wasn't making sense, but that was probably due to the fact that I'd only had an hour or so of sleep the night before. *I was hoping he'd contact me, and he did. I should focus on that. Really, since when do I worry about where something is heading with a man?*

If I'd had a girlfriend, I would have called her for advice. I didn't want to involve Aunt Bibi yet because she'd put more significance on this than it yet warranted. There was really only one person I wanted to talk to right then, anyway.

I picked up my phone and called Scott.

"Monica." There was a smile in his voice that made my impulsive act seem less crazy.

"Hi, Scott. I just got your text."

"And I just got home. Let me walk into a room without so many interested ears."

"If this is a bad time . . ."

"It's perfect, actually." I heard a door close. "Much better."

"How is your shoulder?"

"Sore, but I've broken bones before, so I've felt worse. Nothing a few handfuls of Tylenol can't handle."

"I'm glad to hear that." I secured my towel back around me. "I loved the photo you sent."

"You did? I was hoping it wouldn't be too much, but especially after the way we met, it's important that you see the real me."

"I don't work for my father anymore," I blurted.

"He really fired you?"

"I quit." I took a deep breath. "You were right. The oxygen numbers were wrong—deliberately. It was the nephew of my father's biggest competitor. Since the man who shot you was a professional, it's probably only a matter of time until my father links him to Stillcourt as well. My guess is someone found out that you were asking all the right questions."

"And they thought I was Jesse."

"That's how it looks."

He whistled. "I saved his life. He owes me one."

Something Crystal said at the hospital came back to me. "Didn't someone attack Jesse while he was pretending to be you? Something about stealing soil?"

"Oh, yeah. Damn. I guess we're just even."

"Why would someone want to steal the soil from a farm?" I had to ask.

There was a pause, then he said, "When you come out to see me, I'll show you."

I wasn't sure how to take that answer. "Okay."

“Okay, you’ll come out for a visit?”

“I—I—” *Yes* was on the tip of my tongue, but all my earlier reservations were still circling in my head. “I don’t even own a pair of jeans.” There. That was all he needed to know to confirm how completely wrong we were for each other.

“So this fantasy I have of stripping you out of cutoff jean shorts and a flowered blouse and making love to you to under a tree near our pond is completely implausible.”

Heat rushed through me as I imagined that scene vividly—the tangle of our limbs, the feel of his hands on my body. My throat tightened, and I choked out, “I don’t own jean shorts either.” As soon as the words exited my mouth, I slapped myself on the forehead. *Scott really is my mental kryptonite. I just get dumber and dumber the more time I spend with him.*

*But damn—I want to be under that tree with him.*

His deep laugh was so sexy the last of my resistance fell away. It felt good to be with him, even if it was only on the phone. “I don’t actually care what you wear as long as you’re not in it long.”

Flushed and smiling, I said, “Pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“We can go as slow as you want, but I wanted to be clear. I don’t remember everything I said yesterday while I was drugged up, but I like you, Monica. And whatever this is we have—it’s important to me.”

It was important to me, too, but that didn’t prevent embarrassment from flooding in. Especially when I remembered how his heart monitor had sounded an alarm—twice. “I shouldn’t have kissed you while you were still —”

“Are you kidding? I woke up this morning praying I hadn’t dreamed your visit. Best method to get any man to heal up fast.”

I chuckled at that. “Whatever this is—it’s important to me too.” Neither of us said anything for a long moment. I took a deep breath. I wanted to be as real as he was being with me. “I’ve spent my whole life in big cities. I don’t even own bug repellent because I’m never anywhere where I’d need it.”

“Are you saying you’re not interested in visiting my farm?”

“No.” I groaned. I did want to see his farm. No wonder he was confused. “I don’t know what I’m saying.”

His tone was soothing. “What *do* you want?”

“With you or in general?” I asked the clarifying question to stall for time while I sorted myself out. My mind raced, stomach began to churn,



hands went cold.

“Breathe.” God, I loved his voice—deep and with the gentle confidence of a man who didn’t chase the approval of others. “Most people fly through life by the seat of their pants, hoping they’re getting it right, often getting it wrong. It’s okay to not have all the answers.”

I shook my head vehemently. “No, it’s not.”

“What happens if you don’t?”

His question sent my defenses flying back into place. Did he see me as another critter to be saved? *I don’t need him or anyone.*

That thought was quickly followed by his voice saying in my head, *Breathe.*

*It’s okay.*

How honest could I be—with him as well as myself? “I get angry.” *Angry* wasn’t the right word. *It’s worse than that.* “No, I get sad and scared.”

“Because?”

“Because life doesn’t make sense, and I need it to.” When he didn’t immediately say anything, I added, “I’m a mess.”

“You’re not. At least, not more of a mess than everyone else is. When my grandfather died, I remember questioning my parents about their religion and how they could possibly know if any of it was true. My mother said it didn’t matter if it was or wasn’t. She said her beliefs bring her comfort and keep her focused on helping others—and that brings her joy. I don’t believe everything my parents do, but my personal beliefs do the same for me. They ground me. They also fill my barn with animals other people might throw away or eat, and that brings me joy. There are still things I’m figuring out, but I love my parents. I love my farm and the manual labor that goes along with maintaining it. I have questions I don’t know the answers to, but having things I believe in makes the rest of it—survivable.”

There was a beauty to Scott that went far beyond my physical attraction to him. He was open with his thoughts and feelings in a way I wasn’t used to, and it made me want to be the same with him. I’d known him only a short time and already felt that there was no going back to who I’d been before him.

I wouldn’t want to even if I could. I finally had the answer to his earlier question. “I want to be myself—whoever that ends up being. I’ve spent so much of my life thinking if I wasn’t perfect, I would end up alone. I’m not afraid of being alone anymore.”

“That’s important.”

“But that doesn’t mean I want to be.”

“I think I understand.”

“I do want to see your farm.”

“We don’t have to start there. We can meet halfway—go anywhere. But if you want to see who I really am, this is the best place to do that. No pressure. No expectations. I won’t even say I’ll cook for you. I’m horrible in the kitchen.”

I laughed, then had a thought. “Will your parents be there?”

“My parents.” He paused as if that hadn’t occurred to him, then said, “When you decide you want to visit, I’ll send them out somewhere.”

“I like them. They were wonderful to me at the hospital . . . it’s just . . .”

“Oh, I get it. Let’s get to know each other first. They’re easygoing. They’ll understand.” There were voices in the background, then Scott said, “Okay, so first my mother would like to make it clear that they’re not trying to hear my conversation with you but that I’m speaking loud enough that they can. Second, she said she and my father are itching to get back on the road. Apparently I’m putting a crimp in their ability to cut loose as well. Don’t ask. They’ll be gone by Thursday.”

Funny, but . . . “Oh my God, tell them it’s not necessary for them to leave.”

“I would, but they’re already talking about where they want to go and what they want to see. Listen, just because they won’t be here doesn’t mean you need to come over. I want to see you—location doesn’t matter.”

That made it easier to ask, “What are barn shoes? If I wanted to buy a pair so I could come see you this weekend, where would I find such things?”

“They don’t have to be anything special, just an old pair of something comfortable that you don’t mind getting dirty—and smelly. Picture what you might wear to run across a field if a goat got loose and we needed to chase him down. I’m not selling my farm well, am I?” He laughed.

“Actually, you are. How does Saturday sound? Around noon?”

“Great.” He told me the address and where to park when I arrived. “I’ll still be healing and have bandages, but I can at least show you the tree by the pond, and we can imagine how great it will be.”

Smiling, I let myself bask in his humor and desire for me. “Perhaps sketch a few positions we might want to try at some future date?”

“Never thought of that,” he said with humor. “You’re a genius.”

“And you’re funny.”

“Life can be difficult—it’s either laugh or cry through it.”

I liked that. “We should do a countdown to when you’ll be well enough to go skinny-dipping with me in that pond.”

“Oh, now you’re just torturing me.”

I lay across the bed, let the towel fall away, and laughed. I felt young and sexy in a way I never had before. “Too bad about that shoulder. I’m fresh from a shower, not yet dressed, and wishing you were here.”

“The things I would say if the walls here weren’t as thin as they are.” There was laughter in his voice. “Plus my shoulder is the only part of me that’s injured. I’m sure I could handle a little discomfort.”

That had me chuckling. It felt good to not only be wanted but to also know that despite how we were joking, he wasn’t in a rush. “I’m glad I met you, Scott.”

“I’m glad I met you too. If you’re up for it, I’d love to call you tomorrow just to say hello.”

“I’d like that. Talk to you tomorrow.”

After ending the call, I sat up with a start. *I’m seeing Scott this weekend. At his farm.*

*It’s happening.*

I scooted off my bed and back to my closet. Since there weren’t many choices, I put on my workout clothing and a pair of running shoes. After giving myself a once-over, I grimaced at my reflection. “I can’t wear this to see Scott.”

I shook my head. *Are my priorities all wrong? Yesterday I was helping design a space station. Today I’m worried about what I’ll wear to see a man. My father would be so proud.*

*No.*

*This isn’t about him.*

*I’m doing this for me.*

I thought about Aunt Bibi, about how much regret she’d carried with her through the years, and what I’d told Scott I wanted. There were two paths before me. One involved seeking out my father, apologizing, and continuing as if nothing had happened. I’d been on that path for a very long time, and it hadn’t brought me joy. The other path was less certain. It required stepping out of my comfort zone and believing that how I felt was as important as what I accomplished. It also meant having faith that I could choose to follow

my heart without it costing me my dreams.

My dreams?

I'd put them aside long ago, but some were coming to life within me. I wanted to be part of something bigger than myself. I wanted to make a positive impact on the future of humanity. What would that look like if I walked away from working with my father? I had no idea, but in my core I believed I was meant to do something important—something good.

Could I do that and make any kind of life with a farmer? If I didn't believe it was possible, then there was no reason for us to even go on one date. Why set us both up for disappointment?

Was Scott someone I could see myself with?

I had to give him a chance to be. We were both learning how to be comfortable with who we were. Maybe we could take that journey together.

I sought out my phone again, this time using a number I'd been given at the hospital. "Crystal? It's Monica Bellerwood."

"Oh, hey, Monica. How are you? Have you spoken with Scott?"

"I'm well." I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. "And I have. He's back at his farm."

"How is he?"

I thought about where his mind had wandered more than once. "He seems to be feeling a little better already."

"I'm at Jesse's apartment with him. Outside of the 'partially destroyed by what looks like a wild tiger,' it's exactly how I imagined it: immaculate and modern. I'm glad I met him when and how I did. This is part of who he is, but there's so much more. We'll keep this place, but we're also getting that little farm. I love the idea of having a bit of both worlds."

It was a good lead-in to what was on my mind. "Scott asked me out to the farm this weekend."

"Oh, you'll love it there. It's so beautiful—so peaceful."

I cleared my throat. "Since you've been there, I was hoping you could tell me what I should wear. I don't think I own anything . . . casual enough." God, did that sound as juvenile to her as it did to my ears? I'd been raised to walk into a room and command attention. Who was this person I was becoming?

"If you're asking me if I'd like to go shopping with you, I'm in. If this includes lunch somewhere nice and possibly a glass of wine or two, I'm still in but could also bring one of my friends, who is the biggest hoot. You'd love

her.”

Her enthusiasm brought a smile to my face. “Are you free tomorrow?”

“I can be. Just tell me when and where.”

“I should clarify that Scott and I aren’t dating or anything yet. I’m just going out to see him. I don’t want you to think—”

“Monica, I don’t choose my friends by who dates Jesse’s brother. When we met at the hospital, I had a feeling that you and I have more in common than the twin thing. I know what it’s like to work so much that I wonder who I am outside of my job.”

That was a good description of where I was mentally. She was so open with me that I found it possible to open up more with her. “Did you feel that you had to give up anything to be with Jesse?”

She took a moment to answer. “Yes. I gave up believing nothing good could ever last. I gave up believing that being strong meant never needing anyone. Jesse’s the first man I feel—”

“Like you can be yourself with?”

“Yes. I’m sure we’ll disagree on things, but I don’t just love him—I also like who he is, and I believe him when he says he feels the same. Everything else? We’ll figure it out—together.”

Gratitude washed over me. These were genuine, caring people, exactly the kind I longed to have in my life. I lowered my guard with her and said, “I’ve never been on a farm—I have no idea if I’ll enjoy being there. I want to give it a real shot, though, and I don’t want to look out of place.”

“If I tell you what I wore the first time I met Jesse, you have to promise not to laugh.” It was hard not to when she described how a shirt that had seemed conservative enough when she’d put it on had shifted upward, unbuttoned, and given Jesse quite the show. “I was mortified when I realized.”

“He didn’t say anything?” I asked.

“Not one word, that stinker.” She chuckled. In a more serious tone, she said, “After that I felt self-conscious, but a friend gave me really good advice. She told me to choose my clothing based on how it made me feel—me, not anyone else. She was right. Jesse’s happy with anything I wear, and when I choose clothing that makes me happy . . . I’m beautiful. That might sound silly—”

“Not at all. I have a closetful of clothing I wore for other people but not really anything for myself. It’s time to change that.”

“Sounds like fun. I’ll clear my schedule for tomorrow. About my friend . . .”

“Bring her.” If Crystal liked her, I was certain I would as well. “Thank you for this, Crystal.”

“That’s what friends are for.”

“See you tomorrow,” I said in a voice thick with emotion and ended the call. A glance at myself in the mirror revealed how tired I looked. Only then did I remember how little sleep I’d gotten. Exhausted but hopeful, I shed my clothing, crawled beneath my bedsheets, and almost immediately fell asleep.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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## SCOTT

The next morning I accidentally walked into my parents' bedroom while my mother was packing her "special drawer" into her luggage. No son wants to see that.

She quickly closed the cover of her luggage and zipped it shut. "Some people knock," she said gently.

"Sorry," I said with some chagrin. She was absolutely correct. "Do you have a minute?"

She came over to where I was standing. "Is it your shoulder?"

"No." I moved it and winced. "It's no better or worse than you'd expect. I wanted to talk something through with you—get your opinion."

"Absolutely." She glanced back at her luggage. "I could use a coffee. How about you?" When I nodded, she linked her arm with mine, and we made our way to the kitchen.

I hopped up to sit on one of the counters as she poured water into the coffee machine. "I want to be honest with Monica."

"As you should be."

With my hands gripping the counter on either side of myself, I sighed. "I mean about my lab, the beans, even what makes them special."

She flipped the switch to start the coffee brewing. "That's a big risk. You still haven't told your brothers or LJ yet, have you?"

"I've told them some but not the complete process I use to modify the plants. I'm planning to, but no, I haven't yet."

"Are you sure you're ready to take that step with Monica?"

"That's one of the things I want to talk out with you. Even though I don't have a usable product in either the food or fuel industry yet, I have enough figured out that I could sell what I know. Possibly for millions. We

could be wealthy.”

She poured a cup of hot coffee for me, then for herself. “I already have everything I could want. I thought you were happy here as well. Did seeing how your brother lives change that? I’ve never been rich, but I imagine it has its perks.”

I loved my parents so much. If I’d actually had any prebirth say in which ones would raise me, I’d chosen well. I decided right then that if Thane came back with information about my biological parents, I was no longer interested in seeking them out. In the parenting department, at least, I also had everything I could want. “It’s not about that. I started experimenting with beans because I wanted to make sure you and Dad could retire comfortably. The farm no longer makes economic sense without an outside infusion of income.”

She came to lean against the counter beside me and sipped at her black coffee before saying, “Your father and I are fine, and the farm is yours to do with as you want.”

I sighed and placed my coffee mug to the side. “Monica just left her job after a falling-out with her father. If I trust her with the process, she could take my research, run to her own lab, and re-create my work. A new fuel source as well as a self-sustaining source of nutrition would be the kind of win for his space station that could put her back in his good graces.”

“So you’re worried she might steal your research?”

That wasn’t it. “Not exactly. I’m worried that a temptation of that proportion might be too much for anyone to resist. I think about Remy. We were ride-or-die best friends. I thought we’d always have each other’s backs. When he tried to kill Jesse, he didn’t know that wasn’t me.” I rubbed a hand over my bandaged shoulder. “I didn’t see that coming. In the beginning, had he asked me, I would have told him my entire process. Not sharing that information, though, is the only reason he wasn’t able to sell my research.”

“That’s true.”

“Mom, he buried his father in his basement. Obviously, I didn’t know him as well as I thought I did.”

“None of us did.”

“LJ thinks I’m too trusting. He doesn’t know I’ve protected my secret from him as well. I used trust as a leverage tool to get what I wanted from Thane and Jesse, but I haven’t been entirely honest with them as well.”

“I’m not really sure what you’re asking me.”



Not surprising, since I was talking out how I felt, so there wasn't actually a question. "It's early in the game to trust Monica with any sensitive information. On the other hand, I've told myself a hundred times that I should trust Jesse more . . . as well as LJ. Yet the secret sits there between us like a wall I can't seem to get myself to knock down. I don't want a wall between Monica and me. She's looking for a real connection to someone, and I want to offer her that." I swallowed hard. "It's a risk I want to take, even if it ends badly."

My mother smiled gently. "It sounds like you already know what you want to do."

"I do, but thank you for talking it out with me."

She leaned over and gave me a hug. "Always." Then she straightened and walked across the kitchen to place her cup in the sink. When she turned back to me, she said, "Relationships aren't easy, Scott. Not romantic ones and not friendships. They're all tested, and they don't all survive. Remy is losing a battle to demons that were not of his choosing. People who are drowning sometimes hurt those who try to save them. That's how I see what he did. It doesn't matter if it's right or wrong—it's a fact of life. Some people make bad choices when they feel they're sinking."

"Are you saying I shouldn't tell Monica?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm saying that Remy won't be the last person to disappoint you, but you can't let them change you. You've never been one to do nothing when someone needs help. Remy needed someone on his side, and for a long time you were that for him. You didn't do anything wrong. None of us knew what was happening at his house. And the rest? You're still angry at Remy, but you can't stay angry. You won't be able to trust anyone completely until you forgive him. Not Jesse, not LJ—not even Monica."

"Only you would suggest I forgive a murderer."

"I'm not saying that what he did wasn't wrong, but a person can only take so much abuse before they break. His father was a horrible man. I'm sad that we didn't know. We could have—"

"I know. I feel the same way. He tried to kill me, though, Mom. Jesse, really . . . but he didn't know that. How do I forgive that?"

She inhaled deeply. "Reach out to his family. They're suffering. You don't need to let Remy back into your life, but if you do something good for his family, I believe you'll help everyone heal—even yourself." She nodded toward my injury. "You've been treating your shoulder pain. Don't brush

aside what you've been dealing with emotionally as well."

My mother was a wise ball of love I would forever be grateful had adopted me. I hopped off the counter. "Thanks, Mom. I love you."

"I love you too." She flipped a dish towel over her shoulder. "Now thank me by getting all the dirty laundry out of your room and down into the wash."

"Yes, ma'am." I gave her a kiss on the cheek and headed upstairs to do just that. As I did, I thought over what she'd said about Remy and helping his family. Some of my anger at Remy was really anger with myself for not being the friend to him I thought I was. It wasn't so much him that I was having trouble forgiving—it was myself. Looking back, there were signs: bruises he'd explained away, how he had always wanted to be at my house instead of his own.

I couldn't see a way back to us being friends again, but my mother was right that it was time to let my anger go. It wasn't helping either of us.

While my laundry went through the wash cycle, I called Remy's mother and asked her if she needed anything. She said she and her other son, Brian, had been fired from their jobs after word got out that Remy had tried to kill me. Things had gone downhill from there. Brian refused to leave the house. He not only thought he hadn't done enough when Remy tried to kill me but also hated himself for running away afterward to save himself rather than staying with Remy. Her voice brightened, though, when she said that she'd received a call from a job training program in Providence. It included a stipend for housing as well as food and clothing. Not long term but enough to get them back on their feet. So, they were relocating and starting fresh.

"Did you set that up for us?" she asked.

"No, but I think I know who did." During conversations we'd had since Remy attacked him, Jesse had asked me a ton of questions about Remy's family. Now I understood why.

My respect for Jesse rose as what he'd done for Remy's family sank in. He was helping them in a way that didn't feel like charity. He was also giving them what many people never got—a chance to start over. I'd find a way to do the same and to thank him.

After ending the call, I headed outside to help my father prepare the motor home. He was checking the tire pressure when I joined him. "Need a hand, Dad?"

"Sure, Mom's inside packing."

“I know.” I preferred to block that memory out. “What do you need?”

He motioned toward the front of the motor home. “Start it up. I want to hear how the engine sounds. We’d hate to head out only to come back and ruin your date.”

I climbed into the driver’s seat and started the engine without closing the door. “Since when do you worry about something like that?”

He took a moment to listen before saying, “Since you found one I could imagine you settling down with.”

“Whoa. Dad, we’re at the first-date stage. Second date, technically. Although I don’t know if I should count the one when she still thought I was Jesse.” I cut the engine, then touched my still slightly swollen nose in memory. “It’s probably better to start fresh.”

He moved his air compressor from one tire to another. “Your mother and I thought she was very nice. From what we saw at the hospital, she and Crystal seemed to get along as well.”

“Oh, that’s good. I was loopy for most of that.”

He chuckled. “We know.” His expression turned serious. “Are you sure you’re okay to be here alone? You *were* shot.”

“It doesn’t feel real.” I jumped out of the motor home, then closed the door behind me. “You’d think being shot would leave me shaken, but do you remember that bull I rescued in high school? Now that was someone who wanted me dead.”

My father chuckled. “You had your own personal running-of-the-bulls experience for a while with him.”

“About once a week. He eventually came around.” I sighed. “I still miss him.”

My father turned off the air compressor. “Don’t look at me. I would have filled my freezer with him the first time he charged me.”

“I considered it.”

My father’s eyes rounded in mock surprise. “You? Mr. Vegetarian?”

I rolled my eyes. “Hey, I’m only human, and I still have scars from him. For a while there I wasn’t sure I could get him to a point where anyone could be in a paddock with him.” I had, but it took a lot longer than expected, and I’d wisely never lowered my guard with him. Still, I’d felt that I’d made progress with him. It was a short-lived win, though, since he died from natural causes less than a year after that.

Each time my father drove me to the doctor after I had a run-in with that

bull, he cautioned me to balance my optimism with realism. I needed a few years and some maturing before I understood what he meant. Thinking everything would always work out perfectly wasn't always wise. "Trust intelligently" was a phrase my father used often to explain healthy boundaries and expectations.

Was that why I'd held back with LJ and Jesse? I was the one who'd made my secret into an issue between us, and I had the power to make it into a nonissue. Funny how clearly I could see the situation now that I had removed guilt from the equation.

At my father's prompting, I followed him inside the motor home, and we continued to talk as we began to clean. He said, "I've always been really proud of you. When you set your mind to do something, you follow through with it. Take your beans—a lot of people would have given up already, but you haven't, and that's why I know you'll figure them out."

"Thanks, Dad. I learned that from you, you know."

He smiled. "Your mom and I did our best."

I folded a blanket and placed it into a drawer beside the built-in couch. "Whenever I get tangled up in my head, and that happens from time to time, I know I can turn to you and Mom. I realize how lucky I am to have you."

He gave my good shoulder a shove. "Stop, before you make me all emotional. We feel the same. Now, if you don't mind, rinse the dishes while I tackle the bathroom."

"Sure." The dishes weren't soiled. I gladly accepted the chore of removing the dust from them by running them under some water instead of cleaning the toilet. My father hadn't looked bothered at all, though, by his choice. "Hey, Dad."

"Yes?" he called out from the bathroom.

"Thank you for everything."

"I'm not cleaning your bathroom too. That's on you."

I laughed and washed another dish, and my worry that anyone would steal my bean research faded away. I didn't need millions of dollars to be happy; I already was.

Unlike my mother, I couldn't say I already had everything I wanted. Both the farm and my work were rewarding, but I wanted someone to share everything with. Monica was someone I knew would appreciate my lab, but my barn and critters?

I paused and looked out the window of the motor home at the paint

peeling off the porch stairs. I wanted her to love my home as much as I did. I wished I'd spent a little less time in my lab and a little more time on the general upkeep of the farm.

Not too much I could do about that while my shoulder was healing. I could have called it impossible and given up there, but that wasn't how my father had raised me.

I had friends, and more than a few, who could be persuaded to paint for a couple of cases of beer. I decided it was also time to ask LJ for a favor. I smiled as a plan for fixing up the house before Monica visited began to form in my head, one that would include removing the surveillance cameras LJ had put up around the property. Hopefully the future would include situations I'd prefer to keep private.

"Hey, Dad, do you mind if I update some things at the house while you're gone?"

"It's your place now, Scott. Just please don't touch our room."

"I won't." That was an easy promise to make.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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## MONICA

Several days later, I drove along a back road that the GPS promised would lead to Scott's farm. Although I'd been to Rhode Island many times in my life, it had been mostly to the airport or work events in Providence or Newport. I had no idea how rural the western part of the state was.

A crisp white fence came into view. It wrapped around large fields, some filled with crops, others with stock animals munching on grass. A sign hung from a white post: **MILLVILLE FARM**. The base of the post was surrounded with flowers. It looked brighter and homier than the photo he'd sent me.

Scott and I had spoken on the phone every night. One would think that would have made me less nervous to see him again, but it had built an anticipation in me that had my heart pounding in my chest as I parked. We'd kept the talks light and flirtatious. More than one night I'd gone to bed frustrated and wishing we'd chosen an earlier date to meet up.

Waiting had probably been for the best, however: it had allowed me to put a little distance between me and the shock of breaking away from my father. It had also given me time to go shopping with Crystal and Ellie. That day had ended not only with me being the happy owner of an assortment of casual attire but also with two new friends and an appreciation for what they called a "girls' day out."

The whole experience had been so much fun and such a boost to my confidence that I'd also bought a suggestive present for Scott. It was in a box on the passenger seat.

Scott was already walking down the steps of the porch of his home as I parked my car on the driveway in front of it. My car. That was another thing I'd done for myself that week—purchased my own transportation. Nothing

flashy, because that had never been my style. I'd opted for a four-wheel drive hybrid. It seemed sensible and would easily adapt from city driving to more challenging roads. I could imagine coming to see Scott was going to become a frequent thing.

I turned off the engine and reached for the present I'd brought him. When I stepped out of the car, he was there with a big, welcoming smile. "You're here."

"I am," I said breathlessly.

"You look amazing."

I felt amazing in my new cowboy boots, jeans, and scoop-necked T-shirt. "You do too." *Damn good.* His jeans clung to his muscular legs in all the right places, and the black shirt he wore with them revealed every ripple of muscle Jesse's suits had concealed.

"And you brought me a present?" His face lit up, and he nodded toward the wrapped box I was holding.

I'd bought him something on impulse during my shopping spree with Crystal and Ellie. When I'd fantasized about giving it to him, I hadn't taken into account that the best time to hand it to him might not be when I first arrived. I tucked it behind me. "It's for later."

His grin sent licks of desire shooting through me. He stepped closer, so close that I could feel his breath tickle my lips. "I can wait, but maybe you could give me something else for now?"

I tossed the box back on the seat and closed the door behind me, then raised my face to his again. "Like what?"

He brought one hand up to cup the back of my head. "A kiss?"

He didn't need to do more than ask. I slid my hands up his strong chest, careful to avoid his bandaged shoulder, and rose on my tiptoes. Brushing my lips lightly over his as I spoke, I asked, "Just one?"

"As many as you want." His arms came around my waist, and our kiss quickly turned more heated. Everywhere our bodies touched was a sweet torment. His lips were deliciously confident, parting mine to allow his tongue to tease and tempt. Had he asked me to strip for him right then, I might have. I writhed against him, loving how his cock hardened and strained against the front of his jeans.

His hands moved lower to cup my ass. I feverishly explored him from his flat abs to his muscled back. I couldn't get enough. We kissed until I couldn't remember where I was or what I'd been worried about. It was only

the two of us, the heat of our desire, and a building need.

When he raised his head, I was breathing as heavily as he was. I could have stayed there all day, basking in the warmth in his eyes. “Now that’s a hello.”

“So far I love your farm,” I joked.

I felt his chuckle rumble through his chest. “There’s more to it, but take your time getting to know this part.”

How was it possible for his touch to feel so right? “I’m glad you didn’t die,” I blurted out.

“Me too.” He laid his forehead lightly on mine. “A question has been bothering me ever since you came to see me at the hospital.”

“Yes?”

“I have the most incredible memory of how you felt pressed up against me—and the taste of you. It’s so good I’m half-afraid I imagined it.”

“You didn’t.”

He bent to claim my mouth again, taking his time in a kiss that was so sweet it nearly brought me to tears. “Good. And you’re even more incredible than I remember.”

I ran the tips of my fingers over the strong line of his jaw. “So are you.” I groaned. Had I actually said that? “You know, I actually sound intelligent when you’re not around. Then you look at me, and all of a sudden I can barely form a sentence.”

His head raised, and humor sparkled in his eyes. “Why, Miss Bellerwood, that is the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

I gave his shoulder a light tap, then cringed when he winced. “Oh my God, I’m sorry. See? I totally forgot about your shoulder.”

He winked. “Don’t worry, so did I.”

He was so nice. I wanted to express how much our date meant to me. “Full disclosure: bought this outfit not only because I felt good in it but also because I hoped you’d like it.” I groaned. Was my goal to see how awkward I could make things?

His hand came up to cup my cheek. “Every building on my property is freshly painted, the furniture in the downstairs part of the house is new, and I had a sign made just for your visit.” His hand moved back to comb through my long hair. “I care about what you think too.”

My head whipped around to look at the house and then the barn. That’s what was different—they were freshly painted. I looked at his injured



shoulder. “You did that for me?”

“Technically my friends did, but I supervised. The new fencing and the flowers were LJ’s contribution. He thought it added curb appeal.”

“LJ?”

“A good friend of mine who lives next door. He helps out with the animals and some other things around the farm. I’m sure you’ll meet him soon, but I did tell him to make himself scarce today.”

I looked around again. No one had ever put so much effort into impressing me. My breathing became shallow as hope bubbled within me. This sure felt real.

He looked down into my eyes. “You could have worn a suit here, but you didn’t. Consider this me meeting you halfway. I know where I live isn’t what you’re used to, but I want you to feel comfortable here.”

That did have tears filling my eyes. “You don’t have to change for me.”

He brought his hands to my hips and tucked his thumbs through the belt loops on the sides of my jeans. “I doubt I could if I wanted to. A little paint, a few new chairs . . . neither changed anything important. Just like these jeans and how you wore your hair down today doesn’t mean you’re not still the kick-ass researcher who stormed into Jesse’s office.”

I liked that but added, “Technically I’m an unemployed kick-ass researcher.”

His expression sobered. “How are you holding up?”

Having his full attention focused on me was addictive and warmed every corner of me. “It wasn’t an easy move to make, but I don’t regret it. Although some people think I was given the position as lead researcher because of who I am, I have all the degrees and experience to back up that appointment. My father has very high standards, and I needed to exceed them to even be considered. I see now that he did me a favor. I’ll either find another project or break out on my own. What I’m certain of, though, is that this time I want what I do to be something I feel invested in. I want to help humanity in general, not just the ones who can afford to live in space.” I looked away, then back up at him.

“You will,” he assured me. “Who knows, perhaps we’ll even find a way to inspire each other in that department.”

Was that too much to hope for? He was already kinder and more supportive than any man I’d ever been with. It probably wasn’t realistic to also wish we could share an intellectual interest. “That would be incredible.”

Just then I felt a slightly violent tugging at the leg of my pants. I pulled away from the source of it and looked down. A duck quacked up at me aggressively. His metal leg was a giveaway as far as his identity. “You must be Alphonse.”

Scott kept an arm around me as he said, “Behave, Alphonse. This is Monica. You are not allowed to scare her off.”

Although I’d had extremely limited exposure to ducks, Scott had told me enough about Alphonse that I felt I knew him. I squatted down onto my haunches. “You’re just saying hello, aren’t you? And maybe showing off your robotic leg? I love it. Very impressive.”

Alphonse walked around us, then paused to preen himself. “He does love attention.”

“Does he have a lady friend? Don’t ducks mate for life?”

“Geese and swans do. Most ducks are seasonally monogamous. He does have a chicken he’s sweet on, and I don’t judge.”

I laughed. “Why, Alphonse, how very progressive of you.” Alphonse circled us again, then wandered off. “He’s cute. I can see why you have him.”

“He wasn’t that cute when he arrived. He’d gotten a leg tangled in a fishing line. Normally animal control would have euthanized him, but the kid who found him is the son of one of my friends. He was convinced I could save him. Amputating his leg and keeping it bandaged until he healed wasn’t the hard part. The hard part was watching him hurt himself again and again trying to get around on one leg. Eventually I used a 3D printer to make him a plastic prosthetic leg.”

“Until someone donated a robotic leg. When you told me about that, I didn’t expect the leg to be as impressive as it is. Who designed it?”

“Wren Romano. Crystal put something up online regarding what she needed, and that’s who stepped up and offered to help.”

“Wow, talk about a duck with connections. I love that you took Alphonse in and how it took a village to get him where he is. That’s beautiful.”

“So are you,” he said, then shook his head as if to clear it. “Are you up for a tour? Which first? The house or the barn?”

“Yes.” Really, I was ready to follow him wherever.

He chuckled. “Okay, then. Barn?”

I closed my eyes briefly as I realized my response hadn’t matched his question. *Slow down. There’s no need to rush.* I opened my eyes and said,

“The barn sounds great.”

He linked his hand with mine. “And then we’ll go in the house, and I’ll show you something I wasn’t sure I should reveal to you on our first date but now I’m excited to. I think you’re going to love it.”

I blinked a few times quickly.

*What does that mean? Is he just going to whip it out? Expect me to clap?*

*Is that a farmer thing?*

He held out his hand toward me. I hesitated, then laced my fingers with his. I glanced at the crotch of his pants. He’d felt impressively large when pressed against me. He looked large even without a raging hard-on. *I’m sure I will love it.*

*I draw the line at clapping, though.*

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

SCOTT

I hadn't gotten to my midtwenties without ever bringing a date home. More times than I was proud of, I'd thrown a blanket over some hay bales in the loft with women who were passing through my life. Those memories faded away as I walked Monica into the barn. I didn't want that with her.

Correction: sex pretty much anywhere was on the menu with her, but I wanted it to mean something. I stopped at the entrance of the barn and gazed down at a confused-looking Monica. My father was right. I'd finally found someone I could imagine settling down with—that was what made everything feel different. She wasn't the first woman I'd shown around my farm, but I wanted her to be the last.

In response to my attention, she wiped a hand over one of her cheeks. "Do I have something on my face?"

I smiled. "Sorry, I'm just glad you decided to come today."

She looked away briefly, then met my gaze. "Me too."

My heart beat crazily at that small admission because I knew how hard it was for her to keep her defenses down. "Are you ready to meet my second family?" She tipped her head to one side in a question, so I clarified, "Some four legged, some two. Most don't stay here for long. When I take an animal in, my hope is always to rehab them and find them a loving home. The ones that remain are misfits in one way or another. Some are ornery, some blind, deaf, or simply old. A few have been rehomed and returned. I keep those, because everyone deserves a place they feel safe. We took these animals out of the wild, often bred them so they couldn't survive without us, then failed them. I know I can't save every animal, but I need to do something rather than nothing."

She took a deep breath. "You are going to make it very hard for me to

ever enjoy meat again, aren't you?"

"No, Bella will do that. She's a thousand pounds of love. A woman brought her over from China thinking she would be a micropig. She was already five hundred pounds when her second owner adopted her with the intention of selling her to a meat dealer. He thought it would be easy money, but he'd never owned a pig before. She quickly outgrew the area he thought would contain her. Pigs are as intelligent as, if not more intelligent than, dogs. Bella had known the comfort of a couch and the pleasure of having a doting human of her own. She wanted that again, and because of that he wasn't able to construct a pen that could contain her. A friend of mine in a neighboring town called me when Bella showed up on her doorstep, asking to come into her house. She was enormous by then and filthy, but neither of those two things were her fault. I helped my friend locate the owner, and as soon as I saw where she was being kept, I offered to buy her."

"That was kind of you. You could easily have reported him."

"I could have, but he already regretted ever adopting her, and honestly, his house didn't look much better than where he was keeping her. He needed the money he intended to sell her for. I bought her and gave him the numbers of a few of my friends who might hire him."

Her hand tightened on mine. "Did he call them?"

"He did. He stocks the shelves at a hardware store a buddy of mine owns. It's not much, but the people at that store have worked there for years, and I hear good things about the community they've built. He comes by every once in a while to visit Bella and share a beer. He credits her for being the catalyst that turned his life around. Like animals, people also need a safe place. I'm glad he found one."

She searched my face. "I've never met anyone who would have done that much for a stranger."

"Then you've been surrounding yourself with the wrong people." I brought her hand up to my lips and gave her knuckles a light kiss. "All I did was give the man a few phone numbers."

"No, you gave him hope." Her eyes shone as she looked up into mine. "You gave me the same. I would still be working for my father if we hadn't met. I had gotten tunnel vision and began to believe there was only one track my life was meant to take. Honestly, I was scared to step outside of what I knew. I'm not afraid anymore."

Was it possible to fall in love on the first date? I wouldn't have believed

it, but that was what was happening. I wanted to offer her my protection, my home . . . myself. Whatever she needed, in whichever order she needed them. The intensity of my feelings for her was scary as hell and fucking incredible at the same time. “I’m not either.”

“What were you afraid of?”

“Of disappointing the people I love. I’m adopted.” Our connection was so strong I didn’t hesitate to let her in. “I’m blessed to have the parents I do, but there’s a part of me that always worried that they would leave me as well. I didn’t sit around and think about it, but I see now how that fear shaped so much of what I did. I essentially became two people, the one I thought they wanted me to be and the person I was likely born to become.”

“I understand that feeling.”

I knew she did.

She continued, “I often ask myself who I would be today if my mother had lived. She had this magical way of bringing out the best in my father—and me. Aunt Bibi does that with me, but my father wants nothing to do with her.”

“She probably reminds him of your mother.”

She sniffed and nodded. “I’ve thought of that, but it doesn’t make it any easier. I haven’t told her that I quit yet. I’m not even really sure why. She would absolutely take my side.”

“You love both of them.” Love could be complicated. I understood how it was possible to be upset with someone but still feel protective of them.

“I do. My father has his faults, but I know he loves me . . . just not in the way I need him to.”

“Have you ever told him that?”

“I’ve tried.”

“And what does he say?”

“Nothing. He considers emotions a waste of time.”

“Sounds like he’s afraid.”

“My father doesn’t fear anything.”

“I bet you’re wrong. Everyone is afraid of something.”

Monica looked around, temporarily lost in her thoughts. I waited and prayed she would find the answer in those memories. When she spoke, it was in a voice tight with emotion. “He was different before my mother died. Even when he made a mistake, she had this way of making him want to do better the next time.”

“How did she reach him?”

She took a moment before answering. “She would always start by saying ‘I love you.’” She cleared her throat. “It didn’t matter how angry she was with him; that was what she always led with.”

I was feeling a little choked up myself. “Have you tried that?”

She shook her head vehemently, then more slowly until she stopped and met my gaze again. “He doesn’t say it to me.”

My heart was thudding, and time seemed to come to a halt. “Someone has to be the first.”

“I don’t know if I could.” She blinked quickly. “It would kill me if he didn’t say it back.”

I pulled her to my chest, and despite the discomfort in my shoulder, I hugged her close. I didn’t know her father, and some relationships were so toxic they were better off left behind, but I would have done anything in that moment to give her the father she craved.

All I had to offer her was my strength. She laid her head on my chest and clung to me for a long time. *I’ll take a lifetime of this, please.* When she tipped her head back, I almost told her that, but she kissed me, and everything I was thinking fell out of my head.

Her kiss tasted of anger and yearning. I was turned on but also gutted by it. It burned but, like my potential fuel source, was too hot. I wanted to be with her, but experience had taught me that something rushed and careless often ended in regret. I didn’t want that to be what we shared. I raised my head, took a deep breath, and kissed her on the forehead.

She shuddered against me, then hid her face in my chest. I understood why. I needed a moment to recover as well.

From her paddock around the corner, Winnie the donkey brayed. A variety of animals called back to her, including Chester the rooster, who never missed an opportunity to crow his heart out. Monica raised her head. “Is that Winnie braying?”

“You guessed it. She’s the only donkey here.” I smiled. “You were paying attention.”

The storm in her eyes had passed. She stepped back and returned my smile. “I can’t believe your brother is going to buy a farm for Winnie and Molly. Really, I can’t even imagine him here, doing the chores.”

“He couldn’t, either, but he and Molly bonded.”

She looked skeptical. “I want to believe that, but it’s a stretch.”

Rather than heading into the barn, I led her around the side to where Winnie and Molly's paddock was. As soon as I approached the fence, they both made their way over for attention. I did my best to appease both with some good neck scratches. "It makes more sense when you know that Jesse was raised to believe that he needed to be the best at whatever he did. Second place was unacceptable. Animals don't care about your accomplishments or trophies. They don't care who you were with someone else. The only thing that is important to them is the relationship you build and the energy you bring to it. Molly pushed Jesse to be real, and I believe that helped him do the same with Crystal. I doubt she would have given him the time of day the way he was before he came here."

"Did spending time in his life change *you*?" She bent and began to scratch Winnie's neck the way I had done. Winnie closed her eyes and arched her neck in sheer bliss.

"Not in the same way, but it gave me a better understanding of who he is. It also helped me see how much I love living on my farm."

In a tone meant for Winnie, Monica cooed, "I can see why." When she straightened, she looked me right in the eye. "I don't bake."

I coughed on a laugh because she said it so seriously that I guessed I was supposed to glean some deep meaning from that statement. "So you're not my mother."

She simply continued to hold my gaze without giving any of her thoughts away.

I chose my next words carefully. "My mother is a wonderful woman, but I'm not looking for someone like her. My father is an amazing man, but we also have our differences. I'm looking for someone I can simply be myself with—someone who wants to be just as real with me."

Her eyes widened, her face contorted a little, and then she threw her arms around my neck and kissed me. I didn't tell her that the move sent a sucker punch of pain through me. No, I took it like any turned-on man would have and savored the shit out of her enthusiasm. When she stepped back, I couldn't remember my name, never mind whatever complaint my shoulder might have filed a few moments earlier.

For a moment, I wasn't sure if she was verging on laughing or crying. Then she smiled, and I'd never seen anything more beautiful. "That's all I want as well."

"I also do dishes," I joked to lighten the mood.



“Good to know.” She laughed.

“But not toilets.”

“Me neither. How would you feel about paying a cleaning service?”

“I wonder why I’d never thought of that. You know, outside of maybe not having the money for one.”

“Money would no longer be an issue.”

I didn’t know how I felt about that. “It never has been, but I don’t need a lot.”

There was a sudden tension, and I regretted answering without thinking about how my response might sound to her. We had certainly been raised differently, but I didn’t feel that made either of us better than the other.

When she spoke, it was in a tight voice. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

I reached out to take one of her hands in mine again. “Neither did I. I’m actually getting used to being surrounded by wealthy people. You’re not as bad as I thought you’d be.”

She laughed at that. “Wow. Careful you don’t open the door for me to roll out the farmer jokes.”

I puffed out my chest playfully. “Bring ’em on. I can take it.”

Still smiling, she shook her head. “Before I leave a one-star review for this tour, tell me, does it always move this slowly?”

“It never has.” I could have answered with a joke, but I chose to say what was on my mind instead. “This is uncharted territory for me.”

She was all eyes after that. “Me too.” She looked down, then met my gaze again with a boldness that was sexy as hell. “I want to see your barn, but I’m also looking forward to the tour of the house.”

Wham: all my blood headed south, and I lost the ability to think straight. In a strangled voice I said, “You could meet the animals later.”

She ran a hand up the middle of my chest. “They won’t be offended?”

I knew she was joking, but I growled, “They’d completely understand.”

Her touch grew softer as she felt my bandage beneath my shirt, and her eyebrows drew together in a crease. “How do I keep forgetting that you’re hurt?”

“Probably for the same reason I’m sure it won’t matter.”

She bit her bottom lip as if giving in to a decadent urge. “Then I’m ready to see what you wanted to show me.”

*Oh, shit. I forgot about my lab.* Despite how eager every inch of me was

to know every inch of her, I didn't want that to happen while we still had the wall of a secret between us. "You're right. That's more important than this part of the tour." *I'll show her the lab, tell her what I'm working on, then carry her up the stairs to my bedroom.*

*Or one of the new couches.*

*Or the stairs, if we end up somewhere between.*

"Let's get this over quick."

Her eyebrows shot up. "That's not my *preference*—"

"Mine either." I would have preferred to take her on a leisurely tour of my lab, even give her a taste of the bean mixture. Considering how difficult it was for me to concentrate, though, the tour wouldn't be extensive, anyway. Even if it was a flop, at least she would have gotten a glimpse of my other side before we had sex. "And we can always do it again when we have more time."

As we started walking toward the house, she asked, "Why do we have to rush?"

Still holding hands, we cleared the stairs two at a time. "Technically we don't have to, but—"

We were inside the door of the house when she slid a hand up around the back of my neck and pulled my head down so our lips were almost touching. Her other hand started on my hip, moved across my stomach, then cupped my cock in what I considered the most straightforward way for a woman to tell a man what she wanted. Against my lips she murmured, "Then let's not."

Lab? What lab? Tour? The only one I wanted was of her body. With my good arm I held her close while I gave myself over to the desire I'd been holding in check.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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## MONICA

With any other man I probably would have stopped and asked clarifying questions or reviewed the differences between the length of time the average woman needed foreplay versus the average man. That fact probably explained why most of the sex I'd had could be called mediocre.

There was no inner dialogue when Scott touched me. The past dissolved away, and the future was too distant to matter. The simple act of lacing his fingers with mine was enough to focus all of my senses on him.

Words couldn't adequately express how much I hungered for him, so I let my body do it for me. He didn't need to tell me what he wanted. His cock throbbing and straining to be released said everything I needed to know.

We may have closed the door behind us. We may have left it open. I didn't check, because I didn't care. I kissed Scott with all the need that had been building within me as my hand stroked his cock through his jeans. He met my passion with an equal hunger, his hands strong and sure as they explored my curves.

He paused between kisses to pull my shirt up and over my head, then claimed the fresh skin the act had revealed with his mouth and hands. I tipped my head to one side to fully enjoy the trail of kisses from my ear across my shoulder.

My bra dropped to the floor, freeing my breasts for him. There was no rush to his movements, but there was expertise. He brought one nipple to attention with the tickle of his breath, then a flick of his tongue. I arched for more, and my reward was that he moved over to my other breast and teased that one to heightened sensitivity as well.

Back and forth he went, doing a little bit more each time. A graze of his teeth, a circle of the tip of his tongue, a tug, a suck . . . he offered me a full

buffet of choices, and when I moaned with pleasure, I received a second and third helping of whatever I liked. It could have been the roughness of his hands or the amount of time he put in, but a wave of heat rose within me, and I experienced my first nonpenetration orgasm. Just a small one, but holy shit. Sure, I'd heard they were possible, but I'd considered them the unicorns of sex. Definitely a fantasy, probably created by men. Nope, they were real. And wonderful.

I was still basking in the pleasure of the orgasm when he undid my jeans and helped me out of the rest of my clothing. I should have felt vulnerable, being completely naked while he was still clothed, but I'd never felt more connected to, desired by, or in love with a man.

Love.

There was no denying it. I wanted him, not just in that moment but in my life. I expected him to pull me into his arms again, but instead he ran a hand from my jaw down my neck, along the side of my breast, and down my stomach to hover just above my sex. "You're so fucking beautiful."

The guttural way he said it matched the primal look in his eyes. This wasn't casual sex; this was something deeper. He wanted me for his own, and I was his for the taking.

I leaned back against the wall behind me as he cupped my sex and bent to growl in my ear. "I want to taste you."

I shifted, spreading my legs slightly. He sank to his knees before me and moved one of my feet so it was propped up on a carton, a position that laid my sex wide open for him. As he had before, he took his time learning what I liked.

He kissed my stomach and thighs while dipping a finger gently between my folds, then plunging deeper. I splayed my hands on the wall behind me and thrust my hips out to give him even more access. He used his thumb and forefinger to part my folds and claimed my clit with his talented tongue and teeth. One finger, two fingers: he pumped in and out of me while I begged him to not stop. It was too good. I was too close. Had he ended it there, a part of me was sure I would die.

He didn't stop, and when I let myself trust that he wouldn't, I dug my hands into his hair and cried out his name as a second and much more powerful orgasm rocked through me.

He rose to his feet, wiped his mouth with his other hand, and grinned. "How am I doing?"

I laughed breathlessly and straightened off the wall. “Pretty good so far.”

His smile widened, and he stepped out of his boots. “If I didn’t think it would tear my stitches out, I’d carry you upstairs to my room, but you might have to get there on your own this time.” He winced as he pulled his shirt up and over his head, revealing not only his lickworthy chest muscles but also his still-bandaged shoulder.

Concern for him swept in, and I said, “Does it hurt?”

He twirled his shirt in the air and gave me a light crack on the ass with it. “Get up to my room, woman. Git.”

I laughed. “Are you *herding* me?”

He snapped the shirt in my direction again playfully. “Only if it’s working.”

I stepped closer, close enough that my bare breasts crushed against his chest, then kissed him from his lips down to his navel. “Oh, it’s working.” I undid his belt and slid his pants down his hard, muscled legs. Free of clothing, his cock sprang up and waved proudly between us.

Huge.

Beautiful.

I almost did clap.

Instead I bent and took it deep into my mouth. He groaned and brought a hand around to rest on my back. I swirled my tongue around him as I bobbed my head up and down. My hands were everywhere I could reach, cupping his ass, his balls, seeking out every sensitive corner of him. He’d taken the time to learn what brought me pleasure, and I gladly went on that same journey with him.

“I want to come inside you,” he said in a deep, gravelly voice. “Not like this. Not the first time.”

From another man, that might have been a surprise, but I understood. This was about a deeper pleasure. I rose, stepped back, and said, “So which room is yours?”

“Up the stairs, first door on the right.”

After giving him a quick kiss, I turned and bolted toward the stairs. “Race you there.”

He was on my heels instantly. “What do I win if I beat you there?”

“Same thing you win if you don’t.” I sprinted through the open door of his bedroom.

“I like the way you think.” We were both laughing as we tumbled onto his bed. He winced, then reached for me.

I scooted closer but chastised him. “You need to be careful with your shoulder.”

With that, he rolled onto his back, opened a drawer beside his bed, and tossed me a condom. “I’ll be more careful if you’re more quiet.” My mouth dropped open in shock, and he burst out laughing. “You’re too much fun to tease. You should see your face.”

A reluctant smile stretched my lips, and I found myself laughing again. “You’re a jerk.”

He made a sad face and nodded toward his bandages. “But one who almost died this week, so I get a pass.”

I laughed again, then froze as a thought came to me. I hadn’t been with many men, but enough to know that this wasn’t how it normally was. Sex could be fun or disappointing, but it wasn’t something people stopped in the middle of and shared a laugh during.

Scott wasn’t just a man I was having sex with.

He wasn’t just someone I was falling for.

Somehow, he’d become the friend I’d always longed for. This was real. I’d finally found someone I could be myself with. And I’d almost lost him. The thought, as well as gratitude that I hadn’t, brought tears to my eyes.

He sat up and touched my cheek. “Hey, I’m sorry. That was a stupid joke.”

“No, I’m sorry. I just started thinking about how much you mean to me and how I don’t want to lose you.”

“Hey.” He lay back down beside me, nose to nose, his beautiful eyes aligned with mine. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I nodded. “Me neither.”

His smile returned, and he glanced down at his erection. “Neither is he. I wasn’t going to mention it, but once he gets a thought in his head . . .”

I ran my fingers down to encircle his thick cock. “Completely understandable.” I pumped my hand up and down. “No one likes to be forgotten.”

Scott’s breathing became more ragged. “Nope.”

I sat up, found the condom on the bed, opened its wrapping, and rolled it onto Scott. I bent for a deliciously deep kiss, then straddled him, poising my sex just above his cock. “Tell me if I hurt you.”

“I’ll tell you later,” he choked out as I lowered myself onto him.

We kissed again as I took him deeper and deeper into me, adjusting to accommodate the glorious size of him. He felt so damn good. I sat up, braced my hands on the headboard of his bed, and began to move up and down slowly.

The way he filled me—the places he touched inside—I thought I might explode right away. Instead I rode a beautiful wave of heat as it washed over me. My moves became faster and more powerful. He met me thrust for thrust, murmuring how good it felt as he did.

I tried to remain careful, but as urgency replaced technique, I gave myself over to the passion. I called out his name. I may have sworn a few times. All I was sure of was that it was so damn good I felt like I’d stepped outside my body to experience the intensity of the orgasm when it rocked through me.

He rolled over so he was above me and pumped into me so hard and so fast my pleasure extended until he found his own release. When he rolled away, he used his good arm to hold me to his side and gave me a kiss on my temple. “Okay, now it hurts.”

I didn’t mean to, but I laughed. “I told you to be careful.”

He pulled me closer. “It was worth it.”

I turned and brushed my lips over his, so relaxed I let slip, “Aren’t you glad we didn’t rush?”

His eyebrow cocked. “Rush?” Then a huge smile spread across his face. “Hold on, you thought I was talking about sex when I said that?”

It was impossible to be embarrassed after what we’d just shared. “What else would a tour of your house refer to?”

He gave me a long look, then kissed my lips lightly. “I’d tell you, but I’d rather show you. Not this moment. Right now I want to hold you. But I do have something I want you to see.”

I settled against him and thought over what that meant. Normally I would have kept my thoughts to myself, but I knew he’d find it funny, so I told him how when he’d said that before, I’d thought he’d planned to simply whip out his cock to show me. “I wasn’t going to judge, if that’s a farmer thing.”

He burst out laughing, then groaned as that seemed to hurt his shoulder as well. “Monica, a farmer is simply a man who works with the land and raises animals. We’re not actually that different.”

That was a relief to hear, but I said, “You are different—in every way that matters to me.”

He wrapped his bad arm around me and cuddled me close. “So are you. Now, less yakkity-yakking.”

I closed my eyes and savored the feeling of having him all around me. Against his chest, I murmured, “I would kick your ass for that, but you did almost die this week, so I’ll give you a pass.”

This time he chuckled deep in his chest. We kissed one last kiss and fell asleep in each other’s arms.



# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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## SCOTT

After waking with Monica still cuddled to my chest, I slipped out of bed just long enough to send LJ a text asking him to feed the animals for me that night. He'd understand. Any man would.

My return to bed woke Monica. She smiled, then, with a beautiful lack of hesitation, snuggled right back up to me. We exchanged a slow, gentle kiss.

When she lay back again, she let out a satisfied sigh. "Can we stay like this forever?"

"I'm in if you are."

"We're less than two hours from each other. It's not ideal, but we could make it work."

I followed my heart and said, "Or you could stay."

She searched my face. "Tonight, you mean?"

"For as long as you want." I ran a hand through her hair. If she wanted to date and get to know each other more before moving forward, I could be as patient as she needed me to be. If she wanted half of my closet and to keep her toothbrush next to mine, I was ready for that as well.

She opened her mouth as if to say something, closed it, then said, "When are your parents returning?"

*Valid question.* "Dad estimates a month and a half, maybe two. They've headed off to see the Grand Canyon. Mom says that, after a lifetime of being in one place, there's a lot she wants to see. They sold me the farm. I'll always want there to be a room here for them, but it's my place now, and they would respect that."

"So they didn't leave because of me."

"No, but like me, they're hoping you'll be here when they return."

“I—I could stay the night. If you’re sure.”

For such a strong woman, her voice was uncertain. It pulled at my heartstrings. “Monica, I want you here.” I almost said I loved her, but it felt too soon. “But don’t be afraid to be honest about what *you* want. Come and go as you want. Do what makes you happy.”

She chewed her bottom lip and frowned. “You’d hate that.”

I ran a hand down her arm. “I don’t know what kind of relationships you’ve seen, but my parents never tried to control each other. They’ve always enjoyed each other’s company, supported each other, and found a compromise when there was something they didn’t agree on. That’s what I want.”

“What if I found a job that took me back to the city?”

“Is that what you want to do?”

“It might be.”

“Then we’d figure it out.”

“You’d leave your farm?”

“Part-time. Compromise. I couldn’t walk away from this, but I wouldn’t want you to not do what’s important to you. So we’d find a way to make both work.”

“Just like that.”

This was a side of her I was beginning to understand. What had initially seemed confrontational was really her moving forward cautiously. It was her way of requesting reassurance, and I took that as a good sign. “Just like that.”

She let out a shaky breath. “Okay.”

“Okay to what?”

“I’ll stay the night.”

I smiled. We’d already agreed to that, but knowing that the decision wasn’t an easy one for her had me inwardly cheering her on. *Trust takes time, and she is moving forward intelligently. I like that.*

She smiled. “And maybe tomorrow, if you don’t drive me crazy.”

“You’re already there, sweetheart. No driving necessary.” She moved to playfully slap me on the shoulder. I caught her hand and brought it to my lips. “Careful, remember I’m fragile.”

The challenge in her eyes instantly had me ready for another romp. “Which is such a shame because I had a gift for you.”

I remembered the present she’d tossed back into her car. “Well, go get it, woman. You can’t say that to a man and hold out.”

She scooted off the bed, threw one of my shirts over her head to cover herself, and from the door of my bedroom said, “Stay right there.”

I didn’t move a muscle.

A few minutes later, from just outside the door, she said, “I’m coming in, but do not laugh. I’m not sure if I feel sexy or ridiculous.”

I propped myself up in the bed and promised, “No laughing.”

She stepped out into the middle of the doorway in a pair of jean shorts cut sinfully short and a flowered blouse tied around her waist with the buttons undone. As she moved, I caught delightful glimpses of her ass, as well as her nipples, as she spun and her shirt gaped open. When she came to a stop beside the bed, I was at risk of drowning in a pool of my own drool. “Holy hell that’s hot.”

She did another spin. “Considering your injury, I’m willing to be flexible about location this time, but I’m hoping sometime soon you can deliver the whole fantasy.”

I was up on my knees in an instant. “I promise to not stop trying until I do.”

She flipped her long hair over one shoulder, then turned so her back was to me. “Was this the outfit you imagined?” Her voice was low and sexy. She spoke over her shoulder as she turned slightly, bent over, and wiggled her ass at me. “What? Nothing to say?”

I tried to speak but couldn’t come up with one coherent thought.

She laughed, spun, placed her hands on her knees, and gave me the perfect view down her shirt as she arched backward. “I bet I could do this better to music.”

In a strangled voice I said, “Sure.” I told my phone to play my country playlist and nearly came just from watching her move for me.

If I’d had any doubt left in me that she was the woman for me, she cleared it up right then. We were meant for each other.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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## MONICA

The sun was going down by the time Scott and I left his bedroom to forage for food. I was happily covered in one of his shirts. He had pulled on a pair of boxer shorts. Scarfing leftover pasta off paper plates we'd both just pulled from the microwave felt natural and right.

When I finished, he took my plate and tossed it into the trash along with his. "It's time."

"I need a moment to digest," I murmured with a laugh.

He pushed my hair back on one side and kissed the curve of my neck he'd exposed. "You, young lady, have a dirty mind. I'm not always referring to sex."

"Damn," I joked and turned in his arms. "Is this where you show me whatever it is you were talking about earlier? What you thought you'd have to rush?"

"Yes." He retrieved a key from a drawer and said, "I don't like to brag, but I do believe you'll be impressed."

I gave him a side glance. I didn't like not having any idea what he was about to surprise me with, but I refused to start guessing at bad scenarios. Instead I wiggled my eyebrows and said, "I already am."

He rolled his eyes and slid his hand down his chest and flat abs. "It should be enough for you to want me for my body, but I'm hoping that what I'm about to show you will rock your world."

My breath caught in my throat. *Don't overthink this.* "Lead on."

He led me to a door just outside the kitchen. "We have to go through the basement."

Okay, if I were watching the scene in a movie, I would have been yelling, "Don't go down there!" I took several deep breaths and told myself

that this was Scott, the animal-rescuing man whose parents had a bedroom in his house. People like that didn't have scary secrets. In a tight voice, I said, "Oh, the basement. What do you keep down there?"

"You won't believe it unless you see it."

I let out a shaky breath. "Okay."

He turned on the light and began down the stairway. "Coming?"

I swallowed. "Sure." Then began down wooden steps into a musty cement-walled room that had a nonthreatening-looking washer and dryer in one corner. "Is that it?" I pointed to them.

He gave me an odd look. "I'm pretty sure you're familiar with those. No, what I want to show you is in here." He crossed the room and turned on another light. "Come on," he said as he unlocked that door and flipped on a bright light inside the room.

*Oh, hell no.* I took a step back. If anything went wrong, I didn't even have my cell phone on me. "Scott—"

He must have heard the panic in my voice because he turned and gave me an odd look, then his mouth dropped open. "Are you freaking out because this is a basement and it looks like I'm trying to lure you into a room that locks?"

"Yes?"

He looked from me to the door behind him and back. "You know what, I can see your point. This could come across as dangerous." He pursed his lips. "What would make you less nervous?"

My voice came out in a squeak. "Not being in a dark basement?"

He laughed. "Besides that. I really want to show you what's in the next room." He looked around the room. "What about that broom? You could hold that like a weapon as we go inside."

The image brought a smile to my lips. "I'm being ridiculous."

"No. You're being smart. I can assure you, though, that there is nothing scary in there. What if I walk to the stairs while you peek inside?" He was being nice about it, but there was a twinkle in his eyes that made me want to smack him for laughing at me.

"Show me the damn room."

"That's my brave Monica. You know, in a scrap, you'd probably win. I've always been more of a lover than a fighter."

That had me chuckling. I stepped over to where he was. "It's fucking creepy down here. Anyone would be nervous."

“I’m on your side.”

“And enjoying yourself too much.”

His smile widened. “Maybe a little.”

I walked past him through the doorway and stopped. This room was several times the size of the one before. It had a kitchen area on one side with refrigerators, cabinets, and ovens. The other side looked like a chemistry lab. There were various computers as well as a large 3D printer. “What is this place?”

He followed me into the room, beaming with pride. “My secret lab.”

“Your secret lab,” I repeated slowly in a hushed voice. *He has a secret lab.* I stepped closer to one of the shelves, where there were plastic storage containers with a dark substance in them. *A secret lab?* “What is that?”

“A solution to food shortages, I hope. I’ve modified bean plants to create beans that can be processed into a material that easily retains nutrients and has an extremely slow degradation. Raw. Cooked. Room temperature. Doesn’t matter. This is something someone could store for a decade, and it would be just as good. It can be made to look like most foods, although I haven’t successfully made it taste like any of them so far. Want to try some?”

I shook my head. “Not yet, but thanks.” I continued to look around the room. The researcher in me was fascinated.

“It’s stable until the digestive process, then releases its nutrients and returns to normal mammal waste—completely environmentally safe. It can also be grown in a third of the time it takes to grow a normal bean.”

I stopped in front of a dry-erase board covered with chemical equations. “Is this your work?”

He came to stand beside me. “Yes. I’m self-taught via YouTube and whatever I could find online.”

His equations were solid and read like beautiful poetry to me. I could see what he was working through and loved the ways he came to solutions. Self-taught? Difficult to believe, but when it came to Scott, I was getting used to being impressed. “It’s beautiful.”

He put an arm around me. “I’m still learning, but I keep my mistakes up there because they all teach me something.”

“Is that burn temp correct?”

“It is.”

“And the duration?”

“Unexpected, right?”

“Definitely.” I was in awe. Could this be real? I alternated between looking around the room and reading over his dry-erase boards.

He took out a notebook. “Here. This is where I keep some of the good stuff.”

I sank to a chair and lost myself in his notes. “What you have here could also power the planet. If the emissions are as clean as you believe, it could replace fossil fuels.”

“And it’s replenishable.”

“Holy shit.”

He pulled a chair beside me. “It can’t change the world yet. As a food I still have to figure out how to make it palatable. It’s also highly combustible, but I could probably sell it as it is—let someone else finish the research.”

“You definitely could.”

“In the wrong hands it would feed no one and possibly even be weaponized. I’d like to keep control of how it develops for as long as I can.”

I flipped through his research, then sought his gaze. “Especially while you determine what is in the soil that is making the modification possible.”

He turned my stool to face him. “It’s not the soil.”

“But your notes say—”

“My notes are intended to mislead. The modification is due to a viral vector I add to the seedlings. The process is written nowhere, and I’ve let everyone believe I don’t know how the beans are transforming. Well, outside of my parents, but they have no idea what I’m talking about.”

“Why tell me?” I held my breath.

“There have been enough lies between us. If we’re going to move forward together, we need to be real with each other.”

“How do you know you can trust me?”

He held out a hand to me. I laced my fingers through his. “I don’t. All I can do is follow my heart.”

Never had I felt so . . . *loved*? He hadn’t said the words, but this was how I’d always imagined a healthy relationship would be. Adrenaline surged through me, and I decided to be just as real with him. “You—us—all of this is overwhelming. We still have so much to learn about each other. Statistically, the likelihood that we will stay together is—”

“Monica.” His thumb made comforting circles on the back of my hand. “You once told me you didn’t have time to ask yourself how you felt about anything. I don’t think it was time related. I think you’re afraid to hope for

something you don't think you'll ever have . . . or maybe you don't think you deserve. What I want you to know is that we all feel that way sometimes. I doubt myself. I worry that if I keep trusting people, they'll keep having the opportunity to let me down, but I don't want to be the person all that doubt makes me into. I'm making the choice to let you in. You're worth the risk."

I let out a shaky breath and gave his hand a tight squeeze. "So are you." As we sat there, layers of insecurities fell away, and I made the choice to let him in as well. "I don't want to be the person my doubts make me into either. I choose you and all of this. Just promise me something."

"Anything."

My eyes filled with tears. "If I ever do let you down, and we need to talk it out, please start by telling me how you feel about me. I think I'm the kind of person who needs that."

He pulled me into his arms and tucked my head beneath his chin. "Only if you promise to do the same with me. We can do this, Monica." He raised his head, and I glanced up at him. "We're both a little messed up, but that's what makes us perfect for each other."

Trying to lighten the mood, I sniffed and asked lightly, "You're messed up?"

He motioned to the room around him. "I'm a nearly broke farmer with research that might end up being a waste of time, a best friend who tried to kill me, another friend who might be here to steal my work, and a twin I'm still trying to get to respect me. I'm looking for more than a lover, I'm looking for a partner . . . someone who is not afraid to figure this all out with me."

"A partner." An equal. With Scott, a relationship would be a true give-and-take. I blinked back fresh tears. "I'm looking for that as well. I'm an unemployed researcher who wants friends, a father I don't need to apologize to for being me, and someone I can believe in."

He smiled. "We're like two little fucked-up puzzle pieces that somehow fit together."

My heart soared at his analogy. "I like that."

After a moment, he asked, "Would you also like to see what I haven't shown anyone yet?" He took out a fresh piece of paper and began to write.

I nodded.

He pushed the paper my way. I read it over, then placed it to the side and searched his face. "You've created something entirely new."



“I hope so.”

“Scott, you’re going to change the course of history.”

He reached out and took one of my hands in his. “No, we will—if you’re interested in working on this with me.”

My head was already spinning from ideas about how he could solve both the combustion and the flavor issues. Still, I had to ask, “Are you sure?”

“I should warn you there’s risk involved. The beans are no longer a secret.” He told me about his friend Remy and how he’d tried to kill Jesse over a sample of the soil. “You might want to keep your security around, at least until the dust settles.”

*My security.* “You’re right. I can hire my own security now, people who are loyal to *me*.”

“Of course you can.”

I smiled. “I can do this.”

“Bet your ass you can.”

“We can do this.”

“I sure as hell hope so.”

“Together.”

“That’s the plan.”

I couldn’t have smiled wider. “Tell me this isn’t a dream.”

He reached over and picked up a container of the bean paste that had been molded into the shape of a mini hot dog. He popped one piece into his mouth, then held another up to my lips. “If it was a dream, this wouldn’t taste as bad as it does. Open up.”

I opened my mouth, and he popped a piece in. As I chewed, an incredibly bitter taste spread over my tongue, nearly bad enough to make me gag. “Oh, that’s awful.” I spit it out into a napkin he handed me.

“You get used to it,” he said, apparently having swallowed his piece.

“Do you?” I asked with skepticism.

He shrugged. He closed the storage container, then reached for another. “Want to try the chicken-flavored version?”

I raised a hand. “No.” Then I saw the twinkle in his eyes and added, “Jerk.”

“But a really, really smart jerk, so I get a pass?”

A laugh tumbled out of me. “This time.” Then I looked around again, still trying to wrap my head around the fact that Scott had done this. “You’re brilliant, you realize that, right?”

He sidled closer and kissed my neck, murmuring, “Save the compliments for when I really earn them.” Then he whispered some hot suggestions for what he’d like to do with me on the desk of his lab.

I could have let him have the last word, but I countered by whispering what I’d like to do with him on that washing machine.

The future and all its possible issues were temporarily forgotten as we stripped each other down and decided there was time to try both of our ideas.

Compromise. Not such a bad thing.

# CHAPTER THIRTY

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## MONICA

The next morning I went with Scott to the barn to feed the animals. Some unpleasant smells assailed me, but they paled in comparison to how amazing it was to see Scott care for his “other family.” He introduced me to each animal as if they were a friend, and somehow that didn’t feel odd.

I stood there watching Scott talk to a cow so it would eat its grain while memories of another time and place came back to me. Paddington, the dog I had as a child, sat with me as I learned to read, stayed with me when a nightmare had scared me, played with me when I felt lonely. As I looked back at that time, I realized I’d lost two family members that year . . . but only allowed myself to mourn one.

I’d tried so hard to forget him. Why? I searched my memories for the answer and came up with one I’d pushed to the background. It was my mother’s decision to put Paddington down. I overheard her telling my father that it was the kindest thing to do because he was suffering.

I revisited that day, the anger I’d had toward her. She’d talked about putting him down so calmly that for one awful moment I’d wished she would feel the kind of pain I did at the thought of losing him.

I hugged my arms around my waist as I let myself remember that I’d wished for something bad to happen just before it had. It was only a short time later that she became very ill and died.

I felt guilty and angry.

Then just angry.

Then somehow all that anger turned toward my father. It wasn’t easy to face what I’d brought to my relationship with him. No, he wasn’t the father I needed him to be, but I hadn’t treated him any better than he’d treated me.

As if he could hear my thoughts, Scott came to my side. “What’s

wrong?”

I blinked a few times quickly. “Sorry, just thinking about how complicated my relationship with my father is. I like to think it’s all him, but I’ve said and done things I regret.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

He gave me a tender smile. “Then take a fork and that wheelbarrow and go clean out Bella’s paddock.”

I didn’t hate the idea of helping. Still, I joked, “That’s what you think will make me feel better?”

“It works for me.”

I gathered up the wheelbarrow and fork and headed back to Bella’s pen. Scott had briefly introduced us earlier. She was a mammoth pig who at the time had only been interested in the food he was delivering.

As I approached the pen, she trotted over to the gate. “Well, hello, Bella.”

She grunted at me.

“How do you feel about me coming in to clean up?” I felt a little silly asking, but she was huge, and I knew nothing about pigs. “Okay, I’m coming in.” I opened the gate and pushed the wheelbarrow in first. She simply stood there, looking at me. I walked inside her area and closed the gate behind me. “My name is Monica. We met earlier.”

Nothing.

I cleared my throat. “I’m guessing this is straightforward.” I looked around and saw one pile of manure. “You keep your area pretty clean.”

Due to her massive size, when she came closer and brought her snout up into the air, it came to about my shoulder. Not knowing what else to do, I said, “Bella, sit.”

She sat.

I let out a surprised laugh. “Good girl, Bella.”

She grunted and, I swear, grinned.

I laughed and brought a hand tentatively up to scratch her head. She closed her eyes as if it brought her great pleasure. “Do you like that, Bella?”

She grunted again and wiggled her huge body.

Gaining confidence, I stepped closer and gave her neck and the place behind her ear a good scratch. She dropped onto her side, rolled over, and offered me her stomach. I laughed.

From over the fence, Scott said, "I knew you'd like her."

I bent to give her stomach a rub and noticed something. "I had no idea pigs wagged their tails."

"They share more characteristics with dogs than bacon lovers care to admit." He stepped inside the gate. "I don't think Bella knows she's a pig. I made her a nice shelter and give her plenty of space to root and mud to roll in, but she would live in the house if I let her."

As soon as I stopped rubbing her stomach, Bella rolled back to her feet and came to stand at my side as a dog might. I said, "Bella, sit." And once again she did. "You certainly trained her well."

"I didn't do that. Bella's first owner used to take her for walks on a leash and even took her to puppy-training classes."

To test what Bella knew, I told her to stay, then walked away from her. She sat perfectly still except for her little curled tail, which kept wagging. From beside Scott, I said, "Bella, come."

She stood, trotted over to my side, and sat before she was asked to. The proud look she gave me had me smiling with wonder. I gave her a good scratch just behind one of her ears. She closed her eyes again, and my heart melted.

"She's not coming in the house," Scott said. "I just bought new furniture."

"I wouldn't think about letting her in the house," I said, then winked at Scott. "Without a bath. Bella, would you like a bath?" I was joking, but Bella started zooming around us. A thousand-pound zooming pig was a sight to see.

"Now you've done it," Scott said, but he was smiling. "She knows the word *bath*. And the word *house*."

"Hold on." Hand on hips, I turned to him. "You've kept her in the house before, haven't you?"

His mouth opened before he reluctantly admitted, "I *did*, but it didn't work out."

I turned my attention to Bella, who was sitting again, looking absolutely innocent of all charges. "What did she do?"

He sighed. "The better question would be, What didn't she do? She's too smart. She can open doors. Open the fridge. She likes all the drawers of every dresser to be open and emptied on the floor."

"No." I looked from Bella to Scott and joked, "She says she didn't do

any of that. She was framed.”

“Oh, and she wanted my bed. I drew the line there. I’m not sleeping on the couch so Princess over here can snuggle up on my mattress.”

“Bella.” I said her name in light chastisement. “You threw Scott out of his bed?”

Bella grunted.

I laughed. “She said you didn’t offer her an option.”

Scott tipped his head to one side. “Really? How about that blanket I put on the floor for her?”

I wrinkled my nose. “Your mattress was softer. She says she would leave your bed alone if you got her one of her own.”

He gave me an odd look. “You’re still joking, right?”

“Yes,” I said but couldn’t look Bella in the eye. It did sound crazy. When I looked back at Bella, I imagined her in a little sweater. “She’s just so cute.”

“Oh man. She’s working you over. That’s how she convinced me to let her in the house the first time. When she shredded my father’s favorite jeans, I thought she was bacon for sure. She’s been out here since, but before she tries to convince you she’s neglected, her shelter has a porch. How many pigs can say that?”

I gave Bella’s head a pat. “Bella, naughty pigs can’t come in the house.”

Bella snorted in protest.

“Seriously, Monica, she’s too big to be an inside pig.”

I heard him, and what he was saying made absolute sense, but Bella looked up at me with the sweetest expression in her eyes, and I knew I’d have to give her one more chance at it. Somehow, on my second day at Scott’s farm, I’d found a new critter friend who filled the hole in my heart Paddington had left.

“Scott?” I turned to the man I was quickly falling in love with and batted my eyelashes at him.

He leaned in. “Yes?”

“How do you give a pig a bath?”

He groaned, then started to laugh. I joined him, and we were soon laughing so hard we had tears in our eyes. When we sobered, he stood there, just looking down into my eyes. “I’m in real trouble, Monica.”

I stepped closer until we were flush against each other. “Why do you say that?”

“I can’t say no to you.” He wrapped his good arm around my waist and pulled me tighter against him. Just before he kissed me, he growled, “And Bella knows it.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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## SCOTT

A few weeks later I was sitting on my porch swing, enjoying a cool beer, thinking about how nice it was that Monica and Crystal were getting along as well as they were. They were off to shop and then to have dinner with Aunt Bibi and Donny.

Monica had gone out to see them twice since we'd gotten together. At first it was a little awkward—Donny and I had to get over how we'd met—but we both put that aside quickly. Aunt Bibi was everything I'd imagined she'd be from how Monica described her. Warm. Welcoming. Hilarious. Blunt.

I also loved how Monica relaxed and was herself around her aunt. They laughed, bickered, teased each other as any loving family did. Aunt Bibi thoroughly interrogated me before accepting me, but then it was as if she'd always known me. I loved that as well.

And Donny? He made it clear that he and I were good as long as Monica and I were good. *As it should be.*

As I sat there on my porch swing, I thought about what Aunt Bibi said when she pulled me aside after my second visit. "Do you love my niece?"

"Yes, ma'am, I do," I said.

"Have you told her yet?"

"Working on that part."

She'd touched my arm and said, "Donny asked me to marry him. We're holding off announcing that we're engaged until after you do, but we're not getting any younger. So if you know where this is going . . . get it going."

I laughed. She didn't. "I'll do that."

Her hand stayed on my arm and tightened. "Tell me something about your mother."



I laid my hand over hers. “She’s the strongest, wisest person I know and the perfect match for my father. She keeps him on his toes.”

That brought a huge smile to her face and tears to her eyes. “Be good to my baby.”

“I will.”

When Monica said she wanted to take Crystal to meet her aunt, I was tempted to ask if she wanted me to tag along, but I decided to take advantage of the evening alone to talk to LJ.

As if on cue, LJ came walking up the driveway. “You’re looking at peace with the world.” He made his way up the steps of the porch.

“I’m feeling that way.”

He nodded toward my injured shoulder. “How is it?”

I raised and lowered it. “Mostly back to normal.” I hadn’t seen him much since Monica had come for a visit and not gone home. “How have you been?”

“Bored. No crazy twin running around. No attempted murders. Not even needed at the barn since you have Monica here. I’m ready to get back to work on our bean research.”

*Our research?* We needed to talk about that. “I’ve been working with Monica on some possible solutions.”

“Really? I’d love to hear what she suggested.”

There was something that had to be addressed first. “LJ, you’ve become a good friend, but things get tricky when friendship and business overlap.”

His expression closed. “What are you saying?”

*Trust intelligently.* Dad’s advice was always sound. “I want to keep you in the mix, but as we move forward, I think we should be clear about what we’re doing. Jesse has lined up legal counsel for me, and I need to know that you’re willing to sign documents that make the ownership of my research clear.”

“You don’t trust me.”

“I do trust you, but I’d like to share certain aspects of my research that I’ve held back. I’m only willing to do that if I have some assurance that I’ll maintain control of it after I do.”

LJ nodded slowly. “Okay.”

“You handled that better than expected.”

He shrugged. “I’m actually impressed that you’re taking the step. I’d do the same if I were in your place. Send the paperwork over whenever it’s

ready. I'll sign it if I agree, and we can move forward."

"I will."

"Now, tell me about Monica. Is she living here now? That was fast."

Fast? I felt as if I'd waited forever to finally get with her. "We enjoy being together. It's as simple as that."

"It's never that simple unless . . ." He gave me a long look. "You're in love with her."

I smiled. "From the first time I saw her."

"And she feels the same?"

"We haven't actually discussed it. I don't want to scare her off. I want to give her time to get used to being here first."

"Working with you in your lab."

"Being with me in general."

He sighed. "I hope she's who you think she is."

I thought back over how she'd been the last few weeks and was confident that she was. "I'm sure she's hoping the same thing about me. She's happy here for now, but she has big dreams that reach beyond the fences of this farm. I told her we'll figure out how to balance our goals, and I meant it."

"What do your friends think of her?"

"That she's too good at darts but an easy mark when it comes to pool. Surprisingly enough, she can drink some of them under the table. That woman can handle shots of hard liquor like a pro."

"And she enjoys the farm?"

"I wasn't sure she would, but Bella won her over. Don't tell my parents, but Bella sleeps on a mattress in the spare bedroom now. I didn't think it was possible, but Monica has trained her to leave our things alone. Bella spends the day in her paddock but comes in every night like she owns the place now."

"What does Monica think of that?"

"It was Monica's idea."

LJ whistled. "I hate to say it, but I approve of this one. Every pot has a lid. I can't imagine a more perfect match."

"Me neither."

"What does her father think of you?"

My smile faded. "She hasn't heard from him."

"So he doesn't know about the switch?"

“With the amount of surveillance he has on her, he has to by now, but we haven’t said anything to him. It’s been eerily quiet.”

“Be careful with him, Scott. Bellerwood fought his way to where he is, and if you cross him, he goes for blood. The Eden space station program has been dismantled. Stillcourt is ruined. I’d be surprised if he doesn’t end up in prison on a charge completely unrelated to shooting you or sabotaging Bellerwood’s project. That’s how good Bellerwood is. He walks away from the carnage with no blood on his hands.”

“I didn’t realize you knew him.”

“We move in the same circles, but let’s just say that even I’m careful around him. When he strikes, it’s without warning and deadly—business-wise. He probably won’t arrange for you to get shot again.”

“Probably?” I laughed without humor. “I feel better already.”

LJ leaned back with a smile. “But put me in your will just in case.”

“Real funny.” Since we were talking about Monica’s father anyway . . . “I did want to talk to you about something. Things are getting serious with Monica. I’m ready to tell her how I feel and propose, but I hate to do that without having a conversation with her father.”

“You’re not thinking what I think you’re thinking.”

“It’s old fashioned, but I want to ask him for his permission to marry his daughter.”

“No. Bad idea.”

“I’ll propose even if he says no, but when I think about how hurt I’d feel if my daughter got engaged to a man I didn’t know . . .”

“You don’t have a daughter.”

“One day I hope to. From what Monica has told me about her father, he sounds like someone who wants to be part of his daughter’s life but doesn’t know how to be.”

“And you think you can help him with that?”

“I can try. I can’t sit back and do nothing.”

“You do know that this could cost Jesse and Thane their contract with him?”

“If Bellerwood is going to punish them for my relationship, he’ll do it regardless.”

“You’re going to do this no matter what I say, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going with you. In fact, now that I think about it, we should bring

Jesse and Thane. He can't kill all of us, and he won't want witnesses."

My jaw dropped. "You'd go with me to talk to him?"

"Of course. You're the best friend I've ever had." He paused. "I understand Bellerwood better than I'd like to admit. I didn't get to where I am by playing nice. Success is a jealous and demanding bed partner. I loved my wife, but I could have been a much better husband. My son can't be bothered to see me now unless it's to ask for money. Being rich isn't all it's made out to be, Scott. Before you and your parents, I didn't have anyone in my life who wasn't with me for what I could give them."

"That's sad."

"That's reality. The more you have, the more people want from you. I bet Bellerwood is watching you closely, waiting for a sign that you're with Monica because of who she is."

"How do I show him that I'm not?"

"That's the billion-dollar question, isn't it?"

It didn't take much deliberation to decide I had someone on my side who could guide me through this. "I'm going to ask my dad to come back early so he can go with us. He'll know what to say."

"If I didn't know Ryan, I'd say that sounds as crazy as the rest of the plan, but he's a good man. If anyone can help you reach the father in Bellerwood, it's him."

"I'd still like you there."

"I wouldn't miss it. What do you think Jesse will say when you tell him what you're planning?"

"He won't like the idea at first, but he'll want to be there. He'll say it's to stop me from completely fucking things up."

LJ laughed. "That sounds like Jesse."

"But he'll be there right along with Thane. I wasn't sure what they'd think of Monica being here, but they've been wonderful. In fact, she's out with Crystal today."

"Good." He turned to look at the barn. "When we go to see Bellerwood, I'll arrange the transportation. We won't be pulling up his driveway in Ford trucks. He has a helipad at his home, and that's how we'll arrive."

"I'm done pretending to be something I'm not."

"It's not pretending, it's making a statement."

"That I have money? I don't."

"You have something better—powerful allies."

I shook my head. “You make it sound like we’ll be going into battle. I’m going to see a man who hopefully will be my father-in-law soon. What will matter the most to him is that I love his daughter and want her to be happy.”

LJ shook his head. “How thick are those rose-colored glasses you’re looking at this through? Do they allow you to see reality at all?”

“I’ll win him over,” I said with conviction. Failure was not an option: not because I cared what he thought of me but because this was something I wanted to do for Monica. “And then I’ll help him fix things with Monica.”

“I admire your confidence.”

“It’s not confidence, it’s determination. I will make this happen.” I met his gaze. “I love her.”

He was quiet for a moment, then said, “Okay. Fords up the driveway it is.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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## MONICA

In a booth in a corner of Donny's restaurant, Crystal, Aunt Bibi, Deja, and I raised our shot glasses for the fourth time that evening. It was Crystal's turn to make a toast. She said, "To good friends and making good memories. I had a great day."

"So did I," Aunt Bibi added.

Deja and I clinked our glasses together and concurred.

After we downed that round, Crystal looked tipsy. "Bibi." A slur marred her speech. "I'm going to marry Jesse. If Monica marries Scott, she and I will be sisters. If we're sisters, can you be my aunt too? I love you."

Aunt Bibi laughed. "I think that should be your last shot, Crystal, but you can call me Aunt Bibi now if you'd like."

"Aunt Bibi," Crystal said with a big smile, then leaned over and hugged me. "No pressure, but you *have* to marry Scott."

"We're not at that stage yet," I said more seriously than I'd meant to.

Aunt Bibi's attention riveted to me. "What's wrong, baby?"

"I love him," I said in a quiet tone.

Deja interjected, "She knows that's a good thing, right?"

Aunt Bibi leaned toward me. "It is, Monica. He's a wonderful man."

"No, I mean I really love him. This is it. I would marry him if he asked."

"Why does she still make that sound like a tragedy?" Deja asked.

"Because she's scared," Aunt Bibi answered.

"Oh, Monica." Crystal hugged me again. "Scott loves you. You have to know that."

It might have been the effects of the fourth shot, but I let out my biggest concern. "He hasn't said it."

“Have you told him how *you* feel?” Deja asked.

I shook my head. “We’re essentially living together. He has shown me aspects of his research he hasn’t trusted anyone else with. I know he trusts me. The sex is great. We get along really well. We talk about having a future together. But he hasn’t said that he loves me.” I swallowed hard. “What if . . . what if he doesn’t?”

Aunt Bibi picked up one of my hands and gave it a shake. “Now, you listen to me. I don’t know whatever put it in your head that you’re not worthy of being loved, but you need to put that behind you. I’ve never seen a man more in love with anyone than Scott is with you.”

I wanted to believe her. I wanted that so badly, but my confusion had another layer to it. “It’s been almost a month, Aunt Bibi, and my father hasn’t even tried to contact me. Not a text. Not a call. Nothing.”

“Oh, I see,” Deja said.

Aunt Bibi’s hand tightened on mine. “Me too. Baby, Scott isn’t your father.”

I blinked a few times quickly. “I know that.”

“He’s probably taking it slowly so he won’t scare you off,” Crystal suggested.

Deja nodded. “That fits my impression of him.”

“I’m the problem.” I sighed. “I know it, but that doesn’t change that I need to hear him say it.”

Aunt Bibi gave my hand another shake. “Now, you listen to me, Monica. You are not a problem. You are a loving, intelligent woman who has been hurt and who doesn’t want to be hurt again. All that makes you is human. You’re stronger than you know, but you still think there’s only one way for people to show that they love you. Look at Donny. He forgave me, stayed in my life, and waited for me to want more than friendship again. That’s love, baby, and it means so much more than if he’d kept telling me how he felt and pressuring me to be with him. Scott loves you even if he doesn’t say it. Let his actions show you how he feels about you.”

A calm settled over me, as it often did when I was with Aunt Bibi. In my gratitude I blurted out something I’d often thought. “Sometimes when you talk to me, Aunt Bibi, I can feel my mother reach right through you to hug me.”

“She does, baby. She does.” She wiped tears from her cheeks.

I did as well.

Crystal propped her head on her hand. “That’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard.”

Deja ordered another round and told Donny we’d all need transportation because none of us were in a condition to drive.



# CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

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## MONICA

It was late by the time the car Donny had sent me home in pulled up Scott's driveway. I'd almost called Scott to tell him I was on my way, but I didn't know if we were at that stage. It was strange to have no one telling me where I should be or having me watched to make sure I didn't stray. Scott trusted me.

The porch light was on, but the interior of the house was dark. As I let myself in, I was thinking about what Aunt Bibi had said about letting a person's actions show me how they felt about me. The light of the television in the living room led me that way. There, I saw Bella's rump sticking out in front of the couch. Had she accidentally gotten locked out of her room?

When I moved closer, Scott came into view. He was asleep, still sitting mostly upright against the front of the couch, with Bella's huge head on his lap. They were both snoring. I laughed but muffled the noise behind my hand. All six of their legs were covered by the same blanket. It was so sweet I fell even harder for him.

There was a plate of toast with some gummy-bear vitamins on the table beside the couch, along with a glass of water and two aspirin. I'd seen this particular combination before. Scott called it his "nausea-fighting hangover deterrent." He'd served it to me the night we'd gone out drinking with his friends, and it had proven effective at alleviating my symptoms.

The water was for dehydration, the gummies to replace the vitamin B and zinc lost during drinking, the toast for carbs, and the aspirin for inflammation and aches. When I'd joked that he should make a line of bean products for hangovers, he'd said he'd considered it, but if he ever did it, he would add a Japanese supplement, dihydromyricetin, that has been known to block alcohol from accessing the GABA receptors in the brain—thus

lessening the effects of alcohol that may still be in a person's system.

Scott must have guessed I'd drink with my aunt and that, with Crystal there, we'd take it from one shot to a party. He and Bella had waited up for me with something designed to make me feel better.

How could I not love such a man?

Intelligent. Thoughtful.

Loving.

*He does love me.*

*He doesn't have to say it. I can see it now.*

Standing over them, I downed the aspirin with a gulp of water, then popped the gummy bears into my mouth. Bella woke when I picked up a piece of toast; then Scott's eyes opened.

"You're back." The smile that spread across his face was more confirmation that his feelings for me were clear.

"I am. Thank you for waiting up for me and for this."

"You're welcome." He stretched his arms over his head and flexed his shoulders. "I meant to be awake to greet you."

My body began to warm and crave him. Holding his gaze, I stepped out of my shoes. "Are you tired?"

His smile turned to a sexy grin. "Not at all."

I looked down at Bella and said, "Bella, go to your room." She made a grunt of protest but heaved herself off the floor and came to my side for an ear scratch before padding out of the room.

He rose to his feet. "Have I ever told you how amazing you are? I never succeeded in getting her to listen to me."

I stepped closer, running my hands up his muscular chest. "That's why you consider me amazing? My pig-training abilities?"

His arms looped around my waist to pull me flush against him. "I'm sure you have other qualities I like. None of them come to mind right now. Is there some way you could jog my memory?"

I wrapped my arms around his neck, went up onto tiptoes, and kissed him with bold passion. I claimed that man with my mouth, my hands, every part of my body that touched his. When his cock began to swell against my abdomen, I writhed against it rhythmically, drawing a groan of pleasure from him.

When I broke off the kiss, we were both flushed and breathing heavily. "How about that?"

“I do love that.” His tone was husky and playful. “There’s something else you do, though. Can’t seem to remember what it is.”

Holding his gaze, I stepped back and ever so slowly undid the buttons of my shirt before letting it drop to the floor. Just as slowly, I removed my bra and let it fall as well. I stepped closer, pulled his shirt out of his jeans, and lifted it over his head. Once we were both bare chested, I stepped back into his arms and moved my excited nipples back and forth against his chest while I began to undo his belt. Rising back to my tiptoes, I murmured against his lips, “Maybe it’s this?”

He groaned. “Keep going. It’s coming back to me.” Then he kissed me deeply, and desire replaced the game. And what a long game it was, with double overtime.

The next morning I woke early, naked and snuggled to his side. His eyes opened, and he greeted me with a light kiss. “How do you feel?”

“Better than expected.” I ran a hand over his chest, pausing near the wound that had become a scar. “You should add everything we did last night to your hangover remedy.”

He smiled at that. “I couldn’t add it to my bean paste, but I could include instructions.” My chuckle had my breasts jiggling against his side, drawing his attention to them. He brought up a hand to cup one before bending to kiss it. “I love the way you laugh.”

“And I love the way you show me you love me.” I froze as the words hung in the air, aware that I couldn’t take them back.

He raised his head and met my gaze. It was a powerful moment and one I knew I’d never forget. “I’m glad because I do love you, Monica. I never thought I could find someone I could be myself with. With you, being me just seems natural and right.” He made a face. “I’m not expressing myself well.”

I brought a hand up to cup one side of his jaw. “You are. You’re saying it perfectly, and my only regret is that I didn’t have the courage to say it first. I love you, Scott. You’re everything I was afraid to hope for because I didn’t think someone like you could exist. You’re strong but kind. Loving without demands or drama. You’re not with me because of who I am, and you have no idea how much that means to me.”

Humor lit his eyes. “You and LJ should form a support group for the wealthy. I had no idea being rich was so difficult.”

I tipped my head to one side and challenged, “Are you mocking me?”

“A little.” It was impossible to be upset with him when I was still so

relaxed from his loving. “In all seriousness, it has been eye opening. My parents always said that money doesn’t make people happy, that they already had everything they needed, but I didn’t fully believe them. I started my research with the intention of saving them, but now I see that they’re fine. It’s all you rich people who need my help. You guys are a mess.”

“You’re a brat.” And he was right, but I wasn’t about to give him that win. “So, LJ did come over last night?”

“He did.”

“How was he?”

He smiled and rolled onto his back, cuddling me closer to his side as he did. “Missing me. He’s a little jelly that I’m working with you instead of him now, but I asked him if he’d sign the papers Jesse suggested I had drawn up, and he agreed to look at them. If it’s okay with you, I’d like to tell him how I modify the beans and start working with him again. We could use him on our team, and I’m kind of missing him too.”

“You don’t need my permission. The bean research is yours.”

He gave me a long look. “It doesn’t have to be. It could be *ours*. You’re bringing fresh ideas to the project. Pretty soon you’ll have added as much to the process as I have. When I have the paperwork drawn up for LJ, I can have something written up that states that as well.”

“You would do that?”

“I want to build a life with you, Monica, and for me that means no walls.” He looked away. “Now I feel bad that I’m keeping something from you.”

There was a time when that statement would have sent me into a panic as a variety of worst-case scenarios overwhelmed me. I held my calm, though, and put my faith in the man I loved. “Then tell me.”

“You’re probably not going to like it.”

“Then definitely tell me.”

He tucked his other hand beneath his head and kept his gaze locked to the ceiling. “I asked my parents to come home early because . . .”

Emotion tightened my throat. I croaked, “Because?” Was he saying what I thought he was saying?

“Because I want to take my father with me to see yours. Not just my father, but LJ, Thane, and Jesse. All of them.”

I sat straight up, jaw open, cross-legged, staring down at him. “I’m sorry—what? Why would you do that?”

He looked a little guilty and like he expected me to be angry with him when he said, “I’m going to ask your father for permission to ask you to marry me and, while I’m there, figure out how to get him to be nicer to you.” He winced and waited.

I let his words sink in. “You think you need his permission?”

Looking like a deer caught in headlights, he answered slowly. “No, but when we have a daughter together, I hope the man she chooses respects me enough to have a conversation with me before popping the question.” He cleared his throat. “It’s a guy thing.”

I hadn’t thought it was possible to love him more, but then he went and pulled me in deeper. I brought a hand to my mouth as tears flooded my eyes.

He sat up quickly. “If you don’t want me to, I won’t. I just thought—”

“I’m not crying because I’m upset. I’m crying because you have the most beautiful, loving, amazing soul. I don’t know what you see in me, but I don’t ever want to lose you.”

“Hey,” he said gently as he mirrored how I was sitting and put his hands on my knees. “First of all, I feel the same way about you. Second, if you keep talking like this, I’m going to start crying with you and ruin my whole macho image.”

I laughed through my tears. “*Macho* image?”

“Ouch. People fear me.”

“Who?” I was giving him shit, and the laughter in his eyes told me he was loving it. “Name one.”

I was doing a humorous victory lap in my head until he pointed to his fully erect cock and said, “Shh, don’t talk like that in front of him. He’s sensitive about stuff like that. Tell him he’s a stallion.”

Was he serious? His tone made it hard to determine if he was. I looked down at his cock, then back up to meet his gaze again. “I’m not having a conversation with your dick.”

He burst out laughing. “Oh my God, you should see your face.” As he gasped for air, he said, “Admit that I almost had you doing it. You almost spoke to him.”

I was shaking my head and laughing as well as I said, “You’re such an idiot sometimes.”

“But the rest of the time I’m a *macho stallion*.”

This time I was wiping tears of laughter from the corners of my eyes. “Yes, you took the words right out of my mouth.”

We sat there for a moment, simply smiling at each other, and I was grateful for friendship being the foundation of our relationship. Our future would be full of love, laughter, children, and research projects we worked on together.

Together. We'd make a life that would be ours.

*Ours.*

"I'm going with you to see my father," I said with conviction.

"That's not how this works. I'm supposed to—"

"I'm going." I placed my hands over his on my knees. "I'll let you talk to him first, but I have to be part of the conversation." I inhaled deeply. "I have to tell him that I love him."

Scott's expression crumpled, and his eyes filled with tears. "Now look what you did. You're killing my macho mojo."

I wiggled my eyebrows playfully. "I have an idea for how to remedy that. What do you think of a blanket, some jean shorts, and an early-morning swim in the pond?"

Fire returned to his eyes. "I hung a swing out there. We could christen it."

"Better now than when your parents are here again."

He laughed. "Good point." He leaned forward and gave me a quick kiss. "I'll pack a snack in case we decide to stay for a while."

"We should feed the animals but do the barn chores later."

"Look at you—already sounding like a farmer's wife."

"I never thought I'd say this, but that's exactly what I want to be."

He turned, moved off the bed, and held out his hand to me. "Wait till I show you what we can do on a moving tractor."

I put my hand in his and joined him next to the bed. The idea of going to see my father with him should have had me anxious, but it didn't. I knew that no matter what my father said, Scott would be at my side.

Just to put a smile on his face, I bent and spoke to his cock. "Hey, meet me at the swing next to the pond."

Scott took my hand and spun me around in a smooth dance move, then dipped me back over his arm before kissing me. "Go get those shorts, woman, before we get tangled up here again. I really want to try that swing."

"Me too," I said as I smiled up at him. Being with him wasn't changing me; it was bringing the old me back to life. I'd always wondered who I might have been had my mother lived, and I was experiencing the answer to that

question.

This was the confident me.

The me who could feel wonder again and laugh over silly moments.

Love had brought me full circle, and I prayed it would do the same for my father.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

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## SCOTT

A week later I was wedged between Monica and Aunt Bibi in the back of an SUV as we pulled up the long driveway that led to Bellerwood's Boston mansion. Jesse had insisted on driving because . . . well, he's Jesse. Crystal was in the other front seat. The SUV behind us had LJ, Thane, and Donny. My parents, God bless them, were in their motor home, following behind. My mother said at her age she liked the convenience of having a bathroom accessible to her—especially when she was nervous.

Monica's father knew we were coming. She'd sent him a text telling him that I wanted to meet with him. His only response was a time and location.

Jesse parked the car, then turned in his seat. "You sure you want to do this?"

I inhaled deeply. "I'm sure."

Aunt Bibi smiled at me. "I'm proud of you."

"That's a bit premature. I haven't done anything yet."

She leaned over me and gave Monica's knee a pat. "You've done more than you know, Scott. The Bellerwoods had someone like you a long time ago, and I believe she sent you to them."

Monica clasped her aunt's hand. "I believe that too. Mom would have loved Scott."

I separated their hands and sat taller. "Hey, hey, you are not allowed to get me all emotional before I go in there. I need to be calm and collected."

Jesse interjected, "You need to be yourself. You've got this. Walt doesn't stand a chance against your optimism."

I let out a slow breath. "I'll do my best to not mess up your deal with him."



Jesse nodded. “I know that, and I wouldn’t be here if you weren’t more important than any deal could ever be. We go in there as a family. We come out as a family. He can’t change that.”

Crystal leaned over and kissed Jesse quickly, then said, “And that’s why I’m marrying this man. He talks tough, but—”

“Total softie,” Monica said, then met my gaze. “My man talks soft, but when it comes to what’s important, he’s tough.”

I gave her forehead a quick kiss, then looked from her to Aunt Bibi and back. “One of you has to move, or I can’t go do this.”

Monica opened the door and got out. I followed her. We stood there for a moment before she said, “Thank you for this.”

I nodded. “Give me a few minutes alone with him before you come in. I think it’s important for us to find our footing with each other before we add everything else on.”

Monica looked uncertain. “Maybe I should talk to him first.”

“Do you want to?”

“No.” She made a pained face. “I don’t want to mess this up.”

I pulled her in for a hug. “There’s no way you could. Everyone here loves you. All I’m going to do is give your father a little pep talk.”

“I shouldn’t send you in there alone.”

I ran my hands up and down her arms to comfort her. Monica had graduated at the top of every school she’d attended. No one needed to light a fire beneath her: she was always asking, always searching for a deeper understanding of the world around her. She’d never told me her IQ, but I guessed it was genius level. She grasped concepts faster, retained information more easily, and made mental calculations more accurately than anyone I’d ever seen. I didn’t doubt for a second that she could go in there and verbally tear her father apart if she wanted to, but that had never been her goal. And it wasn’t mine. “There are a few things in life that scare me, but your father is not one of them. He wants to know how to make things better between the two of you. The reason he hasn’t called you is because he doesn’t know what to say. I want to help him change that.”

She searched my face. “I love the world when I look at it through your eyes.”

“People will disappoint us, Monica, but it’s too depressing to go through life expecting them to.”

She nodded once. “Tell me when you want us to come in.”

“I will.”

I rose to my full height and walked toward the house. Walt Bellerwood was broken, no different from an old tractor. He'd probably start off by blowing smoke and making noise. My goal was to see past that to what the underlying issues were and do my best to fix them. It was a lot to hope for from an initial meeting, but I had to believe it was possible.

For Monica.

I walked up the curved stairway of the home, then paused to look back at the cars below. Everyone had exited the vehicles and was gathered in a small circle. My mother looked up, waved both arms at me, and called out, “You’ve got this, Scott!” in the same tone she’d used when cheering me from the bleachers when I’d played sports.

I gave her a thumbs-up and shot Monica one last reassuring smile before turning back to the door. It opened while I was still searching for a doorbell.

“Mr. Millville.” The man who opened the door was dressed in a suit but was built like an NFL linebacker. I flexed my shoulders and looked him in the eye. If he was anything like Jesse, he’d built up those muscles in a gym. I could probably run circles around him. Plus I didn’t know a man who could hit harder than a horse could kick, and I’d been on the wrong end of a kick plenty of times in my life.

“That’s me,” I said, hoping I sounded calm and casual.

“Follow me.” He led me across a foyer that was as large as the house I’d grown up in to a room filled with modern white leather furniture. “Wait here.”

I did.

A few minutes later a side door opened, and Walt Bellerwood entered the room. He was about my father’s age, almost the same height, but not as physically robust. Unlike my father, manual labor had probably never been part of Bellerwood’s life.

He walked up to me, looked me over from head to toe, then said, “Don’t waste your breath trying to impress me. I know all about you.”

“All?”

His eyes narrowed. “My people are incredibly thorough.”

I could have let that slide, but I didn’t. “Except for the twin thing. They missed that.”

His head dipped ever so slightly in concession. “That was an

unfortunate oversight, and one that they didn't make a second time."

Trying to lighten the mood, I joked, "I have another twin?"

"No, *you* don't."

I almost asked if he was joking, but he clearly wasn't. "I don't understand."

He shook his head. "It's not important—not to this conversation, anyway. Tell me, Mr. Millville, what do you hope to achieve by coming here today? And why in the world is there an RV in my driveway?"

I scratched the back of my neck as I chose my next words. "We're all here for the same reason—we love your daughter, and we want the two of you to work out your problems."

"My daughter and I don't have *problems*."

I cleared my throat. "You don't?"

"No, we don't."

Was he lying to me or himself? "Have you spoken to her recently?"

"Not in weeks, but she left her position at Bellerwood, and I've been busy."

If he felt anything toward her, I couldn't tell. No wonder Monica didn't trust her instincts. Her father was a little left of normal. "Do you know why she left?"

"She said she was tired of trying to be more important to me than my work."

*Okay, so he heard her.* "And?"

"And she wanted more control over where she went and who she saw, so she was done with everything."

"And that's not a problem?"

He gave me a long look. "My daughter is a well-educated, highly intelligent, experienced lead researcher. She can easily find another position if she wants one. If she doesn't, she has ample money of her own."

*This is so odd.* I decided to try to shock him. "I intend to marry your daughter."

"I figured as much, which is why I've already brought you under the umbrella of my security team."

"I'm sorry? What did you do?"

"I couldn't let my daughter live with a man who was likely going to get killed for his research."

"Hold on, you know about my research?"

“It’s common knowledge on the dark web, and the price for your head is high, but most people want you taken alive. There is speculation that whatever you’ve done to those beans of yours has nothing to do with the soil. Since no one has been able to find notes on it—not stored on a computer, not online—the only option available is to torture the information out of you or someone you care about.”

My eyes rounded. “You’re serious.” I could see why LJ trod carefully around this man—he missed nothing.

“And since my daughter is one of the people you care about, that whole issue needed to be dealt with.”

My voice was an octave or two higher when I asked, “And it has been?”

“There’s no one coming for you now.”

I swallowed hard. I didn’t want to know how he’d handled that problem. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I opened my mouth to say something, thought about it, changed my mind, then started over. “Monica needs you.”

“I know, and I need her.”

*This is so strange, but maybe he doesn’t understand what he’s doing wrong.* “She needs to hear you say you love her. When you don’t, she starts to think you don’t care about her.”

His eyes darkened. “She knows I love her.”

“No, I don’t think she does.”

“Then we do have a problem.” He turned and walked to a photo of a woman who looked a lot like Monica. “Leah would have made sure Monica knew. She always made sure I understood what Monica needed from me. She was good like that.” He turned back to face me and referenced the space around him. “I’m not here most of the time.” He tapped his temple. “I’m here.”

It felt like I was learning a second language, but I made an attempt to use his own words. I referenced the space around me. “Monica is here most of the time, and she doesn’t know how to reach you when you’re there.” I tapped my own temple. A thought came to me, and I took a stab at a theory. “Did Leah have a special way of doing it? Of bringing you out of your head and back to her?”

A smile thinned his lips as he seemed to get lost in memories for a moment. “She did. Whenever she started a conversation with ‘I love you,’ I

knew it was important and I needed to put everything else in my head to the side and listen.”

And there it was—Monica’s solution. “Mr. Bellerwood, I love you.”

His eyebrows shot up. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

I smiled. “I just want to make sure you’re here with me when I tell you this. I love your daughter. I want to ask her to marry me. If she says yes, we’ll live on my farm and wherever else she wants to live. We’ll raise animals and children and hopefully solve world hunger together. Do you approve?”

“Only if you never bring that damn pig of yours here.”

“I can’t promise that, sir, since Bella is technically Monica’s, and she does what she wants.”

Once again he seemed to retreat to his memories before saying, “I always meant to get Monica another dog. She said she didn’t want one. She said there wasn’t one that could ever replace the one she lost.” His eyes met mine. “I hear she really likes that pig.”

“She does, and Bella adores her right back.”

He smiled. “I’m glad. She needs that.” He gave me another long look. “She needs someone like you too. I approve of my daughter’s choice. In both.”

I couldn’t help but grin and ask, “So, can I call you Dad?”

Completely seriously, he said, “Not yet.”

I coughed back a laugh. Monica’s father was one odd duck, but I kind of liked him. “I’ll be right back with Monica. When she comes in, could you tell her what you told me about how Leah used to reach you?”

“I can do that.”

“And then I’d like to bring everyone else in to introduce them. My parents are dying to meet you. Warning: my mother is a hugger.”

“No way to stop her?”

“We don’t even try. It makes her happy, and she makes all of us happy, so it’s the least we can do.”

“Okay.”

I left him there and sprinted out to where I knew Monica was waiting anxiously. From the top of the stairs I called her name. Everyone turned to look at me, and I gave them all a double thumbs-up.

Monica was sprinting up the stairs in a heartbeat. “What happened in there?”

“We’ll talk about everything I learned later, but right now let’s go see your father. Just do yourself a favor and say ‘I love you’ before you say anything else. Every single time you want him to hear you, really hear you, that’s what you need to say to him.”

She studied my face, then nodded. “I can do that.”

I smiled because although she was different from her father in so many ways, she was also similar to him. My hope was that I’d found a bridge they could use to reach over their differences.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

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## MONICA

An hour later I was seated next to Scott in the study of my father's house, marveling at how heavily my interpretation of events was influenced by the lens I chose to perceive them through. My father was very much the man he'd always been, but Scott had seen something I'd never allowed myself to. My father's genius was as much a curse to him as it was a gift. He couldn't be the father I'd always yearned for him to be, but that didn't mean that he didn't want to be.

Somehow my mother had seen the man locked inside of him and drawn him out. Through that lens, my mother's death had been just as devastating to my father as it had been to me. He'd lost his connection not just to the world but to his only child.

I glanced at Scott, who was sharing a funny story with the group. The thought of losing him terrified me. Without him, would I retreat into myself as well? "You have to marry me," I said loud enough that the room fell silent.

Scott smiled down at me. "That's the plan. In fact, I was building up my courage to ask you today while we're all together."

"Yes."

He laughed. "I didn't ask yet."

"Then I'll do it. Scott Millville, will you marry me?" I was serious. No one spoke. No one moved during the pause before Scott answered.

He dug a small ring box out of his jacket. "I will." He opened the box, took out the ring, and placed it on my finger. "Today. Tomorrow. Anywhere or anyhow you want. I'm all in."

His face blurred as tears filled my eyes. "Me too." I looked around the room until I saw my father and said, "Dad, I love you, and Scott and I are getting married."

He smiled. "I love you, too, and I couldn't be happier. You've got a good man there."

"I do." I threw my arms around Scott's neck and hugged him between raining kisses on his lips. "Everything he does, he does out of love. That's how I'm going to live my life from now on."



# CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

SCOTT

A few days later I met Jesse and Thane for a drink at an out-of-the-way restaurant near Boston, somewhere we could talk without worrying we'd run into anyone we knew. There were things we needed to discuss. We were seated, and I was halfway through my beer when I said, "Now that Bellerwood knows about me, how do you want to move forward?"

"Move forward?" Thane asked.

Jesse rolled his ice around in his empty glass. "We don't need to announce anything. People will talk when we start showing up in public together, but we let them. They don't need to know that we haven't always known about each other."

"I agree," Thane said. "The less we tell people, the better."

"That works for me." I took another swig of beer before adding, "Jesse, about George . . ."

Jesse sighed. "I heard. I can't say I love that you pretended to be me, but I am glad that you stepped in with that situation. I knew something was up with him, but when he asked about potentially taking time off and I said everyone should wait, I had no idea about his sister's situation. I spoke with him the other day, and he now knows he can have whatever time he needs. George has been with us since Thane and I took over and has always gone above and beyond. He deserves the same from us."

"I'm glad. He was instrumental in finding the Bellerwood issue." I shot both of my brothers an apologetic smile. "Oh, and for his involvement, I did promise him a healthy retirement package."

"He earned it," Jesse said to Thane.

Thane nodded. "I'll get that ball rolling."

I cleared my throat. "There's something else, something I probably

should have told you earlier.”

They both looked at me, eyebrows raised with a similar expression of impatience. There was a time when that look would have left me feeling judged, but I was beginning to accept it as simply who they were. I doubted they were aware of how they came across at times. “It’s about my beans.” Slowly and clearly, leaving none of the process out, I explained to them how the modification to the plants had nothing to do with the soil and how I’d known all along.

When I finished, Jesse was the first to speak. His expression gave none of his feelings away. “You kept this a secret because you didn’t trust us.”

“Correct.”

Thane looked from me to Jesse and back. “Given the same situation, I would bet my life that Jesse would have done the same thing. It’s truly uncanny how, despite being raised very differently, there are fundamental ways the two of you are the same.”

Jesse nodded. “He’s right. I would have.” After a moment, he added, “When we first switched lives, I thought I would be the one to save you, but I’m now the happiest I’ve ever been. Crystal is a large part of that, but stepping into your life also opened my eyes to what mine was missing.”

“Plus I saved your project.”

With a tip of his head in concession, Jesse said, “There’s that as well.” Then he wagged a finger in the air. “We’re even, though, because I saved your farm.”

“It was never in jeopardy—”

A waitress for another table stopped at ours and said to me, “I remember you. Thank you for the generous tip. I’d been missing my mom, and it allowed me to fly out to see her.”

Jesse answered, “You’re welcome.”

She did a double take, then laughed. “There’s two of you.”

Thane joked, “And they both chose this restaurant to treat me to.”

Not getting his sarcasm, she smiled. “Well, we’re happy to have you back. And thank you again.”

After she walked away, Jesse said, “Thane, you really are a snob.”

“I am not.”

Jesse leaned toward me. “He so is. Ask him if he has ever checked his car’s oil. Or better than that, ask him if he’d know how to.”

Thane did not look amused.

I added, “We both enjoy giving Thane shit. Add that to the list of what we have in common. Did he ever tell you about the shower at your apartment?”

“What about it?” Jesse asked.

I couldn’t help but laugh as I told him about how I had had Thane convinced I didn’t know how to use it and how he’d run for the bathroom to check for damage. Jesse started laughing along as I described how unamused Thane had looked when he’d returned.

“That’s hilarious,” Jesse said.

“Or not,” Thane said.

I laughed so hard I had to hold my side. “He had that exact expression on.” As I laughed more, Jesse joined in, and eventually, grudgingly, Thane did as well.

The waitress returned and asked if we wanted a photo taken of the three of us. I said yes just to mess with Thane, but when I saw the photo, I knew it would always be one of my favorites.

The three of us had moved to sit on the same side of the table, side by side, smiling like three brothers who were enjoying simply being . . . family.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

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## THANE

### *Six months later*

It wasn't unusual to be summoned to Walt Bellerwood's office. The closer we came to launching the first components of the space station, the more Bellerwood needed to be part of every decision. In a way, I couldn't blame him: in the eyes of the public, the success or failure of the project rested on his shoulders.

As I made my way down the hall to Bellerwood's office, I prayed he hadn't found a major fault in our final design. We'd run endless simulations and tested and retested it for every conceivable situation in the lower atmosphere. Bellerwood's latest launch was testing its in-space viability. Nothing *should* go wrong, but anything could.

Bellerwood didn't turn to greet me when I entered his office. He remained at the window, looking at the sky. "We have a problem."

I took a deep breath and told myself there was no progress without failure. Whatever the issue was, Jesse and I could fix it. "And what is that?" I didn't waste time with niceties because Bellerwood didn't require or even appreciate them.

"Six months, two weddings, countless hugs—so, so much hugging. And still . . ."

"Yes?"

"Scott's bean paste tastes like shit."

I coughed back a laugh. "He and Monica are working on it."

"Not fast enough to be useful. I want that bean paste as a fuel source for the station, but unless they solve the volatility issue, that won't happen anytime soon."

Before Scott had shared his theory on Bellerwood with me, I would have thought he was a self-absorbed narcissist. Scott saw him as a man who struggled to connect with people, a genius trapped in his own head most of the time. When Bellerwood spoke, it was with a directness that many found uncomfortable. There was a key to softening him, but I'd be damned if I'd use it. I didn't mind blunt. "Monica did just find out she's pregnant. That's probably where her energy is focused."

"Not good enough. Can't people fall in love and start families without affecting my project?"

"That space station is right on schedule. Jesse and I—"

"Mostly you. Jesse checked out as soon as he met Crystal. He used to be focused. Now all he wants to talk about is his new house, Crystal, and some damn cow. Without you, the life-support system would never have been completed."

"Do you have the stats on how it's performing? Any issues?"

"Do you expect any?"

"No, but I'm prepared to deal with any that arise."

He turned toward me and nodded. "Stay that way." He looked around the room as if he could see more than what was there. "Don't look further into Jesse and Scott's adoption."

That rocked me back onto my heels. "What?"

"Wait until the space station is completed."

Had Scott told him about how I'd looked into his adoption? "Neither Scott nor Jesse are interested in finding their bioparents any longer."

"Good. Put your energy into helping Scott and Monica solve his bean-paste issues. Don't let anything distract you."

"Why would looking into their adoption distract me?"

Bellerwood turned away from me again, returning his attention to whatever he imagined was outside his window. Oh, what the hell . . . "I love you."

Bellerwood whipped around to face me again.

I said, "Did you bring me here to tell me something about Jesse and Scott's bioparents?"

"No, yours, but if you go off looking for your own twin . . . and you fall in love . . . who will be at the helm of your company?"

"I'm not going anywhere," I said absently as what he'd said about me looking for my own twin echoed in my head. "What do you mean, my own

twin? Do you know something I don't?"

"I know a lot of things." He turned away again. "Bring me a working bean-paste fuel, and then ask me that again."

I stepped closer. "If you know something, say it now. No games."

"Goodbye, Mr. Rehoboth."

I would have stayed and pushed for more, but Bellerwood responded to results, not pressure. A twin? Could I really have one? Bellerwood wasn't the type to lie or even joke. He'd found something that made him believe there was another me out there.

Holy shit.

As I left his office and made my way back to my car, I went over everything I'd found out about Jesse and Scott's adoption. Yes, they'd used the same adoption agency as my bioparents had, but I hadn't uncovered anything that implied I had a twin.

Although I had to admit I hadn't looked that hard into my own ancestry. Like Jesse, I didn't want to know. I had a good family, and there wasn't anything about my life I wanted to change. There was no reason to go looking into my life, preadoption.

Unless I had a twin . . .

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ruth Cardello is a *New York Times* bestselling author who loves writing about rich alpha men and the strong women who tame them. She was born the youngest of eleven children in a small city in northern Rhode Island. She lived in Boston, Paris, Orlando, New York, and Rhode Island again before moving to Massachusetts, where she now lives with her husband and three children. Before turning her attention to writing, Ruth was an educator for two decades, including eleven years as a kindergarten teacher. Learn about Ruth's new releases by signing up for her newsletter at [www.RuthCardello.com](http://www.RuthCardello.com).