

PRIMAL ^{VOL. 3} INSTINCTS

A REVERSE HAREM LOVE STORY



NICOLE
EDWARDS

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A circular logo with the text "BECAUSE NAUGHTY CAN BE ON SO NICE" around the perimeter and "NE LTD" in the center.

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**PRIMAL
INSTINCTS**

Volume 9

BY NICOLE EDWARDS

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A Million Tiny Pieces

Inked on Paper

Bad Reputation

Bad Business

Filthy Hot Billionaire

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PRIMAL INSTINCTS

Volume 9

NICOLE EDWARDS

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**PRIMAL
INSTINCTS**

Volume 9

**NICOLE
EDWARDS**

1

Very early on Sunday...

CREED

“*THERE* YOU ARE. WELCOME BACK. I THOUGHT maybe I killed you too soon.”

Clark Huxley.

No matter how disoriented I was, no matter how badly my body hurt, I would never forget the grating whine of his voice. Not for as long as I fucking lived. Which, based on my physical state and his unique brand of crazy, might not be that much longer.

“So glad that’s not the case. We’ve got so much to talk about first. How are you feeling?” Hux asked with feigned interest. “A little bit of a headache, I imagine. That’ll wear off.”

Not if you keep talking.

“And don’t fret. The drug I gave you won’t have lasting side effects.” He cackled harshly. “Not that you really need to worry too much about that. The end is nigh, my friend. The. End. Is. Nigh. For you, anyway.”

He was overly dramatic in the way he spoke, as though he was performing for an audience of two hundred, not one. But Hux had always been like that. He craved attention.

“I’ll bet money you thought it would be easy,” Hux continued. “Trade yourself for her, then take me out before I could dump your giant ass in the trunk of that fucking car. Wasn’t an easy feat, let me tell you. You’re a big guy. I had to work for it. You should be proud. Proud and...”

I tuned him out, letting him ramble incessantly while I tried to get my bearings. Physically, I was still in one piece, but that was the only positive. The side of my neck throbbed, assumably where he dosed me with whatever knock-out drug he used. My clothes were in a pile on the floor beside me. I was naked, and the hard wooden chair I was straddling wasn’t cold, meaning I’d been sitting in it for a while. My back felt like someone had taken a branding iron to it. My shoulders

ached because he had my arms pulled down in front of me, my wrists contorted by zip ties that had been weaved between the wooden spindles on the chair's back. The angle was only part of the problem because they were bound tight enough to cut off the circulation to my hands. The same plastic zip ties secured my ankles to the chair legs.

He obviously didn't want me to get free, and in this position, I doubted I could. But the worst part was whatever was wrapped tightly around my neck—some sort of thin wire bit into my skin whenever I swallowed.

“I heard you were thinking about closing this place down. Such a pity.” He clicked his tongue several times, then sighed. “But I honestly expected no less. You never did have big dreams, did you, Alpha? Just take what's handed to you and make do. Pathetic, if you asked me.”

If I didn't feel like I'd been run over by a truck and someone had put the overheated engine block directly on my back, I would've found that amusing. I'd clawed my way up from nothing, and those who knew me at all knew that.

“I will hand it to you, though. The suggestion to come here was brilliant. I was honestly surprised you would make the request,” he rambled. “Quite fitting, if you ask me. And who am I to deny a dying man his last wish?”

We were at the club—a four-hundred-thousand-square-foot, single-story warehouse building that had once been a distribution center. I'd acquired it at auction specifically for the club and, with help from the members, had modified it to accommodate our needs. For the most part, it wasn't fancy, but our brand of kink didn't need extravagant wall coverings or expensive carpeting. Bare concrete and metal walls were more our style. At least in the main room. The jungle that made up a majority of the building could probably be considered overkill, but the members enjoyed it.

“You didn't think I knew it was closed, did you?” He sounded proud of himself. “I did.”

He shouted the last two words loud enough for them to echo through the empty space. There was currently no one

here because I'd temporarily closed the doors until I could decide what my next steps would be. I couldn't be here to oversee activities, and with Nick and Garrison too busy to help out, there was no one who could do so in my absence, so it felt like the right thing to do.

"I have my ways, Alpha. You always thought you were smarter..." He laughed uproariously. "Such an idiot."

I was grateful there wasn't an audience for this shit show. Not because I gave a fuck whether the members saw me like this. I wasn't vain enough to care. However, I would move heaven and earth to keep submissives out of this bastard's reach. To say he was a monster was a grotesque understatement.

Hux snorted. "I thought about using one of those cages over there. It would've been poetic to see you trapped behind the bars. I do love how eager little rabbits peek out, eyes hopeful. Desperate for whatever scraps I'm willing to give."

Little rabbits were what Hux called submissives.

"Sorry to break it to you, but I have no scraps for you, Alpha. Not this time."

About twenty feet in front of me, several chairs had been dragged over, all in a line facing me. Or rather him, I figured. The center of the main room had become his stage. He was the star, and those chairs were for his audience. Whether he had them designated for someone specific or his imaginary friends were already occupying them was anyone's guess. The guy was fucked in the head.

"The best part about those little rabbits was the way they would cower when I poked at them. I used a steel ruler once. Don't tell anyone, but I filed the edges just a little so it would scrape easily. That was the best feeling in the world. It left little nicks in the skin." He laughed. "Fuck, that made my dick hard."

His footsteps thudded loudly on the bare concrete. Although I was trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey, Hux maintained a wide berth as he moved around me. The bastard

was still nervous. Under different circumstances, I would've been pleased.

When he moved behind me, I attempted to loosen the zip ties that were firmly circling my wrists. They were at least two inches wide and too thick to snap, but getting free was an instinct I couldn't abandon.

"Do you think they'll come for you?" he asked.

I didn't respond.

"I'm really hoping they do. I got them chairs and everything. Maybe that little whore will come. She can have a front-row seat."

Whoopssshhh.

My head snapped up to catch the tail of the whip as it snapped near the chair he was referring to, cracking the air with an ear-splitting sound that echoed off the metal walls.

"I would *love* to tell her my story. I know she'll get a kick out of it. She deserves to get to know the man responsible for your death, doesn't she? Plus, I already know so much about her; it doesn't seem fair. I mean, I've seen her naked." He cackled. "Hell, I've seen her getting fucked like the whore she is."

I jerked against the restraints on my wrists.

Hux laughed. "I do love that you're scared. It makes me all tingly inside."

How he came to that conclusion was beyond me. I wasn't scared. Not for myself. As far as I was concerned, the fucker could do whatever he wanted. The only thing that mattered to me was that Hawk and Journey were safe. And for my peace of mind, I chose to believe they were.

The last image I had of them was Journey hovering over Hawk, pressing a towel to the bullet wound in his leg. He'd been conscious, his eyes pleading as he stared at me. I had no idea how long it'd been since we left the house, but the windows and skylights above were dark, so it wasn't yet

morning. With any luck, Journey had called 9-1-1, and Hawk was getting medical attention. He would be fine. He had to be.

Hux circled me again, but he remained behind me this time.

“This could be easy,” he said, his words followed by the hiss of braided leather sliding along the concrete floor. “But trust me when I tell you I’d like nothing more than to beat it out of you.”

A second later, I heard the tell-tale song of that vicious bullwhip slicing through the air, followed by the slice and burn as he flayed open the skin on my back. I grunted as the pain singed my nerve endings.

That explained why I hurt so fucking much.

A gleeful laugh echoed in the empty space. “That’s more like it. It’s not nearly as satisfying to beat an unconscious man.”

But he had, obviously. The bite of the whip ignited the flames and flipped the switch in my brain that had been turned off to the pain.

Whoopssshhh.

Whoopssshhh.

He cracked the whip in rapid succession, the explosive crack in the air making me flinch. I anticipated the strike, but it didn’t come. Not then.

Hux laughed giddily. “Don’t worry. I’ll give you more. Promise. But I have to do so sparingly. It wouldn’t do to kill the Alpha too soon.”

The grandiose tone and the cocky tilt of his chin told me Hux believed he’d won. In his feeble little mind, he probably had. If the man knew anything about me at all, he would realize this wasn’t a victory for him. I’d been reduced to a whipping post more than a few times as a kid. A couple of the foster fathers I’d encountered had been belligerent drunks. This wasn’t new for me.

More importantly, I didn't give a shit what happened to me. Journey and Hawk were all I cared about. And because he'd opted to take me instead of them, he'd unknowingly forfeited the game because they were the prize. Not me.

"You're not even a little curious how I did it?"

I didn't respond. I didn't need to. He wouldn't spare me the details because the bastard had looser lips than a ten-dollar hooker.

"It was easy. I just had to sit back and wait for that little bitch whore to come back from college."

I assumed he was referring to Journey. I considered asking why he hated her so much but decided I didn't care.

Whoopssshhh.

I flinched, but the strike didn't come.

"I visited her a couple of times. Bet you didn't know that. At Princeton. Jesus, I can't figure out what the fuck you see in that whore. She's a fucking child. But her parents would be proud to know she kept her nose in a book. Didn't give me the time of day because of it."

Probably not the reason. I opted to keep that insight to myself.

"Imagine my surprise when she comes home and makes a beeline for your fucking door." He laughed, the maniacal sound echoing off the bare concrete. "A little do-gooder like her. I didn't think she had it in her. But it was perfect. So fucking perfect. Not only could I get to Ryder and Roman, but now I had a chance to get to you. All because the little whore was curious about this place." He spread his arms wide. "Was it her idea to close it? She couldn't handle the way you ripped into unsuspecting prey, could she? Didn't want to accept you shoved your dick into anything that walked. They always think they can change you, but they're only good for one thing."

He paced around behind me once more, dragging the whip with him. I knew it was coming but refused to brace myself for impact. Another grunt choked out when the whip licked the same wound it had created before. The edges of my vision

dimmed, but I held on. I wouldn't give this bastard the satisfaction of taking me out. I wouldn't last forever, but I damn sure wasn't giving up this easily.

My thoughts drifted to my last conversation with Rule when he had come to the house. The night his hacker had separated the photo that had been delivered to Journey. During the meeting, I'd kept it aboveboard for Nick's benefit, not wanting my best friend to know the true depths of my depravity. But the moment I had Rule alone, I dropped the facade.

"What would you like me to do when I find him?" Rule asked, his eyes locked with mine as though he wanted to dig the answer from the depths of my soul.

"Kill that bastard," I seethed. "A bullet right between the eyes. Let him know it's coming, but don't give him time to beg."

I probably should've questioned my sanity for wanting this fuck dead, but wiping him from the face of the earth was a long overdue public service.

Whoopssshhh.

I took a deep breath, grateful for the reprieve.

"I'm not above admitting I had some help." There was a gleeful curve to his vowels, reflecting his excitement. "But you know that already. Wayne. God, he was so fucking eager to take that little bitch down. Like a high school boy hellbent on hate-fucking the head cheerleader because she wouldn't give him the time of day."

I saw Hux out of the corner of my eye as he moved around to my left. He paused long enough to pull the whip back, then swung it around with enough force to cut the air with a whistle. The whip's fall slapped my right leg, curling around my calf. The burn was instant, as was the blood that trickled down when he flayed it open. He wasn't pulling any punches, the fucker.

I probably should've been concerned that I was naked and bound to a chair.

I wasn't.

It didn't matter what he did to me. He would get his. With Rule's help, Garrison and Nick would avenge Hawk, and the three of them would spend the rest of their days protecting Journey. Ryder and Roman might feel a twinge of guilt from time to time, but they would stand by their decision to keep Theresa hidden from this insane fucker. It was the right thing to do.

I only hoped Garrison and Nick realized this had been the plan all along. I would gladly give my life to protect Journey and Hawk. Perhaps I didn't tell them that I loved them as often as I should have, but I did. Enough that I was willing to die to save them.

2

JOURNEY

EVERY TIME I CLOSED MY EYES, IT all came rushing back, playing over the backs of my eyelids like a horror compilation.

Gun against my head.

Creed offering himself.

Hawk walking in.

Gunshot.

Hawk falling.

Creed leaving.

Cell phone.

9-1-1.

Garrison's panicked voice.

Red and blue lights.

Oxygen mask.

Sirens.

Frantic doctors.

As the memory played, my breaths grew more labored, my heart pounding so hard I swear I could feel the expansion of the muscle in my chest. Knots formed in my intestines as I fought to breathe. I tried to squeeze out the memory and replace it with one of Nick on the day he talked me down from a panic attack. I could almost see him in my mind's eye, urging me to take sips of air.

I wished Nick was here. He would know what to do.

Forcing my eyes open, I took a deep breath, diverting my gaze to the double doors leading to the trauma wing.

Those doors hadn't opened in at least an hour. No one going in or coming out.

At first, there had been. A rush of people—doctors, nurses—racing in to do what was necessary to save Hawk. But once

they were back there, they never came out. With the exception of a lone nurse who advised me to wait here because the doctor would be out to talk to me once the surgery was finished.

Waiting.

That was what I'd been doing ever since.

Although I'd watched her disappear behind those doors, I imagined fog billowing along the floor, all the rooms empty, lights off. My rational brain knew that wasn't the case, but the longer I sat here, the more anxious I became.

I tapped the screen on my phone, willing it to ring or a text message to appear. Something to tell me that Garrison wasn't coming here. There was nothing more we could do for Hawk, so I didn't need him here. I wanted the doctors to care for Hawk, and I needed Garrison to find Creed. I needed him and Nick to go after them and bring Creed back to us.

There weren't any notifications obstructing the image on the screen—the photo that Rhylee took for me just a few hours ago. The one of me standing in front of the four men I loved with everything I was. They had their arms stretched over each other's shoulders, wide grins on their handsome faces. The first time I saw it, I wondered whether they'd ever taken a picture together before—something to forever capture their friendship. I'd seen a few photos in the house, but none with all four of them together.

I skimmed the smiling faces, wondering how we'd gone from that to ... this.

When the ambulance arrived at the hospital, they had whisked Hawk away, not allowing me to stay with him. During the drive, the EMT remained calm and professional. I knew it was a facade based on the way she continued to work on him at a hurried pace. I'd detected her concern for her patient, and rightfully so, considering the amount of blood he seemed to be losing. Hawk had been in bad shape, fading in and out of consciousness while I stared, helpless to do anything. I kept waiting for her to perform some miracle that

would have Hawk walking out, not being wheeled out on a gurney, but she didn't.

I appreciated the woman's effort to keep me from panicking, but it hadn't worked. Nor when a calm nurse at the hospital assured me he was in the best capable hands and that they would let me know as soon as they had an update. Another had gotten me a pair of socks to wear since I was shoeless, along with a scratchy blanket in case I was cold, then escorted me in here so I could be alone with my chaotic thoughts.

That was almost three hours ago.

Since then, my mother had arrived, providing a modicum of comfort but no news on where Creed was or whether anyone had found him. I figured she knew what happened because my fathers weren't with her, and there would've been only one reason they left my mother alone in the middle of the night at the hospital. I wanted to believe my dads were Superman and Batman, off to save Creed from the violent bastard who'd been ripping my life apart piece by piece for weeks. Although I had the utmost respect and admiration for my fathers, I knew they weren't superheroes. They couldn't swoop in and save the day.

I flipped my phone on my knee, staring at the dark screen. I was losing hope that it would ring or chime or vibrate. No phone calls. No texts. I had no idea what was happening outside this bright, cheerful room with its large paintings of sunflowers and dandelions hanging perfectly straight on sunshine-yellow walls. The decor felt like a desperate attempt to bring cheer to those holding their breath, waiting for answers.

My mother appeared with a cup of coffee in one hand, a dark gray blanket draped over her forearm, and her phone in the other.

She forced a smile as she approached.

"I found this in the gift shop," she said, as she set her coffee on the end table, then draped a soft, fluffy sherpa-lined

blanket over my legs, removing the scratchy one I hadn't been using.

I couldn't imagine the gift shop was open at this time of night, but whatever. My mother had her ways.

I stared at the blanket and fought more tears. The color reminded me of Creed's eyes.

"I called Mason to bring you some clothes."

I looked up as she eased into the chair across from me. "You know Mason?"

Her eyes darted to me briefly before she shifted her gaze to the wall behind me. "I do, yes."

"How?"

She continued to stare at the wall as though memorizing the smallest details, like the corner of the canvas picture that was slowly working itself loose. Or the tiny crack in the wall near the ceiling where the building had shifted at some point, and the dark spot above one of the chairs, likely oils from so many heads leaning back against it. I doubted she was seeing anything I hadn't when I had occupied that seat during the first hour I'd been here.

"If you called him, it's not a casual acquaintance," I said, wanting an answer.

I could tell she was trying to come up with something that wouldn't prove she'd been lying to me all along.

"It's okay, Mom. You know them. I get it. You didn't tell me because you were trying to protect me."

I was impressed with how adult I sounded when inside, I was curling into a fetal position, wishing someone would hold me so I didn't fall apart. It was coming. My heart couldn't handle the pain of not knowing whether Hawk or Creed would live through the night, it couldn't process the fear that Garrison and Nick would meet the same fate. I was stuck in this horrible void of nothingness as I waited for someone to give me a lifeline to hold onto. I was starting to think it would never arrive, and I'd be left to drift off into oblivion.

My mother's expression softened and fear caused my heart to pinch. "What aren't you telling me?"

She shook her head. "No, honey. No. Nothing like that."

"Then what is it?"

"I can't remember the last time you called me Mom. It surprised me, that's all."

Ah. I could see how that tripped her up. Or at least gave her an excuse not to answer my original question. I didn't call her Mom. Not usually.

"Mason is a driver for the club," she finally said. "He's responsible for taking the Alpha to and from wherever he needs to go."

"His personal chauffeur." I was curious whether Mason had driven her around the way he drove me around. If it were his job to cater to the Alpha, he would've been responsible for driving my fathers at one point, so I figured it was a safe assumption that he'd driven my mom, too.

"In a sense, yes." She tapped the screen of her phone. "He also has a key to Creed's house."

The mention of Creed's house brought questions I'd wondered about during the ride in the ambulance.

"How did he get in?" I looked at my mother. "Clark Huxley. How did he get in the neighborhood, much less the house?"

I remembered walking into the kitchen, smiling like a fool, still floating on the cloud-like high of my orgasm. It wasn't until I was staring at the contents inside the refrigerator that I heard someone behind me. At first, I assumed it was Creed, but then something hard was pressed against the back of my head.

"Do exactly as I say, and we won't have a problem."

"Okay."

"That's it. Close the door and walk with me."

I did as the unfamiliar voice said, closing the refrigerator door and allowing him to lead me toward the glass doors at the back of the room.

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“All in due time.” Whatever he was holding pressed hard against my skill. “You’re going to want to be out here for this!”

When he shouted the words in the direction of Creed’s bedroom, I knew exactly who he was. I couldn’t see his face, but my fear had turned him into a monster—hideous and deformed with fangs and devil horns—as he held me at gunpoint and taunted the man I loved. I didn’t get my first look at him until he was forcing Creed out of the house.

But Clark Huxley wasn’t some vile creature; he was just a man. One who couldn’t walk through walls or slither under doors, so how did he get into the neighborhood and inside the house? He would’ve had to get through the guards at the main gate, then past the private one at the driveway. Granted, there hadn’t been a car at the house, so it was possible he came on foot. It was the only way that made any sense. But how did he get inside?

My mother’s phone buzzed.

I snapped my attention to it, praying it was an update from someone about Creed. My heart squeezed painfully in my chest as I waited for her to tell me he was all right and that the only thing left to worry about was Hawk’s recovery. He would recover; I knew that much. There was no other option.

“They found him,” my mother said.

I stared at her, those three words not making any sense, although they were the only words I’d wanted to hear.

“Hux has him at the club.”

Has him? Meaning what? That crazy fuck was holding him hostage?

“That’s all the text says,” my mother added, clearly expecting me to voice questions she couldn’t answer.

I swallowed past the lump in my throat, my attention turning to the double doors leading to the surgical suites beyond.

“Honey, I think I should call Hawk’s mother so she knows what’s going on.”

My gaze slowly shifted back to her face, disappointment filling me because I hadn’t thought about it first.

“I don’t have her number,” I admitted, hating that I hadn’t yet met Hawk’s mother. Terrified that I would have to tell her this was all my fault. That her son had taken a bullet because he was trying to protect me. What if he lost his leg? What if he...

I shook my head, refusing to finish that sentence. Hawk would be okay. He would fight to live because we needed him.

My mom pushed to her feet. “I’ll take care of it.”

I nodded.

“Breathe, Journey.”

I was trying.

“They have to be okay,” I whispered, choking on the emotion that would soon suffocate me if someone didn’t give me something to cling to.

3

GARRISON

“YES, HE’S INSIDE,” I TOLD RYDER, CONFIRMING my original suspicion when we arrived to find Creed’s Audi parked near the front door of Primal.

“You have visual confirmation?” Journey’s father asked.

“What are you? SWAT?” I countered. “Jesus Christ. Just fuckin’ get here.”

“We’re on our way. Wait for us.”

I wanted to tell him we would, but that wasn’t an option. I damn sure wasn’t sitting on my fucking ass while my best friend was held hostage by a goddamn maniac.

Rather than lie, I disconnected the call and tucked my phone in my pocket.

“I just texted you the address,” Nick said into his phone. “Do whatever the fuck you need to do, Rule. But do it now.”

Nick stabbed the phone as he spun to face me, his eyes widening when he saw me watching him.

I hadn’t interrogated Nick about his conversation with Rule earlier because my only goal was finding Creed. Now I couldn’t help wondering why he had a direct line to the guy or why he sounded as though they weren’t merely acquaintances who’d met once or twice.

“Is Ryder on his way?” Nick prompted before I could question him.

Probably better that way. I honestly didn’t want to know. The same laws didn’t govern Rule as the rest of us, but only because he managed to evade law enforcement like it was his job. Considering the things he did in an effort to save the one-percenters from their multitude of bad decisions, his list of crimes was long. The question wasn’t whether he had cops in his back pocket but how many. Since I didn’t have to worry about getting on the guy’s bad side, I chose not to ask questions to which I knew I wouldn’t like the answers.

“Yeah,” I told Nick. “They’re on the way.”

“How long?”

“Too long,” I said, pulling my key ring from my pocket so I could unlock the door.

We made it inside and into the empty reception area. It was dark, with only a sliver of light bleeding under the door that led into the club’s main room.

I moved closer to the door with Nick at my side. I stared into the blackness and focused my attention on noises coming from the other side. I could hear the faint sound of a man’s voice—not deep enough to be Creed’s but whiny enough to be Clark’s.

They were definitely in there. But without sight, I had—

Whoopssshhh.

Whoopssshhh.

“Fuck,” I muttered.

“Was that a whip?”

“Yeah.”

“We have to go in there,” Nick stated.

I took a deep breath because he was right.

4

CREED

MY HEAD LOLLED FORWARD, PAIN MAKING IT difficult to hold up for too long. With every slap of the whip, my energy was being leached from my veins. It didn't help that Hux had been waxing poetic about Wayne Parson for the past ten minutes, claiming he could've been a good student if only he would listen.

I honestly didn't give a fuck about Wayne. He would get his. Sooner rather than later, thanks to the text I sent Rule as soon as I got home last night, warning him the bastard hadn't learned his lesson.

"He wasn't the brightest bulb," Hux mused, then slapped the concrete with the whip.

I no longer flinched because it required too much effort.

"At one point, I thought I'd have to beat some sense into him, but then out of the blue, I received an offer I couldn't refuse." He gasped and giggled. "She was so fucking eager. At first, I thought it was a setup. Why would she want to help me?" He clutched his hands over his heart like he was performing for someone who gave a fuck. "Turns out she holds a grudge against you. She blathered on about her husband playing second fiddle or some shit." He waved a hand. "I didn't really pay attention. She talked too fucking much."

Trust me, man. I know the feeling.

"I only had to set the scene for her. Told her I worked for you and that I'd seen with my own eyes the way the blond bimbo flaunted herself at her husband. Jealousy is a vile bitch, is it not?"

I suspected I knew, but I asked anyway.

"Who?" I whispered, my throat too dry to heft the word out of my mouth.

"I knew you were listening." Hux tapped the tail of the whip against my head like he was praising a child. "Good

boy.”

I rolled my eyes but kept my head down, chin pressed to my chest. Not only was I protecting my face from the bite of that whip, I refused to let him see my reactions. He would have to eventually, or he wouldn't be satisfied. The man would want someone to recognize him for what he saw as accomplishments. He was the worst kind of egoist.

Whoopssshhh.

Before the snap stopped echoing, the whip slapped across my back. I grunted. It felt like my insides were now on the outside of my body.

Hux laughed, clearly getting off on my pain.

When I first met Hux, I mistook his attention-seeking for an exhibitionist kink. Since I never saw him outside of the club, I didn't realize it went beyond that. According to Journey's mother, the clinical diagnosis for Clark's illness was histrionic personality disorder. She had explained it at one point. Cadence said she suspected something was wrong by his distorted self-image and volatile emotions. His intense need for validation from others caused him to act out, which he did. Often. Clark Huxley was overdramatic and theatrical, expecting everyone to pay attention to him. Couple that with his violent tendencies, and the man was a danger to society.

Too bad we hadn't realized it sooner.

“A little too whiny for my taste, but I talked her down. Told her I knew the perfect way to get that little whore out of the way without anyone knowing who did it. She turned out to be a big help.” Hux snapped his fingers. “I'm trying to think of her name. Nick's wife.” He laughed. “God, was she fucking eager. I mean, I get wanting to get back at him, but she was a real go-getter. Took it up the ass like a champ just to get me to listen to her.”

“Kim,” I rasped.

Whoopssshhh.

“Yes!” He laughed again. “She fuck you, too? Probably. I didn't dare shove my dick in her. Told her she had to earn that.

She didn't mind that giant dildo in the ass. Did you know I made her pick it out herself? She tried for a smaller one, so I limited her options. She chose wisely the second time."

I knew Kim was jealous, but I didn't think she had it in her to hurt anyone. She was capable of anything, sure, but I got the feeling Hux was embellishing for my benefit. At least, I hoped he was because this revelation would devastate Nick.

"She had enough to say about you. It was obvious she harbored some feelings. Admitted she wanted to fuck you once when she realized you were the head of the club. When I asked her what she thought of the place, she told me she'd never been. Not sure I believe her. It was a secret, she said. She wasn't supposed to know."

I didn't react, or at least I didn't mean to.

"You didn't know she knew about it, did you? All that secrecy and your business partner goes and blurts it all out for some pussy." He snorted a laugh and moved behind me again. "Figures someone close to you would let the cat out of the bag. You're not as big"—the whip snapped between my shoulder blades—"or as bad"—it snapped across my hip—"as you fucking"—a slice along my opposite side—"think you are."

He was breathing harder when he stepped around. He was losing it faster than I anticipated.

"But as I said, she was a big help." His tone leveled out—Dr. Jekyll suppressing Mr. Hyde for the time being. "I never could've gotten the little whore's jewelry planted without her help. The security guard was easy. Hard up for money, that one. You should really think about treating your employees better. Maybe once you're dead, they can distribute your salary across the board."

That wasn't the first time he mentioned he was going to kill me. He had said it with more authority and conviction seconds before he stabbed a needle into my neck and forced me into the trunk of my Audi earlier.

I had to give it to him. Hux might've been mentally unstable, but he had it all planned out right down to the last

detail. He wasn't worried that someone would find us because it didn't matter if they did. He had a backup plan.

Hux made a couple more circles around me, pausing to snap the whip in my direction, hitting whatever he could.

“Back to my—”

I could see his feet in front of me, so I noticed that he had stopped and turned.

“I think your friends are here,” he said in a sing-song voice. “Goody, goody.”

I lifted my head in time to see Garrison and Nick cautiously peering in from the front reception room.

“Come!” Hux shouted. “Join us.”

The door opened wider, and they entered the club's main room.

Hux tucked the handle of the whip under one arm and began a slow clap. “I knew you'd make it. I even knew you'd leave the cops behind. God forbid you draw attention to this place. So predictable.” He motioned toward the chairs set up in front of me. “Please, have a seat. It's a shame you don't have the whore with you, but you're just in time for the show.”

I met Garrison's eyes and shook my head once.

“I should warn you, though,” Hux announced. “Being the genius that I am, I have a garrote around the Alpha's neck.” He lifted the end of a lanyard he wore. “The button to turn it on is right here. I just have to flip up this little cover and push that tiny little button... When I do that, there's this little motor that'll start to turn, tightening that wire inch by inch. It won't stop until his head is cut clean off.” He made a cutting motion across his neck to add flair to the mental picture he drew. “And don't think you're getting it from me. I'll hit the button before you can get close.”

“What d'ya want, Hux?” Garrison asked, his drawl casual, as though he was asking an old friend about the weather.

“I'm telling a story right now,” he said with a huff. “Do you know when the other two will be here?”

“Who?” Nick asked, looking around.

“Those self-righteous bastards who started it all.”

“I haven’t talked to them,” Garrison said, but I sensed the lie and assumed it was for my benefit.

“Well, that’s a pity. I really think they’d get a kick out of this.” He gestured toward the chairs. “Now, I’d appreciate it if you’d sit down and listen. It’s important.”

Garrison’s expression was hard, but he moved over to the chairs with Nick.

“Much better,” Hux said with sincere approval. “I was just telling the Alpha about the help I received from Kim.” He glanced over at Nick. “He had to remind me of her name. She’s not exactly memorable, although, as I was telling him, she likes having a fake dick in her ass.”

He paced back and forth between them and me, his chest puffed up, chin high—an actor playing for his audience.

Whoopssshhh.

Garrison grunted when the whip cracked the air to the left of him.

“Don’t get me wrong, she tried everything to avoid it, but I can be persuasive, can I not?” He touched his ear and looked to the ceiling with a smile. “I can still hear her begging.” His pitch changed to a falsetto. “*Stop, Clark. That hurts. Please use lube.*” He laughed. “She never used her safe word, so I didn’t stop.” He *tsked*. “It wasn’t until *after* I shredded her asshole that I found out she didn’t *have* a safe word. More’s the pity.”

Hux continued his stroll, incorporating more lashes as he went. The pain was excruciating, but I refused to let it show. I could take this for as long as I needed to. He could sever my muscles and hack my internal organs, but I would go out knowing Garrison and Nick would take care of Journey and Hawk. It was all I could ask for.

I could feel blood dripping down my legs and back, but I ignored it. I was no longer under the illusion I was walking

away from this. Hux would have me flayed open before the night was through.

And once he pressed that button, none of it would matter anymore.

JOURNEY

“DID YOU TALK TO HAWK’S MOM?” I asked when my mother returned to the waiting room a short time later.

Her expression was filled with concern. “I did. I explained what happened and told her we’d get her a private jet to bring her here.”

Good. Yes. That was good. Hawk’s mother needed to be here. He would want her here. Plus, she would know what to do. She would be able to make sure the doctors updated us. They hadn’t yet, and it was killing me. I wanted to throw a fit, to stomp and scream until someone told me something, but I didn’t want to risk taking the medical team away from Hawk because he needed their help more than I needed to know what they were doing.

Would Hawk want his dad here, too? He said they were estranged, but maybe he should be told. His mother would surely do that if she felt it was appropriate, right? But what if she didn’t?

I tried to weigh that decision because it gave me something to think about besides Creed being held by some crazy asshole and Hawk under a surgeon’s sharp scalpel. I still had no updates. Not from Garrison or Nick. Not from my fathers. I didn’t know if they were with Creed or if they simply knew where he was. I didn’t know if the police had been called—surely they had—and they were waiting for them to arrive. Maybe the SWAT team had already stormed the building. Did they save Creed? Did they arrest the man responsible for the madness?

A thump on my left dragged me from my thoughts. The double doors were opening, the thumping sound coming from the seal as they separated.

I held my breath, praying this wouldn’t be one of those moments when my life came crashing down around me. I studied the tall ebony-skinned man in blue scrubs as he walked toward me, his mask dangling around his neck as though he’d

just untied it. There was a cloth cap on his head, but he left it on, covering the salt and pepper hair that peeked from underneath.

I could only assume he was Hawk's doctor since we were the only people in the waiting room.

"Ms. Zeplyn," he greeted as he made his way over, a solemn expression on his face.

"Yes," I said, shoving the blanket aside and slowly getting to my feet, fisting the hem of my sweatshirt as though that might fend off bad news.

His expression relaxed, and I sought hope in that.

"Mr. Hawkins' surgery went very well," he said, his tone even and professional. "He was given a blood transfusion, and..."

The sound of my blood rushing through my veins grew louder as he spoke. Based on his tone, everything would be fine, but the words weren't making sense.

"...no damage to his femoral artery..."

"...anesthesia..."

"...compound fracture..."

"...no fragments..."

"...femur..."

"...risk of blood clot..."

"...recovery..."

"...move to ICU..."

His words spun through my brain, dimmed by the lights overhead as I tried to understand what he was saying, tried to piece them together to give me a final answer to the most pressing question: would he be all right? I appreciated the in-depth medical lesson, but I didn't have the patience for it, nor could I really understand since my heart was pounding like a bass drum in my ears, too loud for anything else to make sense.

I stared at him blankly when my mother asked a few questions. He nodded, and words came out of his mouth, but he still didn't get to the answer I needed.

When he finally looked at me, his expression softened.

“It'll take some time, but Mr. Hawkins is young and strong. I have no doubt he'll make a full recovery.”

If only he had led with that, perhaps he wouldn't have needed to catch me when I passed out.

6

GARRISON

THE GOOD NEWS WAS I DECIPHERED CREED'S cryptic message accurately. He was at Primal.

The bad news ... well, everything else, really, because I couldn't find one good thing in this whole fucked up situation. Clark Huxley wielding a bullwhip while my best friend slumped in a chair, blood coming out of lines slashed into his skin, puddling on the floor beneath him. And the chairs ... Good Lord, I couldn't forget the fucking chairs set up like this was an auditorium, and this crazy fuck was putting on a rehash of *Macbeth* or some shit.

The worst part of all was that I was sitting here like a dumbass waiting for intermission because there wasn't anything I could do to disrupt the performance; otherwise, there would be real-life consequences. It pained me to let this fucker tell me what to do, but the threat of him taking Creed's head off was enough to motivate me to follow directions. But I wanted it noted that it was under duress.

"I was just telling the Alpha about the help I received from Kim." He flashed a smile as he looked at Nick. "He had to remind me of her name. She's not exactly memorable, although, as I was telling him, she likes having a fake dick in her ass." Hux pivoted on his heel. "Don't get me wrong, she tried everything to avoid it, but I can be persuasive, can I not? I can still hear her begging." A high pitch mockery followed with, "*Stop, Clark. That hurts. Please use lube.*" He laughed. "She never used her safe word, so I didn't stop." He *tsked*. "It wasn't until *after* that I found out she didn't *have* a safe word. More's the pity."

I glanced at Nick when Hux did, wondering if he knew she'd been part of this. Based on his horrified expression, he hadn't. I was torn between feeling sorry for Kim since she'd managed to get mixed up with the likes of Clark and wanting to see her wearing an orange jumpsuit, living in a ten-by-ten cage for the rest of her life. The latter was more suitable, considering I'd seen her tonight at the dance, and she damn

sure hadn't looked like a traumatized woman. She'd been smiling and laughing, following Nick around like a starving puppy waiting for scraps. I saw nothing to tell me she'd been sodomized by a fake dick against her will.

Hux cleared his throat, clearly expecting my full attention.

"Believe it or not, she liked being dominated. Not at first, no. When I met her, she claimed she abhorred your lifestyle," he told Nick directly. "But I showed her the error of her ways."

Based on the way he spoke, he hadn't given Kim a choice. Was self-preservation making Kim do rash things? Or was she more screwed up than I initially thought she was?

"Did you know he told her?" Hux asked, his question directed at no one and everyone. "About this place."

Whoopssshhh.

My ears rang from the deafening crack of the whip near my head. He wasn't aiming for me, only in our direction. Likely to ensure we were paying attention. We were because it was impossible not to. It was like seeing an elephant loose in the city. When it comes toward you, your brain tells you the best thing to do is turn and run, but you can't look away; you can only wait to be trampled.

"It's supposed to be this guarded secret," he said, his tone deepening on the last two words. He looked at Creed. "You'll have to sue him now for violation of the NDA. It's only fair, right? She's not a member, so he violated it."

I wasn't keen on the legal lesson, but I didn't know how to shut this bastard up without risking Creed's life.

"He made her promise not to tell you," Hux added, tapping Creed on the head with the tail of the whip. "Proves he knew what he was doing."

Hux continued his path around Creed, tapping his chin as though trying to figure out where he'd left off in his story.

He looked up, his eyes meeting Nick's before he paced his circle once more.

“I know you want to ask, so I’ll tell you. Yes, she’s waiting for me. She’s waiting to ride off into the sunset together. I told her I was going to win that lawsuit with her help. You’d have to pay *me*. While jealousy fuels her, that bitch is motivated by money. I bet for a million dollars, she’d let me permanently insert that fake dick in her ass.”

Hux laughed, then snapped the bullwhip at Creed again. I cringed when it cracked heavily against Creed’s battered body. From the looks of it, Hux had been at it for a while.

“But she’s not for me.” Hux snorted. “Like I said, I can’t even remember her name. And God, is she needy. Always wanting someone to pay attention to her. When she told me she had faked pregnancies to get your attention”—he looked at Nick again—“I knew she was batshit crazy.”

Pot meet kettle.

“She’ll figure it out, I’m sure.” Hux turned back to Creed. “I, on the other hand, only have eyes for one woman. My heart and soul were *ripped* from my chest when you stole her.”

He hit Creed twice more, this time with a force that matched the fury etched on his face.

Creed’s body flailed as though he’d lost control of it.

“But I can’t blame you for that, can I, Alpha? Other things, yes. Like how you swooped in and used my distraction to take what was mine.” He leaned toward Creed but kept a safe distance. “Mine, you fuck!”

Evidently, we’d reached the breaking point of crazy because his voice grew louder with every word.

“It all should’ve been mine. The title, the power. I was meant to rule this kingdom, to keep the scared little rabbits in line. I would’ve been good at it.” He whipped Creed twice more in rapid succession. “No, I would’ve been *great*, but then those half-wits went and stole what was mine.”

“We didn’t steal her.”

My head snapped around when I heard the familiar voice. I’d been so caught up in Hux’s crazy that I hadn’t heard Ryder

and Roman come in. They stood shoulder to shoulder inside the room, dressed in jeans and T-shirts, as though they'd been dragged out of bed and managed to pull on whatever was nearby. A sliver of sunlight cut through the windows that lined the upper edge of the building, a near-perfect spotlight for their entrance.

“About fucking time,” Hux snarled, reaching for the button on the end of the lanyard. “Come any closer, and I’ll cut his head off.”

When Ryder looked my way, I nodded to ensure he understood Hux was serious. When I first walked in, I saw a small box pressed against the back of Creed’s neck. According to Hux’s explanation, it was the mechanism that would tighten the wire around his neck.

“I thought for sure I’d have to hurt that little whore to get your attention. She’s clueless, that daughter of yours. Probably had to use your money to get her into an Ivy League school. So stupid she never had time to hang out with friends. If she had, I would’ve fucked her just to prove she’s a whore.”

He sounded like a playground bully reaching for words that would have the most impact but coming up with insanity instead. I could see Ryder and Roman doing their best not to react. I understood because I wanted to wipe those fucking words right out of the bastard’s mouth with my fists.

“She didn’t make it easy for me, that’s for sure. Never noticed I was practically under her nose the entire time. Right *there*.” He laughed like a hyena. “I spent the night under her fucking bed, and she had no idea.”

Oh, fuck. The thought of him being that close to Journey...

“All alone in that big bed,” he mused with a slimy grin. “I could’ve shown her what a real Alpha looked like.”

Beside me, Nick’s hand balled into fists. He wasn’t the sort who generally showed much emotion, certainly not anger, but I could practically feel him vibrating.

“I wrote it down, by the way,” Hux said. “Every beautiful detail. For my memoirs. It was noteworthy the way I crawled

out from under the bed in the middle of the night and watched her sleep. She had no idea I was there.” He looked at Ryder and Roman. “To be fair, she really does look like a doll. The next morning, I waited until she got in the shower before I left. I considered introducing myself when she was brushing her teeth naked, but I refrained. It wasn’t time.” His grin split his entire face. “But I’m sure everyone will get a kick out of that.”

“Everyone?” Roman asked.

Hux turned toward him. “Yes. When I publish my memoirs? Are you obtuse? I already told you.”

Roman didn’t respond.

“I can only imagine how much I’ll get to tell my story. I want to see them duke it out for who gets it first. They’ll want it aired on television, for sure. Especially when they learn I’ve got pictures as proof. I’ll add those for authenticity.”

The fact that he wrote his batshit crazy antics down didn’t surprise me. Clark Huxley wasn’t right in the head. Never had been.

“Don’t worry, the little whore isn’t the protagonist in my tale. The star of the show is the love of my life.” Hux glared at Roman and Ryder. “But her part’s incomplete because you stole her from me. I can’t finish until I have her in my arms again. Once she shows me how much she missed me, I can deliver a suiting punishment for being swayed by your lies and deceit.”

Hux turned his attention back to Creed as he stepped around him. This time when he raised the whip, he glanced at all four of us, slowly pulling it back.

“You ready for this?” he taunted. “Watch closely.”

He threw his arm forward, delivering the blow with deadly accuracy, this time slicing horizontally across the top of Creed’s shoulders.

Creed’s scream was deafening.

“I knew I could get him to make noise if I tried hard enough.”

A sickening smile formed on Hux's mouth as he stared at the blood gushing from the wound.

"I must finish the final chapters, so I need her back." He looked up at Roman and Ryder. "Which is what you're going to do for me now."

"I don't understand," Ryder said, and he was almost convincing.

Hux fingered the plastic-covered button on the lanyard. "Are you sure you want to play the role of village idiot?"

Roman spoke up. "You want us to find Theresa."

"No!" he screamed, dropping the button and wielding the whip. "You don't *have* to find her. You already know where she is. You just need to bring her to me."

He hit Creed twice more, his aim off. He was losing it.

Hux took a deep breath and squared his shoulder. "You've got an hour to do so."

Shit. And here I thought this crazy fuck was going to entertain us all night. Why did he have to go and put a time limit on it? It killed me to watch Creed taking those blows, but we needed time to figure out how the fuck to disarm this bastard.

"We don't—"

Ryder cut Roman off by gripping his arm. "It'll take more than an hour to get her here."

Hux smiled proudly, and I swear his eyes began to tear up.

"I knew you had her," he crooned merrily. "You doubt my intelligence, but you shouldn't. I can run circles around you idiots."

"You're right. We do know where she is," Ryder confirmed. "She's not too far from here, actually."

That was a lie. I didn't know exactly where Theresa was, but I knew she wasn't in California.

“I know,” Hux acknowledged. “I can feel her calling out to me. You made her leave, but she didn’t want to go. She told me she was mine. She’s my soul mate.”

The guy had a funny way of showing it. Ryder and Roman had gotten involved because of how Hux treated the woman. He’d used domination as a way to disguise his abusive tendencies. She’d been a victim, traumatized by his abuse. Ryder and Roman had attempted to intervene numerous times, but Theresa continuously denied there was an issue. It wasn’t until Hux had beaten her nearly to death that she acknowledged he wasn’t going to change, and there was a good chance she wouldn’t survive the next beating.

With nowhere else to go, Theresa had gone to them, broken and battered, and they’d stepped in to help her. Once the doctors tended to her injuries—broken jaw and nose, her lip split so deep it required stitches and a scalp laceration that required numerous staples to close—they’d made it possible for her to disappear once and for all. According to her, it was her only option because Hux swore he would find her wherever she went. She had believed him, and based on what I knew of the man, she was right to.

It was during the distraction caused by the change in leadership that we had a firsthand glimpse of Clark’s rage. Before they could ban him from the club indefinitely, he’d beaten a collared submissive, leaving her restrained and alone to be found when Creed came to the club the next day. Unfortunately, that submissive—who happened to be a prominent and respected judge—had refused to press charges out of fear of her lifestyle coming to light. If she had, perhaps we wouldn’t be here today.

Not that I was putting the blame on her. She did what she felt was necessary to survive. We should’ve stopped him another way.

“Okay,” Ryder said, holding his hands up. “I’ll go get her and bring her to you. But you need to stop hitting him.”

Creed’s head had tipped down again, his chin against the wooden back of the chair. He was bleeding, and there was a

good chance it was life-threatening at this point. If Hux continued to whip him, he would get through muscle and down to organs, maybe bone. Bullwhips were meant to be used to get an animal's attention from the sound it made, not to be used on them physically. The amount of damage the whip would cause would do far more harm than good.

But Hux was using it as punishment, and with every swing, he was increasing the pressure of the strike, a signal that he was losing it despite his attempt to pretend otherwise. He could keep his tone calm, but the sweat on his brow and the tightness of his shoulders contradicted it. As did the speed at which he was walking. When we arrived, he'd been pacing slowly. Now he was constantly moving and not always in the direction he intended.

I wasn't sure how long before he snapped and pressed that button, but I prayed to God Ryder knew what the fuck he was doing.

7

NICK

I WANTED TO ASK CLARK HOW LONG he expected to carry on this fucking charade. Every time he swung that whip, I wanted to tackle him to the ground and shove it up his fucking ass. More than once, I imagined myself weaving it through his fucking intestines and pulling it out of his mouth. I'd never felt a rage this violent before.

Clark was talking as though he was telling a lively story to an auditorium full of people. He was relatively at ease, content that he had the upper hand because of that terrifying device he had wrapped around Creed's neck. For all we knew, it could've been a toy he'd fashioned to look evil. If we were lucky, it was fake, and he was using it to draw this out longer. If it weren't for that, no doubt Clark would've been dead at this point.

I figured the only saving grace was that it wasn't on a dead man's switch because I didn't trust Clark not to snap and forget he was holding it. And no, that wasn't a light at the end of the tunnel, but it was the only hope I had as I waited for Rule to show up.

Because Rule *would* show up. That man was a lot of things, but he would never let Creed down. Ever. They were brothers. Maybe not by blood, but a bond equally as strong. God knows if I had the skills and resources Rule had, I would've done this myself because Creed was like a brother to me. They all were. They'd been there for me from day one, never turning away even when I'd given them plenty of reasons to do so. But I didn't own a gun, much less know how to use one. If I did, I wouldn't bat an eye at taking this crazy fucker's life to save Creed.

That was why I'd called Rule.

While Ryder and Roman were buying time with their bullshit and lies, Rule was doing what needed to be done. I only hoped he had a plan that didn't involve storming the

place, guns blazing. If he did, there was a good chance Creed was going to die.

“We’ll need to go get her,” Ryder told Clark. “How do we know you won’t kill him before we get back?”

Clark looked at Creed and grinned. “You don’t.” When he looked back up, his crazy was a bright beacon in his eyes. “I guess you’ll have to trust me.”

That ship sailed a long fucking time ago, asshole.

“Better yet,” Clark noted, “you can get your daughter to bring my Theresa to me.”

“She can’t,” Roman told him. “She’s at the hospital.”

Clark nodded as though he was considering that. “She made it that far. Impressive. I thought for sure she would come after *him*.” He gestured toward Creed. “He was the one she always wanted. He was the only one who could control her.”

It wasn’t lost on me that he was talking in the past tense, as though there was no future for Creed and Journey.

No one said anything, and Clark took it to mean we were hanging on his every word.

“You didn’t know about that, did you?” he asked Ryder and Roman. “That he beat the little whore into submission. I saw it with my own eyes. The bruises on her neck. She tried to cover it with a scarf, but I saw.”

Ryder and Roman looked at Creed, their eyes narrowed as though processing what Clark said.

Clark looked at me. “That was the day you swooped in and tried to save her.”

I assumed he was referring to the day I took her to work after Creed had left bruises on her neck. He hadn’t acted out of aggression, and Journey hadn’t been bothered by them, but the same couldn’t be said for Creed. For the first time since I’d met the man, I saw shock and horror. He had been devastated.

But that could be easily explained. What couldn’t was how Clark could’ve seen the bruises. We’d gone from the house to

her apartment, then to work. A scarf covered her whenever she was around people. If she'd removed it at any point, it would've been while she was in her office. Unless he had cameras in there...

I let the thought trail off because there was a good chance he did. I'd never considered it before, but Journey had mentioned that the earrings had ended up on her desk. That meant someone had gotten to the seventh floor and into the offices. The security feeds we'd reviewed hadn't shown anyone, but that didn't mean they hadn't slipped in there somehow.

“Ding, ding, ding,” Clark shouted dramatically, pointing the whip toward me. “You figured it out, didn't you? Your wife was very helpful. She played her part to perfection. Far better than that fuck-up Wayne. He was an amateur, motivated by greed. But not Kim. No, Kim was motivated by jealousy. She was determined to ruin Journey's life. I doubt you'll ever find the cameras she planted.”

Garrison looked at me as though I might have a clue what the hell he was talking about. I didn't. But I would damn sure be getting answers when this was over. And I prayed that would be soon because I couldn't stand the sound of this man's voice or the sight of my best fucking friend beaten and bloody for another minute.

“Kim thinks she loves you,” Clark said to me directly. “She's delusional. I tried to tell her you were too far gone, but she won't listen. She's determined to win you back. Thinks she's got it all figured out. She doesn't. She's needy and—”

Clark's mouth slammed shut as footsteps shuffled into the room.

“Who're you?” he demanded, grabbing the lanyard. This time he didn't merely lift the button; he flipped the cover that protected it from accidentally being pressed.

All eyes shifted to the back of the room where Rule was standing. He hadn't come through the front doors, so he must've come through the office at the back. Beside him was a woman with a pillowcase over her head. She wore black

skinny jeans, black combat boots, and a long sleeve black shirt, the sleeves covering her hands, which were cuffed in front of her. I didn't remember much about Theresa—her height and build eluded me—so I had no idea whether he'd found the poor woman and dragged her back here or if this was some sort of ruse.

“I heard you were looking for this,” Rule said, his voice deep and smooth.

He shoved the woman forward, making her stumble a step.

“Jesus, fuck,” Roman muttered.

Garrison's eyes slammed into me, but I shook my head. It wasn't what he thought. It couldn't be. I would go to extremes to protect those I cared about, but I wasn't a fucking monster. Rule was, which was why I'd hesitated to ask for his help the day he came to the house. Unfortunately, I'd seen no way out because the only thing I cared about was protecting Journey. Creed refused to do what was necessary to get Clark to back off, so I'd hired the one man who would, with the agreement that he would not hurt Theresa or put her in danger.

Clark stepped forward but stopped himself. “Theresa?”

The woman hummed under the hood.

“Is it really you, baby?” His voice was full of wonder, a complete one-eighty from a moment ago when he was telling the tale of his horror show.

Another hum.

“Bring her to me,” Clark insisted, clutching the button, his thumb hovering over it.

“Take that thing off him first,” Ryder insisted.

“You don't make the rules,” Clark barked, his thumb hovering dangerously close to the button. “If I press this, his head comes off!”

“Understood. Put it down, and I'll send her your way,” Rule said calmly, guiding her one step closer until she was beneath the beam of sunlight coming in from the skylight

overhead. “You can keep it on you; I don’t care. But I don’t want any mishaps.”

Clark considered that, his gaze bouncing between Rule and the woman whose identity was concealed by clothes and a pillowcase. He reached a conclusion and closed the cover over the button.

The audible exhale that sounded didn’t come only from me. It was a group effort, all of us breathing for the first fucking time.

“I have all the control here. Remember that.” Clark held onto the button for a few additional seconds before finally letting it dangle from his neck. “Now send her.”

“Walk,” Rule snapped, ushering the woman forward.

I stared in horror, praying Rule hadn’t broken his fucking promise. If that hood covered the woman they’d fought so hard to hide from this sick fuck, Creed would never fucking forgive me.

“Keep coming,” Clark crooned. “I’ve got you, baby. Just a few more—Wait. What are you—”

His sentence ended abruptly with a muffled shot that was loud enough to make me jump. The hole that bloomed in the center of Clark’s forehead stopped his words instantly. Before Clark’s body hit the floor, the woman had ripped the pillowcase from over her head and tossed it aside. She discarded the cuffs next—they hadn’t been real—letting them hit the floor with a clatter.

Not Theresa. Thank God.

“Nobody touch that fuckin’ button,” Garrison shouted.

“Thanks for waiting until I was out of the way, boss,” the woman said, rushing toward Creed. She looked down at Clark briefly. “Right between the eyes. Nice job.”

All eyes turned to Rule, but the space he’d occupied only seconds before was empty.

“You work for him?” Garrison asked.

“What gave it away?” She was behind Creed in a heartbeat, working on releasing the contraption circling his neck.

The rest of us stood stone still as though one breath might trigger that fucking button.

“Do you know what you’re doin’?” Garrison asked.

“I guess you hope so, huh?”

Jesus. It was like having a conversation with Hawk.

She dug into her pocket and pulled out a multi-tool. I watched as she flipped through the options before stopping on one. She clipped the wire quickly, smiling when the small plastic box fell away, dangling from the wire she held between two fingers.

“This is some wicked shit right here,” she mused, lifting the device to admire it once she’d removed it. “Really fucking wicked.”

“Where the fuck did he go?” Roman asked, staring toward the back of the room.

“He’s got another job,” the woman said, tossing aside the device before she worked to free the zip ties around Creed’s wrists and ankles. “I do suggest you get him to the hospital.”

“No hospital,” Creed grumbled. “Where’s Hawk? And Journey?”

“The hospital,” Garrison retorted. “You know, the place you don’t wanna go.”

Ryder and Roman were at Creed’s side, helping him to his feet. He couldn’t stand on his own, but he hobbled with their support.

“The rest of you, get out,” the woman said. “I’ve got a job to do and not all day to do it.”

“Did you know he was gonna do this?” Garrison asked, staring at me with the same shock filtering through my bloodstream.

I’d trusted Rule would do *something*, but...

I shook my head. Never had I imagined it would be this.
I honestly couldn't say I was sorry he had.

JOURNEY

— *PLEASE TELL ME CREED'S OKAY.*

— *Answer me. I need to know.*

— *Please. I'm losing my mind.
Will one of you please text me?*

— *Are both of you okay? I'm
starting to freak out.*

— *Aerosmith! That's my safe
word. I said it. It's too much.
Please answer me.*

— *If I don't hear from you in
five minutes...*

From the moment they allowed me to see Hawk, I'd been sitting vigil by his bedside, waiting to hear from Garrison or Nick. I needed to know they were okay because my worst-case scenarios had begun to include them, and that was becoming a strain on my blood pressure.

I clicked the button to darken my phone screen. I'd been staring at the text messages I sent them, desperately waiting for a response. It wasn't helping. Not tapping out an empty threat or watching the little words until they blurred. Willing them to respond wasn't making them answer me any faster, either.

Taking a deep breath, I looked at the man sleeping in the bed. His eyes were closed, his forehead smooth. Hawk looked so peaceful when he was asleep. His jaw was darker than it had been hours ago. By the time the sun was high in the sky—which would be very soon—he would want to shave. I knew because he'd told me that once. He didn't like stubble on his chin, but if I were being honest, it was rather sexy.

As I sat at his bedside, listening to the monitor beep softly, I tried to remember if I'd ever simply watched Hawk sleep. I'd been in his bed plenty of times, but I couldn't remember a time I'd merely admired him like this. Nor could I remember a time

I'd been as scared as I was. Holding Hawk's hand gave me a frisson of comfort, but not enough to slow the rapid beat of my heart. My gut was churning as I imagined the worst possible outcome for Creed. I could only assume he was still alive because no one had called to tell me otherwise, and I refused to believe it could be possible.

I pulled my legs up into the chair and leaned sideways against the hospital bed, continuing to watch Hawk sleep.

"I don't know where Creed is yet," I told him, hoping he could hear me and maybe it would wake him. "He's okay, though. I would know if he wasn't. You would, too. Something's holding them up. Hopefully, they're talking to the police, waiting for them to take Clark to jail. It has to be something important; otherwise, I know they'd all be here with you. I'm sure Garrison is going out of his mind. He loves you. Creed does, too. That's why he let that asshole take him."

I took a breath, trying to keep my tone calm and soothing. I didn't want my anxiety to bleed through.

"I just need to see them," I whispered. "Until I can lay eyes on all four of you at the same time..."

Hawk's fingers twitched inside my palm.

I leaned forward and gently squeezed his hand. "Wake up, Jacob. I don't want to be alone anymore."

A tear slipped down my cheek as I held my breath and willed my stomach to stop doing somersaults, waiting for him to open his eyes. My mother assured me the doctor said he would wake up, but it could be some time. I trusted she knew what she was talking about because I'd blocked out the conversation with the doctor. Apparently, I'd passed out afterward, something I'd never done in my life. My mother told me that, too.

Hawk's eyelids fluttered, and his eyes opened, but they closed just as quickly.

"Welcome back," I whispered, brushing my thumb over his knuckles. "You're in the hospital. You had surgery."

“Where’s Creed?” The edges of his words were abraded from the tube they’d had in his throat during the surgery. “Is he here?”

“No.” I waited for him to open his eyes. “But they know where he is.”

“How is he?”

I shrugged. “I haven’t heard.”

I tried to hold back the tears, but they came anyway. Partial relief that Hawk was awake and partial fear that something would happen to Creed and none of us would ever be the same.

I couldn’t imagine a world without any of my men in it. Creed’s overbearingness, Hawk’s edginess, Garrison’s protectiveness, Nick’s sweetness ... I’d grown accustomed to all of it. They’d burrowed deep into my heart, and I wouldn’t survive without any of them. I didn’t want to think that I might have to.

Hawk pulled his hand from mine, then brushed a tear from my cheek with his thumb.

“Don’t cry.”

I sniffled, wishing I could stop because I didn’t want him to see me falling apart.

His gaze moved over my face. “Did you tell Garrison?”

I nodded. I wasn’t sure what it had meant, but Hawk’s adamantness that I told him had gotten through. Since my mother assured me they’d found Creed, I could only assume it had been some sort of secret code. I could only hope the police were dealing with the matter and they were hung up having to answer them.

Hawk continued to watch me, so I pulled myself together for his benefit. He didn’t need the added stress of having to worry about anyone else.

My phone buzzed.

I jerked so hard it tumbled to the floor. I nearly fell out of the chair when I lurched for it. With shaking hands, I reached for it, terrified to read the text message. If I didn't, no one could give me bad news. Then again, no one could give me *any* news.

I caved when Hawk's eyebrows lifted.

"It's Garrison," I told him, then read the message.

— *How's Hawk?*

— *Out of surgery. Just woke up.*

"Where's Creed?" Hawk asked, his voice shredded.

I was hesitant to ask because the answer could change my very existence. I wanted to know, but I didn't. I typed up the response, then hovered my finger over the send button for the longest time. I could feel Hawk's eyes imploring me, and I knew I had to do it.

I hit send.

— *Is Creed okay?*

The three little dots bounced, signaling Garrison was typing a message. Every second caused my chest to tighten until I could hardly breathe from it.

— *Define OKAY. He's in one piece, but he's banged up. We're here at the hospital. Nick's taking charge like he always does. Once the doc comes in, I'll head up there to you.*

"Oh, God!" The relief was so potent it knocked down the floodgates. "He's okay," I managed to tell Hawk through snot and sobs.

His relief was as potent as mine. He reached for my hand, squeezed my fingers, and closed his eyes. I held onto him while I let the fear and anxiety tumble out in wave after wave of tears. I couldn't stop. Not even when my mother came into the room.

She held up her phone.

I nodded. "I know. Garrison told me."

My mother looked at Hawk and smiled. “Love’s a powerful motivator, Journey. Never underestimate it.”

I swallowed and sniffed. She was right. It was. I wouldn’t be whole again until I had all four of them with me, but for now, the chaos was suffocated by relief. My life wasn’t ending as I’d thought it would when the bullet went into Hawk, and a crazy man led Creed away. I wasn’t even sure it was over yet, but there was hope, and it was the bright sunshine-yellow of the waiting room.

9

HAWK

“YOU COULD USE A RAZOR.”

I forced my eyes open, the sound of Garrison’s voice easing some of the tension inside me. “Tell me about it.”

Garrison stood in the doorway of my hospital room, his gaze moving over Journey as she rested her head on the edge of the mattress. Her neck was craned in an awkward position, but she didn’t seem to care. We’d been sleeping intermittently since she received Garrison’s last text message. According to the clock on the wall, that’d been an hour and a half ago.

“Is he okay?” I asked, studying every line of Garrison’s face for clues.

“Nothing life-threatening.”

“It must be bad if he agreed to go to the hospital.”

“He didn’t, but we refused to listen to him.” Garrison moved closer.

I bet Creed loved that. The man detested hospitals.

I waited for him to explain, but he didn’t. “Tell me.”

Garrison sighed. “Clark whipped him with a bullwhip.”

“Shit. How bad is it?”

“It’s not good.” His gaze slid to Journey briefly, then he lowered his voice to just above a whisper. “A couple of muscles have some damage. Worst of it’s the split skin. He’s gettin’ some stitches, and they’re bandaging him up now. He doesn’t want ’em to, but they’re admittin’ him. As soon as they look away, I’m sure he’ll find his way up here.”

I knew the damage a bullwhip could do because I’d seen it with my own eyes. One of the members of Primal had a penchant for whips, but he used mainly the novelty ones for club submissives, refusing to use utility ones on anyone who didn’t have a history with them. During a training session, he proved the damage they could cause by using them to knock

down cans and bottles. In several cases, the whip destroyed what it hit.

“How do you feel?” Garrison asked as he wrapped his fingers around the railing on the bed.

I brushed his knuckles with my finger because I needed to reassure him. “Not too bad for being held together by pins and screws.”

“I talked to Cadence. She told me what the doc said.” He grinned as he looked down at Journey. “Also told me she passed out.”

I turned my head and stared at her. She was the last thing I remembered before I went under and the first thing I saw when I woke up. I’d pushed through the drug-induced haze because I needed to know she was alright. Then I’d needed to know about Creed because I’d been helpless as I watched Clark Huxley march him out of our fucking house with a gun jammed into his back. I wouldn’t be entirely at ease until I saw him with my own eyes, but having Garrison there was a start.

“Cadence called your mom.”

“I know.”

“I arranged the plane as soon as I got here. She’ll be here in an hour or so.”

I shifted my attention back to him. This time I reached for his hand, gripping two of his fingers. “Thank you.”

Garrison’s gaze moved between Journey and me. “How do you wanna handle this?”

I had an idea what he was referring to, but I wanted to hear him say it out loud. “This what?”

He was onto me, but Garrison answered anyway. “Tellin’ your mom about you and her ... you and me.”

“You and her,” I added.

“You and Creed,” he quipped.

I grinned. “You’re behind the times. I already told her.”

“About...?”

“About all of you. Creed included.”

“And Nick?”

“Him and Journey? Yep.”

I didn't keep secrets from my mother. I couldn't. She could read me like a book. I'd never learned how to keep my emotions in check, so I didn't have the ability to hide anything from the people I cared about. And my mother knew me better than anyone.

“How'd she take it?”

“Like she takes everything I tell her. She loves me. Wants me to be happy.”

And that was the truth. I was one of the lucky ones who had a mother who accepted me for me. Sure, she'd asked some questions because she didn't understand how a relationship of this magnitude could actually work. I told her I wasn't sure I knew either, but I was willing to do whatever it took to ensure it did.

Garrison's eyes were dark, his voice low when he said, “I'm glad you didn't die on me. I woulda had to kill you.”

“Good thing, then. What happened to Clark?”

His throat worked on a swallow, and his jaw clenched. “He can't hurt anyone anymore.”

I wanted to ask what happened, but something in his tone had me holding back the question. I didn't think he meant Clark would be serving out life in a jail cell, and I didn't want to consider what it meant that I was relieved to know that.

“We're havin' you moved to the VIP floor as soon as they're comfortable doin' so.”

I rested my head on the pillow. “Thanks, G. You know I love you, right?”

He chuckled. “Yeah?”

I nodded.

He squeezed my wrist gently. “I love you, too.”

With that between us, I closed my eyes.

Time was inconsequential when you were restricted to a bed. It could’ve been days since they brought me here, but I prayed it was only hours since I had yet to see Creed, and the sun was beginning to set out the window.

Journey’s mother had come in to check on me when my mother arrived. I’d introduced her to Journey, and as I expected, Dana Hawkins embraced the woman I loved with a hug. Nick joined the fray, claiming to be checking on me, but I could tell he wanted to be closer to Journey. I understood completely. When he urged Journey out of the room for a few minutes, my mother asked me how I was feeling, then spoke to the nurses before going to the cafeteria with Cadence for dinner. She assured me she would be here for a few days, so we had time to catch up. For now, she instructed me to rest.

I did because it was the only thing I *could* do. I was in and out of consciousness with the aid of pain meds. No matter when I woke up, Journey was always there. Aside from those few minutes when she stepped out with Nick, she didn’t leave, and she only got up once to use the restroom. I was beginning to worry because she wouldn’t eat or drink anything, despite everyone urging her to do so.

She was worried about Creed. I could see it in the lines creasing her forehead as she watched the door. Garrison had assured us that Creed was okay, and I knew the man wouldn’t lie. If there were a problem, he would’ve found a way to relay the news.

Footsteps sounded outside the door, and Journey’s head lifted, her eyes pinned on the empty space. A second later, the nurse came in to check my vitals and to ask how I was doing. Journey’s disappointment was obvious.

“Why don’t you go up and see him,” I suggested when the nurse left the room.

For a second, I thought she would argue, but she didn’t.

“You can be my eyes and ears, too,” I assured her.

“Okay. I won’t be gone long.” She glanced at the sling elevating my leg, which was immobilized with a brace. “Don’t you dare try to get out of this bed.”

I laughed but stopped myself when pain radiated through my groin. It was probably time to push the button for more morphine.

I grunted. “I promise I’ll stay right where I am.”

“I’ll only be a few minutes.”

I squeezed her fingers when she covered my hand. “If they’ll let you stay with him, you should. I’ve got my mom and Garrison to keep me company.”

“You sure?” she asked, leaning over the bed railing to kiss me.

I turned my head, meeting her lips. “I’m sure.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too, smokeshow.”

As soon as she left the room, I pressed the button to ease the pain and let sleep claim me once again.

10

CREED

THE PAIN WAS EXCRUCIATING.

As was the damage that the bullwhip had done. Thankfully, there'd been no significant damage to my muscles or internal organs, although there were a couple of places where Clark had flayed me deep enough to require a substantial number of stitches.

With time I would heal. What I wanted to do was see Hawk and Journey, but at some point during my examination, someone gave me a painkiller. I remembered explicitly thinking that I didn't want anything for pain, but I couldn't remember whether I'd said the words aloud. Most of the past several hours were a blur. I remember being carried out of the club, placed in the backseat of Ryder's SUV, and carted off to the hospital despite my refusal to go. At some point, I must've passed out from the pain because I woke up with lights shining in my eyes and people talking around me.

Twice, Garrison had offered to get Journey and bring her up, but I urged him not to. As much as I wanted to see her, I didn't want her to see me like this. The worst of the lacerations had been stitched, the rest bandaged, including the slice on my neck from the wire that had been strapped around me. I was in bad shape. Laying on my back was impossible, so I'd settled for being propped on my side, enduring the pain radiating from the underside of my arms. Although Clark hadn't been aiming for them, that whip had stripped the skin from there, too.

As soon as the pain medication vacated my system, I would be out the door. I didn't give a shit if it was against medical advice. I couldn't stay here longer than I had to.

A soft knock sounded on the door, and I forced my eyes open.

Journey stood there as though she'd walked right out of my sweetest fucking dreams. She was wearing her sleep shorts, her favorite oversized sweatshirt, and a pair of green

socks with the hospital name stamped on them, which told me no one had brought her clothes or she'd refused to leave Hawk's side long enough to change. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and her face held the faintest hint of tear streaks. New tears freshened those when she scanned me from head to toe.

"It's not as bad as it looks," I lied.

She sniffled, taking a hesitant step into the room.

Because I didn't want her to dwell on my injuries, I took command of the conversation. "Garrison tells me Hawk's good. Awake and talking."

She nodded. "Surgery went well."

"Good. Now come here," I urged.

She moved faster, the tears flowing steadily as she took in the bandages on my legs. From this angle, she couldn't see my back, and I was grateful for that. There was one particular laceration they had to doctor repeatedly because it continued to open. They assured me it would be restitched if necessary, but they were monitoring it for now.

Her gaze trailed to my neck, and I knew what she saw because her eyes widened.

"It's fine. I promise."

"Did he... oh, my God. Did he cut your throat?"

"No."

I could tell she didn't believe me, but I didn't want to go into detail. I didn't want to think about it at all.

"Come here, kitten."

Journey stopped at the edge of the bed, placing her hand in mine. "You've got a bigger room than Hawk."

I grinned. Of course she would mention that.

I tugged on her arm, urging her closer, then released her hand. "Lay with me."

She shook her head and wiped her cheeks. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t. I promise.” I deepened my voice. “Don’t make me tell you again.”

Her eyes glittered with a hint of amusement. “I never thought I’d say this, but I think I could take you.”

She was probably right, although I didn’t tell her that. I laughed, patting the bed again.

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely,” I said, fighting the urge to move back. If I did, she would no doubt see the real pain I was experiencing, and I wanted to shield her from that for as long as possible.

Journey finally relented, then sat on the bed, raising her feet first before easing down on her side so I was spooned behind her, my arm under the pillow as she rested her head. I laid my arm over her, holding her close, and breathed easily for the first time in hours.

I pressed a kiss to the back of her head and closed my eyes. The tears came then. Relief more than anything. She was with me, and that was all I needed.

“I love you,” I whispered against her hair.

“I love you, too,” she sobbed, then took my hand and gently brought it up to her neck. She pressed her hand over mine and held it there as though that was the security she needed.

I drifted off with her in my arms and didn’t stir until I felt someone fucking with the bandages on my back. I opened my eyes, and I could see the nurse through the mirror above the dresser on the far side of the room.

“These are going to leave nasty scars,” she said, not for the first time.

“I’ll live.”

“Yes, you will.” She continued to silently check the wounds. At least they’d stopped asking questions about how it

happened. Nick had taken care of that for me. As it turned out, making a rather large donation to the hospital was one way of getting them to pretend a six-and-a-half-foot tall man having been shredded by a bullwhip was an everyday occurrence.

“Would you like something for the pain?”

“Depends.”

“On.”

“Whether you’re going to fight me about her being here.”

“I doubt I need to tell you she shouldn’t be in bed with you.”

“No, you don’t. And it wouldn’t matter if you did.”

“Somehow, I knew you’d say that.” She moved to the end of the bed and adjusted the blanket to cover Journey’s legs. “I’ll get the pain meds added to your IV.”

“Thank you,” I whispered, then let sleep pull me under with Journey breathing deeply beside me.

NICK

“WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU?” I SNARLED when Kim finally answered the damn phone.

“Why so upset, Nick?” she said sweetly. “Did something happen?”

“Where are you?” I repeated, pretending not to hear the mockery in her tone.

“I’m at home. Why? Where are you?”

“Stay there.”

“Mmm. Are you com—”

I disconnected the call before I had to hear another word from her lying mouth.

I’d made it through the majority of the day seeing to things that needed to be taken care of. I ensured Creed was checked in and moved to a room on the VIP floor. Then I took care of getting Hawk scheduled to move to a room next to his once he was stable enough to be moved out of ICU. I didn’t want Hawk, Creed, or Journey to have to lift a finger to do anything. Creed and Hawk needed time to heal, and Journey needed to be with them.

I got Hawk’s mother a room at a nearby hotel and checked in with Ryder and Roman. Although they curled their noses at being ordered around by me, I talked them into going to the club to ensure there wasn’t a dead body left on the floor. They called me a short time later to let me know there were no signs that anything had happened there. Because I knew what happened, I decided to shove it all down deep to be dealt with later if necessary. Watching a man get shot in the head wasn’t an everyday occurrence, and I had no doubt there would be some mental fallout at some point. Thankfully, I had more than enough to keep me busy for now.

My to-do list extended outside the hospital and beyond those closest to me, so I followed up with the hotel, checking that everything was good after the dance. I arranged to have

the Prius returned to its owner with a check for ten grand that would hopefully show my gratitude. I debated twice on whether that was enough. If we hadn't gotten to the club when we had...

I shook off the thought.

Creed was alive, and he would heal. A few scars would remain, but he was strong enough to deal with those. Hawk made it through surgery, and though he would be hating his immobility for the foreseeable future, he would be up on both legs in no time. He had his mother and Cadence to cater to his every whim, Garrison to ensure nothing happened, and Journey to keep him sane. There weren't any spots left over for me to fill, so I was doing my best to hold my shit together until it was my turn to hold Journey. The few minutes I had with her earlier weren't enough, but when she threw her arms around me and sobbed against my chest, I knew she hadn't forgotten about me.

I couldn't ask for much more than that.

Now I needed to take care of—

“Where do you think you're goin'?”

I pretended not to hear the Texas twang from behind me as I marched toward the exit doors to the parking lot.

“Goddammit, Nick. Fuckin' stop.”

I only did because two ladies looked up at the profanity, and I knew if I didn't acknowledge him, there was a good chance it would get worse.

I turned to see him swaggering toward me.

“I hope you're not goin' to talk to Kim.”

This was the reason I was slipping out without telling anyone. I didn't need to be read the riot act over the part my ex-wife had played in this fucked up mess.

“I am, actually. I'm done with this shit.”

Garrison exhaled heavily, then put a hand on my shoulder, turning me away from the hospital and guiding me down the

sidewalk. “She fucked up. We know that now. But the threat to Journey’s been dealt with.”

“Has it?” I wasn’t sure I believed that.

“Kim can’t hurt her or you anymore.”

I stopped and spun on him. “She didn’t hurt me.”

“No?”

I frowned. “I won’t lie. I want to punish her for what she did to Journey, but—”

“And you by proxy.”

“It’s not *about* me,” I countered.

“No, it’s not. It’s about Journey.”

Jesus, fuck. Why was he talking in circles?

“It is,” I agreed. “She’s the only thing that matters.”

“And you love her.”

“Yes.”

“So when someone hurts her, they hurt you.”

I hated that he was driving home his point, but I understood.

“Kim has problems,” Garrison said. “No one can deny that. She’s selfish and vindictive, though I’m surprised by how far she went.”

I think that was what I was having the most difficulty with. The things Clark had said ... I had a hard time tying them back to the woman I’d married. At one point in time, I loved Kim. How could I have been so fucking wrong about a person?

“But you heard Clark,” Garrison continued, holding my stare. “If what he said was true ... there’s a good chance Kim suffered through some of that, too.”

I wasn’t so sure that was the case. Kim had come to the dance last night, and she’d looked like she didn’t have a care in the world. She’d smiled, laughed, and danced with people

willing to talk to her. She certainly didn't look like a woman who'd been brutalized by a sadist like Clark Huxley.

"You know if you go over there, she's gonna break down and give you some sob story. I hate that she might've had to suffer at his hands, and I pray like fuck he was full of shit. For her sake. But you're only punishin' yourself if you keep puttin' up with it."

"She's pregnant," I prompted, although I knew it wasn't my problem because it wasn't my baby.

"She's not."

I frowned. "What?"

"She's. Not. Pregnant."

I ignored his tone and pretended he wasn't talking to me like I was five. "How do you know?"

Garrison stared at me for a second before he exhaled sharply. "Because y'all aren't the only ones who can hire someone to find shit out."

"What did you do?"

"Nothin' serious," he said quickly. "I mighta hired a private investigator to check up on her, see if she was seein' a doctor. Based on everything she could find, Kim's not pregnant. But if she is, she hasn't gone to the doctor yet."

Based on the timeline she'd given when she first told me she was pregnant, she would've been close to five months or so. I couldn't imagine she hadn't gone to see a doctor yet. Not to mention, she would've been showing at this point, right? She damn sure hadn't looked pregnant in the dress she wore last night.

"It's not my business, Nick. You can take care of this shit however you want, but I think you should consider cuttin' the cord. Move on with your life. You gave her the house, and it's paid off, so she won't be pitchin' a tent under a bridge. She's got her yoga studio, so she can work there to make money. And she's got her alimony for what? Another year?"

I nodded. I agreed to alimony for two years, although her attorney had only asked for one and a half since that was half the length of our marriage and precedent for the state of California.

“You want a future with Journey?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then let the rest go. We’ve got a chance to do this for real. All that shit’s behind us.” His eyes moved over my face. “I know I’m ready. What about you?”

There were a few things I wanted to discuss with Journey about the future, but yes, I was ultimately ready. Now that we wouldn’t be looking over our shoulders waiting for the axe to drop, Garrison was right. We could move forward.

“Cut Kim loose,” Garrison said. “Block her number. Ensure security knows she’s not permitted in the fuckin’ parking lot of PI, much less the building. Trust me when I tell you it’s the only way to move forward. For you *and* for her.”

“You’re right.” I took a deep breath. “Okay.”

“Why don’t you go home, grab a shower and a nap? I’ll keep an eye on Journey until you get back.”

“She’s asleep right now,” I told him. “In Creed’s room.”

He grinned. “Doesn’t surprise me. When you come back, you can bring dinner for her, and I’ll go back to the house for a bit. We can figure out the rest as we go.”

“You’re not staying with Hawk?”

“I figure it’s only a matter of time before he loses his mind. All these women fawnin’ over him... He might like it for a while, but he’ll need me to be awake when he’s ready to vent.”

“Fine. You win.”

He smirked. “Don’t I always?”

Half an hour later, I was pulling into the driveway of the house I had once shared with Kim.

It only bothered me a little that I'd lied to Garrison, but it had been necessary. I knew he wouldn't give up. In many ways, he was right. I should leave well enough alone and move on with my life, but I knew Kim. She wasn't going to walk away without a fight unless I ensured she understood the consequences if she continued to cause problems for Journey. And with Kim, it was imperative that she not have the last word. She took that to mean she'd won, and I had every intention of proving to her that wasn't the case.

It didn't surprise me when she answered the door wearing a short floral robe and a pair of heels. Her hair was pinned up high on her head, her face done up with only minimal cosmetics. She was pretty enough that she didn't need makeup, and she would be the first to tell everyone that, but she would not be caught dead without bronzer, mascara, and lip gloss, even if she claimed it was natural.

"We got disconnected earlier," she said, stepping back and gesturing for me to come inside. "I wasn't sure what you wanted me to wear."

I ignored her. "We need to talk."

"Sure. Is it about last night?" Kim moved past me toward the living room, strutting on her long legs. "I knew we would need to talk about it."

Confused, I said, "Talk about what?"

She fluttered her lashes and flashed a coy smile. "I get that it's difficult for you to accept, but I know you still feel something for—"

Oh, for fuck's sake. I should've known.

I didn't feel bad for interrupting her. "Last night, Clark Huxley tried to kill Creed."

I watched her expression closely to see her reaction. I'd known Kim long enough to tell when she was reacting the way she thought she should rather than a genuine response.

"That's terrible," she said, placing her hands on her cheeks. "Is he all right?"

“Is it serious between you and Clark?”

Her hands fluttered down to her sides as her eyebrows dipped low. “What?”

I decided to play it her way. “If you marry someone else, the alimony goes away. I’d like to know how serious things are between the two of you.”

She couldn’t look at me when she answered. “I ... I don’t even know who that is.”

I sighed and decided to get right to the point. “He told me all about your newfound preference for anal sex, Kim.”

Her jaw hardened, and her eyes narrowed.

That was the response I was expecting. Denial and self-justification were Kim’s go-to reactions. If she realized she was about to get caught, she would become defensive. And when she was backed into a corner, she merely denied everything.

But I wasn’t actually looking for a response. I knew that it didn’t matter what her relationship with Clark had been at one time. It was over. She would figure that out sooner or later, but I wasn’t going to be the one to tell her that he wouldn’t darken anyone’s doorstep ever again.

“That’s disgusting, Nick,” she said haughtily. “That’s the kind of perverse shit your girlfriend would be into. Not me.”

At least she acknowledged I had a girlfriend.

Since I was on a roll, I decided to take one more gamble. “We had an incident at the office a couple of weeks ago, and we were going through the security footage... Why were you on the seventh floor?”

“I wasn’t.”

“I saw you with my own eyes, Kim. You went into Journey’s office.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did. You put something on her desk.”

Her eyes narrowed. “That wasn’t me.”

“Sure looked like you.” I tucked my hands in my pockets. “We’ve sent the footage to the police. They’re looking into who broke in and stole some files from the second floor. I gave them your information so—”

“That wasn’t me!” she snapped. “I did *not* go to the second floor, and I damn sure didn’t steal anything. Ask Dave. He knows. I was just taking her jewelry to her.”

It was always easier to get her to spill when she was trying to defend her actions.

“So you were on the seventh floor?”

Kim’s mouth opened and then closed quickly. She knew she’d been caught.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“I was coming to see you. That’s my right, you know.”

The hell it was, but I could talk until I was blue in the face, and Kim would believe what she wanted.

“Where did you get Journey’s jewelry?”

Kim’s gaze shifted to the table, but she tried to pretend she hadn’t looked, so of course, I did. There was a gold necklace lying near the aromatherapy candles she kept there. Before she could reach it, I grabbed it.

“Is this hers?” On one side of the circle was the letter Z and on the other a J. “Jesus, Kim. What the fuck?”

“It was just supposed to scare her into leaving you alone. He said if I wore it, she’d realize I could get to her. I just wanted her to back off.”

I honestly don’t know how I never saw this insane jealousy in Kim before I married her.

“That girl...” She curled her nose in disgust. “How can you even want to be with her? She whores herself out to *them*. I saw the videos, Nick. He showed me. It was disgusting.”

“I thought you didn’t know Clark?”

Again, she was caught in another lie.

“She’s a whore, Nick. He caught her on video!”

“The same way he caught you?” I countered. It was a lie, but I figured since it was *her* modus operandi, why not?

Kim jerked back as though I’d slapped her. Since I was across the room, there could be only one reason she was shocked. There was a good chance Clark had recorded the things he did to her.

“It wasn’t like that. It was ... we were...”

My eyebrows rose as I waited for her explanation.

“It’s serious between us,” she finally said.

I nodded as though I understood. I didn’t.

However, for my own peace of mind, I needed to know that Kim was okay. That he hadn’t done those things to her against her will. I didn’t want to be with Kim, and I didn’t like her most of the time anymore, but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t care if someone hurt her. And it would appear Clark had been full of shit. That or Kim had finally gotten in touch with her kinky side.

I took a deep breath and started for the door.

“Where are you going?”

I paused and turned back to her. “Here’s the thing, Kim. From this point forward, you’re going to leave Journey alone. You will not go near her; you will not talk about her; you will not *think* about her. We’re of no concern of yours anymore.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“It sounds like you’ve found someone who makes you happy. I want that for you. Truly.” I reached for the doorknob. “But if you come near her or anyone I care about ever again, I will ensure those videos find a wide audience.”

Her eyes widened. “Are you threatening me?”

“No.” I smiled. “I’m just telling you how it will be.”

I walked out and didn’t look back.

Kim would heed my warning because her image was the most important thing to her. It didn't matter that I didn't have any videos of her. The fact that she thought I did would be the only motivation she needed to move on with her life. And since Clark Huxley was no longer a threat to anyone, I figured it was only a matter of time before she would find real happiness.

Whether or not she actually recognized it when she did ... well, that was on Kim.

12

Monday...

JOURNEY

“YOU LOOK TIRED, HONEY,” MY MOTHER SAID when she walked into Creed’s hospital room.

“I am,” I admitted, glaring at Creed. “I’ve spent the better part of the day arguing with him about staying here.”

My mother looked at Creed and smiled. “Who won?”

“I did,” I insisted at the same time Creed said, “Me.”

I wanted to tell him he was in no shape to leave because he could hardly walk, but I wouldn’t do that. Not with my mother in the room. It was one thing for me to argue with him when we were alone. Creed was a prideful man, and I saw no reason for him to take a blow to that pride from me. Not to mention, I was fairly certain I’d won since we were now moving into late afternoon, and he had yet to get up and walk out. I considered that a win.

“I have an idea,” my mother said, glancing between us. “Why don’t I make sure Journey goes home, gets some dinner, takes a shower, and grabs a nap?”

Creed’s expression smoothed out. Evidently, he was willing to be bribed with my well-being.

“I saw Nick and Garrison a few minutes ago. They’re looking a little worse for wear if you ask me. Probably need some rest. They could probably use a good meal, too.”

I knew what she was doing. This wasn’t so much for them as it was for me. But by dangling their health in front of me, she knew I couldn’t resist. They’d been running themselves ragged for the past twenty-four hours, and I knew I wasn’t making it easy on them by refusing to leave the hospital.

“Plus, Ryder and Roman would like to talk to you for a bit.”

I looked at Creed, trying to get a feel for his thoughts on the matter.

“Not a nap. At least six hours straight. And I want proof that she’s sleeping,” he said, looking directly at me.

“I can’t take a picture of myself asleep,” I countered.

“No, but Garrison or Nick can,” my mother chimed in.

I peered back at her over my shoulder. “You know, this wasn’t supposed to be a gang-up-on-Journey moment.”

“Maybe not. But this way, you both get what you want.”

I turned back to Creed. “How do I know you won’t try to leave?”

“I’ll give you my word.”

That wasn’t fun. I had no way of disputing that since Creed didn’t go back on his word if he could help it. That didn’t mean he wouldn’t because Creed also did whatever he wanted.

“I’ll let you two talk it over. I’m going to find Nick.”

When my mother left, I dropped my feet to the floor and stood up. I’d been sitting in the fancy recliner, but rather than using the footrest, I’d put my feet on Creed’s bed so I could be closer to him while still giving him space. He was pretending it didn’t hurt to move, but I could tell he was in a lot of pain. Rightfully so, considering the significant damage that had been done by a vicious bullwhip. I still didn’t have details on what happened, but it wasn’t hard to piece it together based on Creed’s injuries.

His wrists and ankles had cuts and bruises from where something had been wrapped around them. Likely secured to something.

His neck had a ring around it from something thin that had cut through the skin. Likely some sort of strap to hold him down.

His back, arms, and legs bore a variety of gashes, some viciously deep and wide. I would not have guessed they were from a bullwhip if I hadn’t overheard Garrison telling Hawk. Now that I knew, it made me want to cry all over again.

“Promise me you won’t leave,” I told Creed, hoping he understood I was being sincere and not simply trying to be a hard ass. I knew he wouldn’t stay the length of time the doctors wanted him to, but I was terrified that he would leave too soon and something terrible would happen. “At least one more day.”

“One more day. But you don’t get to beg tomorrow.” Creed smiled, just a slight curve of his beautiful lips. “Not for this, anyway.”

“What I beg for depends on how good you are.”

He reached for my hand and rubbed his thumb over my wrist. “I want you to stay home tonight, though.”

I shook my head and tried to pull my hand away. “No. I want to be here with you and Hawk.”

“Just tonight, Journey. The three of you need to get some sleep.”

“I *did* sleep,” I argued. First at Hawk’s bedside, then in Creed’s bed. And I even caught a brief nap in the fancy recliner that wasn’t nearly as comfortable as they all pretended it would be.

“They didn’t.”

I hated that he was guiltting me into this. I knew he was right. Nick and Garrison had been running themselves ragged since they brought Creed in. Both of them had gone home, but only for a brief period of time and definitely not long enough to do much good for either of them.

“You can text me whenever you want,” I told him. “I’ll keep my phone with me. And if either of you needs—”

“We won’t, kitten,” he said softly, gently squeezing my hand. “I know you want to take care of us, but you have to take care of yourself, too.”

I sighed. There was no way I was going to win this.

Leaning forward, I kissed him on the mouth. He kissed me back, his hand cupping the back of my head.

“I love you, Journey.”

My heart swelled as though that was the first time he'd told me. Whether he was aware of it or maybe the pain meds were making him delirious, Creed had said those words so many times over the past twenty-four hours. I was starting to think he was getting used to it.

“I love you, too.”

“Now go before I drag you into this bed and do wicked things to you.”

“You're in no shape for that,” I said sternly.

“Maybe not. Doesn't mean I won't do it anyway.”

A knock sounded on the door behind me. I turned to see Nick standing in the doorway. He definitely looked like he could use a good night's sleep. He was still gorgeous, even with the dark circles that were forming under his eyes.

“Take her home, Nick,” Creed grumbled from the bed. “Feed her, bathe her, and love her. Then let her sleep.”

Nick chuckled. “In that order?”

I rolled my eyes as I turned back to Creed. “Do not leave.”

“One more night,” he said firmly. “That's all you're getting from me.”

“I'll take it.”

“Take care of our girl,” Creed called out as we were walking out the door.

“I will. Trust me,” Nick replied.

I linked my fingers with his and leaned into his shoulder as we made our way toward the elevators. “I need to check on Hawk before we leave.”

Nick nodded, then pressed the down call button for the elevator. “How're you feeling?”

“I honestly don't know. I'm relieved they're both going to be okay. I'm mentally and emotionally drained. I'm tired of my mother trying to cram hospital food down my throat. And I

miss you and Garrison.” I peered up at him. “Does that sum it up enough?”

“Why don’t you let us take care of you tonight? Then tomorrow, you’ll be back to fighting form, ready to take on the hard-headed ones.”

“I’d like that.” I giggled. “I’d *really* like that, actually.”

Two hours later, after the three of us shared burgers and fries out on the back patio, I convinced them that we should get in the hot tub for a little while. I had promised them I would embrace this night at home, and though I was tired, I didn’t want to waste any of the time I had with them. I knew the coming days and weeks would involve all of us taking care of Creed and Hawk. It was hard enough to find time together when things were *normal*, so I couldn’t imagine it would be any easier with more to deal with.

“I’ll join y’all in a bit,” Garrison said. “Lemme clean up the food, then I need to call my folks. They called earlier to check on Hawk and Creed.”

“I can do the dishes,” I told him, even as I glanced through the house toward the kitchen. I hadn’t been in there since Saturday night, and I was reluctant to return. Every time I thought about that gun being pressed to the back of my head and Creed being forced to trade himself for me, my stomach churned violently. It was even worse when I thought about Hawk taking a bullet because that ... that had stolen years off my life. I’d never been more scared in my life.

“Go, girl,” Garrison said firmly, a sinful smirk on his mouth. “Get naked and get in the water. I’ll be up there in a minute.”

I laughed. “No one said anything about getting naked.”

“I did,” he countered. “Just now. I said it.”

Any argument would’ve been half-hearted on my part, so I said, “Fine.”

Nick took my hand, and we walked up to the rooftop together. The sun was still up, but it wouldn't be for long. The day was cooler than normal, which made for the perfect opportunity to sink into a tub of hot water and turn my brain off for a little while.

“Get in. I'll get you some wine.”

“It's hard to say no to that.”

While he went to the small outdoor refrigerator, I stripped off my clothes, leaving them where they fell. I could feel Nick's eyes on me the entire time, and I didn't fight my body's reaction. I wanted to get lost in him for a little while. God knows we both needed the time together.

“Thank you,” I told him when he handed me a glass of wine before he set two tumblers of amber liquid on the outer edge.

“You know I'm going to ogle you while you strip.” I took a sip of wine and stared, waiting for him to uncover all that sexiness.

He didn't disappoint. While he disrobed, I looked my fill, admiring the tattoo of the tiger and wolf on his chest. Hawk had the most number of tattoos, but Nick's covered the most surface area. The dragon holding the skull covered nearly every square inch of his back. I remembered the night I traced it with my tongue, eager to memorize every part of him.

“How long did the dragon tattoo take?” I asked when he joined me in the water.

“Four sessions, seven hours each time.”

“How long do you have to wait between sessions?”

“The first time, I didn't wait long enough, but I suffered through. After that, I waited a few months in between.” He took a seat beside me. “Took a little over a year to complete.”

“That's what I call dedication.” I set my glass on the ledge and moved over to him, straddling his hips.

His arms came around me, and I sighed, leaning into him, soaking up his strength.

“I’m glad you’re here.”

Nick brushed my hair back from my shoulder. I hadn’t bothered putting it up, so it was wet halfway down my back, but I didn’t care. Right now, the only thing I wanted was to feel, and I knew Nick would give me that without question.

“Love me, Nick,” I whispered against his mouth as I settled over his thighs.

His palms flattened on my back as he pulled me closer, my chest pressed to his, the hard ridge of his cock nestled between my thighs. My lips melded with his, and the tension that had tightened my muscles shifted to a different part of my body as I gave myself to him. I sighed as his hands roamed over me, my body coming alive, nerve endings singing from the pleasure of his touch.

He kissed me deeply, owning my mouth with the gentle urging of his tongue. He didn’t rush, nor did he allow me to. I was grateful because I didn’t want this to end. Once it did, my brain would come back online, and I wasn’t ready for that.

“Can I ask you something?” I moaned as he kissed my neck.

“Anything.”

I twined my fingers in his hair to hold on as he sucked the skin of my neck, causing goosebumps to form on my flesh.

“That night ... when Creed and I were in the media room...” I moaned when he nipped my collarbone. “You were watching us.”

“You. I was watching *you*, Journey.”

I would never forget that moment. I’d purposely turned so I could face Creed, wanting to see Nick while Creed fucked me. The way his eyes heated as he stared unabashedly as I rode Creed’s cock... I’d been so turned on by it.

“Do you like watching me?”

“Yes.”

I was surprised by how easily he answered but not so much by his response.

“Why?”

Nick pulled back and met my gaze. “It turns me on.”

“It doesn’t make you jealous?”

His fingers dipped between my legs, gliding over my clit before slipping lower.

“Insanely,” he said, pushing one finger inside me.

My body tightened around him, wanting to hold him inside me.

“How does that turn you on?”

“I can’t explain it.”

“Oh, God...” I whimpered when he pushed two fingers inside me.

I tried to ride his hand, needing him to sate the ache that was building.

“I like when you watch me,” I admitted, curling my arm around his neck and pressing my chest to his so I could get closer. “It makes me feel ... like I’m doing something ... wicked and dirty.”

This wasn’t the first time I’d thought about my reaction to Nick watching me. I couldn’t explain the feeling at first, but then I realized it was akin to being caught cheating, only without the deceit. Knowing it made him jealous probably should’ve concerned me, but it only aroused me more.

“I want you inside me.”

He groaned, his fingers sliding out. When the head of his cock bumped my entrance, I shifted so I could align my body with his. I sank down on him slowly.

“I won’t last,” I warned. I needed him too much.

Nick pressed his thumb against my clit and circled the little nub, rubbing in a rhythm that matched the rocking of my hips.

“Come for me, Journey. Milk my cock, baby.”

I loved the gruffness of his voice as he spoke right in my ear. We held onto each other as I took what he offered, driving us both to that sweet, sweet peak of ecstasy.

“Nick ... yes ... I’m so close ... so ... close...”

He drove his hips up, filling me completely. I shattered on impact, a rush of energy moving through me and exploding out of my fingertips and toes.

Nick’s arms tightened around me. “Oh, fuck, Journey.”

I felt his cock pulse inside me, and it triggered a warmth I hadn’t realized I’d been missing.

“I love you,” I whispered in his ear. “I hope you know that.”

He tucked his face into my neck. “Promise me forever, Journey.”

I pulled back so I could look him in the eyes. I cupped his chin and turned his face toward me. “Always and forever. I promise.”

“That’s all I need.” He pressed his lips to mine. “You. Always and forever.”

I hoped he meant that because what Nick and I had ... there was no denying it was different from what I had with Hawk, Creed, and Garrison. He was mine and mine alone, and I didn’t take that for granted. However, I couldn’t give him the same in return, and I prayed that what we did have would be strong enough to tether us for a lifetime because I couldn’t imagine it without him.

CREED

“DID YOU MAKE A DECISION ABOUT THE club?”

I hated that I was laid up in a fucking hospital bed. More so that Ryder and Roman thought it was an appropriate time to make small talk. Yet, they'd been doing it for the better part of the last hour. Although they asked relevant questions, I knew this was their way of distracting me. Ensuring I didn't up and walk out of the hospital after I'd promised Journey I wouldn't.

“I have not.”

“Journey asked her mother why you haven't taken her,” Ryder mentioned.

This certainly wasn't a conversation I wanted to have with Journey's fathers. They were club members, so they were well aware of what went on there.

“You're making this weird for him,” Roman said in a loud whisper.

“Not weird,” I countered gruffly.

“Liar.”

I growled low in my throat to let him know I disapproved of the direction this was going. Neither of them gave a shit based on the matching grins that formed on their matching faces.

“You are a pain in my ass,” I muttered.

“Good thing that whip didn't get you there, huh?” Roman countered.

Ryder looked at his twin.

“What?” Roman asked. “Too soon?”

I grinned. It was too soon, but it didn't matter. I was ready to put that shit behind me, and the only way to do that was to look to the future.

“Mind if I give you my two cents?” Ryder prompted.

“Like I could stop you.”

He chuckled, then crossed his ankle over his knee as he leaned back in the chair he'd pulled close to my bed. “For the sake of your relationship, I don't think you should make major decisions without consulting Journey. She's a curious girl; we all know she went into this trying to find out about the club. If you close it down and shut her out completely, she'll always wonder.”

“Is it weird that you're getting relationship advice from your girlfriend's dad?” Roman teased.

“Yes.”

“Is it true?” Roman prompted. “What Clark said about the bruises on her neck?”

My eyes shifted to the mattress beneath me. “Yeah.”

“It bothered you,” Ryder noted.

It wasn't a question, but I responded anyway. “Yeah. It fucking killed me to see them. It wasn't—we weren't—” I couldn't go into details. Not with them.

Ryder's voice was softer when he said, “It's different when you love them. Trust me. I know. The same thing happened with Cadence. The first time...” He shrugged his shoulders. “It nearly tore me up. It took a long time before I trusted myself. The only reason I did was because she trusted me.”

He was right. It was something I'd been thinking about a lot lately. And Journey did trust me. Not because I forced her to but because I'd ensured she had a reason to. I wanted that to be enough, and maybe one day, it would be. Until then, I would love her in every way I knew how.

“You worried that Nick told Kim about the club?” Roman asked, clearly noticing the need for a subject change.

“No. I told Journey of its existence, so I can't hold that against him.”

“You might want to clue the members in on it,” Ryder added. “Considering how vindictive she apparently is.”

“Unless you’re planning to close it,” Roman said with a smirk. “Then it won’t matter.”

“I still think you should talk to Journey before you do. She might surprise you.”

Before I had to explain why I didn’t think including Journey in a decision of this magnitude, there was a knock on the door. A moment later, it opened, and Rule appeared.

Ryder and Roman twisted to look behind them at the visitor. As soon as they saw him, their expressions hardened.

Rule had a thick leather-bound notebook tucked under his arm and a bland expression on his face.

“I would say it’s good to see you again...” Ryder said as he got to his feet.

“Likewise,” Rule replied, his gaze shifting to me. “How’re you doing, man?”

“Like someone stripped my hide,” I told him honestly.

“Well, you look good.”

“Liar,” Roman noted.

The tension eased somewhat when Ryder held out a hand to shake Rule’s. “Thanks for what you did.”

Rule frowned as he returned the gesture. “You’re thanking me?”

Ryder nodded toward me. “Our daughter happens to be in love with this one. And she thinks we”—he gestured to himself and Roman—“are superheroes. If he’d died, she would’ve known the truth.”

Rule chuckled.

“And she never would’ve forgiven us,” Roman tacked on.

His tone had a teasing hint, but I suspected he believed that. Journey idolized her fathers, and she would’ve held someone responsible even if she knew they couldn’t have done anything to stop it.

“I think that’s our cue,” Roman said, getting to his feet. “One more night. You promised her.”

“I know.” And I intended to hold up my end.

Ryder and Roman slipped out of the room, leaving me and Rule staring at each other from across the room.

“Thank you,” I said as emotion clogged my throat. Every time the pain medication wore off and the memories of last night came flooding back, I remembered seeing Rule appear. At that point, I’d been drowning in agony, so I didn’t remember much of what was said, but I did remember the instant relief I felt when Rule eliminated the threat with a single bullet between the eyes.

“Anything for my brother. You know that.”

“What’s that?” I nodded toward the book under his arm.

“A ridiculous work of delusional fiction.” He gripped the book and held it out to me.

I took it from him and opened the front cover. There was a title page on the interior, with the words: MEMOIRS OF A MASTER.

“You read this?” I asked.

“Naw. Not my thing. But Rhyan did. She said you might get a kick out of it.”

I seriously doubted that, but I would read it. Only because I wanted to ensure that there wasn’t anything more I needed to do to protect Journey.

“Oh, and she said you’d find it interesting that there’s a chapter about a relationship with some guy. They were planning to run off together or some shit.”

That was code, and I didn’t need a clear head to know he was referring to Wayne Parson. I knew without asking that Rule had taken care of Hux. The man’s disappearance would never come back to bite me in the ass. As for whether the same could be said for Rule, only time would tell. But he was creative when it came to his endeavors, and if I had to guess, there was a trail that followed Clark Huxley and Wayne Parson

to some tiny little island that no one had ever heard of. It would look like they'd gone there together to live out the rest of their days.

“Very interesting.”

“There's always a lesson to be learned,” he noted.

Although I could never repay him for what he'd done for me, I asked anyway. “What do I owe you?”

“Not a damn thing. Family takes care of family.”

There was a twinge in my chest, an emotion I couldn't name. “You know I've got your back if you ever need me.”

“There might come a time.”

We both knew that was true. Rule lived his life on his terms, and while he didn't suffer the consequences the rest of us might, that didn't mean he was above them.

“All you have to do is ask,” I reminded him.

“I know.” He nodded his chin toward me. “Get yourself better. We'll grab a beer one of these days.”

“You can count on that.”

GARRISON

“HOW'RE YOU DOING?” JOURNEY ASKED AS WE walked down the stairs from the rooftop.

I'd joined their hot tub party late, but that had been intentional. I'd been giving Nick time with her because I knew he needed it as much as I did. And though I was selfish and would've preferred to keep her all to myself, that wasn't what we had.

That didn't mean I wouldn't take full advantage of the time I did get with her.

“I'm not pruning if that's what you mean,” I teased, grinning down at her as I opened the door so she could go inside.

“You weren't out there as long as we were.”

I stopped in front of Journey's bedroom and motioned for her to lead the way.

“My room, huh?”

“I'm not the only one sleepin' with you tonight, darlin'.”

“By sleep, you mean...”

“*Sleep.*”

“And Nick knows this?”

“It was his idea.”

“That the three of us sleep in my bed?”

“You think because he's straight, Nick can't sleep in bed with another guy?” I asked, following her toward the bathroom so I could turn on the shower.

“I didn't say that.”

I chuckled. “I'm messin' with you, darlin'.”

“So we're not all three sleeping in my bed?”

“Oh, we are.”

I flipped on the shower so she could get in, then started toward the door.

“You’re not joining me?”

“I figured I’d give you some space.”

“What if I don’t want space?”

We both knew I couldn’t say no to her. However, I was trying to be considerate. We were all tired. It had been a very long couple of days. Plus, I didn’t have to be clairvoyant to know what she and Nick did in the hot tub.

Journey dropped her towel, revealing her delectable body, and my dick stirred. Evidently, not every part of me was tired.

“You can join me or not, but I won’t ask twice, cowboy.”

“You haven’t asked once,” I corrected her.

She pivoted on her heel and walked into the shower, her cute little ass beckoning me to follow.

“Garrison?”

Yeah, it was futile to resist.

I shoved my shorts down my legs and joined her, pulling her in for a kiss because my lips needed to be on hers.

Journey gripped me as though she feared I would get away from her. Her arms curled under mine, her fingertips clutching my back as she thrust her tongue against mine. There was an urgency to her movements that surprised me enough that I pulled back, cupping her face so I could look into her eyes. That was when I saw the tears.

“Ah, hell,” I muttered, pulling her into me so I could hug her.

I cradled her head and let her cry. Journey had bottled up everything she felt, holding it back to put on a brave face.

“They’re both okay,” I assured her.

“I watched him get shot,” she said, sobbing so hard her chest heaved. “I thought we would lose him.”

“We didn’t. He’s gonna be fine.”

“I know, but...”

I held her, not urging her to speak. I wanted her to let it all out. I understood how she felt because I'd felt the same thing. The moment I heard her voice on the phone when she told me that Hawk had been shot and Creed had left with Clark, my world got infinitely smaller. The only thing I could think about was Journey and Hawk and whether they were safe from that monster. And while I went after my best friend, I couldn't help worrying that I might never see Hawk again. I might never get to hear his laugh or listen to his snarky comments. I feared I wouldn't get to watch him throw one of his fits again or witness how his eyes glazed when he succumbed to pleasure.

Journey pulled back, her eyes wide as she stared up at me. She cupped my face, her thumbs brushing over my cheeks, and I realized I was crying. There were no tormented sobs because my rational brain knew everything would be fine. Hawk would be fine. I wasn't losing him before I ever really had him.

“I love you,” she rasped, her voice a throaty purr.

“I love you, too, darlin'. With all that I am.”

I meant those words more than I ever had before. For those brief moments when they were at the hospital, and I was trying to get my best friend out of the clutches of a madman, I'd thought someone had pulled the rug out from under me. I knew that if we all made it through that, we would be stronger for it. I certainly was, and I was tired of pretending I didn't want a future with Journey and Hawk. I didn't quite know what it looked like for the three of us because there were so many variables, but I was willing to make it work. It didn't matter that I had to share Journey with Creed, Hawk, and Nick—her body and her heart—because it was worth it just to have her in my life. And I didn't care that I only had part of Hawk because a part of him belonged to Creed. It was enough because I loved them with every fiber of my being.

It wouldn't be easy, but nothing worth it ever was. I couldn't count how many times I'd heard that growing up. It was a family mantra or something. And it was true. The things

you fought for most were those you would never take for granted.

Journey clutched at me again, rubbing her chest against me as she curled her leg around mine. I knew what she was asking for, so I gave it freely.

“Turn around,” I urged, plucking her arms from around my neck. “Put your hands on the glass.”

She was still recovering from the crying jag, a few sobs escaping as she did as I instructed. With her hands flat on the glass partition that separated the shower from the bathroom, I moved up behind her, curling my hand under her thigh so I could lift her leg and make room for myself between. I dragged my cock along her slick folds, teasing her before plunging deep and hard.

Journey pressed back against me, taking me deeper than I thought possible.

“Watch me fuck you,” I groaned in her ear.

Her eyes met mine in the mirror that reflected our images back at us.

“Fuck, you’re so tight like this.”

I gripped her hip with one hand while the other held her leg. I twisted my hips so I could drill her from the side, my thighs burning from the position, but I ignored the pain and focused on the pleasure, watching her in the mirror.

When she dropped one hand to tease her clit, my dick throbbed, my balls tightening. I was dangerously close, but I wanted her to come first. I wanted to feel her pussy tighten around me, to hear her scream my name as she came apart at the seams. It was my only goal, and I fucked her harder and faster until she was panting desperately.

“Garrison ... oh, God ... it’s too much.”

I drove in harder, wanting to etch myself into her skin. I wanted her to remember what I felt like for the rest of her life, to always know that I could give her this. That together, we

were so much stronger than we were apart. It didn't matter what the rest looked like because we had this.

I fucked her so hard I couldn't speak, riding the waves as I waited for her to carry me out with the tide.

She screamed my name, her pussy locking down on my dick. I saw stars behind my eyelids as I gave myself over to the release that stole my breath the same way Journey had stolen my heart.

15

Tuesday...

CREED

“WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU’RE GOIN’?” GARRISON drawled when he walked into my hospital room.

I shoved my foot into my Nike knowing full well I wouldn’t be able to bend over to tie the damn thing. Although I had no desire to spend another minute laid up in this fucking place, I was acutely aware of my injuries as well as my limitations. Bending over would cause pain and probably split open some of the wounds that were being held together by butterfly bandages.

“Home.”

“You know they’re movin’ Hawk up here later today.”

“Good for him.” I cared. Of course I did. But right now, my priority was getting out of there so I could breathe. Being confined to this room was killing me slowly, and not being able to see Journey whenever I wanted wasn’t helping matters.

“You need a ride?”

“I called Mason,” I informed him as I shoved my other foot into the other shoe.

“Need help with your shirt?”

I ignored the amusement in his tone even though I preferred it to all the pity glances I’d received for the past couple of days. I didn’t need them to coddle me.

“Or *I* could help with that.”

I looked up as Journey was stepping around Garrison. As soon as I saw her, something loosened in my chest.

“I’ll see that he gets home,” Journey told Garrison. “If you’ll go hang out with the other ornery one.”

Garrison smirked. “I can do that. I’ll see if his mom wants to come with.”

Journey laughed. She’d told me the story of Hawk’s last tantrum, which had been early this morning. It sounded like he

enjoyed hospitals as much as I did, and he'd made his irritation known, only to be put in his place by his mother. Dana Hawkins was a kind, nurturing woman, but she'd mastered motherhood when Hawk was younger. She knew how to handle him.

I was glad someone did.

"Be still," Journey instructed as she knelt in front of me to tie my shoe.

It shouldn't arouse me that she was on her knees doing something as simple as tying a shoe because I couldn't, but it did. So fucking much.

I watched as she effortlessly tied my shoes while my cock continued to grow, tenting my sweatpants. I definitely needed a fucking shirt.

When she peered up from her knees, I damn near fell over.

"Stand up," I commanded gruffly, forcing my gaze away from her.

She obviously knew the struggle I was having because she got to her feet and moved closer. Journey was careful with me, gently running the tips of her fingers over my chest where there weren't any wounds.

"I could take care of that for you," she said softly, reaching around to grab the T-shirt on the bed. "But only if the doctor says it's okay."

I met her gaze. "You want me to ask him?"

Her eyebrows lifted.

"Because I will. I'll ask the doc if it's okay for the woman I love to suck my dick."

Her nostrils flared, and her eyes dilated. Yeah, it was safe to say she was turned on. And this certainly wasn't helping my current condition.

"Is that what you need?" she asked, holding the shirt so I could put my arms in first.

"I need *you*. Any way I can get you," I corrected.

“Well, you have me.” She shifted so she could help me guide my head through the hole. “Step forward and turn around.”

I did, hating that she would see the damage done to my back. I’d tried to protect her from it the first day, but Journey was relentless when she wanted something, so yesterday, she’d waited until the nurse came in, and she’d helped herself to a good look.

“I was reading up on the healing process,” she said, sliding the shirt down without allowing the cotton to graze the wounds too much.

“A week and I’ll be as good as new,” I told her, although we both knew that was a fucking lie.

“The smaller ones should be better in a couple of weeks,” she continued as though I hadn’t said a word. “Those with the stitches should heal faster than they would without them. Three months or so.”

That was what the doctor said, too, so I figured I would be right as rain by summer. Until then, I intended to move on with my life. The pain I could handle. Being cooped up in this place, not so much.

“It’s my understanding you’re leaving against my orders.”

I turned to see the doctor walking in, his eyebrows lifted. He didn’t appear surprised.

“If you change your orders, that won’t be the case,” I told him, grabbing my watch from the table.

Journey took it from me before I could put it on. “Not until those heal,” she said, nodding toward the deep grooves that were etched into my wrists from the zip ties.

I didn’t bother telling her I’d been wearing the watch when the zip ties were on, so it had space on my wrist.

“At least I know you’ll be well taken care of,” the doctor said, smiling at Journey.

“He will. I promise.”

“I still want you to come to my office in a couple of weeks. Let me see how they’re healing.”

“I’ll make sure he does,” Journey said, clearly not interested in my opinion on the matter.

“I can also refer you to a brilliant plastic surgeon who—”

“No. I’m good. But thanks.” I had no desire to go under the knife because of a few scars. I was lucky in that I had medical treatment. The scarring wouldn’t be nearly as bad as it could’ve been.

“All right. I’ll call in a prescription for an antibiotic and pain med—”

“No pain meds,” I inserted. “Don’t need them.”

He sighed as he reached for my chart. “Okay. But you will take the antibiotic. I’ll sign off, but I want to see you in two weeks. No excuses.”

“Fine,” I answered because Journey was staring at me expectantly.

When the doctor left, Journey smiled up at me. “You didn’t ask him, so I guess—”

“Hey, Doc!” I called out.

Journey’s hand shot up and over my mouth. She shook her head, laughing. “Please don’t.”

The doctor appeared in the doorway. “Did you call me?”

I held Journey’s stare and waited for her to make the decision.

“I’ll do it,” she whispered, moving her hand.

“No,” I told him. “We’re good.”

The doctor exhaled heavily, then turned and walked out.

“As soon as we get home,” I told her.

“Depends on how good you are between now and then.”

“Hellcat, I can be very good.”

“Don’t I know it,” she muttered before grabbing the bag that contained the few items I’d come into the hospital with. “We have to see Hawk on the way out, though.”

I let Journey lead the way down to ICU, where Hawk was. He was being moved to the VIP floor now that he was out of the woods. I hadn’t heard anything about problems, so I assumed they’d kept him there to be cautious or maybe because Garrison or Journey had asked them to.

I took a deep breath when we turned the corner into Hawk’s room. I hadn’t seen him since he was lying on the floor with a bullet in his leg. I’d been relying on Journey, Garrison, and Nick to give me updates because I was hesitant to see him. I wanted to, but I wasn’t sure he wanted to see me. After all, I was the reason he was laid up in that bed. I was the reason he had pins and screws holding his fucking bone together. If I’d stopped Clark Huxley before it got that far...

“Hey.” Hawk smiled when he saw me.

“Hey,” I said, taking stock of who was in the room.

“Why don’t we give them a minute,” Garrison suggested, nodding at Hawk’s mother.

“It’s good to see you’re up and around,” Dana said as she approached. “How’re you feeling?”

“Like someone took a branding iron to my back,” I said truthfully because the woman wouldn’t believe anything else.

“That’ll get better with time. Provided you take it easy.”

I didn’t promise that I would because everyone in the room knew that was a lie. Instead, I hugged her, aware of how she managed to avoid my back while still managing to embrace me fully.

“We’re gonna head down to the cafeteria for coffee. Want anything?” Garrison asked Hawk.

“Nah. I’m good,” he answered, never looking away from me.

“I’ll go with them,” Journey said. “Don’t you dare leave this hospital without me.”

“I won’t,” I assured her. “You owe me something when we get home.”

Her cheeks turned a fascinating shade of pink, and I figured it was because Hawk’s mother was close enough to overhear.

Once they left the room and closed the door behind them, I moved closer to Hawk’s bed, looking at the brace that encapsulated his leg.

“I heard the surgery went well.”

“Yeah.”

“And that they’re moving you today.”

“They are.”

I nodded, not sure what else there was to say.

“Creed, look at me.”

I forced my gaze to his face and felt a tightening in my chest. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

He frowned. “For what?”

“For letting this happen.”

“*Letting* it?” He snorted. “I’m pretty sure you’re not bulletproof. You couldn’t have stopped it.”

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it.”

We stared at one another for a solid minute. I couldn’t look away, grateful he was alive.

Hawk spoke first. “I know you don’t want to hear it, but I’m gonna say it anyway.” He swallowed. “I love you, Creed. It’s not something you want from me, but—”

“I love you, too,” I admitted, keeping my tone even.

Hawk’s forehead creased in surprise, but he didn’t say anything. I was grateful for that. I didn’t think it needed psychoanalyzing. It was the truth, and I was beyond pretending otherwise. Life had become far more precious than it had been before that crazy fucker shot Hawk. I was no longer going to take that for granted. I wasn’t perfect, and I

was sure they'd have to remind me more than once to pay closer attention to the important things, but that was my goal.

"They have you up and walking yet?" I asked, nodding toward the sling holding his leg up.

"Not yet. That's tomorrow."

"Looking forward to it?"

"If it'll get me out of this place, absolutely. I'll run a mile if they need me, too."

That was the pain meds talking, I was sure.

"Thank you for not dying on me," he said with a grin.

"Same." I looked at the clock on the wall.

"You don't have to stick around," he said when he noticed. "I'm sure you're eager to get out of here."

"More than," I agreed, then smiled. "But not for reasons you're thinking."

"If it has something to do with what Journey owes you, I get it." He laughed softly. "Totally get it."

"How long till you'll be walking like the rest of us?" I asked.

"Only a couple of months. They're saying nine before I'll be ready to start training again."

I nodded, tucking my hands in my pockets. "Good thing that mouth doesn't require the use of your legs."

His eyes glazed over. "Damn good thing."

JOURNEY

I PRETENDED NOT TO NOTICE THE WAY Creed flinched and grunted during the drive to the house. He couldn't lean back without extreme discomfort, and since he was refusing pain medication, he was suffering unnecessarily.

I knew better than to mention it. He would simply tell me he was fine, which he'd been doing for the past forty-eight hours or so. He hadn't been quite as stoic his first night in the hospital, so I had a good sense of how bad he hurt. The damage the bullwhip had done was extensive, and though some of those cuts would heal in a couple of weeks, there were several that would take much longer. And there was still the risk of infection that the doctor warned me about. I was doing my best not to fret because it would only upset Creed.

"I don't suppose you'll be staying at the house for a few days," I said when I walked through the front door, pretending not to notice that he was walking with his back slouched and slightly slower than usual.

"I need to go to the office tomorrow."

"Technically, you don't *need* to do anything. Nick's taking care of everything."

"How is Nick?" he asked, following me into the living room.

I turned to look at him. "You've talked to him. You should know."

"I see what he wants me to see."

"Did something happen to Nick?" I asked, suddenly fearful I had missed something. Garrison and Nick had assured me that they weren't injured in any way, but they could've been lying for my benefit. I wouldn't put it past them. They were guarded about what went down that night, refusing to give me the details.

"Physically, no."

“Then what? Tell me.”

Creed sighed. “Talk to him.”

“I *have*,” I countered, hating that he was keeping something crucial from me.

Creed stared at me, and I could tell he was debating how much he wanted to reveal.

“Creed...”

He swallowed and looked away. “I think I’d like that blowjob now.”

“No,” I snapped. “Not until you tell me.”

His eyes narrowed as he glanced back. “No?”

“No,” I said, standing my ground.

Jesus. Why did the men in my life insist on being so damn stubborn?

“Just tell me,” I insisted.

Creed sighed. “I think Kim had something to do with what happened.”

I frowned. “He didn’t mention anything.”

“And that’s why you need to talk to him.” He started toward the kitchen.

I fell into step but stopped before I walked in there. I still couldn’t bring myself to do it. The blood had been cleaned up, and there were no signs that anything had happened, but I couldn’t bring myself to go in. I didn’t want to think about what happened, much less relive it, and walking in there was going to dredge it all up again.

“Journey?”

“Hmm?”

Creed was in front of me again, his finger curling under my chin. He didn’t speak, but his eyes bounced over my face.

I did the only thing I knew to do to distract him.

His eyes closed when I rubbed the palm of my hand along the ridge of his cock. Immediately, he began to swell from my ministrations.

“What’re you doing, hellcat?”

“What I promised.”

He braced one hand on the wall that separated the living room from the kitchen.

I slowly lowered to my knees, staring up at him as I did. “You sure you’re up for this?”

He moaned when I pulled his sweatpants down to free his cock. “Stupid question.”

Obviously, but it worked to get his mind off my reasons for not wanting to go into the kitchen. For the next few minutes, I kept him riveted on the pleasure of my mouth, sucking and stroking him until he was iron-hard and close to orgasm. I had the luxury of controlling the momentum because he was trying to remain still.

That only lasted so long, though.

“Journey...” Creed laced his fingers in my hair and held my head as I sucked him as deep as I could. “Fuck, baby.”

I wanted him to come in my mouth. I wanted to taste him, to feel the pulse of his dick, to hear the groans that would come from his throat. I spent too many hours thinking I would never have this again, and now it was all I could think about.

I sucked harder, deeper. I fisted the base of his cock and used my hand to meet my lips, ensuring I brought him the most pleasure possible. When he came, it was with my name on his lips, and never had it sounded sweeter than it did then.

Two hours later, I was on the rooftop staring out at the haze over the city. I felt as though I could finally take a breath. Not as deeply as I would like since Hawk was still in the hospital, but it was better. Despite the fact Creed could

potentially be causing himself more harm by coming home early, I was grateful that he was well enough to go without too much fuss from the doctor.

It had been a difficult few days emotionally. And while I'd struggled with that, it was nothing compared to what Creed or Hawk had endured. Or even Garrison and Nick, who had to find Creed in the state he was in. I got the feeling they weren't telling me what happened for my benefit. They didn't want me to know how close Creed had come to death or how awful what they witnessed truly was. I appreciated their concern, but I wanted to know. More so because I wanted to be there for them. I didn't want any of them going it alone.

That brought my thoughts to Nick. I thought I'd detected him being a bit standoffish the last couple of days, but I had attributed it to the stress everyone was under. Although the doctors were telling us Hawk and Creed would be fine, it was easier to hear than to believe. Only time would ease those fears. How much time was anyone's guess. But now that I thought about it, Nick had been sharply focused on the small things. He claimed he was taking care of what needed to get done—and he was, that was true—but I now knew it was deeper than that.

I think Kim had something to do with what happened.

Creed's words from earlier sounded in my head. Was that true? Had Kim played a role in it? I remembered seeing her at the dance. I'd even asked Wayne if Kim was with him. His answer—*Maybe. Maybe not*—told me nothing. But it honestly wouldn't surprise me if she was.

I glanced at my phone. I had texted Nick an hour ago and asked if he could meet me on the rooftop when he got home. He would be home any minute because he wasn't working full days. I wanted to talk to him. To really talk to him. I needed to ensure he was all right, and since last night I'd selfishly talked about him watching me rather than taking a deeper look as to whether there was something wrong, it had to be done soon.

A few minutes later, I heard the sound of footsteps. I looked over as Nick was coming around the corner. His eyes

skimmed over me slowly as I got to my feet. I couldn't hide my smile because I was so happy to see him. Things between Nick and me were new. Much newer than what I had with Garrison, Hawk, and Creed. But that didn't change how I felt about him. I loved him, and having gone through what we all just did, I refused to go a day without ensuring they knew that.

"You said you wanted to talk." His honey-gold eyes held a hint of concern.

I stepped up to him and laid my hands on his chest. "You make it sound like I'm about to tell you I'm moving to Mars, and there's only room for one on the ship."

His eyebrows rose, and a smile formed. I'd caught him off guard with that. Exactly as I'd intended.

"You're not then?" he asked, grinning.

"Moving to Mars?" I took his hand and led him over to the oversized chaise that was more like a bed than a chair. "No. Not today. In a few years, maybe."

"In a few years, there'll be more room on the ship, I'm sure."

"True," I agreed, urging him to sit.

Nick watched me closely as he did. Once he was situated, I straddled his thighs, facing him. His hands went to my knees as he stared up at me. He was a perfect gentleman, but I sensed he was worried I had something bad to tell him. As far as I was concerned, the bad news was all behind us. We could only go up from here.

"Is something bothering you?" I asked, resting my hands on his shoulders and playing with the ends of his hair.

"No. Should there be?"

I met his gaze. "Creed told me he thinks Kim had something to do with what happened."

Because I was sitting on his legs, I felt him tense.

"I want to make sure you're okay," I added, swiping his jaw with my thumb. "I know she's your ex-wife, so I'm sure

you'll always have feelings for her.”

“No,” he said quickly. He shook his head. “The feelings I have for her...”

“You can tell me, Nick. I’m a big girl.”

His brown eyes glittered with something I couldn’t quite name.

“I hate her,” he said, his voice low. “That’s the only thing I feel for her. She helped that bastard torment you.”

I was curious about what part she’d played in this, but I honestly didn’t want to torture Nick by asking him to tell me. I didn’t *need* to know. It wouldn’t change the outcome of my feelings on what happened or on the men I loved, so I didn’t care.

I pressed my fingertip under his chin, forcing him to look at me. “It’s not your fault.”

His lack of response told me he disagreed.

“Whatever she did, you had nothing to do with that. She’s jealous and vindictive and ... and mean.” I smiled. “But that’s on her, not you.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

His hands relaxed, his fingers brushing under my skirt. He was still being a gentleman, but at least now he was acknowledging that he was touching me.

“I know I can’t control what she does.”

“No, you can’t.” I moved closer, pressing the ache between my legs against the hard ridge between his. “Only what *you* do.”

I couldn’t help myself. When I was close to him, I wanted to be closer. It was a phenomenon I couldn’t explain.

The tips of his fingers pressed more urgently against my thighs, but he didn’t make the first move. “Should I be doing something, Journey?”

I brushed my thumb over his lower lip. “Yes. You should be loving me, Nick. And letting me love you.”

“Do you?”

I didn’t expect the question, and it broke my heart that he had doubts. After last night, I thought for sure we’d solidified our footing. Evidently, I was wrong.

“I do,” I confirmed. “I love you, Nick. I love everything about you. Your big ... brain.”

A hint of a smile curled his mouth.

“And your big ... heart.”

The curve of his mouth increased.

“And your big...” I ran out of things, so I said, “Toe.”

“My big toe?”

“Yep,” I answered, deadpan. “It’s quite sexy, that toe.”

“Only one of them?”

“I haven’t really gotten to know the others yet, but I’m sure I’ll love those toes just as much.”

Nick laughed, then leaned forward, his forehead pressing to my chest, his arms coming around me. I curled my arms around his neck and held him, teasing his scalp with my fingernails.

“I love you, Nick,” I whispered. “And I’m going to make sure to tell you every single day for the rest of our lives.”

We remained like that for a few minutes. Nick was the first to pull back, and when he did, he looked into my eyes.

“I need to ask you something.”

The teasing had faded from his countenance, so I took a deep breath and offered my full attention. “Anything, Nick.”

“Do you want kids?”

“Oh.” That took me by surprise, and I couldn’t hide it. “I ... uh ... I honestly don’t know.”

“You’ve never thought about it?”

“Yes and no,” I admitted.

I probably could’ve used the excuse that I was only twenty-four and I hadn’t given much thought to the rest of my life, but that would’ve been a cop-out. And a lie.

I opted for the truth. “I’ve never really imagined myself as a mom. Why?”

“I want kids, Journey.”

He was very serious, but I could also see a hint of worry. Admitting this made him vulnerable, and it made me love him even more.

“Are you asking me to have your baby, Nick?”

“Yes,” he answered without hesitation. “I don’t mean right this minute. I just ... I *have* imagined myself having kids one day, and I just...”

“You just what?” I slouched to meet his gaze when he looked away. “You want to make sure we’re on the same page?”

“I guess.”

“Let me ask you this,” I said, turning the question back on him. “How do you see children in ... this?” I gestured toward the house.

“The relationship, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“I see it being complicated but doable. Extended families do it all the time. Half-brothers and half-sisters aren’t uncommon.”

Clearly he’d given this thought. And not only before but since we started this relationship.

I grinned. “Half-siblings ... so I’m having babies with them, too, huh?”

He choked on a laugh. “That’s ... that’s up to you. And them, of course.”

I considered the logistics. “It would definitely be complicated. I mean, conception would be tricky. I’d have to stop taking the birth control shot. Then they would have to start using condoms. At least until we got pregnant.”

Nick’s eyes rounded. “Are you actually considering it?”

“I never wanted kids before, but I also never had *this* before. A love that consumes me. That changes one’s perceptions.” I cupped his face. “And the thought of having your baby, Nick... I am certainly not opposed to the idea.”

His arms flew around me, and he pulled me in tight. I laughed as he squeezed the air out of my lungs.

I wasn’t sure if we’d made a plan for the future or if this was simply hypotheticals, but the one thing I knew with certainty was that I would give anything to make this man happy.

Anything.

NICK

WHEN I DECIDED TO BROACH THE SUBJECT of children, it had been driven purely by self-preservation. I honestly hadn't expected Journey to openly discuss the idea, much less to agree to have my baby—not today, but one day.

In the past few minutes, she'd given me more hope than I'd had in a long time.

Yes, I was in love with Journey, and I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. But wanting it and doing it were two different things. If we couldn't align our goals in life, I wasn't sure there was a point in hoping for something that wouldn't end in happiness.

But now ... this woman had just given me the greatest gift ever. Not only her love but a chance to have a family with her.

"Do you think we're moving too fast?" I asked.

"By talking about the future?"

"Yeah. It hasn't been that long since we started ... dating if that's what this is called."

"It hasn't," she agreed, her cool fingers brushing my cheeks as she cupped my face. "And this isn't dating, Nick. We've moved way past that. This is happily ever after with some dates sprinkled in." Her eyebrows lifted slowly. "Because I still want dates. That's non-negotiable."

Fuck, I loved her.

Journey swiped her thumb along my jaw. "I can't explain how it happened or when, but what I feel for you doesn't feel new to me. It's like I've loved you my entire life, and I'm just now getting to explore it. I want to talk about the future. I want that for all of us because no matter how you slice it, we are all in this together."

She was right. We were.

"I feel like the odd man out," I admitted.

“Why? Because you’re not sleeping with someone else?” She chuckled. “I mean, you could if—”

I pulled her mouth to mine and kissed her as I smiled. “That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“Good, because I really like the idea of having you all to myself.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, I really do.” This time she pulled back slowly, her eyebrows pinched. “What we have ... it’s just between us, Nick. I have Creed. I have Hawk. And I have Garrison. But I’m not the only person they’ve given their hearts to. But you ... I get all of yours, and that’s a blessing to me. It makes what we have different than what I have with them.”

Her voice was softer when she continued. “With that said, wanting you all to myself also makes me selfish. And I need to know that we can weather any storm that might cause because I can’t change the way I feel.”

I cupped the back of her head and pulled her down until her forehead pressed to mine. “I love you, Journey. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want to have you to myself whenever I can, and I want to be open to what you have with them. Sharing you ... it feels right to me. As long as I know that you love me, I want to do what makes you happy. It won’t be easy. I know that. I’ll feel like the third or fifth wheel from time to time. That can’t be helped. But I’ll also know that a part of you will always belong only to me.”

Journey pressed her lips to mine. “Always, Nick.”

“Sometimes things don’t go as you expect them to, but they end up exactly as they should.”

She pressed her hips down, attempting to get closer. I was trying not to make this about sex because I wanted her to know that what I felt for her went beyond the physical. But it was difficult to resist her. And this woman ... she didn’t have any qualms about letting me know exactly what she wanted.

“Nick.” She slanted her head and put her lips on mine. “I want to feel you inside me. Right now.”

There was an urgency in her voice that sent all the blood in my body rushing right to my dick. I was stiff and aching by the time we managed to free my cock from my slacks. Journey pulled her panties aside, and the slick heat of her cunt brushed the head of my dick. I gasped, then did one better. I ripped her panties along the seams at her hips and tossed them away.

“Better,” she said before covering my mouth with hers and sliding down on me.

I held her still, enjoying the sensation of her tight wet sheath enveloping me.

“God, you feel good,” I mumbled against her mouth, closing my eyes to savor the moment. “So good.”

She rocked her hips, sliding along my shaft, her heat caressing me. It wasn’t enough, but it was everything all at once.

“Love me, Nick,” she moaned, lifting and lowering her hips, taking her pleasure from me.

“Always, Journey. I will love you always.”

Her husky whimper went right to my head. I tried to hold on, tried to let her control the outcome, but I needed to dominate her. I needed to steal back the control that had been taken from me.

“Take off the dress,” I commanded, gripping her hips and holding her still.

She sat astride me, unbuttoned the top few buttons on her dress, then pulled it over her head, tossing it to the ground.

“I fucking love it when you don’t wear a bra,” I growled roughly. “Now take off my shirt.”

Journey made quick work of it before I pushed her down to her back so I could stand up and get rid of the rest of my clothes. I left them in a pile on the ground before moving over her. I mounted her in one quick thrust, loving the way her legs wrapped around my hips. She rocked against me, her hand curling around the back of my neck, her eyes locked with mine.

I loved her then, precisely the way we both needed. Even though I had all the control, it was a give and take. We gave each other exactly what the other needed, and I knew that would be the case for the rest of our lives. This woman didn't belong only to me, but she was all mine. The same way she was all theirs. It was complicated and impossible to explain, but it worked for us. I loved her as much as they did, and I knew in my soul that I would never find another love like this one. Not for as long as I lived.

“Nick...oh, God, yes.” She threw her head back when I slammed into her. “Oh, yes ... more ... please.”

I gave her everything I was and everything I ever would be. That stolen moment between the two of us was merely a precursor for the life we would build together.

I growled when her inner muscles locked down on me, caressing my dick. “Come for me, Journey. Let me feel you ... I want to feel you come.”

She gasped and moaned, her nails digging into my neck as I drove us both to that glorious edge between ecstasy and heaven. And when we went over, I knew that I would forever belong to her.

18

One week later, Tuesday...

JOURNEY

“I AM *NOT* AN INVALID.”

“Maybe we should get that tattooed on your ass,” Garrison told Hawk as he stepped out of the way to allow him to walk into the house.

Well, technically, Hawk wasn't walking, but he was upright with the help of crutches. If Garrison had his way, Hawk would've been confined to a wheelchair for the foreseeable future, but Hawk had adamantly put his foot down. The *good* foot. And when that didn't work, he threatened to shove the crutch up Garrison's ass if he kept insisting.

Hawk won that argument, but only because Garrison knew when to pick his battles.

“We've moved you into Creed's room,” I told Hawk, following him into the living room.

“Is Creed aware of this?” Hawk retorted.

It was good to see his spirits were up. And by that, I meant his frustration had returned to normal, detectable levels.

I had to admit he'd been a good sport the past ten days. Although he'd been ready to leave the hospital on day two, the doctors insisted he remain in bed until they deemed it safe for him to get up. By the time that happened, Garrison and Creed had been forced to exert their dominance over him simply to keep him from violating the doctor's orders.

Of course, Creed's argument hadn't been nearly as compelling since he checked himself out after two full days. I still couldn't be sure a few more days wouldn't have helped. He was healing, but it was a very slow process. But, to hear Creed tell it, he was *fine*. Literally, his favorite word these days.

Fortunately, Hawk hadn't had the luxury of strolling out under his own steam. That helped our case. As had his mother being on standby. From the moment the jet landed in LA, Dana had spent her days at the hospital with us and her nights

at a hotel nearby. She'd returned to Vegas last Friday but promised she would be back as soon as she had a couple of days off. She also dropped a few breadcrumbs for us, insisting a weekend in Vegas would do us some good. She probably wasn't wrong.

The good news was that Hawk was home and on the mend. And in eight to twelve months—depending on his dedication to getting better—he would be back to regular activity. Granted, Hawk had come up with four to six months somewhere within those details. He was determined he would be back to fighting form sooner rather than later. I had no doubt he would do what was necessary to make that happen. I was also sure that Creed and Garrison would force him to do what needed to be done. Something told me those wouldn't be the same thing.

Creed and Garrison had suffered quite the scare when Hawk got shot, although you wouldn't know it by looking at either of them. The only reason I knew about it was that I'd been the one who held them when they finally broke down. First Garrison, then Creed. It hadn't been an epic ordeal, but for them, it was worth noting. I never imagined seeing either of them shed a single tear, but they both had in those days that followed.

And while we were all making a big deal of Hawk's injury, Creed was still recovering from his own. He was trying to play it off like it was no big deal, but I wasn't an idiot. His trauma wasn't merely physical, though I knew for a fact he would never admit that. Having someone strap you down, put a wire around your neck and threaten to behead you even as they whipped you raw and bloody would also leave some emotional scars. The beheading by wire part, they didn't think I knew about. To be honest, I wish I didn't. Unfortunately, I'd overheard my dad's talking to Garrison about it. I'd kept it to myself—I didn't even tell Hawk—because the horror of that was too great for my brain to process. I certainly didn't want to talk about it.

To sum it up, Hawk and Creed were healing, so aside from a few lingering scars—both mental and physical—they would

be back to their usual, ornery selves in no time.

“Why don’t I cook dinner tonight?” I offered when Nick set Hawk’s suitcase on the floor beside the sofa.

Garrison’s gaze shot to Nick, and I swore I saw a helplessness I’d never seen before.

“What? You don’t think I can cook?”

“We ... um...” Nick looked at Hawk.

Hawk shrugged.

“I’m quite adept at microwaving corn dogs,” I told them.

Garrison snorted. “I think we’ll leave the cooking to Creed for now.”

If only I could guarantee he would be home long enough to work in the kitchen, I would be satisfied with that decision. The problem was Creed was spending a ridiculous amount of time at the office, pretending everything was back to normal.

It wasn’t.

Not by a long shot.

I hadn’t been back to work yet, and while I was getting the itch for something to do, I wasn’t ready to leave Hawk. My mother assured me I would get past that eventually. Since she was a psychiatrist and she understood the effects of PTSD on a person, I had to believe her. Having watched Hawk get shot had taken a few years off my life. And watching Creed get marched out of the house—potentially forever—had only compounded the problem. Since no one was willing to tell me outright what happened in the hours between Creed leaving and when he was delivered to the hospital slashed to ribbons, my nightmares were bearable. With the exception of the ones that were about Creed and a guillotine. Those were becoming more frequent. I could only imagine the horror my psyche would conjure up if it had more details. I’d seen firsthand what he looked like afterward, and they could tell me all day that it was nothing to worry about, but as I said, I wasn’t an idiot.

“I’ll order something,” Nick offered. “Creed said he wouldn’t be late.”

“And you believed him?” I snipped before I could stop the words from tumbling out.

For the most part, I’d held myself together rather well this past week. It helped that my parents had checked in frequently, and Garrison and Nick refused to leave me alone with my thoughts. Although I had wanted to spend all my time at the hospital with Hawk, my men wouldn’t let me. Even Hawk had weighed in, insisting I needed to be home to take care of Creed. I’d compromised, and they allowed me to spend two of those nights with Hawk, the rest in my bed with my men alternating who would join me.

Because I had no choice in the matter, I was learning how to divide my time. It wasn’t easy. There was one of me and four of them. It was natural to want to take care of the one who was hurting the most. In this case, Hawk because he’d been in the hospital. Next in line was Creed since he was still injured. Juggling a relationship with four men was hard, but this situation took it to another level. Now that they were all home, I anticipated it would get easier. (Note that I did not say *easy*.)

“If you’re taking suggestions,” Hawk said as he dropped his crutches against the sofa. “I’d like pizza.”

“Done. I’ll place the order,” Nick stated. “Then I need to work for a couple of hours.”

“I’m gonna shower,” Garrison said.

I looked at Hawk. He looked at me.

“I’m calling a family meeting,” Hawk stated. “Do whatever you need to do, but family meeting at six. Don’t be late.”

Garrison and Nick traded looks that I couldn’t decipher. They’d been doing it for a week. Anytime me or Hawk asked what happened that night, they clammed up tight. My fathers were doing the same. For whatever reason, they didn’t want us to know, and from what little I’d gleaned, I had a feeling they were right. While I didn’t want the gory details, I was looking for confirmation of the outcome. Was Clark dead? Did Creed kill him? I wanted to know for my peace of mind.

As it was, cooking dinner was an offer I made because I knew they wouldn't let me. I hadn't gone into the kitchen since the shooting and wasn't sure I could, even if it meant we would all starve. They noticed. I knew they did. It was safe to say I needed some reassurance that we were all safe. Talking was the logical conclusion.

"It's time we know," I added. "It's not fair to keep us in the dark."

"It's best you don't," Nick said, his tone somber. "Really."

"Let us be the judge of that." Hawk looked between the three of us. "Six o'clock."

Garrison grunted, and Nick massaged the back of his neck, but neither actually agreed to tell us.

"Go on then," Hawk said to them, crooking his finger at me. "I'm going to cuddle with my smokeshow."

I certainly couldn't say no to that.

HAWK

I PROPPED MYSELF AT THE END OF the sofa while Nick and Garrison rearranged the furniture so I could have a footrest for my leg. The brace they had on me was cumbersome, but I was thankful it wasn't a plaster cast. This way, it could come off from time to time, and though I was restricted from doing anything worthwhile, it was something.

Journey joined me when Nick and Garrison left the room. She curled up against my good side, careful not to jar my leg. She acted like I was made of spun glass with how little she touched me. I didn't want her to see me as broken and injured, but I was cognizant of my limitations. I had every intention of getting back to fighting form, which meant following the doctor's orders to the letter. I might never fight professionally again, but I had endorsements that depended on my abilities, and I had people who looked to me for guidance with their careers. I couldn't very well tell them what to do if I wasn't willing to put in the work myself.

"Closer," I urged, putting my arm around her and pulling her into me so I could reach her lips for a kiss.

"You're supposed to be taking it easy," she said, sighing when I cupped the back of her head and kissed her appropriately.

She tasted like cinnamon and happiness.

"This *is* easy."

Journey smiled against my lips. "I'm so glad you're home."

I melded my mouth to hers. I wanted to inhale her into my skin, to keep her there for eternity so she would know I would never leave her. It wasn't a promise I could make, but I wanted to. I'd watched her hold herself together by sheer will this past week, and I prayed she never had to go through anything like that again.

“I think someone’s glad to *be* home,” Journey murmured against my mouth, the edge of her pinky brushing my crotch.

Yeah, my cock was tenting the front of my shorts, eager for her attention. Could you blame it? She was only the hottest woman on the planet, and I didn’t care how many times my cock found its way inside her, it would always want more. Not that I was asking for sex, but the damn thing didn’t know that.

“We probably shouldn’t be doing this,” she whispered against my lips as her hand slid down my chest.

“It’s not a strenuous activity,” I said, reminding her of the doctor’s orders.

“It could be.”

I grunted when the side of her hand grazed my dick.

“You did that on purpose.”

She giggled. “I’ll never tell.”

“Oh, fuck,” I moaned when she covered my cock with her hand.

I could feel the warmth of her skin through the shorts. My dick kicked hard, trying desperately to get her attention.

“Journey?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m not sure how much I can take right now. If you’re not gonna take care of him...”

Ah, fuck. Her hand felt so damn good. Too fucking good.

“Can you be really still?” She asked, tucking her fingers into the waistband of my shorts.

“Yes,” I hissed. “Fuck, yes.”

She pulled my shorts over my cock. The cool air caressed my flesh, drawing another moan from me. And when she curled her fingers around my shaft, I thought I would explode. Not just my dick. I was talking, my whole body shattering into tiny fragments scattered throughout the house.

I could feel her eyes on my face as she stroked in a slow, even rhythm. My heart beat faster than her hand moved, but I didn't ask for more. Hell, I wasn't sure I would survive this.

"Close your eyes."

I looked at her. "Why?"

"Just do it." She propped a small pillow behind my neck. "Lean back and close your eyes."

Curious what she had in mind, I did as she requested, sinking into the cushion and resting my head on the pillow. I closed my eyes and focused on the smooth glide of her hand along my cock.

"I'm going to put my mouth on you." Her mouth was near my ear, so I heard the words and felt the heat of her breath at the same time. "But you have to keep your eyes closed."

"Anything," I told her, eager to feel her lips on me.

It had been too fucking long. Even if I'd wanted to take care of myself, it wasn't possible when you had nurses coming to check on you all the damn time. That and the people who loved you always hovering nearby, ready to do whatever you needed before you realized you even needed it. I'd spent the past week longing for Journey while suffering in silence.

I felt her move beside me, her warmth disappearing for a moment while she repositioned so her head was hovering over my lap, her hand curled perfectly around the base of my cock.

The first swipe of her tongue made me gasp.

The first press of her lips made me moan.

And the wet, hot suction that followed made me groan.

Journey did her own thing, sliding up and down, occasionally pausing to lick every throbbing inch. She sucked me deep, then shallow. Fast, then slow. I couldn't keep up with her whirlwind momentum, so I stopped trying and simply enjoyed it. I slipped my fingers into her hair and cupped the back of her head so I could feel her as she bobbed up and down.

“Oh, fuck, smokeshow. It feels ... so ... fucking ... good.”

I was gasping, the tension coiling inside me. I was expecting pain, but it never came. I didn't know whether that was due to the overwhelming pleasure or my brain's delayed reaction, but I didn't give a shit. Journey's mouth was a heaven unlike anything else. I would gladly endure agony simply to know I could have her again.

She stopped to lift her head. Her lips pressed against my neck, then along my jaw, while her hand took over where her mouth left off.

“I want you to come in my mouth.”

Those husky words nearly caused an eruption before I was ready, but I managed a nod. “Please.”

Her attention returned to my cock, and this time she didn't tease or torment. She took me to the stars with heated suction and soft moans that vibrated my balls. I gasped for breath as I held back as long as I could. I dug my fingers into the pillows around me and growled my release.

“I could return the favor, you know,” I offered. “Just let me lie down and—”

“No.” She laughed. “I promise I'll use your mouth for all it's worth, but not until I can indulge in the rest of you.”

“Fine.” I pulled her against me and angled our bodies so we could see the television. “Just know that your timeline and mine will probably be a few weeks apart. I won't need nearly enough healing time before I can make that a reality.”

Journey's laugh echoed in the room, and I realized it was so fucking good to be home.

CREED

“WE’RE HERE,” GARRISON TOLD HAWK WHEN WE JOINED THEM in the living room.

I’d been summoned by both Garrison and Nick, informing me that Hawk was calling a family meeting, and they didn’t give a shit what I was doing, it was my duty to be home at precisely six o’clock. Honestly, I’d expected Garrison to give me shit because he’d been cooped up with an ornery Hawk for the past week. But Nick?

Regardless, I was here even though I knew I wasn’t going to like the topic of the conversation he wanted to have. I was constantly reminding myself that a relationship requires a give and take, and I had to give from time to time. This was me giving. Since I would expect the same of them, I couldn’t very well boycott, could I?

“Get on with it, boy,” Garrison grumbled.

I couldn’t contain my grin. It was the first time things felt relatively back to normal since all the shit went down. And while nine days wasn’t a long time, it felt like an eternity. I was grateful Hawk was finally home. We’d been in a state of influx for a week, coming and going, sometimes sleeping at the hospital, sometimes at the house. I wouldn’t deny the thought of sleeping horizontally in a bed every night was something I looked forward to. Even if it wouldn’t be in my bed, I was all right with that. Letting Hawk use the space in the interim was a concession I was willing to make to have him home.

“Quit grinnin’,” Garrison chastised. “Wait till you hear what’s on the agenda for this meetin’.”

“Just sit down, would ya?” Hawk motioned toward the sofas.

He was sitting on one with Journey at his side, and they were both watching us as though we were caged lions about to rip into one another.

“What’s going on?” I asked, perching on the arm of one of the sofas.

Hawk looked patiently between the three of us. “We’ve heard bits and pieces of what happened that night, but we want the details.”

That was all I needed to hear before I was on my feet and heading toward the kitchen. I had absolutely no intention of telling them what went down. They needed to be spared that information. It was bad enough that I’d lived it once; I didn’t want to go through it again.

“Please don’t run away,” Journey called out.

It was her tone that had me stopping and turning around. “I know you think you want to know what happened...” I shook my head. “I promise you don’t.”

“Fine,” Hawk stated. “We don’t need the details.” He nodded toward me. “We get the gist of it already.”

Journey chimed in with, “Based on your injuries, it’s relatively clear.”

The marks on my body did tell a decent story about what happened, and if they wanted to be satisfied with that, I wasn’t going to argue.

“Then what do you want to know?” I asked, looking between the four of them.

Journey sat forward and met my gaze. “What happened to Clark Huxley?”

My gaze dropped to the floor.

“Is he...?” Hawk asked.

I met Hawk’s stare and held it for a moment. I did not want anyone to utter a word about this. Not one single syllable. As far as anyone was concerned, Clark Huxley and Wayne Parson took off to a faraway land to live together in secret. That was what that horrifically disturbing compilation of stories—what Hux had referred to as his memoirs—said, anyway. And as long as no one looked too closely or did a handwriting

analysis, it would hold up under scrutiny, which, no doubt, was Rule's plan.

"If it's any consolation, I had Journey turn on the jammers," Hawk noted, glancing between us.

"Fine," Garrison blurted. "Yes."

"How?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does."

"No, it doesn't."

The back and forth between them could've gone on for hours. This wasn't the first time Hawk had inquired about what happened to Clark. They both deserved to know, if for no other reason than to give them peace of mind, but I didn't want to speak the words aloud. Because Rule's people had come in and sanitized the building, there was no trace that Clark had ever been there. He'd also gone through the rigorous process of creating a trail that left California for both Clark and Wayne. Yes, they were dead, but without bodies, the deaths didn't happen. As for what Rule's people did with them after ... well, that was something I preferred not to know. It was definitely better that way.

And I damn sure wasn't losing any sleep over their deaths. I'd read every single word that Clark had written in his journals, and while he'd sounded batshit crazy when he told us his tale, his retelling on paper was pure insanity. He hadn't been lying, though. He'd kept detailed records of what happened. Times, dates, and even notes on his notes to ensure he captured every gory detail. I even had the distinct displeasure of reading what he'd done to Kim. If his ramblings were to be believed, he'd lied to us outright. He hadn't used a fake dick. He'd fucked her ass himself, and he'd enjoyed it immensely. Based on his ramblings, he'd been on the verge of falling in love with her. He'd outlined precisely how he planned to punish Theresa with Kim's help.

Needless to say, everyone was safer now that he was dead. Including Kim, and I didn't give two fucks about that bitch.

“Who did it?” Journey asked, looking between us.

“No one in this room,” I said truthfully.

“My dads?”

“No.”

She held my stare for several heartbeats before finally saying, “Okay. Fair enough.”

I looked at Hawk. “That’s all I’m telling you.”

He didn’t look nearly as appeased, but he nodded anyway.

“That needs to be the last of it,” I told them. “Let’s bury it. It’s over.”

“We can move forward,” Garrison added. “We need to.”

“Agreed,” Hawk said, causing Journey to jerk her head toward him.

Clearly, she hadn’t been expecting him to cave that easily.

“Is that all?” Garrison’s exasperation clipped his words.

“One more thing,” Hawk said as he grabbed his phone off the armrest beside him.

The four of us stared as he tapped the screen. I was about at the end of my patience when he looked up.

“Catch.”

I caught the phone when he threw it toward me. “What do you want me to do with this?”

“Look at it.”

I flipped the phone around so I could see the screen. On it was a picture of a house.

“Scroll through.”

“For?” I asked, sliding my finger across the screen to see each image.

“It’s a little smaller than this,” Hawk explained, “plus—”

“No,” I said before tossing the phone back to him.

He stared at me, and the hurt expression on his face filled me with guilt. Rather than apologize, I dug my phone out of my pocket and pulled up the email I'd received earlier today.

"Catch," I told him before tossing my phone.

Journey lunged to the side, and Hawk caught the phone.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Look at it," I told him, using his exact words.

Journey leaned in to look.

"The real estate agent has an appointment for Saturday morning," I explained. "I was waiting for you to get home before we went to look at it."

"Holy shit," Hawk muttered. "This isn't smaller."

"No."

"But it's got..." Hawk smirked. "Hell yeah."

"What?" Garrison snorted. "You like that it has room for even more cars?"

I'd already shown Nick and Garrison the pictures and told them my idea. Since they had a vested interest in Journey's and Hawk's happiness, I figured it was only fair.

"No," Hawk said, still looking at the pictures.

"Because it's got one more bedroom than this one?" Nick asked.

When I started looking for a house last weekend, I brought them in the loop because I wasn't looking for a house for myself. I wanted something the five of us could agree on together. One that we could start fresh in. One that Journey could put her spin on because she was the most important person to all of us.

"Two pools?" Garrison asked.

"No."

"Actual grass?" Nick asked.

"No."

“More terraces and a bigger hot tub?” Garrison asked.

“No.”

I waited for Hawk to enlighten us about whatever had struck his fancy.

“I know what it is,” Journey said, skimming her finger on the screen.

“Do tell because the suspense is killing me,” Nick deadpanned.

She looked up, grinning. “He likes that it has not one, but *two* islands in the kitchen. You know, more space to enjoy a Sunday buffet.”

“Aww, hell,” Garrison grunted. “She’s gonna be the death of me, this one.”

I laughed. “Did you see the one by the outdoor kitchen?”

Hawk’s eyebrows shot skyward as he grabbed the phone back.

“Saturday, you say?” he muttered, swiping through the images.

“Yeah.” I fixed my gaze on Journey. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed you won’t go in the kitchen.”

Her beautiful blue eyes cut over to me. “I—”

“You don’t have to explain, kitten. We get it. And since we’re taking the next step, we figured we might as well do it right.”

Her smile started slow, then widened. “Since you brought it up and all ... think maybe we could look at something closer to the beach?”

Garrison tilted his chin. “Darlin’, if you want oceanfront, I’m sure we can find somethin’.”

“It has to have two islands,” Hawk said, not looking up from the phone. “Or room to add a second.”

“There’s only one of her,” I reminded him. “Why do we need two?”

Hawk shrugged. "I'm sure we can think of something."

He was probably right.

"So we're good now?" Garrison asked as he prepared to stand up.

Journey turned her attention to me. "Actually, there's one more thing I'd like to discuss."

I had an idea what it was, but I prompted her anyway. "What?"

"The club."

"What about it?" Nick glanced between Journey and me.

"Are you walking away from it?" she asked me.

"I don't know yet."

"Before you decide, would it be possible for you to take me? At the very least, I think I deserve to see it. I mean, it is what ultimately brought us together."

In a very roundabout, convoluted way, maybe. But she did have a point.

I looked at Garrison. He nodded his agreement. Nick followed suit. When I looked at Hawk, he acted as though he didn't have a say in the matter.

"I need to know your thoughts."

"I don't see a problem with letting her see it."

"While it's open," Journey added.

"Fine," I agreed.

All eyes snapped to me.

"You don't get to pick the date," I told Journey. "I will schedule it."

"Soon," she insisted.

I grinned. "Soon enough."

I didn't bother telling her there were a few things I had to put in place first before I could make that happen.

Thanks to a conversation with Nick and Garrison, we decided we would remain as members of the club; however, I would be stepping down from the role of Alpha. It was a position that required dedication, and since I'd recently outlined my priorities, Primal had dropped too many points on the list for me to continue as I was. I didn't necessarily want to give it up, but a relationship required compromise. And I intended to do my fair share.

I still had Austere and Primal Instincts, LLC, to focus on, and they would take enough of my time. Especially since my time would be limited now that I was in the process of aligning things so that I could put my attention where it really mattered.

On the family I never thought I'd have.

EPILOGUE 1

1

One month later, Friday...

JOURNEY

“I’M LEAVING RIGHT AT FIVE,” I TOLD Nick when he called me for the third time since he left at two. “Might even be a few minutes early. I’m almost done.”

“It can wait, Journey. Come. Home.”

I chuckled. “Since when do you condone procrastination, Mr. Weston?”

“Since we made plans for the weekend.”

I sighed. “You’re right. I get it.” I glanced at the clock on my computer. “I’ll leave at four-thirty. I’ll have Duke call Mason to let him know.”

“*I’ll* call Mason,” he corrected.

“Fine. You do that, and I’m going to finish what I’m doing. I promise I’ll be home in time to go. Where are we going again?”

“Nice try. Hurry it up.”

The call ended, and I set my phone on my desk, smiling as I finished typing up the email I’d been working on. It was the final review of my team’s plan for the upcoming silent auction that would run during the newly implemented summer break. One full week off for the entire company in order to reset for the second-half push. Since we historically saw our highest revenues during the holiday season and the first month of the new year, rolling out new products took priority at the end of the year.

We had some huge rollouts coming up, including the Primal Reflect and the Primal Rower—both of which were on target for a November launch, with preorder interests breaking company records. In order to prepare for them, I suggested that we implement a summer break for all employees—five full days off during the Fourth of July week. Honestly, I hadn’t figured anyone would go for it, but sometimes people surprise you. Creed, Hawk, Garrison, and Nick all jumped on board and set me to work preparing for the announcement.

As if that wasn't complicated enough, I coupled the surprise holiday with an online auction that would raise money for the newly created Natalie Weston Memorial Fund in honor of Nick's sister. With help from Garrison and Creed, we created the nonprofit organization in order to raise money that would directly benefit various charities across the country that supported mental health awareness. Similar initiatives would roll out globally once our new sites opened next year.

I'd been working ridiculous amounts of overtime to get everything set up, but I didn't mind. Even if I didn't have an extra few days off this year, I wouldn't mind. It was worth it.

My desk phone buzzed.

I smiled. "Yes, Duke. I know. I'm packing my stuff now."

"Just making sure."

I pushed the button to disconnect the call, then clicked save on my document, undocked my laptop, and tucked it into my bag before tossing my phone in with it.

I said goodnight to Duke, Bree, and Diane before Kurt kindly escorted me down to the main lobby and out to the Escalade that was waiting for me. I considered getting some work done during the drive home but decided against it. Instead, I opened my phone and flipped through the images of the new house that we had just made an offer on.

I couldn't count the number of houses we'd seen over the past four weeks. At least three dozen, I was sure. That was my fault. I went into the process intending to cater to everyone's needs. It took me about a week to realize my men were deferring to me on everything. When I called them on it, they told me whatever I wanted would be perfect for them. I tried to tell them that was like leaving dinner choices up to me every night—a stress no woman wanted—but they didn't relent, insisting the location—waterfront, in the hills, whatever—was for me to decide. They would, however, weigh in on the design. Once I realized I wasn't trying to buy a cookie-cutter house that would suit all our needs, the task became significantly easier. The hard part would come once we signed on the dotted line.

But that wasn't something I had to worry about until the sellers accepted the offer, so for now, it was a matter of enjoying the possibilities.

"Any chance Nick disclosed where he's taking me?" I asked Mason as he drove to the house.

"No, ma'am."

I'd figured as much. Even if Mason did know—which I believed he did—I just thought he was sworn to secrecy. And since he was a member of the highly secret kink club I still hadn't been invited to, it was pointless to push him for details.

When we arrived at the house half an hour later, Garrison greeted me at the door. He had an apple martini—a new drink favorite of mine—waiting.

Something was up. I could feel it in the air. "What's going on?"

He took my bag and set it on the bench near the front door. "Follow me."

"Do I want to?" I asked, sipping my cocktail as I ogled his sexy ass in those well-worn Wranglers that fit like they'd been molded on him. Not for the first time, I realized I needed to go to Texas. I hadn't been since I was a kid, and I was now curious if there were more asses that looked like his. Perhaps a small town full of them? I was supposed to finally get to meet his family in June, but Garrison hadn't mentioned it since our last discussion, so I was waiting for him.

"Walk, darlin'. That's all you need to worry about."

Uh-huh. Right. I wasn't sure what he was up to, but I realized I didn't have a choice when he took my free hand, leading me up to the third floor.

"If you're trying to delay me, you're going to have to explain to Nick," I informed him when he took me into my bedroom.

"You have fifteen minutes to change."

"Like a full personality makeover or...?"

This time he tried to hide his smile but couldn't. Garrison nodded toward a flat white box that was on the bed.

"What is this?" I asked but turned to find I'd been talking to no one. Garrison had left, closing the door behind him.

I took another sip of the fruity cocktail, then set the glass on the dresser. I fought the squeal that wanted to escape as I made a beeline for the present.

"What are y'all up to?" I wondered aloud as I lifted the lid on the box and set it aside. "Oh, my God."

Inside was a black velvet mini-dress. I held it up and grinned.

I guess it was fair to say that it had been a dress at some point in time, but then the designer decided to make ladder cuts along the arms from wrist to shoulder, as well as along the hips, and last but not least, across the front. Now it looked more like fabric that got stuck in a shredder. If it covered all the pertinent parts, I would be surprised.

"Only one way to find out."

Fifteen minutes wasn't a long time, so I carried it to the bathroom and quickly disrobed. The lightweight stretchy fabric wasn't as easy to get into it as you would think, thanks to all the cuts across it. It took work to get my arms through and not tangle my fingers. When I managed to get into it, I went to the bedroom to look in the cheval mirror.

Whoever picked this out had one thing in mind: sex. Because I looked freaking hot. Like goth-chic hot.

I adjusted my boobs. I had no cleavage to speak of, but it allowed the strips to stretch tight across my chest. The bodice was form-fitting, outlining the curve of my body and giving peeks at the skin beneath, highlighting the tan I'd been working on thanks to Hawk's desire to watch me sunbathe naked on the roof.

If Nick expected to take me out in public, he was going to rethink that once he saw me in this. It was absolutely stunning; however, it left very little to the imagination. Because of the numerous cutouts, I couldn't wear a bra or panties, and if I sat

down, I was almost positive I would be indecently on display. My nipples were covered, but I suspected a wardrobe malfunction was imminent if I wasn't careful.

A knock sounded on the door a second before it opened. Creed walked in, his eyes wide as he looked at me.

“Motherfucker,” he muttered under his breath.

I turned and posed for him, testing to see how much I could actually move without a nipple popping out. Surprisingly, the nips didn't slip.

His hands were behind his back as he approached, but then he produced another box, this one bigger than the first.

“Put your hair up and put these on. Then meet us downstairs.”

“Us?”

He set the box on the bed, then turned and walked out without a word.

“The no answers thing is getting awkward,” I called after him.

Hmm. What were they up to?

I padded over to the bed and opened the second box.

I giggled to myself, unable to hide my excitement when I pulled out one black leather, over-the-knee platform boot. It had a pointed toe and a skyscraper heel, but the laces that ran from ankle to thigh were what intrigued me.

It took a few minutes to get them on and to get the bows situated so that I was happy with them, but I managed. I tested them out, walking toward the bathroom. I was surprised by how comfortable they were. Once in the bathroom, I pulled my hair up in a ponytail before working it into an intricate design that required me to pull out my curling iron. I also touched up my makeup and added vivid red lipstick.

The result was ... well, to be honest, it was quite kinky.

I liked it. A lot.

Before leaving my bedroom, I tossed back the last of my drink and left the glass behind. I made it down the stairs with care, holding onto the railing to ensure I didn't go head first to my unveiling. To my surprise, Creed, Garrison, Nick, and Hawk were waiting for me in the living room.

A giddy churn erupted in my belly as they watched me approach. They held similar expressions to the one Creed had when he'd come to my room a short time ago.

Figuring it was fitting, I stopped and turned, giving them the full effect.

"Is this the look you were going for?" I asked when I made a complete turn, planting my hand on my hip.

"Fuck me," Garrison mumbled under his breath as he adjusted the crotch of his—

"You're wearing leather." My words came out like an accusation, but it was really a realization.

All four of them were wearing all black—leather pants, chest-hugging T-shirts, and combat-style boots—and holy mother of dragons, they looked edible. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen a man in leather before, but now that I had, I knew what I was going to request for my birthday. Yum.

Creed held out his hand, urging me toward him. I placed my right hand in his and allowed him to guide me toward him. He nodded at Nick, then turned his full attention to me. A moment later, Nick dropped a pillow onto the floor, right at my feet.

"Kneel, kitten."

My heart skipped a beat at the rough grind in Creed's voice, but I did as he requested. It wasn't easy in platforms, so I was grateful when Nick and Garrison assisted, holding my elbows as I lowered myself to the floor.

"We're going to present you with something before we leave," Creed said.

"We?" I looked at Nick. "I thought you said..."

His smirk was devious.

“There is no trip, huh?”

“We’re going somewhere, sweetheart. I promise.”

“Sneaky,” I acknowledged, then cut my eyes back to Creed and dutifully closed my mouth.

He moved, drawing my attention to his hands. He was holding a black velvet jewelry box that was far too big to hold a ring or a necklace. My heart beat a little harder in my chest as I waited patiently for him to open it. I got the feeling he was testing me because he waited a few uncomfortable beats too long before he opened it, revealing the most stunning piece of jewelry I ever could’ve imagined.

“A collar,” I whispered, admiring the beauty of it. It was a rigid C-shaped necklace made of white gold, probably two inches wide, with a strip of leather inlaid from one end to the other. A red metal heart was affixed to the very center of the front, with a gold Trinity Celtic knot laid over it. Beneath the decoration was a gold loop designed to hold the clasp from a leash.

My insides started a party as my anticipation soared to dangerous levels. For a month now, I’d been dropping hints about going to the club, and I could think of only one reason why they would dress me up like this and put a collar around my neck.

Creed turned the box so I could see the back of the necklace. There was a linked chain and a snap hook, which allowed it to be adjustable. He used his forefinger to move the decorative charm that dangled off the end. My initials.

Personally, I’d never owned a choker or a collar of any sort, but I’d read numerous stories of submissives who’d received one from their Dominant. In most of those stories, it represented a pivotal moment in their relationship. Was that what was happening here? Were they declaring their love? My heart squeezed so tight I expected the dress to become loose across my chest.

“We present this collar to you as a sign of ownership,” Creed said, his voice deeper and raspier than I’d expected. “Should you choose to accept, everyone who sees you at Primal will know who you belong to.”

I gasped, my gaze shooting to his face. “Primal? Really?”

I fought the urge to clap merrily. Barely.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “It’s time we show you what brought you into our lives in the first place.”

“Awww.” I smiled up at him.

“Do you wish to accept?” Garrison asked from where he stood beside me.

“Yes.” I nodded. “Absolutely, yes.”

Creed passed the box to Nick, then took the collar from its velvet bed before moving around behind me. I held my head high, stretching my neck so he could adjust it to fit snugly. As soon as it was secured around my neck, I reached up to touch it.

“I want to see it,” I said, trying not to bounce up from the floor although I wanted to.

“Patience, kitten.”

I giggled, too excited for patience. Unfortunately, getting up was nearly impossible with the boots. I was trying to decide which mirror would be closer—the one by the front door or the one in the guest bath—when Nick took my hand to help me up.

There was no way to keep from flashing them as I put one foot flat and started to rise. However, my men weren’t paying any attention to the sneak peek they were getting because Nick, Garrison, and Creed were going down to one knee before me. Hawk, encumbered by the brace on his leg, couldn’t perform the move, but he grabbed the small leather ottoman behind him and took a seat. The gesture made me smile, even as I tried to figure out what they were doing, because now I was the one standing over them, not the other way around.

“And this is a sign of our love,” Creed said, producing another velvet jewelry box, only this one was a standard ring size.

“What are you doing?” I rasped, tears instantly forming as I swallowed a lump that formed in my throat.

“Exactly what needs to be done.”

That was Creed. To the point even though I could hear emotion thickening his words. Before he even got the box open, a tear dripped down my cheek. I sniffled, holding my breath as he popped the lid open.

“Oh my God,” I gasped, staring at the stunning emerald-cut diamond that glittered back at me.

Creed took the ring from the box, and I noticed the four platinum bands, each lined with diamonds all the way around.

“Each band represents one of us,” Garrison explained, still on one knee and watching me closely.

I couldn’t stop the tears that fell because that was the sweetest thing ever. Still, I had to make a joke or risk curling into a ball and sobbing like a baby. “Makes sense. I just figured they were to support that freaking boulder.”

He chuckled softly.

“Although we’re doing this in ceremony only,” Nick said, “we’d like very much if you would spend the rest of your life with us.”

My hand went to my heart as I looked at each one of them. “This is ... you’re asking ... Oh, my God.”

“Is that a yes?” Hawk whispered. “I’m hoping it’s a yes.”

I choked out a laugh as more tears fell from my eyes. “Of course, it’s yes. So many times, yes.”

Garrison looked at Creed. “Isn’t that the same thing she said about the collar?”

“I think it is,” Creed said, his eyes still locked on my face.

“I’m easy when it comes to the four of you,” I said with a sob. “What can I say?”

Nick and Garrison laughed while Hawk grinned, and Creed continued to stare at me.

“Still yes,” I added so there was no question, laughing because the tears wouldn’t stop.

Creed took my left hand and slid the ring on my finger.

The weight of the ring on my finger was more than I expected, but I loved it. It would take some getting used to because it was so wide, but it was absolutely perfect.

“We’d also like to request a ceremony of some sort,” Nick added. “Doesn’t have to be—”

“A wedding?” I blurted, staring in awe at the ring. “I get to have a wedding?”

“If that’s what you wanna call it.” Garrison nodded.

A wedding. My heart sighed because I hadn’t expected that. I understood that it would be only in ceremony because I couldn’t marry four men, and I wouldn’t choose only one of them to tie the knot with. I had no desire to take their last names, either. However, I wouldn’t mind an event that would relay to our friends and family what we meant to each other.

“First, you’ve got to check out the kink club,” Hawk reminded me.

My gaze snapped to him, and my other hand went to the collar around my neck. “Definitely. Kink first. Wedding later.”

“The way it should be,” Nick added, earning some laughter.

Never in a million years could I have imagined a day happier than that one.

Or kinkier, as it would turn out.

2

CREED

“IS THE BLINDFOLD REALLY NECESSARY?” JOURNEY ASKED as Mason pulled the SUV into the parking lot of Primal.

“Yes.”

“Are you afraid I’ll know where your secret playhouse is, and I’ll come here when you’re at work?”

“Something like that,” I said in response to her teasing. I wasn’t worried about her coming here. I knew she wouldn’t. Not without one of us. I simply hadn’t decided whether another trip to Primal was in our future.

For the past month, I’d been trying to sort out my feelings where the club was concerned. On the one hand, I was ready to step down. It was necessary for the survival of Primal. They needed an Alpha who would put their needs first, and I no longer had time to do that. But on the other hand, this place was a part of me, and the thought of walking away was the equivalent of deciding which limb I was willing to lose.

Needless to say, I was torn over the decision, but I knew what was right, and I was here tonight to pass the crown to the one who would lead them going forward.

“Am I supposed to act a certain way?” Journey asked when I helped her out of the SUV.

“Tonight, kitten, you belong solely to me,” I stated firmly. “You do exactly what I tell you to do. No questions asked.”

She seemed to stand taller. “Yes, Alpha.”

I had expected a hint of sarcasm, but there was only obedience, which made the choice even more difficult. I hadn’t yet had the opportunity to explore this side of myself with her, and I hated that I would give that up before I did. It was probably for the best, but it didn’t help me come to terms with it.

I left the blindfold on and placed my hand on the back of her neck, guiding her forward.

Hawk, Garrison, and Nick were waiting at the door. They had come in Nick's car so we didn't all have to pile into one.

"Alpha," Garrison greeted as he opened the door for me.

From this point forward, I knew there would be pomp and circumstance. It was part of the ritual. Here at Primal, we embraced the hierarchy that we'd established. And since I was at the top of the food chain, they treated me with the utmost respect. Even my best friends, who had seen me at my worst, took their directives from me within these walls.

I guided Journey into the reception room. The submissive who usually manned the desk was kneeling on the floor, her head down, hands clasped in her lap. She didn't speak to me, didn't greet me, or smile. If she did, it would be grounds for punishment.

Nick opened the next door, and I guided Journey through.

I stopped just inside, taking it all in. It wasn't the first time I'd been back since the night Clark Huxley brought me here. I'd been here a few times under the guise of checking on things. In truth, I'd come to see if I could get some clarity on the decision that needed to be made. It hadn't helped. I was no closer to deciding than I had been, even though I had already mapped out a plan for how the evening would go.

Journey remained at my side, her shoulders back, neck stretched tall, showcasing the collar around her neck. There was no denying she looked fucking edible in that dress and those boots. I wanted nothing more than to strap her to one of those spanking benches so I could spank her pretty little ass for taunting me so much. It didn't matter that she did so without trying.

"Remove the blindfold," I instructed Hawk, who was trailing behind with the help of one crutch.

He'd begged me not to use them tonight, insisting he could walk without them. No doubt he was making progress, but it hadn't quite been six weeks since the surgery to fix his fractured femur, and I was unwilling to compromise his recovery. I'd agreed he could use one instead of two, but the

other was in the car in the event I saw him limping more than I was comfortable with. Hawk had been working diligently to get better, following every instruction from the doctor and the physical therapist, but I worried he wouldn't make good decisions tonight. And since he belonged to me while we were here, I got to decide for him.

Hawk removed the covering from Journey's eyes while I stood beside her and watched. I wanted to see her first reaction to the place because I knew it would help me come to a decision about how to proceed.

Her eyes adjusted as she took it all in, her gaze sliding from one side of the open space to the other. If she were expecting something fancy, she would be disappointed. I saw no hint of dismay in her expression, only intrigue.

“Remove my shirt, hellcat.”

Journey turned to me, her blue eyes glittering with curiosity. She didn't ask questions as she lifted the hem of my T-shirt, slowly working it up until she could pull it over my head.

“May I?” she asked, her voice soft.

I didn't have to ask what she was requesting, and though I was hesitant, I nodded.

Journey moved behind me and ran her fingers lightly over the scars that had formed from the lashing I had taken that night. She pressed a kiss to the center of my back, exactly as she did whenever she saw me without a shirt. It had become a routine that humbled me and made me feel things I never thought I would. I couldn't see the physical scars unless I looked in the mirror, but the mental ones would always be present. Whenever I felt a twinge of pain, it all came rushing back. Although Journey had suggested I talk to a therapist about it, I refused. However, I was using her as my sounding board. I didn't think it would help when I started, but I knew she was the reason I was moving forward, leaving that night behind me without having to bury it deep.

“Remove Hawk’s shirt,” I instructed when she returned to my side.

She didn’t linger as long with him, as though she knew her attention should be focused on me.

Once he was shirtless, I turned to face him, pulling the leather collar from my pocket. I hadn’t presented it to him as we’d done for Journey because it was unnecessary. I didn’t believe in formal collaring, but Nick and Garrison had talked me into it. Since I wasn’t interested in doing what was normal when it came to Journey, I had agreed. While I had no desire to immerse her in a world of protocols and rituals, I couldn’t deny that I wanted to explore this with her. That was part of why I was conflicted. With Hawk, I merely wanted to ensure the members knew he was off-limits.

“You belong to me,” I told him, fastening the thick leather collar around his neck.

“Yes, Alpha,” he rasped, his eyes glazed as he stared at me.

I held out my hand to Garrison so he could pass me the two chain leashes he’d brought with him. I connected one to Hawk’s collar.

“We’ll catch up in a bit,” Garrison told me before he turned and strolled off with Nick.

I turned to Journey, connecting the other leash to her collar. “Would you like a tour?”

“Yes, Alpha.”

I held the handles of both leashes loosely in my hand. When I moved forward, Journey and Hawk did as well.

She was responding precisely as I would’ve expected, although we hadn’t had a single discussion about rules or protocol. I probably should’ve given her a few lessons on how to act while here, but I didn’t. Since I was unsure whether this lifestyle would be something we pursued in the future, I figured it was unnecessary. But her responses pleased me, making it even more difficult to decide what to do.

Holding the end of their leashes loosely, I walked with Journey by my side and Hawk a few steps behind her. There was a wide path that had been cleared, allowing members to walk through without disrupting the scenes taking place. Sections were cordoned off, separating play spaces from open areas.

Although most members preferred private areas or the wilderness, as we refer to the back section of the warehouse, some enjoyed playing for an audience. There were St. Andrew's crosses, barrel horses, spanking benches, and a variety of cages throughout. Most were occupied at the moment—Primals playing with or punishing their prey.

Both Primals and prey came in all shapes, sizes, and colors. Although we catered to a specific brand of kink, Primal was a safe space. We embraced all races and genders and had zero tolerance for hate, and by doing so, we could connect on a deeper level with our baser instincts. After all, that was the point.

I stopped when Journey stopped, allowing her time to observe. I watched how she reacted when a submissive dropped to their knees and bowed their head before me. It was a requirement if they weren't scening with their Primal, and they were not permitted to move until I had passed by. I greeted several members as we walked through, never introducing them to Journey because that wasn't protocol. This wasn't a social club. We didn't come here to chat or catch up. That was what Austere was for.

"Questions?" I prompted when Journey's gaze skimmed the space.

"It's not quite what I expected."

"What *did* you expect?"

"I guess something more ... primitive. Less structure, maybe."

"Keep walking," I instructed. "You've only seen a small portion."

I guided her through, letting her watch as a Primal used a rattan cane on her prey. He had long, thin welts along the back of his right thigh as well as his bare ass. Not too far from the scene was one of our watchdogs—as they were affectionately known—who kept an eye on everything. We rarely had to intervene, but the watchdogs were in place for everyone’s safety.

“Do not react,” I said firmly just before the Primal turned so her face was visible.

I had to give Journey credit. She remained perfectly still to the naked eye, although I felt a slight tug on the leash in my hands when she straightened. Cheryl winked at Journey before strolling to the other side of her submissive so she could create matching lines along that side.

“Good girl,” I told Journey before leading her away from the scene.

We made our way down the hall that separated the front area from the back. It was lined on both sides by private rooms. There were no doors, only long curtains that concealed if that was what the member required or pulled back if they preferred to be watched. The furniture in the rooms varied. Some had iron beds, others spanking benches or stockades. Nothing fancy because most people didn’t come here for privacy or to do what they could easily do in the comfort of their own homes.

“I think this is what you were expecting,” I told Journey when we reached the end of the hall.

She gasped softly when she looked up.

“Welcome to the jungle,” I told her, grinning when she flashed a smile at me.

“Wow,” she said, her voice thick with awe as she stared at what little she could see of the entrance.

Two-thirds of the building had been dedicated to what was referred to as the jungle. Originally, we’d created an obstacle course that loosely resembled a forest due to the artificial foliage tossed in. At the time, the trees were merely two-by-

fours or larger beams added for the purpose of securing prey if necessary. It had morphed over the years into something even I couldn't deny was impressive. And yet, there were as many eye hooks as there were leaves in our jungle, and I couldn't count the number of people who'd trampled through there all in the name of kink.

"Can we go in?" Journey asked, her eyes pleading for a positive response.

I unhooked the leash from her collar. "Take your boots off. Prey can only be barefoot."

If she was trying to hide her grin, she failed.

"Alpha," Hawk said from behind me, drawing the word out in warning.

I turned to look at him while Journey unlaced her boots, passing the leash for him to hold. "It'll be fine."

I could see the concern in his eyes, and I understood it. Unless disclosed beforehand, if and when the Alpha went into the jungle with prey, he could be challenged by any member looking to take over the position of Alpha. And any due-paying member was allowed to challenge the Alpha, but if they didn't defeat him, they could never challenge again.

"If someone follows me in, send Nick or Garrison in for Journey."

Hawk's eyebrows V'd, but he gave a solid nod.

I turned back to Journey and the jungle that would decide my fate in the next half hour.

3

JOURNEY

IF I SAID THIS WASN'T THE MOST thrilling thing I'd ever done, it would be a lie. And I wasn't talking about this wondrous oasis Creed was about to lead me into but the experience as a whole. Never in my wildest fantasies had I envisioned an actual jungle in the middle of Los Angeles. Granted, I wasn't sure we were in LA anymore since Creed had blindfolded me when we left the house, but the point was still the same.

Truth was, I hadn't been sure what to expect because I was still trying to wrap my head around what being a Primal meant. Yes, I'd researched it online, but that didn't prepare me for this. What was laid out before me had me curious and a bit hesitant. If it weren't for Creed being at my side, I probably would've bypassed the opportunity to explore.

He placed his hand on the back of my neck and guided me through the foliage-wrapped entrance, which was nothing more than a wrought iron fence that spanned across the hallway. The gate was opened and secured with a padlock and chain.

Since it was nighttime, the skylights overhead were dark, leaving the forest full of shadows and secrets. There were spotlights scattered throughout, shining up at a variety of trees and towering plants, and more than outlined the thin-planked deck that appeared to be a trail.

We stepped up onto the deck, continuing forward. On the right, a long backless bench went for a few feet before angling and disappearing deeper into the trees and plants. On the left, a stone wall separated this space from the front of the building. As we walked, the teakwood deck curved to the right, and the foliage expanded to the left, providing play space on both sides.

"May I ask questions?"

"Sure," Creed said, keeping his hand behind my neck.

"Who designed this?"

“One of our members is a landscape designer. She started small. It grew from there.”

“Are the trees real?”

“They are,” he said, sounding amused. “Everything’s real in here.”

“That has to be a lot of upkeep.”

“It is.”

I found myself looking at every little detail from the ferns, bamboo, Areca palms, bird of paradise, and elephant ear plants. It was apparent someone had taken great care to create this oasis and even more to maintain it. There were stone structures scattered throughout on both sides of the path. Some contained more plants within; others looked like primitive torture spots.

“Is that for ... playing?”

Creed chuckled. “You could say that.”

I noticed he kept his answers simple, so I tried to do the same with my questions. I peeked down smaller paths that veered off from the main one, curious where they led but not wanting to suggest we take them. Every now and then, I would hear leaves rustling and the sound of heavy breathing, and I could only imagine the scenes we might stumble upon based on what I’d seen at the front of the building.

“This seems like the perfect place to hunt prey,” I mused, noticing a small stream leading to a larger pool of water.

The sound of falling water piqued my curiosity enough to have me sneaking a look through the trees to see a waterfall built into an outcropping of rocks. From where I stood, the only way to know we were inside a building was the skylights overhead and the intimate lighting scattered throughout. Otherwise, it felt like a real jungle oasis.

“Do people actually get in that water?” I asked Creed when I moved back to his side.

“You can’t imagine the things people do in here. Nothing’s off limits.”

A few minutes later, when we were at the far back of the jungle, I understood more what that meant. We came across a woman strapped to a tall palm tree. The light brown rope wasn't just wrapped around her body, it created an intricate design around her torso—circling her bare breasts, weaving across her abdomen and between her legs—while it secured her in place. Her arms were raised over her head, her wrists shackled by more rope and secured to the tree. Her left leg was lifted out to the side, held up by more rope that curled under her knee, and was knotted on the branch of another tree. A man was kneeling in front of her, his face buried between her legs. I wanted to look away out of respect, but I couldn't tear my eyes off the scene. It reminded me of when my men secured me to the leather sling in the wine cellar. They'd trussed me up and had their wicked way with me. Just the thought sent a shiver dancing down my spine.

The chirp of a bird had me peering overhead, seeking the source.

“Those are sound effects,” Creed said softly, urging me forward along the path. “No live animals in here.”

“Unless you count the Primals,” I said with a grin.

I still wasn't sure how they managed upkeep for all of this, but it was most certainly impressive. I could almost imagine myself loose in here, trying to outrun Creed or Garrison. The thought made me smile.

“Any other questions?” he asked as we returned to the place where we'd entered.

I noticed he was looking around as though sensing a threat. Or, at the very least, expecting one.

“Are you waiting for something?”

Creed's attention shifted back to me. “No.”

“For someone?” I amended.

“No.”

He answered too quickly to believe him, but I decided not to question him. He seemed tenser than before we'd come in

here. I had to wonder whether—

My thoughts died instantly when we reached the mouth of the jungle and the hallway we'd come from. As far as I could see, there were people kneeling on the floor, their heads lowered in a submissive position. A sea of black leather and skin laid out before us. Even the Primals I'd seen earlier, including Cheryl, were bowing to their Alpha.

The only ones standing were Garrison and Nick. Their backs were to us as they faced the people kneeling. Hawk wasn't on his knees—probably because of the brace. He had his head lowered and his arms behind his back—his way of submitting.

I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do, so I looked at Nick, hoping he would tell me.

He didn't turn around.

Neither did Garrison.

“Does anyone wish to challenge the Alpha?” Nick asked, his voice loud enough for the people at the end of the hall to hear.

A chorus of *nays* erupted.

“Does anyone wish to challenge the Alpha's mate?”

Another chorus of *nays* ensued.

“Then he stands as our Alpha until otherwise challenged.”

I looked at Creed, and I saw something on his face I hadn't seen before. Relief? Gratitude?

Suddenly, I knew exactly what I was supposed to do.

I stepped away from him, walking a few steps forward, then turned to face him. I was the closest one to him, directly in his line of sight. With his eyes on mine, I bowed my head and lowered myself to my knees, assuming the same position as everyone else.

I didn't know what it all meant, but I knew Creed was not ready to relinquish his reign as the Alpha of Primal.

It felt almost as though we'd come full circle. Finding the Alpha of Primal had been my goal at one point. I'd followed my instincts, and the path I'd taken had led me directly to this man, to this moment. And since I had already pledged my love and life to him, I figured giving him my submission was the only gift I had left.

Knowing that he accepted it made it all the sweeter.

4

CREED

I MAINTAINED MY COMPOSURE UNTIL EVERYONE HAD dispersed, returning to what they'd been doing before their elaborate show of faith. As soon as they did, I turned to Nick.

“It doesn't change the fact we don't—”

He nodded his chin when someone called my name. I turned to find Cheryl standing behind me, a wicked grin on her face.

“Do you have a moment?” she prompted.

Here at Primal, Cheryl Mann did not stumble over herself. She didn't pretend to be anything but what she was, a formidable Dominatrix with a penchant for rattan canes and biting commands—the complete opposite of the kind-hearted grandmotherly persona she maintained while at the office.

I glanced at Nick to see him nod with his chin.

It would've been easy to pass Journey off to one of them for safekeeping while I gave Cheryl the time she requested, but I decided I wouldn't. If Journey expected to be part of this lifestyle in any capacity, she had to understand what I expected of her. It would be vastly different than how I treated her at home.

“Sure. If you need privacy, we can use my office.”

“I do, yes.”

I retrieved the leash from Hawk, then connected it to Journey's collar. I decided not to leave Hawk behind either, wanting him to understand that I wasn't making empty promises to him when I told him I wouldn't go back to the way things were before. I wanted something real with him, and though we hadn't mapped out what that would look like now that he had a relationship with Garrison, I refused to leave the decisions to him.

“Please keep an eye on my pet,” Cheryl told Nick. “He's currently in the aftercare room.”

“Of course.”

While he went off to do that, I led Journey and Hawk through the narrow corridor at the back of the building. We’d cordoned off the smallest section we could for an office that would allow me to deal with club-only business. It wasn’t much more than a ten-by-ten space with a desk and a computer. We did not maintain paper files here because that was a risk we were unwilling to take with our members’ privacy. All pertinent information was kept on an encrypted laptop that I kept locked up in a fireproof safe.

“What can I help you with, Cheryl?” I asked, pointing to the floor on the far side of my chair when Journey looked my way. “Kneel.”

She did without question.

Hawk couldn’t kneel at this point, but he assumed a submissive position, bowing his head and clasping his hands behind his back.

When Cheryl took a seat, I took mine.

“I think it’s time we discuss what a B-team looks like.”

“Betas?”

She grinned. “Yes. I wasn’t sure you’d catch that one.”

She was teasing me, as she was prone to do in private. And though Journey and Hawk were in the room, this was as private as it could get. We both knew prey weren’t permitted to relay any information about what they might hear to anyone. This was the first time I’d trusted anyone to join me in a private meeting with any of the members, and Cheryl would understand the significance of that.

“What did you have in mind?”

“For starters, myself and Rick.”

She was referring to Duke’s husband.

“I think it would be beneficial if we dispersed some of the duties amongst other members as well. It’s time we all stepped up and contributed to the well-being of the club.”

“Why would you want to do that?”

“To put it simply, we’ve all taken for granted that the door would be open when we needed it to be. And the moment it wasn’t ... let’s say there was a bit of chaos.”

I’d heard a few rumors about an uproar within the ranks. Since I’d intended to step down, I’d pretended it didn’t bother me. It had because I had a duty to these people. They trusted me, and I didn’t make a habit of letting people down. Or at least I tried not to.

“I’ve also talked to Cadence. She’d like to contribute by maintaining the membership roster and collecting dues.”

I listened as Cheryl continued to outline a way to parse out the duties that had belonged to me for so long. I maintained my composure, but inside, the weight was lifting.

“For as long as you’ve been in this position, you’ve taken it on yourself to handle all responsibilities. And while that’s noble, it’s unnecessary. No one said anything because maintaining the club was your highest priority.”

“It’s—”

She interrupted without pause, gesturing with her hand toward Journey. “We can all see that you have priorities that require your attention above all else. We respect that because many of us have them, too. Not to mention, you won’t want to remain Alpha indefinitely, so it’s time we start asking members to step up because you and I both know that physical dominance isn’t a true measure of worth, merely determination. This club has been lucky to have such a worthy leader for so long. Help us protect that by allowing us to step up where needed.”

“And if I say no?”

A slow smile formed on Cheryl’s face. “Then I might have to challenge you myself.”

I chuckled. Cheryl would never do that, but I appreciated the sentiment.

“Okay,” I told her without hesitation. “I’d like to see what that looks like from all angles.”

She nodded as she started to stand. “Good. I’ll talk to Rick, and we’ll create an outline. If you hear rumors of secret meetings taking place in the next week or two, ignore them. I’ll ensure you hear everything that goes on.”

“Thank you, Cheryl.”

The sincerity in my tone caused her to look back at me, and for a brief moment, I saw the sweet, grandmotherly woman I interacted with at Primal Instincts.

“Anything for you, Alpha.”

I remained in my chair until she walked out and closed the door.

“What are your thoughts, Hawk?”

He cleared his throat as though surprised I would ask that question. “It’s a great idea. I don’t think the club is ready to lose you as its leader. And I don’t think you’re ready to lose the club.”

I wasn’t. That much was evident based on all the brainstorming I’d done for the past few weeks, trying to devise a way to manage everything on my plate and still ensure I put Journey first.

“Kitten? Would you be opposed to some exposure to our lifestyle?”

She looked up at me, her heart in her eyes as always. “I’d like the opportunity to serve my Alpha. In whatever capacity that may be.”

“Stand up.”

When she did, I tugged the end of the leash, urging her toward me. “Do you understand the duties of a submissive?”

“Not entirely.” She reached up and fingered the collar around her neck. “But I’d like to earn this. Whatever that looks like.”

“When you submit to someone fully, you expose your vulnerabilities,” I explained.

“If you can, I can,” she said cheekily.

I appreciated her candor. “You put your entire existence in the hands of someone else.”

“I already have,” she said softly. “I’ve given my heart to four of the most amazing men in the world. I think it’s safe to say I’m as vulnerable as it gets.”

“Maybe.” I put my hands on her hips and pulled her toward me as I sat up straight. I held her stare. “But you don’t know true vulnerability until you’re naked and running from a predator, not knowing what he intends to do to you when he catches you.”

“If,” she said with a sexy grin. “*If* he catches me.”

My eyebrows arched in challenge. “I certainly look forward to proving who the alpha really is, hellcat.”

“And I look forward to making you work for it.”

5

Three weeks later, Thursday...

JOURNEY

THE VIP SECTION OF AUSTERE WAS RARELY ever closed for private events.

Tonight, it was.

For me.

For my birthday, to be more specific.

The big two-five, and I was celebrating it with nearly everyone I knew and even a few people I didn't.

I'd thought tonight would be a quiet dinner for two since Garrison had asked me to join him to discuss our weekend plans. Garrison, Hawk, and I were going to Coyote Ridge on Saturday so I could meet his parents for the first time. It was my idea, actually. I told him it didn't feel right wearing his ring and not getting to meet the people who brought him into the world. He pretended it was no big deal, but I knew better. He was close to his parents. Very close, if their weekly phone calls were anything to go by. Yet he still tried to play it off.

So I'd gladly accepted the dinner invitation so I could get specifics on how to win his parents over. I wanted them to like me, and I wanted to ensure I didn't do anything that would make them not.

I never had the chance to ask the questions. Nor did I get dinner—at least not the steak and baked potato I'd had my heart set on. Finger foods had become the cuisine of the evening, along with a lavish, three-tier chocolate mousse cake that my mother had ordered for the event. It was from my favorite bakery, and while I couldn't imagine eating another bite, I was hoping there would be some to take home because tomorrow, I would be dreaming about it again.

The finger foods and cake had been served here, in the VIP section of Austere. Instead of the candlelight and wine I was promised, I found friends and family who attempted to give me a heart attack at a young age when they lunged out of their hiding spots, singing an off-key rendition of the happy

birthday song. The surprise had worked, but I assured Garrison, Hawk, Nick, and Creed that was the last time they would pull one over on me. My men were far more secretive than I gave them credit for, and I vowed to keep a closer eye on them so I could be in the know. To be fair, I think they saw that as a challenge, so who knew what was in store for me in the future.

But I couldn't deny it was totally worth it. Spending an evening with the people I cared about most was the best birthday present a girl could ask for. My men were here, as were my parents. Hawk's mom was also here. So were Rhylee and Avery. Oh, and Mason, too.

Most everyone else I knew from work. Duke, Kurt, Bree, Diane, and Hadleigh made it. Hadleigh was my new executive assistant. Evidently, when you were a senior vice president, you needed your own assistant. That, and Nick finally got tired of Diane not being available when he needed her. It wasn't my fault that Diane liked me more.

I got to hire Hadleigh myself, which I did from a huge candidate list. I was an interviewer virgin before that round of interviews, and I spent a good amount of time thinking about my interview with Primal Instincts. I hadn't yet had the chance to ask Hadleigh if they'd been bouncing back and forth between what they wanted to say and what they actually said. I figured it was best I didn't know. Hadleigh was even helping me teach Creed the importance of gender-neutral pronouns. Creed slipped up a lot, but Hadleigh was very understanding when he did. They knew it was age, not disrespect, that had him fumbling more often than not. I loved Creed more because he was trying hard to get it right.

Because my work friends were here, I finally met Duke's husband, Rick. Officially, I mean. I saw both of them at Primal but was never introduced that night. I also wasn't permitted to speak of that, no matter what—not if I ever expected to go back, and I totally did. Let me tell you, that was its own special brand of hell. I wasn't great with secrets, and every encounter I had with Duke was a test I knew I would one day fail.

Bree came solo because she was in between dates at the moment. Diane brought her fiancée, Amy. Kurt came with his wife, Malia, a quiet Polynesian woman who had her husband wrapped around her little finger. Hadleigh was without a partner at the moment but assured me they would be bringing someone to show off at the next gig—their words.

How these men of mine pulled it off, I still didn't know. I'd been busy with work for the past few weeks, so maybe that had been part of it. At the same time, I'd been spending some time with my parents, as well as with Avery and Rhylee, in an attempt to maintain a social life that didn't revolve around the four men I wanted to spend every second with.

"There's the birthday girl," Rhylee chirped when she saw me. "You snuck off after they cut the cake."

She swooped in for a hug, not allowing me to get up from my seat on the bench that ran alongside the bar area. From here, I could see everyone, and I was watching the interactions, enjoying the way my mother and Hawk's chatted about future wedding plans. Although I told them it wouldn't actually be a wedding, they refused to listen. According to my mother, vows should be exchanged between people who love each other. Whether that was two people or five, it still held value. Since she was going on thirty years being married to two men—in ceremony only—I couldn't very well argue with her, now, could I?

"I need to admire that rock again," Rhylee said, lifting my hand. "Holy shit. It's still as stunning as the first time."

She wasn't wrong. I thought the same thing every single time I looked at it.

"That. Is. Something."

I admired the ring as I'd done a few thousand times since the night they gave it to me. Unlike the collar, I could wear this for the world to see, and while I wasn't making a point of telling anyone, people tended to notice a four-carat diamond when it was staring them in the face.

“Are you ready to meet Garrison’s parents?” she asked as she took the seat beside me.

“I am.”

“Excited?”

“Yes.” And I really was. I was also nervous.

“Is Hawk going with you?”

I nodded, my gaze instantly shifting to him. He was standing near the bar, talking to Creed and Garrison. They were laughing at something Hawk said, and even though I had no idea what it was, I found myself smiling. As though he felt me looking, Hawk’s eyes shifted my way. He raised his glass in a mock toast, and I mirrored the gesture.

“You guys are just so freaking cute.”

I laughed. “I wouldn’t let them hear you say that.”

“It’s true, though.”

“Speaking of cute... where’s Avery?”

“She’s hanging with her clique.”

“You mean the people she works with?” I laughed.

“That woman is so in love with her job; it’s not even funny.” Rhylee was smiling. “She talks about them non-stop.”

I was well aware of how well Avery was getting along with her team. I’d had the chance to have lunch with Avery, Gem, and Delaney on multiple occasions over the past couple of months. It was never planned, but when we saw each other in the cafeteria, it was natural to sit down and chat.

“So what did they get you for your birthday?”

“Flowers.”

Rhylee’s forehead creased. “I mean, that’s romantic and all, but that’s it?”

“I happen to like flowers.”

“What kind did they get you?”

I paused, feeling my cheeks warm. “I think the better question is, what *didn't* they get?”

I was embarrassed to tell Rhylee that there had been flower deliveries throughout the day. Twenty-five lavish floral arrangements were now decorating the entire seventh floor of Primal Instincts. Once they filled my office, we had to put them in the reception areas as well as in Hawk's and Garrison's offices just to have enough room for them all. It was a bit over the top, but I wouldn't deny that I loved the gesture as much as I loved the sweet aroma that was now permanently a part of the building. Thankfully, no one was allergic.

“So, flowers and a party?” Rhylee peered around at the guests. “I guess there are worse things.”

I didn't bother to explain to Rhylee that flowers and a party were the perfect gifts for a woman who already had everything she could've ever wanted.

I couldn't imagine anything topping this.

An hour later, I realized flowers and a party weren't the only things my men had in store for me tonight. The best part of my birthday came as the party was winding down.

I should preface this by saying that I had actually asked for a specific birthday present. I made the request that morning before I left for work. Honestly, it was a wonder any of them made it through the surprise party after the note I'd left on the kitchen island requesting the one thing in the world only they could give me: all four of them for one hot, sinful encounter.

I'd intended to leave my request vague, but in case they came up with the idea of tying me up and using me the way I enjoyed so much, I added a few details. Those details turned into a single-page short story. It was the first fantasy I'd written in months, and depending on how things went tonight, I was thinking it might be a fun way to spice things up.

My first clue that they were willing to indulge me was when Nick approached me as I came out of the bathroom.

He was leaning against the wall, his full attention on me, when I stepped out into the hallway.

“Hey,” he greeted casually.

“Hey, back.” I smiled, not catching on right away that he was role-playing.

He stood tall and held out his hand. “My name’s Nick.”

And just like that, someone set off sparklers in my belly.

“Journey,” I greeted, shaking his hand.

He held my hand a little too long for two people who just met, but I didn’t pull away, enjoying how his thumb brushed over my knuckles.

“You here with anyone?”

“Just a couple of friends.” I peered past him as though looking for the people I had come with. “But I think they’re otherwise engaged. I was actually about to leave.”

“Do you have somewhere else to be?”

“Not necessarily,” I admitted.

“Then maybe we could take this two-person party back to my place.”

Based on how he shook his head and closed his eyes, I could tell he realized how cheesy that sounded. I managed to keep a straight face, though, appreciating the effort.

“Oh, I don’t know.” I pulled my hand from his. “I ... uh...”

The air left my lungs when he moved closer, crowding me against the wall. I stared up into his sparkling brown eyes, drowning in the sexy scent of his cologne.

“Just one night,” he said smoothly, leaning in but not touching me. “Haven’t you ever just wanted one night to do whatever you wanted?”

My breaths grew labored, but not from fear. Even if I hadn’t known him, I wasn’t sure I could’ve resisted Nick’s

charm. There was something sweetly sinful about him that had liquid heat pooling between my thighs.

I made the first move, putting my hands on his stomach while I held his stare. He was wearing a polo that was untucked from his jeans. I tried for subtle, slipping my pinkies beneath to feel the warmth of his hard abs.

“And what if I have?” I dared.

His breaths were coming faster, too. “Let me give that to you.”

I pretended to be considering it, but my thoughts became jumbled when he leaned in and kissed me. He was hesitant at first, tilting his head at an angle, his mouth hovering over mine. We swapped air for a few breaths before his lips touched mine. When they did, I caved to the seduction, sliding my hands beneath his shirt to feel the hard body beneath.

He moaned into my mouth, his tongue sweeping in to mingle with mine. Someone should’ve written sonnets about this man’s kiss. The world deserved to know how expertly he dominated a woman’s mouth, but I was unwilling to share, so words would have to do.

“One night,” I agreed, my words whispering against his lips.

He pulled back and met my gaze as though having to make a final decision. When he did, he took my hand and led the way down the stairs and out into the night. His car was waiting for him at the front, which told me he knew I was a sure thing. That made me grin, but I remained in character as he helped me into the car.

The drive to the house was done with small talk. He told me about his day, and I told him about mine, relaying the events as though we didn’t know each other in the biblical sense already. It was a rush.

When we arrived at the house, there were no cars in the driveway. I hadn’t looked for Creed, Garrison, or Hawk before we left, so I wasn’t sure if they were still at Austere or if they’d already come home. I liked not knowing.

“This is where you live?” I asked as he helped me out of the car.

I pretended to admire the house, looking around the same way I did the first time Creed brought me here.

“For now,” he answered. “I’m moving in a few months. The new house is undergoing renovations.”

“That sounds tedious.”

“It’ll be worth it.”

I was glad he thought so because it wasn’t an easy feat, but I was enjoying it as much as I could. And yes, I was looking forward to moving into the new house in October when it was slated to be finished.

Nick looked at me and smiled as he unlocked the front door. He took my hand and led the way inside.

“Can I get you something to drink?” he offered as he guided me into the living room.

“I’m good, thank you. But feel free to make yourself something.”

“There’s only one thing I need at the moment.”

Before I could ask what that was, Nick pulled me into him, crushing his mouth to mine. This time, there were no illusions as to who we were to one another as I sank into the heat of him, letting him own me with a kiss that lit me up from the inside. I clutched at him as though he might get away, pulling on his clothes because I desperately wanted them gone. Despite my efforts, he controlled the momentum, guiding me down to the sofa, his knee settling between my legs while his mouth plundered mine.

“I want to watch you,” he rasped, panting heavily as he ground his thigh between my legs.

I rocked against him, seeking friction against my aching clit.

“I want to watch while they fuck you.”

I swore I would come from his words alone. They painted a picture that I'd only fantasized about. I had no idea what they had in store for me, but I wanted it. More importantly, I wanted to know that Nick was on board with this. I couldn't count how many times he'd watched me these past few months. On the rooftop and the balcony, several times in this very room, I'd caught sight of Nick in the shadows, watching me with Creed, Garrison, or Hawk. They knew he was there because it wasn't a secret anymore. No one seemed to mind. In fact, it heightened the intensity. Being watched by this man was certainly my kink.

"You can watch," I whispered against his mouth. "Under one condition."

"What's that?"

"After..." I pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth. "After they fuck me and make me come, I want to watch you come."

His inhale was ragged and sexy.

I kissed the other corner of his mouth. "And then later, I want to make you come again. This time while you're inside me."

Nick groaned, his hips rocking against mine, making me gasp. I was so close; it would only take—

The sound of a car door shutting had Nick lifting himself up. He smiled down at me and put his finger to his lips in the silent gesture for silence. I nodded my agreement, then mourned the loss of his heat when he stood up and slipped out of the room.

The front door opened, and Creed walked in. He was already discarding his suit jacket, tossing it onto the arm of the sofa as he stared down at me. I watched as he removed his tie.

"Strip, hellcat."

More heat bloomed throughout my body as I surrendered to his dominance. I removed my clothes while remaining seated, my eyes never shifting from him as he stripped off his shirt and unbuckled his belt. He didn't move to take off his

slacks, and I didn't get a chance to ask him what he was waiting for because Garrison and Hawk came through the door.

"You're late for the party," Creed said, not looking back at them.

"Don't worry. We'll catch up," Garrison said when he came to a stop, his eyes hot as they moved over me.

"Spread your legs," Creed commanded. "Let us see that sweet little pussy."

My chest was heaving from the rush that they gave me. I spread my knees and refrained from touching myself. The ache intensified with every passing second, but I didn't want to control the narrative. This was their gift to me, and while I'd suggested it, I wanted to live out their fantasy.

"Fuck, that's pretty," Garrison said as he pulled his shirt over his head.

"You're wet," Creed acknowledged.

"Nick's fault. He's very good at turning me on."

His eyes glittered with intrigue and amusement. "Challenge accepted."

Creed joined me on the sofa, pulling me into his lap so that I was facing Garrison and Hawk. He wasn't subtle about what he wanted, but he didn't rush either. I felt the hard ridge of his enormous cock pressing against my back. I wanted him between my legs. I wanted him inside me. The ache was building, and soon, it would consume my entire being. It was inevitable.

"Tell me, kitten," Creed rumbled in my ear.

"I'm yours to do with as you please," I said, gasping for air when Garrison and Hawk stripped out of their clothes, then came together for a kiss.

Watching them was like watching a house burn up close. You could feel the heat from the fire, but you were so engrossed in the flames you didn't dare move. That was the other fantasy I had yet to fulfill, the one that involved the three

of us together. The day would come, and I was patiently waiting because I knew it would be life-changing.

When they broke apart, I whimpered, letting them hear my disappointment. Garrison grinned, clearly knowing what I wanted but wielding his power over me because he knew how much I liked it.

Garrison stroked his cock as he approached. I was mesmerized by the sight, almost oblivious to the fact Creed was changing positions so that his back was against the sofa arm, his hand snaking between my legs.

“There’s a rumor that you want to have all those holes filled at the same time.”

I had nothing sassy to come back with because Creed was fingering me, my pussy spasming around the intrusion, eager and desperate for more.

“Open those pretty lips, girl,” Garrison growled softly, guiding his cock to my mouth.

I leaned forward, opening wide so I could take all of him. Hawk joined us, coming to stand beside Garrison. Creed’s free hand curled around Hawk’s cock, stroking firmly. I tried to watch, but Garrison blocked my view, fucking my mouth with patience I didn’t possess.

When Garrison pulled back, Creed pulled Hawk forward by his cock, then pressed his hand against my back, urging me to take him in my mouth. I did without hesitation, loving the way Hawk groaned, the rumble in his throat reverberating through my entire body.

They alternated for a few minutes, letting me suck them while Creed fondled every inch he could reach. The heat of his body heightened the intensity, making it difficult to focus.

“Here’s how this is going to work, hellcat.” Creed’s voice thundered softly against my ear. “You’re going to sit on my cock. Hawk’s going to lick your pussy until you come. When you do, and only when you do, Garrison’s going to fuck him.”

My pussy spasmed, and my clit pulsed. The thought of that was nearly enough to make me orgasm. It wasn’t at all like the

fantasy I'd outlined, but I was okay with that. This was much more interesting.

"You've got to make him earn it," Creed whispered. "You think you can handle that?"

I didn't tell him that I was dangerously close to detonation. It wouldn't take much.

"You want Garrison to fuck him?"

I peered up at Hawk, letting his cock fall from my lips. "Yes."

Creed nipped my shoulder. "Don't think I'm going to make this easy on you, though." He teased my clit, flicking the swollen nub with his thumbnail. "I know how close you are. I know you want to come already."

"I do," I admitted, rocking my hips, attempting to get more friction on my clit. "Please."

He pressed more firmly on the sensitive nub. I gasped and moaned, my release just out of reach. "I'll let you come, but then I'm fucking your ass."

"Yes!" I gasped, turned on by the idea of that even more.

My insides coiled tightly as Creed rubbed my clit furiously. It only took a moment before the tension grew to the point I couldn't contain it anymore. I screamed as the electric current blew through me like a lightning strike, leaving me breathless and more turned on than before.

"Good girl." Creed leaned back, pulling me with him. "Get the lube, Hawk."

Hawk was stroking himself as he watched me, so it took a moment for Creed's command to register. When it did, he strolled toward the kitchen, presumably to get lube from Creed's bedroom, where Hawk had been sleeping since he came home from the hospital.

Creed stretched his legs out on the sofa and placed a pillow behind his head. I turned my attention to Garrison, taking his cock in my mouth when he stepped closer.

“I wanna watch you come while I fuck Hawk’s ass,” Garrison muttered, his voice gravel-rough.

He put his hand on my head, helping me to take him deeper into my mouth.

“God, that fuckin’ mouth ... so sweet.”

I moaned because I knew he liked the way it vibrated.

“Fuck, yes.”

Hawk returned with the lube, and Creed wasted no time, positioning me so I was reclining with my back against his chest. Hawk put his good knee on the sofa, the other foot remaining on the floor, allowing him to lean down so he could lube Creed’s cock. I watched, the sight of his hand curled around Creed’s rigid erection, reigniting the glowing embers of my arousal into flames. I panted as though his hand was on me, loving the way Creed’s breathing changed, his chest heaving.

“Sit on my cock, hellcat. Let me have that ass.”

I lifted my hips, allowing Creed to guide his erection to my hole. It wasn’t a quick task, but Hawk helped, using his fingers, lubing my narrow passage and adding more to Creed’s cock until he was able to push inside me. The stretch was accompanied by a wicked burn that left me whimpering as he eased in deeper. I expected the pain, and I accepted it because I knew Creed would take care of me. He did, shifting me on his lap until the angle allowed him to go deeper without splitting me in two.

“Fuck...” Creed hissed near my ear. “You’re so fucking tight.”

My asshole clenched, and he groaned.

Garrison urged Hawk forward. “Get down there and put your mouth on her. You don’t get fucked until she comes.”

I watched as Hawk’s head moved between my legs. I gasped when his tongue caressed my clit. He started slow, tormenting me with his wicked tongue. I watched him, loving the way he closed his eyes as though savoring me. The torture

was exquisite, but when Creed palmed the back of Hawk's head and pulled him down, a conflagration ignited in my core. It was so hot to watch Creed manhandle Hawk and to witness Hawk's reaction. He loved it, and he didn't bother to hide it.

Garrison moved behind Hawk, lubing his hole, preparing him for his cock. He taunted Hawk, urging him to make me come so he could fill his ass. Hawk was moaning against my flesh, stirring the inferno that threatened to obliterate me. Creed began rocking his hips, sliding me along his shaft, fucking my ass.

“You like that? Like having my dick in your ass?”

We both knew I did, but I answered anyway. “Yes.”

“Nick's watching you get your ass fucked.”

I knew that because Nick was positioned directly in my line of sight. I wasn't sure whether Creed had knowingly done that or Nick had orchestrated it after the fact. Whatever the reason, I loved his eyes on me. I couldn't see his lower body, but his arm was moving as though he was stroking himself. I wanted him to come from watching me.

“Yeah, our girl likes that,” Creed said. “She likes having her pussy licked, and her ass fucked.”

His words inched me closer to the edge. I held on by my fingertips, letting the pleasure wash through me because this was a once-in-a-lifetime moment. I wasn't sure I would get another, and I never wanted it to end. One night with all four of them ... it was my greatest fantasy.

“Make her come,” Creed commanded Hawk. “Make her come, and you can fuck her pussy while Garrison drills your ass.”

I wasn't sure Creed intended to set me off, but that did it. I screamed, my pussy clutching at the emptiness that taunted me while my ass squeezed the intrusion.

“Motherfucker,” Creed snapped. “Fuck her, Hawk.”

Without hesitation, Hawk moved over me, positioning his knee so he could guide his cock inside my pussy. I was trapped

between their bodies, surrounded by their heat. I couldn't see Garrison, but I felt his leg against mine as he moved behind Hawk.

“Oh, fuck,” Hawk growled. “Oh, fuck, yes.”

“Fuck me,” I pleaded, needing them to move.

Creed gripped my hips and began thrusting from underneath me, driving in hard and deep. Hawk remained still, letting Garrison's momentum drive him into me, his cock tunneling in so deep, I thought they were going to rip me in half. It was pleasure and pain wrapped in a glorious package and tied with a bow. The best gift they could've given a girl who already had everything she could ever want.

“Yes!” I screamed. “Oh ... yes!”

I came so hard my vision dimmed, and I was barely aware of their moans and grunts echoing in the room as they chased their release, taking what belonged to them.

“Coming!” Hawk hissed at the same time Garrison and Creed roared, the sounds reverberating off the glass walls.

I opened my eyes, seeking Nick. I found him standing a few feet away, his mouth open as he came in his hand. He had moved so he could see me, and it sent a tremor through me.

“Happy birthday, baby,” Hawk whispered, pressing his mouth to mine.

“Best birthday ever,” I said with a smile on my face as I succumbed to exhaustion.

6

Saturday...

JOURNEY

“THIS IS INCREDIBLE.”

“Thank you. We happen to like it.”

The southern twang came from behind me, out of the mouth of Rex Sharpe, the owner of the Double R Bed and Breakfast.

He wasn't a cousin of Garrison's but was still considered family thanks to the twisted vines connecting one family tree to another. At least, that was what I gathered based on the information I'd been given. It was a lot. The information. At least twenty-one first cousins on his father's side alone. I hadn't yet learned much about his mother's side. Garrison was trying not to overwhelm me too quickly. I appreciated that.

“Garrison said it was recently renovated?”

“By recent, he means within the last decade,” Rex corrected.

“Really?”

“We've been open for business for almost four years now.”

Yeah, I guess that didn't quite align with the definition of recent.

Rex wasn't decked out in full western wear as I'd imagined everyone in this small town wearing, but rather a pair of cargo shorts, lace-up work boots, a white T-shirt, and a faded ball cap with a curled brim atop his head. He was following at a close but polite distance as he kindly gave me a tour of the place I would be staying with Garrison and Hawk for the next two days.

“We recently updated the pool area,” Jack, Rex's husband, added as they guided me through the open entertainment space and the kitchen.

“Recent meaning within the last decade?” I prompted with a grin.

“Just last year.”

That qualified.

I walked out onto the back deck, coming face to leaf with what could be considered a tropical paradise dropped dead center in the middle of hay country. Just beyond the nicely structured palm trees, elephant ear plants, and a sparkling blue pool with a wide waterfall cascading down the back wall of the pool were endless miles of fields filled with sun-baked grass. I figured technically it was only several acres, but having been in California for so long, it felt like it went on for infinity. Not a neighbor in sight.

The pool was surrounded by teak furniture in various shapes, all angled for the user to enjoy the sun and the tropical scenery. They’d even done a good job of discretely disguising the large metal building not too far from the house.

“I love the feel of this place,” I admitted, taking it all in while my hosts remained beside me. “Does a B and B do a lot of business in a small rural town?”

“You’d be surprised,” Jack answered. “I mean, we’re not a tourist hot spot like the Old West towns, but we do all right. People like the small-town feel. Plus, it’s close to downtown, so plenty of activities.”

“Downtown Coyote Ridge?” I clarified.

“Yes, ma’am. Big things come in small packages,” Rex drawled.

“And only about twenty minutes to downtown Austin if keeping it weird’s your thing.” Jack grinned when I gave him a questioning look. “The state capital’s slogan?” He shrugged. “I didn’t come up with it.”

“Don’t mind him,” Rex said. “He’s a walkin’, talkin’ tour guide.”

“Someone’s got to be.”

I looked at Rex. “So you’re *not* one of Garrison’s cousins, right?”

“No. But his cousins are my cousins.”

“As if that doesn’t muddy the waters,” Jack muttered.

I laughed. He was right.

For the past week, I’d been trying to familiarize myself with Garrison’s family tree, but it was overwhelming. He had a huge family with numerous aunts and uncles and a ridiculous number of first and second cousins. I wasn’t even sure how they didn’t stretch the limits of a small town with the sheer number of them.

“Curtis, his dad’s brother, is married to Rex’s aunt, Lorrie,” Jack explained. “Trust me, it gets easier to figure out with time.”

I laughed. “If you say so.”

“Once you meet some of ’em, it’ll make more sense,” Rex noted. “I think there’s a bunch of ’em goin’ to Moonshiners tonight.”

“That’s the bar, right?” According to what Garrison told me, there was only one bar in town. Only one diner, too.

“Yes, ma’am.”

I wasn’t sure I would ever get used to everyone calling me ma’am. Considering I turned twenty-five two days ago, I wasn’t sure I qualified for ma’am status, but I wasn’t going to correct him.

The screen door at the front of the house slammed, the loud bang echoing through the house.

“I think they got the luggage,” I said, smiling at my hosts.

Rex urged me inside with a swing of his arm, then opened the rear screen door for me.

Inside, Garrison and Hawk stood at the bottom of the stairs with the suitcases we’d brought. I was pretty sure they’d packed more than I did, which was something I had razzed them about on the flight. I’d packed just enough to make it two full days, with one outfit to spare and a pair of jeans in case I needed them. I wasn’t sure what they’d brought with them, but I’d bet money there was an empty section in Hawk’s closet back home.

“You sure you don’t want me to put y’all up in the downstairs suite?” Rex asked, directing the question at Garrison.

Garrison looked at Hawk.

“Fuck off,” he grumbled with a roll of his eyes.

Today was officially eight weeks since the shooting, and Hawk had only been walking without the brace for two of those. I caught myself more than once wondering if he was ready to put full weight on his leg, but I was doing my best not to ask. He didn’t take kindly to being babied, and he was getting enough of that from Garrison.

“He can probably outrun you if you’d like to give it a shot,” I told Rex in an effort to defend my man.

Rex chuckled. “Naw. I’ll take your word for it.”

As for whether Hawk was up for something as strenuous as a marathon was yet to be seen. He was undergoing intense physical therapy—his idea, actually—in order to get full use of his leg. It had been slow going at first because he had a lot of pain and muscle cramps in his thigh, but an in-home therapist helped him to get through that. And now he was on to strength training for the leg. We all pretended not to acknowledge that he was walking with a slight limp, but his therapist assured him it would get better with time.

I believed him because Hawk was determined, and he was not going to let a bullet through his bone stop him.

And while I was doing my best not to baby him, I had to pay attention to how much I was. For the first few weeks, he had let me. These days, he spent most of his time trying to get me naked. Partly because he claimed he liked me naked and partly because when I was, I didn’t have time to harp on him about taking it easy.

“Y’all still plannin’ to go to Moonshiners tonight?” Rex asked Garrison.

“Yep. Got a handful of the cousins to promise to show up.”

“We’ll be there,” Rex noted. “It’ll be nice to catch up.”

“I agree,” Garrison told him as he picked up my suitcase. “I figure I’ll take her to meet the folks here in a bit.”

“Your brothers gonna make it?”

“They promised to give me shit, so yeah, I imagine they will.”

Rex grinned, then walked over to the small desk at the base of the stairs. “Y’all are in the big suite. All meals are buffet style. Keep in mind we’re full up for the weekend, so food tends to go fast. If you miss out, the kitchen’s open for you.”

Garrison took the key and folded it in his hand. “Good to know.” He glanced back at Hawk. “You sure you’re good?”

“Fuck off,” Hawk said with more amusement this time.

I laughed and headed for the stairs. Garrison gave Hawk a hard time whenever he could, and Hawk took it in stride. It was their thing.

“Come on, then,” Garrison urged, gesturing toward the stairs. “Let’s check out the accommodations so we can get some lunch.”

I led the way upstairs, taking it all in as I went. I was seriously in awe of this place. It was an old farmhouse that had been converted into a bed and breakfast. The renovations maintained a lot of the original charm and brought in the farmhouse flair that was popular in interior design themes these days. Quite the opposite of the modern monstrosity I was in the process of designing—with the help of a professional, of course. With its homey atmosphere and rustic decor, this place made our new house feel like a museum. Perhaps I needed to make a few last-minute changes. To be fair, our new house was just as open and bright, plus we had a pool. And an ocean. So maybe the changes weren’t necessary.

At the top of the stairs, there were rooms on both sides and a large library/game room directly in front.

“To the left,” Garrison instructed.

I went left, looking at the charming little gold numbers on the door. I didn't bother asking what the number was because Garrison stopped at the first door on the right, which overlooked the backyard. He pushed the key into the lock and turned it, smiling when he took a step back.

I went in first, Hawk right behind me.

"This is lovely," I said as I took in the room bathed in sunlight. The linens were white, which offset the dark hardwood floors. The dresser and nightstands were made of white-washed wood with dark-stained tops, and the four-post bed was the centerpiece of the space. I checked out the bathroom while Hawk gave the small kitchenette a quick once over, announcing there was a coffee pot. Since I hadn't seen a Starbucks in town, I figured that might come in handy. For them. Not me. I still wasn't a fan of coffee unless it was disguised as cream and sugar.

"You up for meetin' the folks?" Garrison asked, moving up behind me when I went to look out the sliding glass doors that led to the balcony overlooking the pool and the acres of land beyond.

His arms came around me, and I leaned into him. "I'm more than ready."

Garrison had already assured me that his parents would love me. He'd told me plenty of stories in recent weeks about growing up in a small town. I felt like I already knew them, and I was anxious to put faces with the details I'd learned. Since his family had already met Hawk, it would only be a new experience for me, but I was okay with that. I figured since I was wearing Garrison's ring on my finger, it only made sense to actually meet his family.

Not to mention, my mother was ready to start planning my wedding, but I told her she couldn't until I'd officially met all my future in-laws. I'd met Hawk's mother shortly after he was shot. Now I exchanged texts with Dana Hawkins almost every day, especially in the days following his discharge from the hospital. And Nick had taken me to meet his mother, Jenny, who lived in a long-term care facility in Florida, close to

Nick's aunt. She'd been there for the better part of the last five years, admitted shortly after she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. According to Nick, the disease had progressed quickly, and her sister feared for Jenny's safety when she started wandering off. Nick went out to see her several times a year. Her dementia was so severe that she sometimes didn't recognize her son.

The closest thing to family Creed had were Nick, Garrison, Hawk, and Rule. I hadn't officially met Rule yet, but I'd done some digging on the infamous Hollywood fixer. I didn't know with absolute certainty, but I'd picked up enough bits and pieces over the past couple of months to deduce that I had Rule to thank for saving Creed's life. One day I hoped to thank him in person, but until then, I wasn't going to push the issue. I would, however, ensure he received an invitation to the wedding.

So Garrison's family was the last on the list of people for me to meet, and I was excited. Not to mention, thrilled at the idea of seeing what a small town in Texas had to offer. Having grown up in Houston, I was technically a native but had no frame of reference for small towns.

I had a feeling this was going to be interesting.

7

GARRISON

“MOMMA!” I CALLED OUT WHEN I WALKED through my parents’ front door. “Daddy!”

“Were you raised in a barn, boy? Don’t they teach you any manners in California?” David Walker called back, strolling into the living room as I approached.

I grinned at my old man, then returned the back-slapping hug he offered. It didn’t matter if it had been a week or a year since I’d last seen him; that was the way he greeted me every time.

“*Were* you raised in a barn?” Hawk asked thoughtfully. “It would account for so much.”

“Shut it.” I took Journey’s hand and pulled her closer. “Dad, I’d like to introduce you to Journey Zeplyn.”

My father regarded her with a smile. “She’s even prettier than you said.”

Journey blushed as she took his outstretched hand.

“Nice to finally meet you,” Journey said sweetly.

“It’s a pleasure to meet the woman who’s keepin’ this boy of mine in line.”

“It’s a full-time job, but someone’s got to do it,” she told him.

His smile grew even wider as his eyes cut to me. “I like this one.”

“Me, too.”

“And you, boy,” my father said to Hawk. “Quit hidin’ back there. We don’t bite.”

Hawk strolled forward and shook my dad’s hand but was quickly pulled into a hug.

“How’s the leg holdin’ up?” David asked.

“Stronger every day.”

“Back to trainin’ yet?”

“Close. Another few weeks of PT, I’ll be ready to get back to it.”

If Hawk noticed my dad was careful with him, he didn’t mention it. My parents were well aware of my relationship with Hawk. I didn’t hide much from the people who had brought me into this world, and though I didn’t live nearby, we talked often. They were the first people I called the morning after everything happened. And while I hadn’t shared the finer details, I filled them in on the parts they needed to know. My mother was a worrier, and she had called daily for updates on both Hawk and Creed for the weeks following the incident.

“Momma’s in the kitchen,” my dad said, urging us in that direction.

I placed my hand on Journey’s back and walked beside her. “Nervous?”

Her gaze cut to my face. “I wasn’t until you asked me that.”

I grinned and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “You ain’t got nothin’ to worry about, darlin’.”

She lowered her voice to a whisper. “I’m pretty sure there was a double negative in there.”

Leave it to my girl to fixate on the little things.

As soon as my mother heard us, she looked up from what she was doing. A wide grin formed on her face as she rushed over to embrace Journey.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re finally here.”

“It’s so nice to meet you, Mrs. Walker.”

“No, no,” my mother said, holding onto Journey’s hands as she took a step back to admire her. “We’re not formal in this house. You can call me Elyza or Mom. Your choice.” She smiled. “Garrison, I think you found the prettiest girl in all of California.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” I agreed.

“And you...” My mother released Journey so she could hug Hawk. “I’m glad to hear you’re back to playin’ tennis.”

“Tennis?” Hawk asked, glaring over at me.

My mom pulled back, glancing between Hawk and me. “Garrison told me you’d taken up the sport last year.”

“Did he now?”

I laughed. I’d forgotten all about that. “Where are my rotten, mean-ass brothers?”

My mother ignored my dig, releasing Hawk to pat me on the arm. “Michael and Jill will be here in a bit.”

“Jill is Michael’s wife,” I explained to Journey.

My father joined the conversation. “Lance and Leif had a job to take care of. Said they’d be a little late.”

“They still doing the security thing?” Hawk asked.

“Got their own business,” my father told him. “Doin’ well, too. Business is pickin’ up.”

“I’ve got appetizers if you’re hungry,” Elyza added.

“You want somethin’ to drink?” I asked Hawk and Journey.

“I’ll take water if you don’t mind,” Hawk said.

“Sit,” my mother instructed them, gesturing toward the table. “I’ll get it.”

“I’ve got it, Momma,” I told her, then motioned for Hawk and Journey to sit.

She smiled at me, then turned her attention to Hawk. “Was my boy pullin’ my chain about you playin’ tennis?”

“Oh, he definitely was,” Hawk said, rolling his eyes at me.

“If you’re not doin’ that, what are you up to these days? Besides work, of course.”

“Not as much as I’d like,” he said honestly.

“The recovery’s been too slow for his likin’,” I told my mother. “We’ve been forcin’ him to take it slow.”

“How’s PT?” my dad asked, joining them at the table.

“It’s good. The pain’s mostly gone, and my strength’s coming back.”

“How often do you go?”

“We’re doing four times a week right now.”

As I poured water into glasses my mother pulled down from the cabinet, I listened to the interaction between them.

“I talked to Curtis this mornin’,” my father told me when I approached the table. “Said his boys are meetin’ up with y’all at Moonshiners tonight.”

“That’s the plan.”

“Frank’s kids are gonna be there, too.”

I nodded, grinning to myself.

“How old are his kids?” Journey asked, her confusion forming a line across her forehead.

“My age,” I told her. “He just calls ’em kids.”

“They’re all kids to me,” David countered.

“Most of ’em are married,” Elyza added. “With little ones of their own.”

Journey sighed, and I could tell she was worried she’d missed something when interrogating me about my family. I’d done my best to outline a family tree for her, but as I got going, I realized how complicated it could be for someone who didn’t have a big family.

“Don’t let it overwhelm you, honey,” Elyza told Journey.

“Oh, I won’t,” she said sweetly. “I figure I’ll just keep bringing him back here until I get all the names right.”

My mother’s expression softened. “I wouldn’t mind that at all.”

“Knock knock!”

I glanced at the doorway, waiting for my brother Michael to appear. A second later, he stepped into the kitchen with his

wife beside him. They were both grinning like loons, staring at Journey and Hawk.

“Well, look at you,” I said, carrying the water glasses to the table before greeting my sister-in-law. “You’re about ready to pop any day now, huh?”

She hugged me, then put her hand on her belly and rubbed proudly. “Any day now.”

“You look good,” I told her, hugging her once more before turning to my brother. “And you ... I think that’s gray I see in your hair.”

“Tell me about it,” he said, slapping me on the back as he leaned in. “And not a single one on yours. Makes no sense. You’re older.”

“I’ve got them to keep me young,” I told him, pointing toward Hawk and Journey as I put my hand on my brother’s shoulder and guided him closer. “Journey, I’d like you to meet Michael.” I pulled out a chair for my sister-in-law. “And this is Jill. Y’all, meet Journey Zeplyn.”

Jill leaned over and clutched Journey’s hand. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Good, I hope,” she said, smiling up at me.

“Always.” Jill grinned at Hawk. “You, however.”

Hawk chuckled. “I’d be worried if he had nice things to say.”

“Oh, hush now,” my mother chimed in. “We all know Hawk’s the better half.”

“I think you mean third,” my father corrected as though every day, one of his kids brought home two people he intended to spend the rest of his life with.

I took the liberty of getting drinks for Michael and Jill while they made small talk with the rest of the family. I loved how easily Journey settled in, as though she’d known them for a year, not less than an hour. She didn’t shy away from their questions or their teasing, and I knew she was going to fit in well with the Walker family.

“My brother tells me y’all are gettin’ hitched next year,” Michael prompted when I set a glass of tea in front of him.

Journey peered up at me. “A celebration of sorts, I guess you could say.”

“And it’s my understanding you’re datin’ two more?”

“Committed,” Journey corrected. “We’re all past dating at this point.”

I noticed my dad smile, and I knew he appreciated Journey’s ability to tell it like it was.

“Are there kids in the future?”

Leave it to my brother to jump right to the difficult questions.

I took the seat next to Journey. “We haven’t talk—”

“If and when they want babies, we’ll discuss.”

I looked at Journey at the same time Hawk did. We hadn’t talked about having a family. I wasn’t sure I’d even considered it until that moment.

“You want babies?”

Her blue eyes sparkled with what could only be described as love. “If you want babies, then I want babies.”

“And me?” Hawk asked, and I heard the disbelief in his voice.

“Definitely.”

His face lit up like a five-year-old’s on Christmas morning. “I want babies.”

Journey turned back to my brother. “To answer your question, it looks like there will be babies.”

Michael frowned. “How exactly does that work?”

My father cleared his throat and peered over at my mother. “I thought for sure he knew how it worked. I mean...”

Elyza looked at him, her expression serious as she nodded. “I think we need to have that talk again.”

I barked a laugh. I loved my parents.

“That’s enough outta you two,” Michael teased before turning his attention back to us. “Seriously. How’s that work?”

Journey leaned forward. “As soon as we figure it out, we’ll let you know.”

Yeah. She was most definitely a keeper.

Many hours and some very interesting conversations later, I walked Journey and Hawk into Moonshiners.

“So this is your old stompin’ grounds?” Hawk drawled.

“Technically, when I lived here, I wasn’t old enough to get in this place.”

“True,” Journey said. “That doesn’t mean you didn’t sneak in.”

“In a town this small,” I told her, “there’s no sneakin’ in anywhere. Someone knows you, and someone else is ready to call your folks to snitch.”

“Looks like you survived,” Rex said, raising a hand to signal us to their table. He glanced at Journey. “How’d it go meetin’ the folks?”

“It was great,” she said with a grin. “Did you know Elyza’s got a baby book for each of her kids?”

Rex looked at me. “I did *not* know that.”

“They took a lot of pictures of their kids naked,” Hawk chimed in. “Bare asses in all those pictures.”

Rex barked a laugh. “Sounds like somethin’ the Coyote Ridge Gazette would like to get their hands on.”

“Mind your own damn business,” I told him as I pulled out one of the chairs at the table for Journey. “You want wine?”

“Yes, please.”

“You want a beer?” I offered Hawk.

He nodded with his chin, then waited for Journey to sit before he eased down beside her.

“You need another?” I asked Rex and Jack.

“We’re good for now. Thanks.” He looked at Journey. “So these naked baby pictures...”

I rolled my eyes and left them to it while I headed for the bar. It was still early for a Saturday night, so the place wasn’t at capacity, but it was filling up quickly. A few locals were still hanging around from their afternoon shoot-the-shit session. They would eventually head out, and their stools would be occupied by the younger bunch looking to make a night of it.

“Well, I’ll be damned. Look what the cat dragged in.”

“Mack,” I greeted the bartender/owner.

“How the hell are you, Garrison?”

“Never better.” It wasn’t a lie. “Can I get a glass of white wine for my lady and two beers?”

“Your lady, huh?” He peered around me to check out the lady in question.

I shifted to the side so he could see.

“Never thought I’d see the day someone finally lassoed your ass.”

“Two someones,” I told him, resting my forearms on the bar as I waited.

Mack smirked as he popped the top on the bottle. “I knew you had a thing for that fighter. You didn’t think anyone saw it, but I did.”

“I never tried to hide it.”

“Maybe not.” Mack passed over one beer. “So, y’all gettin’ married like the rest of your kin?”

“It’s a bit more complicated than it appears, but there’s gonna be a weddin’,” I admitted.

“Yeah? You’ve got some cousins who made it work between three of ’em.”

“It’s more than three.” I watched to see his reaction.

Mack’s gaze snapped to mine, and I saw his brain attempting to process. Finally, he shook his head and chuckled.

“Is it a contest or what?” He passed the second beer over and grabbed a wineglass from the rack above his head. “Next, you’ll be tryin’ to outdo your kin in the baby department.”

“Not sure that’s possible.” I took a pull from my beer. “They’ve got a big head start.”

“That they do.”

“But you’re happy?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s the only thing that matters.”

“Can’t argue there,” a voice sounded from behind me.

I turned to see my cousin Braydon and his twin brother Brendon standing behind me.

“Holy shit, man,” Brendon greeted, shouldering his brother aside. “You got old.”

I barked a laugh. “I’m what? A year older than you?”

“Two and a half,” he corrected.

“Hey, forty’s the new twenty in California, don’t you know that?” Mack chimed in.

“Here in Texas, forty’s the new eighty,” someone grumbled behind them.

I peeked around him to see a long-haired man wearing a shit-eating grin.

“Aw, hell, Trey. How the hell are ya?” I clapped hands with my cousin and pulled him in for a hug.

“Couldn’t be better.”

“You could be if you got a haircut,” Brendon said, swirling his hand around his head as though that needed a visual explanation.

Braydon, ignoring his twin’s comment, slapped me on the shoulder. “Long time no see. You don’t make it around these parts enough.”

He was right. I didn’t. But I tried to make it back several times a year. Even if I got back every other week, there wouldn’t be enough time to see everyone when I was here.

“Travis was right behind us,” Braydon said, gesturing toward the door.

“I heard it through the grapevine that you’re finally settlin’ down,” Brendon noted as he peered around.

Since that was the easiest way to sum it up, I agreed and pointed out Journey and Hawk. Before I could turn around and get Journey’s wine, they were sauntering off to make introductions.

“I heard you were gettin’ married,” I told Trey, nodding for him to follow me to the table.

“I am.” He looked toward the door. “Magnus and Ava should be here soon.”

I stopped. “Magnus *and* Ava?”

The smile on Trey’s face could’ve rivaled the sun for warmth. “Yeah. Life surprises you sometimes, huh?”

That it most definitely did.

The rest of the night went much the same way. My cousins came out in droves, and we spent hours catching up while they shared embarrassing stories of when I was a wild kid running around these parts. I got in a few stories of my own. Turnabout’s fair play and all that.

Journey and Hawk never ventured far from me or each other, but they didn’t miss a beat, chatting it up with my family. My brothers joined us, intent on giving me shit, and I was grateful they did. Although I was one of the few who’d

chosen to live outside the small town I grew up in, I still craved the feeling of home.

And no matter where I lived, this would always be home. I was glad I could share it with the two people I loved most in the world.

8

Very early on Sunday...

HAWK

“YOU KNOW, WE CAN FEEL EVERY MOVE you make on your side of the bed, G.”

I fluffed the pillow under my head, inching closer to Journey so my ass didn't fall off the bed. Thank God she was small. Otherwise, the three of us wouldn't fit on what they were trying to pass off as a king-sized bed. I think the owners of this B and B were promoting closeness by shrinking the mattresses by a few inches. It didn't help that Garrison was taking up nearly half on his own.

When we finally made it back from the bar a few hours ago, we'd hit the bed in no time. It had been a long day, and sleep came easy. At first, anyway. But obviously, Garrison couldn't get comfortable because he kept moving, and I was worried I was going to get seasick if he kept it up.

Not really, but hey, it was fun to give him shit when I could.

“Jesus, G. Chill.”

Journey giggled.

My eyes flew open. I lifted my head to peer over her shoulder.

“What are you...” I grunted when I saw Garrison's lips suctioned to Journey's bare breast.

She moaned softly.

“Any reason I wasn't invited to the party?” I asked, waiting to see if I would receive an invitation.

Although I'd been recovering, the intimacy between us had remained relatively steady. With that said, the three of us had yet to consummate our relationship together. And Journey's birthday party didn't count. Sure, that was some kinky shit, and I was glad it happened, but it wasn't the sort of intimacy I was talking about.

I wasn't sure why that was, either. I knew Journey had watched me and Garrison fucking because he'd told me, but it hadn't come up again. Considering I'd been with Garrison and Creed at the same time, as well as Journey and Creed, and now all three of them, I wasn't sure what Garrison was waiting for. Perhaps it was for Journey to give the green light. If so, either he was color blind, or he wasn't paying attention.

Granted, part of the reason could've been my injury. Thanks to the bum leg, I'd had to tap out for a bit, so perhaps it was simply a matter of bad timing.

"You're definitely invited," Journey whispered, curling her arm back and pulling me closer.

When she turned her head, I found her mouth with mine while Garrison continued to suck her nipples.

"You sure you want to do this?" I asked, not wanting to assume anything.

"I don't *want* it. I *need* it," she said, twisting so she was on her back between us.

"Two cocks in you at the same time?" Garrison asked, propping himself on his elbow as he shoved the blankets down.

"God, yes," she said on a sigh.

My dick kicked hard, remembering how it had felt to be inside Journey when Creed's cock was buried in her ass. I'd never felt anything like it. It was the first and only time I'd ever done something like that, but it had been over so quickly.

I kicked the blankets the rest of the way off the bed, then rested my leg over Journey's and trailed my finger along the slick seam of her pussy.

"You sure you're up for it again?" I asked, watching as my finger disappeared inside her.

She whimpered. "Yes. Definitely, yes."

I met Garrison's gaze across the bed. The room was dark, but I could see the way his eyes glittered from the moonlight peeking in through the sheer curtains.

“We’ve gotta prepare you first,” Garrison told her, his hand sliding alongside mine.

He pressed one finger inside her at the same time I did. Her pussy was so tight and so fucking wet. I could practically feel the hot silk of her cunt as it moved along my cock. I craved this woman like a drug, and I’d been deprived of my fix for so long I feared I would overwhelm her in my effort to make up for lost time.

“How do you plan to do that?” Journey asked as she rocked her hips, fucking our fingers while she watched the two of us.

“You’ll have to wait and see,” Garrison said, then jerked his chin at me. “On your back. Let her sit on your cock.”

Fuck.

I loved when this man went all Dom on me. And to have Journey along for the ride ... I had a feeling this would be a night I remembered for the rest of my life.

Reluctantly, I pulled my finger from between her legs. “Come over here, smokeshow.”

When Garrison got out of bed, Journey got up on her knees. I managed to shift to the middle of the bed to give us all more room. I expected her to straddle my hips, but she took my cock in her mouth instead.

My back arched as the wicked heat of her mouth enveloped me.

“Oh, fuck.” I relaxed, savoring the sweet suction as she took me deep. “God, baby.”

She moaned around my dick.

“Slow,” I told her when she stroked me while she licked the head.

She paused. “Are you hurting?”

“Not even a little. But I want to savor it.” I met her gaze. “I don’t plan to come until we’re both buried balls deep inside you.”

Her lips parted, and her eyes glazed. One thing we'd all learned about her was that the dirtier we talked, the hotter she got.

"Come here." I tugged on her arm, urging her to climb up my body.

She came without resistance, straddling my hips and grinding her cunt along my shaft. Chills skated down my spine. The sensation was exquisite, more so how her lips parted with a soft moan as she took her pleasure from my body.

"Oh, fuck, yes," I groaned as she slowly eased down on me, her slick pussy enveloping me like a velvet glove.

Somewhere on the other side of the room, I could hear Garrison rummaging through one of the bags. When he returned, he flipped on the bedside lamp before crawling onto the bed behind Journey. He straddled my legs and urged Journey to lean forward.

When she did, I kissed her, wanting to taste her sweetness and feel those soft gasps against my lips.

"Oh, God," she groaned, tipping her pelvis down so her ass raised.

"What's he doing, smokeshow? Tell me."

"He's ... oh..."

"Is he rimming your asshole?"

"Yes," she hissed, rocking her hips. "Oh, God ... Garrison ... yes."

"You like that?" I whispered, reaching behind her to spread her ass cheeks wide.

Journey whimpered. "So much ... so, so much."

"You also like having two cocks inside you?"

She nodded, rolling her hips, taking my cock deeper while Garrison tongued her asshole. My cock throbbed, the friction and heat of her body overwhelming me with pleasure. I could've remained like that forever and died a happy man.

“That’s it,” I urged. “Fuck me while he gets you ready for his cock.”

“I’m ready,” Journey insisted, moaning as she rocked more insistently. “Now, Garrison.”

I chuckled at her insistence, then smiled when I heard him smack her ass.

“You don’t get to run this show.”

“Don’t I?” she taunted, grinning down at me as she rode my dick.

“Fuck, you’re so beautiful,” I whispered, holding her gaze and brushing her hair back from her face.

“Just my fingers,” Garrison said seconds before Journey’s hips stilled.

“Don’t stop,” I urged. “Ride my cock, baby. Let me feel you.”

Journey pressed her hands on my chest, her movements jerky as she fucked me. Her moans became louder, but she maintained a steady pace, rocking forward and back. I could feel the pressure of Garrison’s fingers when he pushed them into her ass. It went on for what felt like an eternity until the bed finally shifted, and Garrison’s hands covered mine on her hips.

“Hold still.”

Our heavy breaths were the only sound in the room as the three of us became one. I grunted when Journey’s pussy clamped down on me.

“Relax, girl,” Garrison commanded in that sexy drawl that made it impossible to resist his orders.

I caressed her back, trying to help her loosen up so he could work his cock deeper. Journey’s body relaxed, and I had a moment of reprieve before his cock pushed in alongside mine, taking up the rest of the space inside her. I could feel the hard ridge of his shaft along mine, and I nearly came.

“A little more, darlin’. Just ... a ... little ...”

“There’s nothing little about you,” she gasped, dropping her chest to mine.

I wrapped my arms around her and pumped my hips, fucking her pussy while Garrison inched in deeper. When he stilled, seated fully inside her, I met his gaze over her shoulder.

His smile was devilish as he gathered her hair in his fist. When he tugged on her hair, Journey arched her back.

“Don’t move.”

I wasn’t sure if he was talking to me or her or both of us. It didn’t matter because he began to slide out of her, and the sensation of his shaft along mine was so intense I had to grit my teeth.

“You okay?” I asked Journey.

“I will be.” She groaned. “When he fucks me.”

“You heard the lady,” I told Garrison.

He didn’t need any more encouragement. Garrison began fucking her hard, the momentum moving her along my cock. The tension inside me increased with every thrust until I was hanging by a thread.

“Harder,” Journey cried out.

Garrison slammed into her.

I groaned, my cock throbbing as an electric spark fired in my spine. I couldn’t hold off. It was too fucking perfect.

I reached between us, seeking the little button that would send her careening over the edge. I fingered her clit, circling the little nub until she gasped and moaned, bucking against our cocks.

“Yes ... yes ... yes...” Journey’s pussy clamped down tight. “God, yes! I’m coming!”

I let her ride out the orgasm without exploding. When Garrison began to move again, I let the glide of his cock send me over the edge. I came with a shout, driving my hips up so I was buried to the hilt inside Journey. Garrison impaled her

several more times before he stilled, his cock pulsing inside her.

“That was...” Journey fell on top of me.

I could feel her smiling against my neck.

“Good?”

“Better than good.”

I pressed a kiss to her jaw.

“Maybe next time you can be in the middle,” she said, her breath tickling my neck.

She giggled when my cock jerked inside her.

“I take it you like that idea?”

“Oh, yeah.”

I would take them in whatever capacity I could get them because they were mine, and I was theirs.

And though I would’ve been complete if Creed had been there with us, I made it up to him the following night when he insisted I give him the play-by-play while I rode his cock.

9

Four months later, Friday...

JOURNEY

I HONESTLY THOUGHT THIS DAY WOULD NEVER come. The work on the new house seemed endless, and every time it felt like we were almost to the end, it would seem to start over again.

Okay, fine. Maybe that was partially my fault. I might've made a few changes during the renovations, but nothing I regretted after the fact. And in my defense, it was a big house. And there were five of us who were going to live in it. More, when we decided to start a family. Plus, I wasn't the only one who had specific requests.

I know, I know, I sound like a spoiled brat. Maybe I was.

However, my men ensured I earned every single ask. Since I got my way with a house on the beach, as well as approval for nearly every design idea I had, I had to make it up to all four of them. To say they took advantage of the trade-off was an understatement, but I certainly didn't mind. Nor did they.

But now that moving day was finally upon us, I was beside myself.

And by moving day, I mean our official first night at the new house. The actual moving part occurred in stages over the past week and didn't require me to lift a finger. Mostly. The five of us had stayed in the five-thousand-square-foot penthouse suite at the Beverly Wilshire for seven days while the moving service took care of everything else. Not only did they pack our things at the old house, they unpacked at the new one, too.

Although I didn't have to lift a box or carry furniture, I helped. If you could consider directing people and pointing out where things needed to go as help.

It was awkward at first, but I wanted a say in where things went in all the main rooms. Except for the kitchen, of course. We agreed that would be Creed's domain, and he should have a say in the layout. Considering he designed the kitchen to his exact specifications, I wouldn't trust myself to figure out how

it was supposed to flow. But everything else was fair game. And while I had loved the architecture of their previous house, the decor had felt somewhat sterile to me, so I changed it up a bit. With the help of a designer, it turned out amazing, if I did say so myself.

And next weekend, I would get the opportunity to show it off because I was having our official housewarming party. My parents, Hawk's mom, plus Rhylee and Avery, and my friends from work would be coming to check out our new digs. I was excited to show it off, not only because it was stunning but because it spoke to the direction our lives were headed.

"I was wondering where you slipped off to."

I glanced over my shoulder to see Creed walking toward me, his hands in his pockets. He hadn't yet changed out of his suit, but he had nixed the jacket and tie and unbuttoned his shirt to reveal his magnificent torso. Today, while I had been directing the last of our things to the right rooms, Creed and Nick spent the day at the office, taking care of things from that end, while Garrison and Hawk stayed back to keep an eye on me—their words.

"Stay where you are," Creed said before I could turn around to face him.

He put his hands on my hips and pressed against my back, bending down to nuzzle my neck. He was warm, and he smelled so good. Couple that with the brief glance I got at his washboard abs, and my body temperature began to rise.

"Do you have panties on?"

His deep voice vibrated against my neck, making me shiver. "Yes."

"Take them off."

"What's my incentive?"

"My cock."

He didn't have to tell me twice. When he released me, I lifted my skirt and pushed my panties down my legs. As proof I did what he wanted, I passed them to him.

“Put your hands on the rail.”

I did that, too, because I would do anything this man instructed me to do. For the past six months, I'd been surrendering to him as he staked his claim on me in much the same way he had when we met. Now that I wore his collar (figuratively, if not literally at times), it was my duty, and to say I wasn't honored to do so would've been a lie. I loved this man in ways I couldn't explain. I still ached for him every minute of every day. But there was something distinctly different. I wasn't sure exactly what it was, but things had changed between us. We were closer than we had been, and he was opening up to me more. I was finally seeing the Alpha everyone else had seen for so long—both at the club and not. I belonged to him, and we both knew it.

“Are you still taking me to the club tomorrow night?” I kept my hands on the railing and spoke over my shoulder.

“If you can be a good girl, I will.”

Oh, I could be very, very good. Especially if it meant I got to explore the jungle with him. It was my new favorite place. I was getting good at evading him for longer periods, but we both looked forward to the time when he caught me. But the best was when the four of them would play together. Getting away from one of them was almost doable, but all four ... I didn't stand a chance, and that was the hottest part. I never knew what punishment I would receive when they caught me, but it always resulted in epic orgasms.

That wasn't to say we weren't exploring our kinks in other places as well. Now we had twenty-thousand square feet of unexplored territory to play in. Did I mention we had an entire floor dedicated to all things kink? We did, and I was looking forward to spending a lot of time there.

The clink of his belt made my skin tingle. He would be unbuttoning his slacks next, lowering the zipper, and freeing his beautiful erection.

“Lean forward,” Creed said, his big hands sliding up the outside of my thighs as he lifted my dress.

I gripped the railing and bent at the waist. When his hand slipped between my thighs, I widened my stance, giving him the access he sought. I moaned when he pressed one finger inside me, then two.

“You’re wet.”

“Mmm-hmm.” I certainly was. He did that to me.

“Tell me, kitten.”

“I’m yours to do with as you please.”

“Yes, you are. And right now, I’m going to fuck you until you beg to come.”

To accommodate our extreme height differences, Creed had to get creative sometimes. Like now, as he lifted my right leg, curling his hand under my knee to stabilize me. I twisted my hips to allow him better access when he guided his cock right where I wanted him.

He growled softly as he sank inside me, pushing as deep as he could go.

I stared out at the ocean and the sand below, taking it all in. I didn’t think about whether anyone would see us because I trusted Creed to pay attention to those details. He promised to take care of me, and I let him. I trusted this man with my body and soul, which left me free to enjoy these incredible moments.

Creed wrapped his hand around my throat, the other holding my leg as he thrust into me hard and fast. I firmly gripped the railing and accepted every wicked, delicious slide of his cock inside me. I loved the way his hand pressed against my neck. He never did it quite as roughly as that one night—not even when I begged—but we both knew it was an option if and when he ever trusted himself again.

“He’s watching,” Creed growled in my ear.

I looked down at the beach to see who he was referring to but didn’t see anyone. I looked left, and that was when I saw Nick standing on the opposite end of the veranda with a glass in his hand. He held my stare while Creed impaled me from

behind. A shiver ran through me, ramping up my excitement. I loved that he watched. Loved that it turned him on to see me getting fucked. We'd discussed it at length, and when he asked if it bothered me, I admitted I liked it. Since then, he'd been doing it more frequently.

"Oh, God..." I was going to come from Nick's stare and the exquisite friction of Creed's cock tunneling inside me.

"Who's fucking you, hellcat?"

"You are."

"Who? Say my name."

"Creed! My Alpha! Oh, God ... yes ..."

"That's it, Journey. Take my cock. All of it."

I whimpered and moaned, unable to thrust because of the position, so I settled for letting Creed use me, drilling me hard and fast. His sexy grunts accompanied every thrust until he was growling roughly.

"You like my cock, don't you, kitten?"

"I love it," I corrected. "I love your cock, Alpha."

"Fucking come on it then. Come all over it, hellcat."

I exploded, lights dancing behind my eyelids as my body spasmed. Creed held me where he wanted me and fucked me through my orgasm before demanding another. I came again, gasping for air as Nick looked on.

"Move your hair," Creed growled.

I shifted my weight and held the railing with one hand while shoving my hair aside so he could access my neck.

He fucked me deeper, harder until his groans were loud in my ear. And when he clamped his teeth on the back of my neck, I came again, screaming his name at the ocean beyond.

10

CREED

“CAN I ASK YOU SOMETHING?”

I shifted, pulling Journey closer and pressing a kiss to the side of her head. “Sure.”

It was the first night in the new house, and she was in my bed where she belonged, where I preferred her. Now that she didn't have a bed of her own—a choice she made when we started designing—I knew I would have this pleasure more often. That was her idea. She said she didn't need a place to hide out, and she preferred not to sleep alone, so we helped her to design a room to store her clothes and shoes, as well as to get ready for work, going out, whatever. And each of our bedrooms had been furnished to her specifications. She'd put her mark in every room to ensure we had a piece of her even when she wasn't right there beside us.

Journey dragged her fingertips over my chest. “Have you ever thought about having kids?”

To be fair, I'd expected this question to come long ago, so I wasn't surprised.

“No,” I said truthfully.

“Meaning you've never thought about it? Or you don't want kids?”

“Meaning I took care of that when I was younger. I can't have kids.”

Journey lifted her head and propped it on her hand, which rested on my chest. I tilted my chin to look at her face.

“You had a vasectomy?”

“Yes.”

“You never said anything.”

She was right. I hadn't. I rarely ever thought about it.

Her gaze skimmed over my face as though she could read the truth in it. “Do you wish you hadn't?”

I brushed her hair back, tucking it behind her ear. “No.”

She continued to stare at me, and I had to give her credit, her expression gave nothing away. I couldn't tell whether she was disappointed with that information or merely processing it.

“I don't have some sordid tale of not wanting to bring kids into a shitty world,” I explained, resting my hand on her back as I stared at the ceiling. “I just don't have it in me to be a father.”

“You'd be a good one.”

“Maybe. I don't know what that even looks like, kitten. But at this point in my life, I can honestly say I haven't changed my mind.”

Journey tilted her head. “Back when we first started having sex, you asked if I was on birth control. If it didn't matter, why'd you ask?”

“Because you don't tell a vibrant twenty-four-year-old that you've mapped out the future already.”

“So you deceived me?”

I tilted my head down. “When I first fucked you, did you want kids?”

Her answer came faster than I thought it would. “No. Before I met you, I didn't see myself having kids.”

“But now you do?”

“Would it hurt you if I said yes? Nick and I talked about it.”

I smiled. “Nick's always wanted kids. He'd be a great dad.”

“He really would.” She sighed, then relaxed at my side, her head resting on my shoulder.

“Have you talked about it with Garrison and Hawk?”

“A little bit. Not at length, but I will when they're ready.”

“Do you want a baby, kitten?”

“I do. With them, if that’s what they want. Not now,” she amended quickly. “Not until after the wedding.”

“That’s not too far off.”

I felt her smile against my chest. “One hundred eighty-three days.”

I chuckled. “Counting down already?”

“Of course.” She rubbed her hand over my chest. “Do you think it’ll be awkward to bring a kid into this ... relationship?”

“I think if you have a baby with Nick ... or hell, even with Garrison or Hawk, that kid will be damn lucky to have the parents it has. You’ll be an amazing mom. I have no doubt.”

“And it won’t bother you?”

“Bother me how?”

“I mean, I’ll be pregnant.”

I rolled, shifting her off my arm so I could hover over her. “Kitten, I’ve come to terms with what this is. I know your heart belongs to more than just me. I’m okay with that.”

I could see from the pinch of her eyebrows that she was skeptical.

“As long as you love me,” I said softly, “I’m okay with that.”

“I do. I love you.”

As was the case every time she said the words, my chest filled with warmth, expanding until I didn’t think my body could contain it.

“The only thing I want is for you to be happy,” I told her. “If that means we have rugrats running around, so be it. As long as you never stop looking at me the way you do, I can survive anything.”

Journey lifted her head, meeting my lips.

I kissed her, letting her taste my sincerity. I loved this woman in a way I would never love anyone else. Our life together was just beginning, but I knew without a doubt that

we would weather any storm that came our way. That wasn't to say I wouldn't be jealous at points because that was a given. When you shared the love of a woman who meant the world to you, it was expected. But I'd come to terms with the fact that what I had with Journey was different than what she had with them. It was meant to be that way.

“I love you,” I whispered against her mouth as I slipped between her legs. “As long as you never doubt that, we'll be fine.”

She smiled at me, her eyes closing as I pressed my hips down, filling her slowly. “Yes, we will.”

NICK

“THAT WAS ... INTERESTING,” I TOLD JOURNEY WHEN I JOINED her on the second-floor balcony overlooking the pool and the ocean.

We’d spent the first full day at the new house with company. Her parents had come over for lunch, and she spent most of her time giving them a tour of everything, introducing them to our new life. I never thought I would say that hanging out with the parents would be easy, but it hadn’t been awkward. Not *too* awkward, anyway. No, that came when Rhylee and Avery came over for dinner. It wasn’t the first time I’d been around Journey’s best friends since Rhylee and I stopped seeing each other months ago, but it was the first time in a small setting. And, as had been the case back then, Avery ensured it was relatively uncomfortable.

I wasn’t sure what Avery’s beef was with me, but I had sensed it from the first time Rhylee introduced us. I figured it had everything to do with her feelings for Rhylee and her fear that I had been coming between them. Now that I was with Journey, I wasn’t sure what the problem was, but Avery was still as frustrating as she’d been back then.

I had learned a lot about Avery in the span of one evening, though. I didn’t think she intended to broadcast her jealousy, but it tainted every conversation we shared. Journey must’ve noticed because she inserted herself in those conversations, ensuring Avery knew I wasn’t secretly pining after her girlfriend. Rhylee even apologized, which was unnecessary.

“Avery’s unique,” Journey said, smiling up at me as I took a seat on the large sofa that circled the gas fire pit on the second-floor balcony.

“That’s one word for it,” I teased, putting my arm behind her so I could sit closer.

She leaned into me, sipping from her wineglass. “Believe it or not, she’s not always like that.”

“Only when I’m around.”

Journey tilted her head, peering up at me. “You are quite the catch, Mr. Weston. Any woman would see that. You can’t blame her for wondering why Rhylee gave you up so easily.”

“There was nothing to give up.”

Journey sat up and placed her glass on the concrete ledge around the fire pit before changing positions so she was straddling my lap.

“You know that,” she said, sliding her arms over my shoulders so she could cup my neck. “And I know that. But when a woman’s in love, she can’t be held accountable for her insecurities. As crazy as they may seem.”

“You’re not jealous,” I told her.

She leaned in and kissed me. “No.” She pulled back and looked me in the eye. “I would be if I didn’t know that what we have is so much more than a few nights together.”

“Is it?”

Journey grinned as she held up her ring finger. “I hate to break it to you, Mr. Weston, but this is a permanent thing we’ve got. You need to accept it.”

“I think maybe I need some convincing.” I slid my hands beneath her skirt to feel the warmth of her skin on my palms.

“Do you?”

I cocked an eyebrow. “I *did* see the woman I loved getting fucked last night.” I pointed behind me. “Right over there.”

“You did see that,” she said, trailing her lips over my jaw. “And you enjoyed watching.”

She was right. I did. I couldn’t explain what it was I felt when I saw her with one of my best friends, but it was a special blend of torture. A riotous mixture of lust and jealousy that twisted me up even as it made my dick hard. I’d never really considered myself a voyeur; however, there was something distinctly erotic about watching her with one of them. But it was the spontaneity of it that really got my blood

pumping. Like last night, when I came outside and happened upon Creed fucking her not too far from where we were now.

“How would you suggest I prove it to you?”

“Start by taking off the sweater.”

Admittedly, we were exploring this kink together, and that made it even better. I was coming to terms with the fact that I was a cuckold, in a manner of speaking. No, Journey wasn't my wife, and technically, she wasn't being unfaithful, but try convincing my brain of that during the act.

She sat up and lifted her sweater over her head, clutching it to her chest briefly.

“Are you being modest?” I asked, tugging on the sweater to get her to release it.

“What if someone sees us, Mr. Weston?”

The role-playing aspect of our encounters wasn't new for us.

“Let them,” I said firmly. “You like when they watch.”

Journey looked around as though ensuring there weren't strangers who might get a glimpse of her. There weren't. Even if someone were on the beach below, they couldn't see us, but it heightened the intensity.

I moved her hands aside so I could cup her tits. “You *want* them to watch, don't you, dirty girl?”

“Yes.”

Journey moaned, leaning into my hands as I teased her nipples into tight little points. She arched her back and ground her pussy against the ridge of my cock confined in my slacks.

“You want them to see me suck your tits.” I leaned in and took one in my mouth.

When she clutched my head, I stopped.

“Put your hands down,” I ordered. “Behind you. Show off these pretty tits.”

Her eyes were hooded, and I could see the lust burning hot.

I waited patiently until she followed my instructions.
“That’s better.”

Once she positioned her hands on my knees, I licked her nipple. She rocked against me, trying to get friction where she needed it. It drove me fucking crazy, but I was nothing if not patient. I would get mine. For now, this was for both of us.

“Next time he fucks you, I want you naked.”

Journey moaned.

“That way, I can see his cock moving inside you.”

“Nick...”

“You like when I watch.”

“Yes.”

“You like knowing it makes my dick hard.”

“Yes.”

I bit her nipple, then licked away the sting.

“It makes you wet, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Show me.”

I released her so she could get to her feet. She did, moving slowly, pretending to be watching for someone in the shadows as she stripped off her skirt and her panties.

I patted the cushion beside me. “Put your foot up here.”

Journey stepped closer, then placed one foot on the sofa. She shifted her knee, letting me see the glistening pink flesh between.

“You’re drenched. I want to taste it. Put your finger inside your cunt.”

She did, sliding it in to the first knuckle.

“Deeper.”

I watched as her finger disappeared inside her tight, wet sheath.

“Now let me taste.”

Journey slid her finger out, then put it in my mouth. I met her gaze as I sucked it. She gasped, watching my lips.

“Do it again,” I instructed.

She did, fingering herself, then transferring the taste to my tongue.

“Fuck, you taste good.” I slumped on the cushion so my head rested at the back. “Get up here and sit on my face.”

Her smile was radiant. My woman was always up for doing something new.

Journey stepped up onto the sofa, straddling my chest. She rested her knees on the back and knelt over me. I gripped her thighs to support her while I tongued her pussy, staring up at her from between her legs. She watched me, her hair falling around her face and tickling mine. I lapped at her sweetness, flicking her clit a few times.

“Nick...”

I released her thighs and grabbed her hands, twining my fingers with hers.

“Ride my face, baby. Take what you need.”

Journey used my hands as leverage and ground her hips down, rubbing her clit on my tongue. I couldn't speak, but I didn't need to. She knew what she needed, and she was taking it from me. I sucked her clit between my lips and flicked my tongue over the little nub until she gasped, her hands clutching mine as she hovered on the edge of release. When she orgasmed, she cried out my name, her husky voice echoing on the cool breeze.

“It's my turn,” I told her, helping her to climb down. “On your knees.”

She licked her lips as she positioned herself between my legs.

“Take my cock out.”

I let her do the work, unbuttoning and unzipping. I lifted my hips so she could pull my slacks down. When my cock sprang free, her eyes zeroed in on her prize seconds before she took me into the sweet heaven of her mouth.

“Oh, yeah,” I groaned, putting my hand on her head to guide her.

She bathed my dick in heat, licking and sucking until I couldn't take anymore.

“Let me fuck your face.”

Journey relaxed, her lips stretched wide around my cock while her hands rested on the cushion beside my legs. I gripped her head with both hands and used her mouth, fucking in deep.

“Swallow,” I groaned. “When I come, I want you to swallow it all.”

She hummed her approval, and that was all it took. The vibrations shot straight to my balls, and I grunted as my cock erupted.

This woman was going to be the death of me.

“Get up here with me.”

When she got to her feet, I shoved my pants down and kicked them away. I pulled her down, holding her to me as we lay face to face. I pressed a kiss to her nose, then her lips.

“I love you.”

She smiled. “I love you, too.”

I held her like that, kissing her, my tongue dancing with hers. It was a slow waltz because we were replete for the moment.

“I really do like when you watch,” she whispered.

“I know.” I smiled down at her. “And I like watching you.”

“Do you really?”

I held her stare. “Last night, after you and Creed went inside, I went to my room and jacked off. I couldn't help

myself. When I closed my eyes, I kept seeing you with him.”

Even as I said it, my dick thickened.

“I relived it again as I fisted my cock until I came.”

I’d gone into this believing I would be the fifth wheel, but time had proven that wasn’t the case. Whether this kink was a byproduct of that or something that had always been there, I would never know. However, it was something I intended to explore with this woman because it worked for us.

“I wish I could’ve watched you,” she said, reaching between us to stroke my cock.

“Next time, you will,” I told her. “I’ll make sure of it.”

12

HAWK

“WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING?”

I jumped at Creed’s barked question, spinning around to see him standing behind me, his eyebrows lifted skyward.

“I ... uh...” I motioned toward the balcony. “Nothing.”

“You were watching them.”

It wasn’t a question, so clearly, he wasn’t expecting a response. I shrugged anyway, then started toward the living room.

“Did they ask you to watch?”

“Does it matter?” I countered, wondering why the fuck he cared so much. It wasn’t like there was much privacy between the five of us.

“Did they *ask you*?”

There was a darkness in his tone that spoke to something deep inside me. It called to me, inciting my fight or flight instinct. I chose to fight this time.

“No,” I snapped. “But they didn’t tell—”

“Upstairs,” Creed barked.

I stopped walking so I could turn to face him. “What?”

“You heard me.”

I had, yes, but I wasn’t sure where he was going with this. There was only one thing on the third floor of this house.

“Don’t make me tell you again.”

Although he caught me off guard, I couldn’t deny that my dick was already hard. I’d gotten used to Creed’s barked commands in recent months. Ever since the doctor released me, Creed ensured I was getting the attention I’d been deprived of for so long. Granted, most of the time, it resulted in some sort of punishment. I probably should’ve been disappointed, but I wasn’t. Not even a little.

“Garrison!” Creed shouted.

“Yo,” he called back from the kitchen.

Creed waited until footsteps sounded. “This one needs to be taught a lesson.”

“What did he do this time?”

“I caught him watching Journey and Nick.”

“Hmm.”

I looked over my shoulder to see Garrison staring at me, rubbing his chin as though considering what that meant.

“And now he’s not following instructions.”

“That’s not true,” I countered.

Creed’s eyebrows lifted again. “Then why the fuck are you still standing there?”

That was a damn good question.

“Upstairs,” Creed repeated. “I want you naked. Put on a blindfold and get in the sling. Face down.”

That didn’t sound like punishment, but I wasn’t stupid enough to voice that aloud. No doubt Creed would come up with some sadistic shit that would have me begging for mercy.

“Yes, Alpha,” I replied with a hint of mockery because I wouldn’t be me without it.

I ascended the stairs slowly, letting the thrill move through me at the thought of the unknown. At the top of the stairs was an open seating area, complete with a settee and a black marble end table that held a large vase of blood-red roses. An inviting area for those who didn’t know what was concealed behind the three-quarter tall bright white wall that separated the play space from curious eyes. There was a large painting hung in the center of the wall—a black and white abstract design that looked good there.

You could go left or right. There were no doors, nothing to hide the interesting things beyond. Unlike the previous one, this playroom didn’t have concrete floors or walls. It wasn’t

dark and dingy but rather bright and airy, thanks to the walls of windows that ran the entire perimeter of the floor. The ceiling was painted a matte white, with bright LEDs recessed every few feet. The floor was white-washed hardwood. Easy to clean.

Journey explained it as museum-like, a space used to showcase the finest art. At least to the untrained eye.

No expense had been spared in this space that Creed, Garrison, and Nick had designed together. They worked with a friend of Creed's who was a craftsman with a kinky side. He was the same person who had designed the bubble chair Creed had given Journey, the one she liked to read naked in simply to torment us.

If you looked close enough, you would find the equipment that was scattered throughout. They'd opted for the same pulley system as in the wine cellar at the old house; only it was more discreetly hidden in the ceiling than the other. An electronic panel on the wall controlled everything from the pulleys to the blackout shades that slid down to cover the walls. Although we were utilizing the equipment at the club occasionally, Creed had installed the fancy tables, benches, and spanking horses here as well. Even a St. Andrew's cross stood sentry in one corner.

The most interesting was the new milking machine I hadn't yet been subjected to. It was an upgraded version of the last one, and I had no doubt it would be just as excruciating. I secretly hoped to earn that punishment soon, just to test it out.

As soon as I entered the room, the shades descended over the glass, concealing us from the outside world. The lights in the ceiling changed from a vivid blue-white to a dim yellow, creating seductive shadows around the various equipment.

I made my way over to the sling, which was set up and ready for me, positioned at the perfect height.

About a month after I came home from the hospital after femur surgery, I learned that Creed had designed a contraption that catered to my injury. The sling was different from the other because it was shorter, allowing the person in it to be

face down. Back when I had the brace on my leg, Creed had rigged it so that my leg was fully supported without putting any unnecessary strain on it. How he managed that, I would never know, but I could attest to the comfort. In fact, I'd asked to use it a couple of times without punishment because it relieved the pressure when I was experiencing tremendous pain in my thigh muscle.

Granted, that part of the system was no longer in use, leaving only the sling and various hand, arm, leg, and ankle cuffs dangling overhead. There were other straps and ties that could be used to contort the submissive into appropriate poses depending on the objective.

Since I didn't have to concern myself with any of that, I focused on my task. I stripped out of my clothes, grabbed a blindfold, then positioned myself in the sling. It was high enough I could bend at the waist and rest on it comfortably with my arms dangling down and my feet on the floor.

I lost track of time as I remained where I was, entertaining myself by thinking about Journey and the way she'd been straddling Nick's head, grinding her clit on his mouth while she drove herself to orgasm. I hadn't intended to watch them, but even if I had, no one would've cared—certainly not Journey or Nick. But I was on to Creed's games. He needed a reason to instigate this, and I was more than willing to let him punish me because we both enjoyed it.

I was alerted to someone's presence by the sound of footsteps. That was followed by the sound of something being rolled across the floor. I was aware of someone behind me. I assumed it was Creed, but since he'd invited Garrison to give his two cents, it could've been either of them. Or hell, both. I honestly hoped that was the case because I'd grown quite fond of being fucked by both of them at the same time. Ever since that first time on the rooftop, I'd had the pleasure of being crushed between them, one filling my mouth, the other my ass—and not only as a means of punishment.

Warm hands began to move over me as whoever it was adjusted the straps and cuffs to put me in the position they wanted. I was convinced Creed was the one who was doing it

because he was still careful with my leg, although I was fully healed. The bone, anyway. I was still undergoing physical therapy, but that was mostly because I wanted to build that leg back up to pre-break form. I had a slight limp that I was working on. If it weren't for that and the scar from the bullet, it would've been like it never happened.

“So, am I getting it from both ends?” I prompted, hoping to at least find out who was in there.

“Depends.”

Definitely Creed.

“On?” I turned my head as though I might see him through the blindfold.

“If you can survive the milking machine.”

“I can survive it,” I answered quickly. I wouldn't like it, but I could endure.

“But can you survive it while being fucked?”

“Depends on who's doing the fucking.”

“Not a who.”

The husky female voice surprised me.

“Journey?”

She giggled. “Yes?”

“What are you doing here?”

“Helping out.”

“With?”

“Your punishment.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

Oh, hell.

Someone pressed fingers against my anus, generously lubricating me. I hissed, surprised by the initial coldness, then eased by the gentle way they teased.

“How long does he have to go for?” Journey asked.

“What’s a good time?” Creed asked.

“Twenty minutes,” Garrison answered. “Milking machine and fucking rod. If he can survive that without coming, we’ll reward him.”

Before I could ask what the reward would be, someone pressed a ball gag against my lips. I reluctantly opened so they could secure it around my head.

Let’s just say I survived the twenty minutes.

I also survived having Journey watch me get fucked by both Creed and Garrison at the same time, although I wasn’t sure how.

13

Six months later, Saturday...

JOURNEY

“I’M NOT SURE YOU COULD’VE PICKED A more perfect day or a more perfect dress.”

I stared at my reflection in the mirror, admiring the simple white gown that I’d chosen for today. As soon as I saw it, I knew it was the one. With the sweetheart neckline, thin beaded straps, and the long chiffon skirt that billowed around my feet, it was ... well, as my mother said, it was perfect.

Better yet, I didn’t have to wear shoes, nor would I have to change for the reception afterward. Simple, relaxed, and elegant. That was the theme of today’s ceremony. And from the looks of it, my mother had pulled it off without a hitch. That wasn’t to say she hadn’t had help. Thanks to months of endless planning, she’d developed a friendship with Hawk’s and Garrison’s mothers. They often spoke on the phone and traded text messages. Not only for the benefit of this event, either. They’d become friends.

“Are you nervous?”

I turned to check the rear view of the dress, smiling as I did. “Not even a little.”

And that much was true. I’d been looking forward to this day for months. Not because I was looking for a grand ceremony or a lavish celebration. No, this day was about telling Creed, Hawk, Garrison, and Nick what they meant to me and ensuring they knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with them. I had provided my mother with a list of my wants and needs and left the rest up to her. As my mother was prone to do, she’d made it as painless as possible for me. I loved her for that.

It required effort, but we managed to keep the guest list short. It consisted of only those who were most important to us. My parents, of course. Avery and Rhylee were here at my request. Garrison had invited his parents, his brothers Leif, Lance, and Michael, plus Michael’s wife and their nine-month-old son. Hawk had brought his mother and Joey, the

young man he trained at the gym. Nick had invited his mother and brother. Creed had invited Rule.

Fifteen guests, plus the five of us, was about as intimate a setting as I could imagine, and it was exactly how I wanted it. We were even having Michael officiate since our union was in ceremony only. Creed, being who he is, had already had documents drawn up and signed, ensuring I was taken care of from a legal standpoint. Wills had been updated—and created, since I hadn't had one prior—to cover all bases in the event something were to happen.

So today was for us to enjoy and celebrate this crazy beautiful thing we'd created.

“Are you ready?”

I turned once more to look at myself and nodded. “So ready.”

We exited the bridal suite to find my fathers standing in the hallway. As soon as they saw me, their faces lit up, and I felt every ounce of their love for me.

“I'm going to take my seat,” my mother said quickly. “Wait two minutes. Then it's your turn.”

“We won't let her be late,” Roman assured her.

As my mother hurried off, my dads turned to me.

“Honey, you look amazing,” Ryder said.

“Understatement of the century,” Roman chimed in.

“Thanks, Daddies.”

Roman looked at Ryder. “Did she just...?”

“I think she did.”

I giggled. I'd known they would get a kick out of that because I never called them Dad, but I didn't have to. They knew without a doubt they were the most important men in my world and always would be. Their roles were merely shifting. They were no longer responsible for me. They simply had to love me, and they'd done that throughout my life, so I knew nothing would change.

They each offered me an arm, and I linked mine with theirs so they could lead the way down to the beach.

“We already gave all five of them the dad speech,” Ryder said, casual as you may. “Threatened life and limb and all that. I think they’re good to go.”

They maintained the same teasing conversation all the way down.

As usual, they made it impossible to get nervous, and I knew that was their intention. They didn’t have to worry because I wasn’t nervous. I was already living the rest of my life with the men I loved, but this was our way of showing the world that this was permanent. It wasn’t conventional, and most people wouldn’t understand, but it worked for us.

My dads came to a stop several yards away from the arbor that had been set up on the beach. I took a deep breath and stared at the men waiting for me. The backdrop of water, sky, and sun was mesmerizingly beautiful, but I saw only them—with both my eyes and my heart.

“Let’s do this,” Ryder said softly.

Music didn’t accompany my walk down the rose-petal-strewn sand, only the sounds of the ocean and wind. I was aware of every single thing, mentally cataloging it to review later because I saw only happiness standing before me. And happiness took the form of four insanely attractive men wearing khaki pants rolled up to their ankles and white linen shirts, their feet bare. Their attire was a far cry from the power suits they wore in the office, but it was what I’d wanted, and they’d never looked better.

My smile started small but grew with every step until I was sure it beamed from my face. It mirrored those on theirs, and I knew this was a moment I would cherish for the remainder of my days.

My fathers kissed me on my cheeks, then urged me forward. I went without hesitation, walking up to the four men who held my heart in their hands. I was vaguely aware of Michael explaining the origination of the Celtic handfasting

tradition, which we'd opted for instead of a traditional ceremony.

“Know now, before you venture forward together, since your lives have crossed in this life, you have formed ties with each other. As you seek to permanently join lives, you should strive to fully realize the ideals that give meaning to this day. Please, take each other's hands.”

Standing in a circle, the five of us linked hands and wrists, compromising since I only had two hands, but I wanted to hold one of each of theirs. We hadn't planned out how it would work, and it honestly didn't matter as long as the five of us were linked as one. Michael produced the handfasting cord that I'd designed specifically for us. It was made up of two braided cords—red to signify passion and gold for wisdom—each close to six feet in length. At the ends of the cords were several charms: those with our initials, one gold heart, and one gold trinity knot.

Michael held the handfasting cord as he continued. “The hands that are before you are those that will love you and cherish you through the years. These hands will wipe the tears, whether from sorrow or joy, from your eyes. These hands will comfort you in illness and health and hold you when needed, during times of happiness, struggle, grief, or fear. These hands will support and encourage you to chase your dreams.”

“Gentlemen, do you agree to be this woman's faithful partner for life?”

“We do,” they said in unison.

“Journey, do you agree to be these men's faithful partner for life?”

“I do.”

Michael draped the cord over our joined hands so the ends hung down to the sand.

“Gentlemen, do you promise to love Journey without reservation?”

“We do.”

“Journey, do you promise to love each of them without reservation?”

“I do.”

Michael looped the cord around so that it circled our hands.

“Will the five of you stand by each other in plenty and in want during times of joy and sorrow?”

“We will,” we said at the same time.

Michael looped the cord again, tying it under the other end to create a knot, holding our hands together.

“Will the five of you share the burdens of each so your spirits may grow in this union?”

“We will.”

“Gentlemen, will you promise to be open and honest with Journey throughout your union?”

“We will.”

“Journey, will you promise to be open and honest with each of them throughout your union?”

“I will.”

Michael draped the cord while I looked at each of these men before me. Their eyes were on me, and there was so much emotion in them that my chest tightened. I could feel their love as though it was tangible.

“Journey, will you honor these men?”

“I will.”

“Gentlemen, will you honor this woman?”

“We will.”

“Will the five of you seek to cherish and strengthen that honor?”

“We will.”

Michael slipped the end under the cord, weaving it through to bind us together, and stepped back.

“The knots of this binding is formed not by these cords but by the vows they will make to one another. The cords may fall at any time, for you hold in your hands all that is necessary to make this union. Gentleman, you may now recite your vows.”

I felt the gentle pressure as they gripped my hands and wrists more firmly.

As one, they spoke, reciting the traditional Celtic vows we’d chosen.

You are blood of my blood, bone of my bone. I give you my body, that we might be one. I give you my spirit until our life is done.

My heart soared as I met each of their gazes. Something came alive in me at that moment. My love for all of them morphed into something all-encompassing, filling me with a joy I wasn’t sure my body could contain.

“Journey, you may recite your vows.”

I smiled up at them. “Let me preface this by saying I will do my best not to cry.” I grinned widely and made them smile in return. “No promises, though.”

A few chuckles sounded from our families.

With my heart in my throat, I recited the vows I’d personalized just for them.

“You cannot possess me, for I belong to myself, but while we all wish it, I give you that which is mine to give. You cannot command me, for I am a free person, but I shall serve you in those ways you require. I pledge to you that yours will be the names I cry aloud in the night and the eyes into which I smile in the morning.”

The tears came unbidden, but I pushed through.

“I pledge to each of you my living and dying, equally in your care, and I give you my spirit until our life is done. This is my vow to each of you. This is a union of equals.”

THE END

(Unless you'd like to see where they are 20 years from now. If
so, keep reading.)

EPILOGUE 2

Twenty years later

NICK

MONDAY...

“And that, my friends, is the completion of your first-day orientation. Any questions?”

I stared around the room at all the new faces, waiting for hands to go up in the air. I tried not to focus on the familiar ones, but I should’ve known they would be the first to voice their curiosities and concerns.

The vibrant dark-haired young woman directly in front of me raised her hand, fluttered her fingers, and shot me a mischievous grin.

“Yes, Ms. Walker.”

“Would you mind sharin’ with us how difficult it was to embrace technology over the years?”

Even though I was expecting the question—Garrison’s daughter was nothing if not a ball-buster like her father—it still made me smile.

“If you’re interested in the evolution of Primal Instincts, you should visit the equipment museum,” I told her, reiterating what I’d explained to the group at the onset of this orientation.

The next hand went up. Before I could call on him, the words were out of his mouth.

“Is it true you used to have to *push buttons* to make a machine work?”

“Theo,” I shook my head.

“Is it true you hired people to pour coffee?” Tobias asked before I could stop him.

“I think it’s safe to say you both already know all there is to know about Primal Instincts, the technology, and how we did things *back in the day*.” I used air quotes for the last few words to emphasize. “As does your sister. Leave the questions for the rest of the class.”

There were a few chuckles from other people, but no more hands went up.

In all fairness, I knew the twins were going to throw a wrench into the works. They always did. I blamed that on Hawk. He'd turned my sons into monsters. Loveable ones, but monsters nonetheless. It was the highlight of their lives to give me and their mother shit whenever possible. And at nineteen, Theodore and Tobias hadn't grown out of it. Hawk had had the same effect on Garrison's daughter, Willow, but she wasn't quite as outspoken as they were. *Most* of the time. The good news was Hawk was getting payback because his thirteen-year-old son, Isaiah, had learned from his older siblings, and he was proving to be a handful.

“Well, if that's—”

The door opened at the back of the room, and Creed walked in. Although we'd seen vast technological advances in the past two decades, the reactions from our newest employees were the same as they'd been for the last almost forty years that we'd been in business. All heads turned as worshipful eyes eagerly drank in the sight of the six-and-a-half-foot-tall man who commanded respect in every room he walked into.

“Creed,” I greeted, gesturing for him to take the floor.

He turned to face the group. Before he got started, he pointed directly at Theo, Toby, and Willow. “Nothing from the peanut gallery.”

“No promises,” Toby retorted.

Creed chuckled. “You're too much like your mom to listen to me.”

That earned laughter from the room.

“Since I'm not known for long-winded conversations,” Creed began, “I have no intention of boring you any more than Nick has already.” He flashed a crooked smile at me, then turned his attention back to the group. “I just wanted to introduce myself. I'm Creed Granger, the founder and former CEO of Primal Instincts. Our current CEO, Journey Zeplyn, could not be here today. She's on her way back from our

Montreal location as we speak. She assured me she would personally introduce herself to each of you as soon as she can.”

He paused briefly, and I knew he didn’t want to ask if anyone had questions. When he cut a look over his shoulder, I smirked because it was only fair.

Creed turned back to the room, tucking his hands into the pockets of his slacks. “Does—”

“Is it true this orientation used to last eight hours?” Theo asked, directing the question at Creed.

“We can go back to the former curriculum if you’d prefer,” Creed answered without missing a beat. “Perhaps you’d like to walk us through it.”

“I apologize ahead of time for anyone who has to work with one of our children,” I told the room. “I assure you, they’re smarter than they act.”

“*Pfft.* I am, yeah. I’m not sure about them,” Willow said, her cheeks turning pink as soon as she realized she’d said the words aloud.

“That’s all for today. Enjoy the rest of the afternoon, and we’ll see you first thing tomorrow morning.” I pointed at Theo, Toby, and Willow. “Except you three. I think we’ll find something for you to do on your first day.”

Theo and Toby looked at each other and pointed. “This is your fault,” they said in unison.

I glanced at Creed and grinned. He had predicted it, and I hated to admit he was right; this was going to be a fascinating new era for Primal Instincts, LLC.

HAWK

It didn't seem to matter how short the trips were, I always looked forward to going home. This time was no different. After a quick two days in Canada, I was eager to get back to the daily routine.

Not that I hadn't enjoyed spending two days alone with Journey. I fucking loved every second of it, and I would never turn down the opportunity to have her all to myself, no matter how short. I'd long ago learned that every second with her was precious. Twenty-one years since I met her, and it was still true.

"How do you think the orientation's going?" I asked, placing my phone on the table.

She rolled her head on the headrest to look at me. "I'm sure they're giving their dads hell."

They'd better be since I'd paid them to do it. "I wish we could be there to see it."

Ever since I learned that the kids wanted to work at Primal Instincts, I'd wondered what that would look like. Especially since all three of them were attempting to get out of going to college, claiming the family business would give them all the education they needed. Journey disagreed wholeheartedly. However, she *had* agreed to give them a three-month internship before she made a final decision, so they weren't technically getting out of anything yet.

"You think they'll change their minds about school?" I asked, linking my fingers with hers.

"Yes."

"You sound certain."

"I think—"

Before she could finish her thought, her phone rang. She glanced at the screen.

“Hello,” she said politely when she answered. “Yes, Mrs. Lichen.”

The mention of the school principal had my gaze darting to Journey. It explained why she didn't put the phone on speaker. I might've had a couple of run-ins with the school's administration over the years. In my defense, my son was the one they pointed the finger at first because of my former career. That and Isaiah's tendency to punch kids when they did something he disagreed with.

I couldn't hear what was being said on the other end of the phone, but it wasn't good based on Journey's expression.

“I understand.” She nodded, although the principal couldn't see her. “No, his dad's out of town at the moment. As am I. We'll be back in a couple of hours.” She nodded again. “Yes, I'll have Creed pick him up.” Another brief pause followed by, “Thank you. I assure you, we'll address it as soon as we get home.”

“What did he do now?”

Journey grinned, although I could detect her exasperation. “He got in a fight.”

I rolled my eyes and dropped my head back against the headrest. “That boy. Did he start it?”

“Yes and no.” She chuckled. “I think you're rubbing off on me. He was standing up for another kid, so while he didn't start the fight, he did throw the first punch.”

“That's always his excuse.” My son was nothing if not the protector of the innocent.

“And it's usually the truth,” she said, defending him.

Journey spoke directly into her phone, sending a voice message to Creed, asking him to pick Isaiah up from school. It wasn't the first time we'd had to rely on Creed to care for the kids. For a man who never wanted any of his own, he was a damn good father to all four of them. Every one of our kids looked up to him, and for the most part, they took his word as gospel. All of them except Isaiah. My boy had more of me in him than I'd imagined was possible. He was defiant and

moody, and it was only getting increasingly worse now that he was a teenager.

“He’ll be fine,” Journey said, squeezing my hand. “My mother said this is to be expected. He’s the youngest of four. They rile him up because they can. This is him reacting to so much authority.”

Yeah, that was what I continued to hear. And sure, I understood that with so many people in one house looking to parent him, it was only natural for him to act out. Hell, I still did, and I was fifty-one, not thirteen. I’d grown out of some of my anxiety, but I still had my moments. It helped that I had Journey, Creed, and Garrison to lean on. They’d always been there for me when I needed them, and I knew they always would be. We’d all grown through the years, embracing the family we’d created. It was unconventional, to say the least, but I wouldn’t trade it for the world.

“When we get home, you can take him to the gym. Have Joey meet you. Isaiah looks up to Joey.”

He did. The kid I’d mentored when he was a teenager had grown up to be one of the best men I knew. Although Joey didn’t pursue fighting as a career, he’d kept one foot in the ring, choosing to work with at-risk youth as a career. To say he had a way with kids who acted out was an understatement. He had more patience in his pinky than I had in my entire body.

“Good idea. I’ll send him a message. Ask him to meet us.”

Journey was still watching me when I put my phone away.

“What’s on your mind, smokeshow?”

She lifted one eyebrow and smirked.

I knew that look. It was the one she got whenever she was looking for some personal attention. We had all learned to read her signals over the years, and she’d gotten good at ensuring we read them clearly.

“Still half an hour till we land,” she said in that husky voice that had the power to make my brain shut down. “And we do have this jet all to ourselves.”

Yes, we most certainly did.

Needless to say, I didn't waste a single second.

GARRISON

“How’d it go?” I asked Willow when she strolled into the kitchen.

Her smile was instant. “It was amazing.”

“I’m not sure anyone’s ever said that about one of Nick’s orientations.”

She rolled her eyes, a typical response for my teenage daughter. “He’s a good teacher, but I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about the opportunity.”

“Yeah? You think you’ll make it the full three months?” That was how long Journey had given them to make an impression on their leadership team.

“I’m gonna prove to Mom that I don’t need to sit in a classroom for another day. The hands-on experience is gonna be my guide.”

“Good luck to you. You hungry?”

“Creed said he was grabbin’ food on the way home.”

“Did he happen to say it was fried chicken?”

Willow laughed. “I do *not* know how you could eat that every single day.”

“I could, but I don’t.”

“Is Mom home yet?”

I nodded toward the back of the house. “She grabbed a bottle of wine and a glass.”

“Uh-oh,” Willow said. “What did Isaiah do now?”

“If I had to venture a guess, I’d say—”

“He punched a kid,” Hawk said as he strolled into the room. He offered a fist bump to Willow. “Your day better than mine?”

“It was—”

“Amazing,” I interrupted, raising the pitch of my voice to imitate my daughter.

“It really was,” she told Hawk. “I’m gonna check on Mom.”

“Where’s Isaiah?” I asked Hawk when we were alone.

“I dropped him off at the gym. Joey’s bringing him home later.”

“In that case...” I approached him without hesitation. The moment he was within reach, I gripped the front of his neck and pulled him toward me. I crushed my mouth to his, capturing his gasp of surprise before thrusting my tongue against his.

“Don’t fuck with me, G,” he whispered, his hands gripping the front of my shirt.

“In five minutes, I’ll *be* fucking you,” I promised as I pulled back.

“I need you to make it hurt.”

That statement drew me up short. I held his stare, trying to determine what had caused him to slide off the rails. It’d been a long time since Hawk had asked me to hurt him. Usually, he let Creed have that honor because that was their thing. So when he did ask, it wasn’t because he sought physical pain so much as complete surrender.

“Do you want me to call Creed?” I asked. Not because I wanted to pass Hawk off but because Creed and I had learned that dominating Hawk together usually resulted in less chaos for longer periods. According to Hawk, surrendering to both of us was the most incredible high, and while we didn’t give that to him often, it was always an option.

“No. Just you.”

Without another word, I went to my bedroom with Hawk on my heels. When he closed and locked the door, I grabbed him and pushed him against the wall.

His gasp morphed into a moan when I reached between his legs and roughly stroked his cock with the heel of my hand. I

rubbed briefly as a tease, then palmed the top of his head and urged him to his knees. Hawk went without resistance, leaning his head against the door as he stared up at me. His eyes were pleading for relief, and we both knew I would give it to him.

“Take off your shirt,” I ordered as I unbuckled my belt.

Hawk didn't waste time. He stripped his shirt off to reveal his impressive upper body. None of us had the same bodies we'd had when we were younger, but we'd maintained our physiques through the years, focused our efforts on keeping fit. Our business required it since people weren't looking to buy equipment or take fitness advice from someone who wasn't fully invested in their health.

“Give me your hands.”

Hawk raised his hands toward me so I could wrap the leather belt around his wrists. I knew exactly how many times it would wrap before I could tuck the leather under to secure him.

“I'm gonna fuck your face. If you're good, I'll let you come. If not...” My eyes dropped to the belt around his wrists.

Hawk's mouth opened with a soft gasp when I freed my cock from my jeans. I was rock hard, an ailment that plagued me often thanks to Journey and Hawk.

I planted one hand on his head and tilted it back before guiding my cock past his lips. They stretched wide around me, taking what I offered. He pressed his tongue down, giving me as much room inside as I needed to reach the back of his throat. I held still for a moment, loving how he looked with my cock filling his mouth.

“You like when I take from you, don't you, boy?”

His eyes glazed over as I began a slow thrust and retreat, fucking his mouth like I owned it. In a sense, I did because this man had never denied me. The day we pledged our love to Journey was when we'd pledged our love to one another. Our bond was stronger than I ever imagined, making moments like this that much sweeter.

My hips pumped as I took what he so willingly gave. I ensured I used enough force to remind him I was in control because that was what Hawk needed. He wanted someone to hold him together, and this was his preference.

“Fuck, I love your mouth,” I muttered, watching my cock disappear past his lips. “I wanna come down your throat.”

With every word, his eyes flashed blue fire. He wanted more.

I grabbed his face with both hands and fucked him harder, deeper. I didn't stop until the thread on my control snapped. I came in his throat with a rough grunt, watching as he struggled to swallow.

As soon as I was finished, I ordered him onto the bed. I didn't free his hands, nor was I careful when I ripped his shorts down his thighs. His cock was swollen and eager. I didn't make small talk before taking him in my mouth. I controlled every stroke, sliding my mouth up and down the length of him until he was moaning so loud there was a good chance someone would hear it.

“G ... I need to come ... oh, *fuck!* Let me come!”

I tapped his thigh to give him the green light. A second later, he went off, and I swallowed him down.

He was panting heavily, dragging gulps of air into his lungs, when I sprawled over him on my bed, crushing him beneath my weight. I freed his wrists with one hand, holding myself up with the other.

“Better?”

He wrapped his arms around me and buried his face in my neck while he continued to pull himself together. “So much.”

“Tonight, after everyone goes to bed, we'll get Journey in the hot tub. I think it's time we remind her how good it feels when she's between us.”

He groaned, and a chuckle followed it. “I'm not sure where your stamina comes from, but thank fucking God.”

My stamina came from them—Journey and Hawk. They kept me young.

Then again, sixty was the new thirty, wasn't it?

CREED

Tuesday...

“Hadleigh,” I greeted, motioning toward the closed door of Journey’s office. “Is she in?”

“Is she expecting you?” they asked with a straight face.

“No.”

“Hmm.” Hadleigh feigned concern. “I’m not sure what to do about that, Mr. Granger. I’m not sure you understand what it is a CEO does all day.”

Yeah, they had me there. I couldn’t hide my smile. I think that was Hadleigh’s primary goal in life—to make me smile.

“Good one.”

Hadleigh smiled proudly. “Thanks. Go on in.”

I nodded, then strolled through the double doors and into Journey’s office. It was similar to mine, only bright and cheerful versus ... how did Journey describe it? Masculine and moody, I believe, were her exact words.

Journey’s attention lifted from the monitor she was focused on. A smile formed on her magnificent face.

“Close the doors,” I instructed.

She tapped the button on her desk that would conceal us inside the room.

I headed for the sofa and took a seat. “Now, strip.”

I thought for a moment she would argue. My hellcat could be quite unpredictable at times. She was the head of a multi-billion-dollar corporation, after all. Because of that, I now came to her to bark my commands versus summoning her to my office. Although, there were times I did that, too. Simply because it made me happy to do so.

“Am I being punished, Mr. Granger?” There was a coyness to her smile.

“Depends. Are the rumors true?”

“What rumors might those be?”

Even as she responded, she began disrobing, starting with her shoes, then her skirt, and now her pretty silk blouse.

“It’s my understanding there was a party in the hot tub last night.”

“*Really?*” Her surprise was dramatic. And fake. “I hadn’t heard that.”

“No? Two men, one woman, and another man watching somewhere in the shadows.” I met her gaze briefly. “You didn’t hear anything about this?”

Her shirt fell away, revealing her pretty pink lace bra that matched the delicate scrap of lace covering her delectable pussy. Over the years, her body had changed. With each pregnancy, she filled out more, becoming more and more perfect. Gone were the days she could go without a bra because motherhood had filled her tits in, too. She was as sinfully beautiful as she was the very first time I saw her. Only different. Better.

“If you make me wait, your punishment will be severe,” I told her, nodding toward the undergarments still covering her.

Journey freed the clasp between her breasts and let the lace fall away, revealing her dusky pink nipples. I waited patiently while she stepped out of her panties and dramatically dropped them to the floor. Once she was naked, I got to my feet. Without a word, I walked over, took her by the wrist, and led her back to her desk.

I patted the glossy white top. “On your knees.”

With my help, she crawled up onto the surface on all fours.

“What are you going to do to me, Mr. Granger?” she asked, teasing me by wiggling her ass.

“I’m going to start by jogging your memory. I find it hard to believe you know nothing about what happened in that hot tub.”

I smacked her ass. Once on each cheek. Then dragged two fingers along her slit, smiling when I found she was drenched.

“Tell me, hellcat.”

“I’m yours to do with as you please.” She gasped when I thrust two fingers inside her tight little cunt.

“Yes. Yes, you are.”

She whimpered when I dragged her juices to her asshole and teased the little rosebud.

“Did one of them fuck you here?”

A soft moan escaped her, but she nodded.

“Words, Ms. Zeplyn. You answer with words.”

“Yes.”

I pushed two fingers into her pussy. “Whose cock was in here?”

“Garrison’s.”

I coated my thumb with her arousal and pushed it into her ass. “And who had the pleasure of this tight little ass?”

“Hawk.”

“Did they make you come?”

“Yes.”

“While Nick watched?”

She shivered. “Yes.”

“You like when Nick watches.”

“God, yes.” Journey rocked back against my hand, trying to get herself off.

I placed my other hand on her back, stilling her while keeping my fingers and thumb deep inside her.

“If I’d been there, I would’ve fucked your sweet mouth, kitten. I would’ve filled your throat with my cock.”

She whimpered again. “Please.”

“Please, what?”

“Fuck me.”

“I’m not sure that’s the responsible thing to do. You are the CEO, after all.” Even as I spoke, I fucked her with my fingers and thumb, loving how her body responded the same as it always had. She was eager and, dare I say, insatiable. The woman I loved had kept the four of us on our toes for twenty years and showed no signs of slowing down.

“Creed...”

“You’re so fucking sweet when you beg.”

I withdrew my fingers from her body, then grabbed a tissue from the box on her desk to clean them. I tossed the tissue in her trash bin, then retrieved the little clamps we kept in her top drawer for occasions such as this one.

I felt her eyes on me as I moved around to stand in front of her. I ensured she saw what I had. Her breathing became erratic as I placed the little alligator clamp on one nipple.

“Take a deep breath,” I instructed before I released it so the little teeth would bite into her nipple.

She exhaled sharply. “Oh, God.”

“Good girl.”

I did the same with the other clamp, grinning when she threw her head back and moaned.

“How does that feel?”

“It hurts.”

“You want me to take them off?” We both knew it was a courtesy question.

“No.”

“Good.” I tugged on the chain that connected the clamps, pulling harder until her moans grew louder.

“Careful. Someone might hear you.”

Her teal-blue eyes glittered with both amusement and frustration. This was the part she didn’t like. When I dragged it

out. But that was the fun part.

I curled my finger under the chain and tugged again. “Come with me.”

She had to move quickly to keep the chain from pulling too tightly as I helped her down from the desk.

“Come over here and show me what you need, kitten.”

She wasted no time unbuttoning my slacks to free my cock.

“Is that what you want?”

“Yes.” She licked the head, then teased around the crown before opening wide to take me inside her mouth.

I grunted, the wet heat sending a chill down my spine.

“Suck me like you mean it, kitten.”

I let her have her way with me for several minutes, caressing her head while she worshipped my dick. Because I knew she would go until she had me blowing down her throat, I was the one to stop her.

When my cock fell from her lips, I sat, pulling her with me.

“Ride my dick, Journey,” I growled roughly. “Show me what you need.”

The love of my life straddled my hips and guided my cock to the sweet spot between her legs. She was drenched, gliding down on me effortlessly.

“That’s a good girl,” I praised, loving the way her eyes sparkled when I did. “Put the chain in my mouth.”

Her eyebrows arched, and I could see the question in her eyes, but she did as I requested, setting the little gold chain between my teeth.

“Now, fuck me, kitten.”

She started to move, and it only took a moment for her to realize the position she was in. Each time she lowered on my cock, the chain tightened, tugging the clamps on her nipples.

“You’re a sadist,” she hissed, even as she tried to find a position that wouldn’t cause both pain and pleasure simultaneously.

I grinned, watching as she worked through the problem until she gave up, accepting that this was a losing battle. She took the pain in an effort to seek the pleasure, bouncing up and down on my cock until we were both panting and moaning. She felt so fucking good.

“Creed. Oh, God. I ... I need to come.”

“Not yet,” I said through clamped teeth.

We held each other’s gaze as she worked herself on my dick, chasing the release that was just within reach. When I felt the tight clasp of her pussy along my cock, her inner muscles milking me as she tried to hold on, I let the chain drop and grabbed her head, crushing her mouth to mine. I tugged the chain with my free hand as she rode me in earnest, taking us both to the height of ecstasy.

I swallowed her sweet cries as she exploded, coming apart around me at the same time I exploded deep inside her.

Once our breathing had returned to normal, I brushed her hair back from her face. “Next time, I expect you to ask permission before you become the filling in a Garrison and Hawk sandwich. Understand?”

She shivered and beamed me with a radiant smile. “Yes, Alpha.”

I figured it would be a week before I was back in here doing something similar. That was what we did because my kitten didn’t ask permission. I’d long ago learned that was because beneath that sweet exterior was a hellcat who knew she was the queen, and we were the mere mortals who served her.

Precisely as it should be.

JOURNEY

Wednesday evening...

“What’s for dinner?” —Willow

“Creed’s cooking!” —Isaiah

“When’s it gonna be ready?” —Toby

“Never if you ask again!” —Garrison

As I sat on the living room sofa leaning against Creed, I stared out the back windows toward the ocean, listening to the litany of voices coming from various places within the house. I couldn’t keep from smiling because this ... this was my life.

Loving four men...

Making a life with them...

I couldn’t imagine it could’ve turned out better if I’d written it as a fantasy. What we had built stood proudly on a firm foundation of love and acceptance, strong will, and fierce determination.

No, it hadn’t always been easy. We had our share of ups and downs, the same as anyone in a relationship. Our issues were often compounded by the complexity of our situation as well as the passion that burned hot within all of us. That passion was what allowed us to be successful, building a brand that withstood the test of time and technology, a charity that had proven invaluable to so many over the years, a cigar lounge that had weathered the storms of time, and a kink club that embraced our primitive desires.

But most of all, that passion combined with love and laughter allowed us to create four beautiful children. Like their fathers, they were intelligent, energetic, resourceful, and hot-tempered. And fine, maybe they got some of that from me, but I won’t admit it aloud.

We might’ve given them the best of everything we could, but not without lessons along the way. We ensured they knew what it meant to give back to those who needed us, to embrace

diversity, and to love unconditionally. Only time would show us the fruits of our labor, but I could honestly say I don't regret a single moment.

"If I can't pronounce it, I'm not eating it!" —Theo

"More for us!" —Nick

"I'll just order pizza then!" —Theo

"Good. Make sure you get enough for everyone!" —Nick

"What? I thought Creed was cooking!" —Toby

"He's not home yet!" —Hawk (winking as he passed by us)

"Uggh!" —Theo, Toby, Willow

I glanced over at Creed. "You did start dinner, right?"

"Be ready in about ten minutes," he said as he took my wineglass and brought it to his lips.

At the very least, the past twenty years hadn't been boring. I doubt the next twenty will be either.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We made it. As I write this, it's only been about three minutes since I wrote the final words of this book. It feels bittersweet. I'm going to miss Journey, Creed, Garrison, Hawk, and Nick. Not spending my days with them feels a little like losing a part of me. I've spent the better part of the past year writing their story. It certainly didn't end up as I'd intended when I started. It was so much better than anything I could've imagined. I think we all strive for a love that withstands anything and a world that embraces equality and diversity. And I don't think their relationship is perfect, but it is certainly perfect for them, and that's all that matters in the end. When you find happiness, you grasp it with both hands and fight to keep it close.

I do not doubt that I will continue to think about them. If you're wondering whether I'll write another story like this one, I honestly can't say. It was extremely complex—five POVs require a lot of different mindsets—and shifted so many times I would find myself pulling my hair and trying to figure out what they wanted from me. Do I want to subject myself to that again? Probably not. Doesn't mean I won't. The characters lead me, not the other way around.

I do want to thank those who helped me get through this book. Most of those I mentioned likely never knew what I was up to, but they were there for me.

I'll start by saying thank you to my husband. Our world has been a bit topsy-turvy lately, and I know it hasn't been easy for you. As always, you've been my anchor in the storm; even when you were enduring your own chaos, you're always there to ease mine. I don't know what I'd do without you, and I pray I never have to find out.

A big thank you to Chancy Powley for reminding me why I should answer the phone even when I prefer not to. I'm not sure how I got so lucky to have you as a friend, but it means everything that you put up with me the way you do. And to her son for his part in this story. I asked him what he imagined exercise and fitness would look like twenty years from now. He had nothing. At all. He said people should run and not

worry about the rest. Simple and effective, I'm sure, but that didn't help. :)

A huge shoutout goes to Jenna Underwood. I'm not sure I would've tackled this trope if it wasn't for you. Although it may not be the traditional reverse harem (if there is such a thing), it's my version, and I'm glad you suggested I go this route. And while I didn't use "juxtaposition" in the book, I did use an example of it: Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. So there.

I also have to thank my street team. Your unwavering support is something I will never take for granted.

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ABOUT NICOLE EDWARDS

New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author Nicole Edwards lives in the suburbs north of Austin, Texas, with her husband, their three fur babies, and the youngest of their three children, who has threatened never to leave home. When Nicole is not writing about sexy alpha males and sassy, independent women, she can often be found with a book in hand or attempting to keep the dogs happy. You can find her hanging out on social media and interacting with her readers - even when she's supposed to be writing.

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