



Protected

BY MY

GRUMPY HERO

ELLA SLOANE

PROTECTED BY MY GRUMPY HERO

AN OFF LIMITS AGE GAP ROMANCE

ELLA SLOANE

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DAMN IT, Blake. Do your fucking job.

My team and I were at the gala to protect the governor and his family. I couldn't afford to be distracted and usually wasn't. I'd done security work for years with no problems.

But the stunning woman in the sleeveless, black cocktail dress was making it almost impossible for me to focus on anything but the thought of my hands roaming over her mouth-watering body.

I couldn't stop zoning in on her no matter where she was in the room. Normally, I kept a bead on my target at all times, like an automated laser sight programmed to a singular focus.

Every time this woman moved, it drew my eye. Her graceful movement was impossible to ignore as she effortlessly glided across the floor.

There was an energy about her that pulled me.

I watched from the first-floor balcony for an overview of the entire ballroom. I was tempted to go down into the crowd to approach her for a better look.

I wouldn't. That would be irresponsible. But my dick kept trying to convince me to do it.

Just looking at her made me sweat, and I'd only seen her from the back.

I wanted her to turn around so I could see the rest of her. I'd only caught glimpses of the side of her face. But she had

the most perfect, fantasy-inducing body I'd ever seen.

Her presence was proving dangerous because I would have rather admired her all night than watch the crowd I was paid to monitor. My only hope was that she'd leave early. If not, I was going to have a hell of a hard night trying to keep my eyes on the governor instead.

The woman brushed her long, brown hair over her shoulder and took a step backward. She started to turn away from the man she was talking to, but he touched her arm and stopped her.

She was clearly uncomfortable. As he talked and moved closer, she stepped backward again.

The guy had a pink face, like he'd gone overboard with the alcohol. His hand stayed on her arm as she lifted it and tried again to step away. His grip tightened.

Hell no.

Andrew, my top man, glanced up at me as I moved to the staircase. I pointed at my eyes and then at the governor to let him know to watch him.

I was halfway down the winding stairs when he signaled back. Within only a few seconds, I was almost in front of the drunk idiot putting his hands on the woman I couldn't stop looking at.

She pulled her arm away, and he reached to put a hand on her shoulder. She took a quick step backward, too quick, and her heel tilted. She stumbled, but I was behind her in a second and caught her with my hands on her hips.

That perfect heart-shaped ass landed against my crotch and I almost thanked the asshole who'd made her trip.

Almost.

"You alright, ma'am?" I said. "Did you turn your ankle?"

She took a quick, sharp breath and straightened to test it. "No, thank you. I-I'm fine."

The man stared at her. I didn't like the look in his eyes.

“Sir, the lady has other guests to speak with, as I’m sure you do too,” I said in a tone that made it clear he didn’t have a say in it. I put a hand on her shoulder and led her away from him.

“Are you alright?” I asked, softer, my eyes still on the creep who was already grabbing another drink.

She said yes, so I finally stopped and looked at the woman I’d helped.

Her bright blue eyes gazed right into me as she smiled. “Thank you so much. He seemed incapable of taking a hint. I thought I was going to have to karate chop him in the neck.” She chuckled and tucked a long, curled lock of hair behind her ear.

She was so fucking gorgeous. I almost forgot how to speak. Her brown hair had just enough red in it to stand out from all the other shades in the room. And her cute little nose sat above full, pink lips that I suspected could bring most men to their knees.

They could have destroyed me in mere seconds. I could almost taste them and feel them against mine.

She frowned slightly, her blue eyes narrowing. I finally got my wits about me.

“Next time, start with the karate chop. Best bet for men like that. If you’re really alright...”

“I am. Thank you again.”

“Good. Excuse me, ma’am.” I gave her a quick smile and a nod.

Every step I took away from her was like walking through quicksand. Part of me wanted to quit on the spot, throw her over my shoulder caveman-style, and take her home to my bed.

Mostly, I wanted to get her number and see what she was doing after this shindig was over.

Fortunately, the conscientious chief of security inside me kept me professional. But I knew I’d be thinking about her

later that night when I was in my bed.

“Check,” I said softly into my mic as I reached the balcony again.

Andrew spoke over the comm channel. “I’ve got eyes on Bloom One.” I watched Andrew zone in on Sally Ellis, the governor’s niece.

“Copy that, I’ve got Petal Two,” Trevon said.

The rest of my team answered in their assigned order.

I said, “I’ve got eyes on Flower One again.”

Governor Ellis stood next to his wife, Beth Carmichael, otherwise known as Flower Two. I hated the code names Jack had picked, but they were easy to remember.

The governor and his wife were Flower One and Two when separate and Flower Power when together, a name that at least made me smile. The governor’s siblings continued on under the Flower moniker.

Vincent’s and Beth’s children were Petals.

There were only two Petals because each of them had a daughter with another spouse. Vincent’s daughter was in Europe and had been since I took the job. Beth’s daughter Alicia was being shadowed by Trevon even though she’d insisted that no one follow her around.

The blue-eyed beauty of my dreams spoke to the governor, getting a hug, then spoke to his niece briefly before mingling again.

I tore my gaze away from her gorgeous smile and perfect body and focused on the governor.

At least, I tried to. Every time she moved, it was as if my entire body was drawn toward her like an antenna trying to find a signal.

And almost every time I watched her moving among the people, I caught her staring back at me.

I HADN'T WANTED to come to yet another political fund-raising effort for my father. My visit home just happened to coincide with the event, making it impossible to avoid. So, I'd put on my favorite little black dress and decided to make the best of it.

Some drunk man who couldn't take a hint had almost convinced me to get out of there. Then I stumbled backward, caught by a man so sturdy, so good-looking, it was like he'd stepped right out of a romantic fantasy.

His hands caught me and kept me from falling, but not before my body fully pressed against his. Some women might have been offended at how he held me in place for so long.

I wasn't offended. Overwhelmed and turned on.

But definitely not offended.

I was grateful he didn't let go of my arm, as if he was keeping me steady. Because I *did* feel a little unsteady, standing inches from the most gorgeous man I'd ever seen.

He was tall with kind brown eyes that looked down at me with a slight frown as he asked if I was alright. The black suit he wore didn't hide the lean but muscular body I'd felt against mine when I stumbled.

The fact that he called me ma'am, paired with the suit and the way he took charge with the drunk guy, made me think he was working at the event. Either outside security or one of Dad's men.

I'd been in Europe so long I didn't know most of the latest security he'd hired. That was a terrible shame because I could have met this man much earlier.

I was about to ask his name, but he squeezed my shoulders and headed back into the crowd.

He definitely had to be some type of security. He went up the staircase and stood on the landing, surveying the crowd.

I was between bad and casual boyfriends that I knew weren't going to be serious. And though I've never been terribly bold with men, I was tempted to follow him up the staircase and strike up a conversation.

He could watch the crowd and talk at the same time, couldn't he?

Beth waved at me from where she stood with my father, talking up potential donors. I pointedly pretended I didn't notice her. She'd tried over the years, at least a little, but there'd never been warm feelings between us. I didn't want to have to fake that for other people.

I glanced back up the stairs to find my rescuer staring at me. He held my gaze for a few seconds before he looked away.

I couldn't help but glance his way often. Usually, he was already looking at me. Sometimes he didn't look away but seemed to nod in my direction.

I would definitely find him again before the night was over. I'd at least get his name and find out what he'd be doing tomorrow.

I didn't know how many people approached me, wanting to shake my hand and point out that they hadn't seen me since I was *this* high. I knew most of them by name only because they were acquaintances of my father. Everyone wanted to hear about the dance company in Europe and if my plans were to stay there or move back to Austin.

I finally found my cousin Sally in the crowd and talked to her in the hopes of keeping people from interrupting us.

“Who’s that?” Sally gestured with her chin toward the landing.

I glanced up to see the man look to the side, as if he hadn’t just been looking at us.

“Some guy was bothering me earlier, and that guy came and ran him off.”

“He keeps looking at you. You don’t know him?”

“Never met him before tonight. I didn’t even get his name. Not yet, anyway.”

“You’d better,” she said with a grin. “If you don’t get it, I will. He is *fine*.”

I almost told her to stay away, he was mine, but that would have been a ridiculous thing to say. It felt kind of good that she’d noticed him watching me. At least I knew it wasn’t all in my head.

Eventually, I needed to use the restroom, which meant I needed to pass Dad and Beth, so I stopped and said a few words to avoid being rude. Then I went down the long hall toward the ladies’ room, glad to be out of the crowd for a few minutes.

I hadn’t reached it yet when I heard, “Callie, isn’t it?” behind me.

Had my mystery man followed me, ready to introduce himself? I turned with a smile. “Yes. I—”

It wasn’t my handsome bodyguard, but the drunken creep who kept trying to hang on me earlier.

“I *thought* you were the governor’s daughter,” he said, as if I wasn’t looking at him like something stuck to my shoe.

“I am. And I suggest you leave me alone. I can alert security in—”

“Whoa, whoa, no need for that kind of thing.” He was drunker than before, stepping closer even as I backed away.

I glanced past him, hoping to see somebody, anybody, coming toward us. Hoping to see my handsome man in his

black suit most of all.

I thought of strong hands on my hips and kind brown eyes.

Next time, start with the karate chop. Best bet for men like that.

I had a feeling he was right. So I said, “Back off, asshole,” and I lifted my hand.

EVENTUALLY, the beautiful woman approached the governor again. They spoke briefly, then she headed toward one of the narrow corridors that led to lower-level bathrooms and the main kitchen area. I spared a few seconds to watch her incredible ass sway as she walked away.

As my team was checking in, the red-faced bastard who'd harassed the woman before appeared, clearly following her. I tasked Andrew with keeping an eye on Flower Power as I raced to catch up with him before he caught up with her.

I needed to grab that son of a bitch before he so much as breathed in that woman's general direction.

When I reached them, the man was holding the side of his neck.

"What the fuck?" he said.

The woman held her hand rigid between her and him.

She'd karate-chopped him in the neck. Not terribly effectively, it seemed, but it had stopped him for a second.

That was enough.

I grabbed his shoulder and spun him. "It's time for you to leave," I said.

"Yeah? And just who—"

I headbutted him, my forehead cracking against the bridge of his nose. He grabbed his face with both hands and dropped to his knees with a shout.

“That’s who,” I said.

I spoke into the mic for Andrew to send two of the off-duty cops from the crew.

In under a minute, they had his arms and were leading him out the back to avoid drawing attention. I needed to get back out to the ballroom, but I had to make sure she was okay.

“Are you alright?” I stepped closer to her.

“I am now. Thank you.”

“Do you even know karate?” I asked, smiling.

“I do not,” she admitted with a laugh, then she rubbed her hands together.

She was trembling.

I took off my suit jacket and draped it over her shoulders. She grabbed the lapel and pulled it tight around her as she gave me a soft smile. I kept my arm around her.

All I’d wanted to do since I touched her for the first time was find a way to get my arm around her again. I hated that it hadn’t been under better circumstances.

“What you lacked in strength and skill, you apparently made up for with the element of surprise.”

“You think?” she asked nervously, acting almost like she wanted to hide inside my jacket.

I put my fingers under her chin to lift her face towards mine. “I do. You *showed* him.”

Her face was inches away from mine.

The smile she gave me was breathtaking.

Fuck. I wanted to see it again. Preferably from where she rested her head on one of my pillows.

But most importantly, I was determined to make sure she’d be okay before I led her back out into the room. I’d get two other people on the governor so I could escort her to a waiting car.

I had to get her name and number. Because everything about her was all I'd ever wanted in a woman. Standing that close, feeling her tremble, short-circuited my brain.

She was younger than me, and likely not interested in a thirty-two-year-old who wasn't a playboy with a sports car, but I'd never forgive myself if I didn't at least try.

"I can take you to your car if you'd like to leave. Or if you want to wait, I can escort you home after I'm off-duty."

She zeroed in on the wire stretched from my earpiece that disappeared into my shirt.

"So you *are* a part of Dad's security team. I thought so. You have that serious look about you. And you didn't stay to chat me up after running that guy off the first time. It almost hurt my feelings." She grinned widely.

Dad's security team.

Shit.

"Callie Ellis?" *Petal One*.

"That's me," she said, holding her hand out. I took it in a quick shake and didn't want to let it go. "And you are—"

"You're supposed to be in Europe." I stared intensely into her eyes. The only photos in my file were of people I'd be protecting, not family members who lived elsewhere, so I hadn't recognized her.

"He didn't inform us you'd be here."

"It was a surprise. I decided to come home a little early."

Ellis should have told me she came. How the hell could I properly protect his family if I didn't know they were there?

"Callie?" Alicia Carmichael walked up the hall, with Andrew a few steps behind. "Everything okay?"

"Yes," she said. "Just some creep. Fortunately, I was rescued by—I still don't know your name," she said to me.

"Excuse me, ma'am," I said, and I walked away fast, barking orders into the mic to get one of the undercovers to

shadow Callie Ellis while I got back to work watching her father.

“Your jacket!” she called out.

I’d just had the cold fucking shower of learning that she was Vincent Ellis’ daughter. I didn’t give a shit about the jacket. I had to focus on protecting Ellis and putting that auburn-haired, twenty-year-old beauty out of my mind.

Five Years Later

The small private plane taxied in as I got out of the car and walked toward it. Austin to Elm Grove was only two hours by car, but the governor had arranged a private jet anyway.

The flight was on time, but I’d known it would be with Andrew in charge. Andrew still worked for Ellis, and as I’d expected, he’d become the new chief of the governor’s security team after I’d left.

He was a good man, and I’d congratulated him while we exchanged details of the hand-off over the phone. I looked forward to shaking his hand again.

What I hadn’t been looking forward to was getting another glimpse of the beautiful Callie Ellis.

After the gala, I couldn’t stop thinking about her. She was visiting for the summer and would be staying with the governor at his mansion. I’d been tasked to oversee her security detail as well. I’d done the only reasonable thing I could, which was to resign and make sure I stayed far away from her.

I’d only managed to think of her less over the last year or so. Maybe if I’d known she was Vincent’s daughter before I’d thought too much about her lips, the memory of her wouldn’t have hung on as much as it did.

But I knew that after we went our separate ways this time, she was going to be even harder to get out of my mind.

I should never have agreed to protect her, with her beautiful blue eyes and her sad little karate chop. But when

Vincent had called me about the threats against her, he'd practically begged me to watch over her.

She refused to stay with him because she and Beth didn't get along. And he was worried that the threats were serious this time. The threats had been getting progressively worse, and some lunatic had thrown a brick through her bedroom window.

I couldn't stand the thought of her being out there, protected by someone else.

Andrew came down the stairs first, scanning the area for danger. Then Callie followed him out. This time, instead of a form-fitting cocktail dress, she wore jeans and a T-shirt, both snug enough to show off every delicious curve. My body went hot at the sight of her walking toward me.

What had I gotten myself into?

Andrew put his hand on her lower back, leading her across the tarmac.

It shouldn't have bothered me, but it did. Were they dating?

Callie looked up toward me. She gave me a friendly wave, then her smile grew, and she karate-chopped the air.

I wanted to smile back. But I didn't.

Letting myself smile back at her would be the first step down a slippery slope of letting myself feel and think about things that I knew I shouldn't.

I couldn't.

When they reached me, Andrew held out his other hand.

"Sheriff," he said with a broad smile, shaking my hand.

"Andrew. Good to see you again."

We'd said everything we needed to on the phone, so he turned to Callie. "Cal, you'll be with Sheriff Donovan from here on out." Finally, his hand dropped from her back, but only because she gave him a quick hug goodbye.

Cal.

I should have expected them to be on a first-name basis. He'd been Ellis' top man for five years, and she'd been back in the States for at least a couple of those. But the familiarity still irritated me.

He gave me a salute, and he ran back to the plane.

As her bags were loaded into my car, she held her hand out. "It's so nice to see you again."

I took her hand. It felt small inside mine, and I didn't want to let it go. "Ma'am."

"Oh, please. Call me Callie."

"Hello, Miss Ellis," I said, dropping her hand.

"Hello *again*, remember?" she said with a grin. "You came to my rescue and headbutted some creep at one of my dad's galas years ago when he wouldn't leave me alone."

"Glad to know I helped." I probably shouldn't have pretended that I didn't recall, but I didn't want to get too familiar with her.

If I didn't keep my distance, I didn't know how I was going to get through the next several weeks of protecting her.

"You really don't remember?" Her face fell, and I tried not to feel guilty as I gestured toward the car. I would've rather seen a smile like the one she'd given me at the gala.

"Maybe it'll come back to me."

I almost laughed at the idea that anyone could ever forget meeting someone as drop-dead gorgeous as Callie Ellis.

BLAKE DONOVAN DIDN'T EVEN REMEMBER me.

That wasn't great for a girl's pride. But I was impressed that he did heroic things so often that one didn't stick out in his mind.

I'd never forgotten that night.

I'd spent so long trying to put him out of my mind and swallow down the regret of never seeing him again.

He'd run off so quickly that I hadn't even gotten his name. When I'd told Dad about what happened, he explained that it was Blake Donovan, his chief of security. I wanted to give him his jacket back, but Dad told me to leave him alone so he can do his job. I'd been a little shaken up, so I had gone home early that night.

Blake resigned the next morning.

"He set everything up to ensure our safety," Dad said, patting my hand. "Don't worry. I trust the people he chose as much as I trusted him. But I hated to see him go. City life wasn't for him, he said."

If I'd stayed at the gala instead of going home early, I'd have had the chance to talk to him. Maybe feel those strong hands on my arms again.

I'd spent years regretting that missed chance with Blake.

And he didn't remember any of it.

Blake wasn't wearing a crisp black suit like he had the night we'd met, but a dark blue police uniform. A police car was parked several feet behind him, making the moment seem even more official.

"Do I have to ride in the back?" I asked with a smile. "Is part of me hiding out going to be acting like I got arrested? I'm a criminal on the lam you're finally bringing to justice?"

"Front's fine," he said, not even cracking a smile. He was so different now. Not the charming man that I'd met years ago.

I got into the passenger seat and buckled up, marveling at the radio equipment and the laptop on a panel that looked built into the dash. "Elm Grove a high-crime area? Or are you just a tech guy?"

As we pulled away, he said, "Low crime. I convinced the city that budgeting for the proper equipment was a good strategy to keep it that way."

"Tell me the truth," I said, bumping his arm with my elbow. "You pull behind buildings to scan for speeders and spend those hours watching Netflix on this thing, don't you?"

"No," he said sharply, his head snapping in my direction. He frowned this time instead of merely not smiling. He clearly didn't think the joke was funny.

Before I could apologize, he said, "I prefer Hulu."

Then he stared out the windshield, his expression still serious.

I snorted. At least he was capable of making a joke. That was better than stony silence, because the more we didn't talk, the more I kept looking at his muscular thighs, straining against the dark fabric of his slacks.

Then Blake started talking, and all I wanted was for him to stop.

"You won't go anywhere without an escort," he finally said, after he'd given me a run-down of the million rules I had to follow while I was under his protection.

We pulled into his driveway, and I got a good look at the house I'd be staying at until further notice.

It was bigger than I expected for the sheriff of a backwater town: a log-cabin style two-story at the end of a winding drive that hid it from the road.

He led me inside, gave me the tour, and explained that he'd set up cameras throughout the property, inside and out, for my protection.

"No video in the bedroom or bathroom, but your bedroom *is* wired for audio."

"Taking no chances, huh?"

"None," he said flatly.

"I'm not comfortable with you being able to hear me anytime I'm in my bedroom."

"Why not?" he asked, looking like he genuinely didn't understand.

I was tempted to tell him I didn't want him to hear me getting myself off just to see the look on his face. I'd probably be thinking about him while I did it too.

Instead, I simply said, "I value my privacy."

"That's why there's no video. I—," he argued.

"Is there a way to turn the audio off and on?"

He paused and said slowly, "There is."

"Fine. I'll leave it on at night when I go to bed, just in case. But I don't want it on during the day. You've just given me a list of rules as long as Santa's naughty list, and that's fine. But I have some rules too, and that has to be one of them."

He hesitated, then gave a quick nod. "Fine. I'll get your bags."

I watched him walk away, his ass looking so incredibly squeezable in his slacks. Then I glanced around the huge kitchen. At least he was fully stocked with pots, pans, and

everything I needed to cook. If I couldn't be dancing, cooking would help calm my nerves.

I wondered if he'd let me install a barre in a spare room somewhere so I could at least rehearse every day.

I was already most likely going to lose my place in the dance company I'd worked so hard to get into.

I'd be starting over, having to go through grueling rounds of auditions again, and hoping to get accepted somewhere with at least a small amount of prestige. I had little hope of that if I didn't keep up my rehearsal routine while hiding out.

I'd fought against going into hiding at all because of the damage it could do to my career. Dad wanted me to stay with him. I'd have to wake up and see Beth across the breakfast table every morning.

Weeks of cold shoulder served with eggs and coffee for breakfast was a big fat no.

When he'd suggested I stay with a former employee of his for my protection, it had been a reluctant compromise on my part until I found out that former employee was Blake.

Blake carried my bags up to my bedroom, then we stood awkwardly next to the bed I'd be sleeping in for who knew how long. Finally, we put our numbers into each other's cell phones, and he said, "I'll let you get settled, Miss Ellis."

I sighed and put a hand on my hip. "Look, unless you intend for me to call you Mr. Donovan the whole time I'm here, you're going to have to call me Callie."

Blake eyed me warily and sighed. "Alright. Callie."

I touched his arm before he could leave the room. "Is there any way I can get a mirror and a barre set up somewhere? I'm sure my father would pay—"

"I've had all that installed for you in the basement. I think you'll find the room suitable."

“Thank you. Seems you thought of everything.” I glanced around and let my hand drop as he stepped away.

“Make yourself at home, Callie. I’ll be in my office downstairs if you need anything.”

He gave me a quick look up and down before he turned away.

AFTER LEAVING Callie in her bedroom, I went to the office to presumably get some work done.

I didn't work. I sat at my desk, taking deep, slow breaths.

How the hell was I going to be able to handle having Callie Ellis under my roof? I could barely stand next to her without having to fight the urge to lean closer, to touch her in some way.

And every time she tried to make a joke or smiled at me, I wanted to give in to that urge.

Eventually, I realized I'd forgotten about what we'd do for dinner. I tapped on her door.

"Come in," she said.

Callie lay on the bed, facing the ceiling. She didn't move when I opened the door and took one step in to lean against the door frame.

"Hungry?" I asked her.

She rolled onto her side, dug her elbow into her pillow, and propped her head on her hand. "I could eat. What's cookin'?" She grinned.

"I wasn't sure what you'd like. If you make a list, I'll grocery shop tomorrow. Most of what I have is convenience food. I'm not sure someone like you eats it."

"Someone like me?"

I let my gaze roam down her lithe body. She looked as amazing as I'd imagined stretched out on a bed. "A dancer. Healthy diets, working out, all that."

"I eat healthy for the most part, yes."

"Make a list of whatever you want. There's frozen pizza or sandwiches for tonight." I glanced at my watch. Spears Market in town closed at nine every night, but I could make it there and back if I left soon. "I can run into town and get some things now, if you need them."

"I can get by on a couple slices of pizza. You don't need to run out on my account."

"Fine. Make a list, and I'll make sure you have what you're used to eating tomorrow."

I left Callie eating dinner at the kitchen table while I excused myself and took my plate into the office, pretending to be busy.

It felt ridiculous, but it was easier than sitting across from her. I wasn't sure I could look into her bright eyes and keep my shit together.

When she was finished, I showed her how to turn the audio on and off in her bedroom. She sat on the edge of the bed next to where I stood demonstrating, "I hope I don't snore."

"Unless you snore like a buzzsaw, I probably won't hear it." I pushed a button on the tiny panel mounted next to the headboard. "This is an intercom. You push this, we can communicate through a mic and speaker in my bedroom and one in the office that I can hear as far as the kitchen and living room."

"Ooh, handy," she said with a grin. "That's even better than a little bell I could ring to bring you running."

Her wicked grin tempted me to smile back, but I frowned and pointed my finger at her. "Don't play with it. It's there if you really need something, and that's it."

She threw her hands up. "Alright, Mr. Serious. I won't touch it unless I have to." Her plump, pink lips formed a pout

as she glanced up at me. “Do I get a gun for protection?”

The ridiculousness of that caused me to bark out a laugh.

Her smile grew. “What? I can handle a gun.”

I looked at her skeptically. “Ever fire one?”

“No, but how hard can it be? Point it away from yourself, pull the trigger.”

“You missed a crucial step. Aiming.”

She shrugged. “You could teach me.”

I flipped the panel to turn on the audio for the night. “No need, Callie. You already have protection. Me.” I headed out before she could say anything else. “Sleep tight.”

“Thanks, Blake,” she said, touching the panel on the wall and squinting at it.

I left. Damn it, I liked the way she sounded saying my name far too much. Thinking about that also kept me awake too damn long.

I wasn’t sure when I fell asleep, but I snapped awake sometime later to the sound of Callie mumbling. A glance at my bedside clock. It was almost three in the morning. The mumbling sound came again.

She must have been dreaming something pretty intense to verbalize in her sleep.

I closed my eyes to try to go back to sleep. Callie kept mumbling, eventually forming clear words like *no* and *stop*.

Then she screamed.

I jumped out of bed and was in her room in only a few seconds.

Callie was partially sitting up, pushing on her elbows and kicking her feet. She looked like she was trying to crawl backward away from something that was after her. Her eyes were open wide in terror as she pushed herself against the headboard and screamed again.

I grabbed her shoulders. “Callie!”

Lost in fear, she slapped at my chest and tried to push me away.

“Hey, it’s okay. *Callie*.” I gently shook her. Finally, her eyes focused on my face, and she stopped fighting me. “That’s it. Just a dream.”

“What?” she said on an exhale, turning her head to scan the room. “Where...” She looked at me again.

“Elm Grove, remember? It was just a nightmare.”

She took a few fast, heaving breaths, then threw herself into my arms. Callie clung to me, breathing like a track star after the big race. She trembled against me. The only thing between our bodies was the silky material of her pajama tank top.

I cupped the back of her head and stroked her hair. “Hey. You’re okay. You’re okay now,” I said softly.

After a few more seconds, she leaned back enough to look up at me. “Sorry.”

“No need.”

The moment went on too long, her hanging onto me, gazing up at me. I could feel the peaks of her nipples against my chest. The tiniest yank would have torn that silky top and gotten it out of my way.

I should have won some kind of fucking award for not kissing her then and there, because that was all that I could think about. Having her in my arms, our bodies together, her breath against my neck. I almost couldn’t hold her close enough.

I had to remind myself she was terrified. I was supposed to be comforting her, not getting turned on.

“Some nightmare,” I said.

She nodded. “Sometimes, if I’m really stressed, I have the same one. I’m in a room alone, like a basement or underground. I can’t see anything around me, but there’s someone coming to get me, a man...There’s growling and scratching, popping, and the more I try to back away, the

closer he gets.” She sighed heavily. “I usually wake around the time he grabs my legs and starts dragging me toward him.”

“I’d probably scream too.” I stroked her hair again without thinking.

She chuckled at that. “Big tough guy like you? You probably wouldn’t even back away. You’d run at him with your gun, and he’d be the one having the nightmare.”

“Maybe,” I said, glad she seemed to be feeling better.

She finally let go of me and scrubbed her palms down her cheeks, then her gaze settled on my chest. I don’t think I imagined the way she looked at me as some sort of wishful thinking. Callie appeared to like what she saw, even though she also still looked shaken up from her dream.

Her gaze lifted back to meet mine. “I’m sorry I woke you.”

“That’s ok.”

She clearly wanted something, her wide blue eyes appealing to me. I raised my eyebrows, waiting.

Finally, she said, “Would you mind... staying until I fall asleep?”

Her swallow drew my attention to her long, shapely neck, which led down to those thin little straps.

Her shoulders. Her collarbone.

I needed to get the hell out of there before my rational brain got stomped into dust. Every other part of me wanted nothing more than to press Callie back onto her bed and make her scream for reasons a hell of a lot more pleasant than a nightmare.

“Of course,” I said, because how the hell could I say no?

I stood to move into the chair against the wall, but she grabbed my hand and scooted over to make room.

Fuck.

I sat on the bed, my back against the headboard, my hands in my lap. She was on her side, facing me, her hands together

in front of her cheek. Her arm hid her breasts, and the covers draped over her hip, but my imagination filled in all the blanks.

Stop being a lech.

I watched her facial muscles relax as she fell asleep. When her breathing steadied, I carefully got up and slipped out.

Several mostly sleepless hours later, after the sun came up, I found her in the kitchen, eating a bowl of cereal.

I opened the fridge and cringed at the lack of breakfast food. “Did you make a list?”

She slid a piece of paper across the table. “I did. I don’t suppose you have a Whole Foods or Trader Joe’s here?”

I frowned and hoped she wasn’t going to be some kind of prima donna.

“Of course, we do. Right between Saks Fifth Avenue and the Gucci store.” I poured a glass of orange juice while she smirked and took another bite. “We’ve got Spears Market, a locally owned grocery that’s been here since before my mother was born, and that’s about it.”

While I stood next to her, scanning her list of groceries, she put her hand on my arm. The touch sent a bolt of heat right up to my chest.

“Thanks for last night,” she said again. “I usually have to lie awake for hours after a dream like that. You staying there... it made me feel really safe.”

“Happy to help.” I patted her arm. I dropped my hand quickly. “Remember, all the cameras are on. I get alerts on my phone so I can keep an eye out even when I’m not here. I’d prefer it if you stayed indoors, but my backyard’s also under surveillance. Don’t go further than that. And if you get spooked, head to the basement and lock the door behind you.”

“So the basement’s like a safe room?”

“Essentially. There’s still a cell signal down there. You can call me, but I’ll probably already be on my way. Don’t open the door for anyone.”

“What if I want to order food? Can I open it for the delivery person?” She grinned like the question was a challenge.

“Nobody delivers out here. I’ll be back with the groceries in a couple of hours.”

She nodded, sighed, and went back to eating her cereal.

I sat in my squad car for a few minutes, still feeling her touch on my arm. It was so easy to conjure up what it had felt like to hold her in my arms after her dream. But I couldn’t afford to let myself indulge.

Because the thought of her breasts pressed against my chest last night, only made me want even more of the things I knew I couldn’t have.

AT LEAST BLAKE'S backyard had a stunning view.

I sat cross-legged on the grass next to a small stream that separated his property from what seemed like fairly dense woods.

I'd come there every day for the last few days after Blake left for work. It was the most peaceful place I could find. Even though I knew I was being monitored every second I was out there by security cameras, I preferred it to staying in my room.

I wanted to cross the stream and take a walk into those trees to explore, but I didn't want to make Blake's head explode.

"So, you're not allowed to leave the property without him?" Mackenzie scoffed. "I guess you should count yourself lucky that you're allowed to make phone calls and have contact with friends and family."

Mackenzie was one of the few people I had been cleared to talk to. "He explained that I can be here alone for a few hours at a time because of all the cameras and other tech he's set up. He's got video, audio—"

"Maybe infrared and trip wires, capture pits and bear traps."

I snorted. "Sure, why not? He asked his deputy and the other officer to run a patrol out here on the reg, just to be sure."

“So, is he as hot as you remember or hotter? It’s been a long time since you saw him right?”

“Well, I can tell you he’s grumpier. He’s like a totally different person now. I haven’t seen him smile once yet. And he’s definitely hotter.”

Mackenzie laughed.

“He barely speaks to me at all. I mean, he asks me if I need anything, and he does his best to provide it. He drove an hour yesterday to find a grocery store for items you can’t get in town. Never complained once. But he doesn’t talk to me either. Every time I start a conversation, it’s fine for about thirty seconds, then he makes an excuse to end it and leave the room.”

“Maybe he’s gay, and having you there is cramping his style?”

I thought about that for a second, especially how Blake’s arms had felt around me after my nightmare. The way he looked at me and stroked my hair. “I’m pretty sure he’s not gay.”

“Speaking of not gay...”

Mac caught me up on the latest gossip in our friend’s group. Then she mentioned Zander, and I focused on the gentle sounds of the water in front of me to keep my cool.

“He and Sophia moved in together.”

“How wonderful for them,” I said, clenching my jaw. “May they have a lifetime of blissful happiness.”

“Are you still trying that radical positivity thing? Because it’s okay to hope she gets explosive diarrhea while they’re having sex or that he can’t get it up. It’s fine.”

I laughed, feeling grateful to have a friend like Mackenzie on my side. She always lightened my mood, even when giving me shitty news about my recent ex moving in with the woman he’d cheated on me with.

“Okay. I hope she shits herself during sex and he has chronic limp dick. Just for a while.”

“Feel better?”

“Yeah. Honestly, I’m not even that bothered anymore. Mostly just angry that he lied about her instead of coming clean the first time I said something.”

Mac scoffed. “You’re really more pissed about the lie than the cheating?”

“Pretty much. Does that make me crazy?”

“No. It makes you jaded, Cal. And I don’t want that for you.”

I guess I *was* jaded. Being cheated on had gotten so familiar, I hadn’t even been surprised to find Zander had done it too. Men were faithless, selfish horndogs for the most part, always sniffing for something different. Before Zander, I’d decided to give up on relationships and just have fun instead. But he’d been so sweet, so sincere and loving, that I’d fallen pretty fast.

I didn’t think I was in love with him, but I thought maybe I could be someday.

If I hadn’t been staying over for a couple of days and gone to hug him when he got home before he’d hurried into the shower, I’d never have smelled the floral, very feminine perfume that still clung to his skin.

It made me angry to think that if that hadn’t clued me in, I’d probably still be with him thinking maybe he’d be with me forever. All while he was banging a woman named Sophia Potts.

“I said, you *are* going to make it, aren’t you?”

“Sorry.” I’d gone off into my own thoughts and hadn’t been fully listening. “I am absolutely going to be at your wedding, Mac. I don’t care how long I have to stay here. There’s no way I’m missing that.”

“What if he won’t let you come?”

“There’s no ‘he won’t let me’ here. I’m not a prisoner. He can’t keep me here against my will. If I insisted on leaving, I don’t think he’d try to hold me captive.”

Would he? I couldn't imagine that. But I could imagine him trying to put his foot down and acting as if I didn't have a choice.

"Have you asked him about it?"

"No, because there's probably no need. This will be over before your wedding. If that changes, I'll mention it. Don't worry. I'm going to be there to watch you cry off your mascara and get cake smashed in your face so we can relive those moments when we're eighty and shouting insults at each other across the room in a nursing home."

"A true friend," she said with a chuckle. "Any more thoughts about your career, since all you get to do there is think?"

That was a drawback of too much time on my own. I started to question my decisions too much. "I still keep thinking about teaching. I know I'd enjoy it, but I worked so hard to get where I am. I love performing, and the thought of giving that up, Mac, it just feels bad. All the time my mentors devoted to me, all the encouragement and the hard work, it feels like almost like a betrayal to shift to teaching."

"Do you think your dance teachers felt that way when they chose to be teachers? If nobody taught, there'd be no one to perform, Callie. I think you should do what you want based on what you really want, not what you think someone else will feel about it."

I knew she was right, but I guessed I wasn't ready to make that kind of decision yet.

As I got up to walk back into the house, I glanced to my left at a more open area next to the stand of dense trees. And I saw what looked like the start of a well-worn path on my side of the stream.

I really wanted to go for a run. It would help me clear my head and feel less penned in. I'd been cooped up for days now and I felt like I was going insane. I'd be back in fifteen minutes, tops. Blake wouldn't even know I was gone.

I quickly went inside and put my shorts and running shoes on, rushing to head outside so I could make sure I'd be back long before Blake would get home. Then I took off on the trail, letting it lead me deeper into the rural Texas countryside.

I wasn't sure how many miles I had to go to hit the official trailhead, but I figured I should only be out for a short while. I decided to set a timer on my phone to keep myself from being gone too long, but when I reached for it, my pocket was empty.

Shit.

I had left in such a hurry, I'd forgotten to grab it from my jeans pocket. But I had my watch on, so I noted the time, fully intent on being back in less than fifteen minutes.

I passed a few offshoots and turned onto one that lead to a smaller trail. A few minutes in, I heard the distinct sound of someone running behind me.

There were threats against me. I was in hiding and supposed to stay on the property with all its security cameras. And now I was alone on a trail, with Blake not knowing where I was, with someone behind me.

I glanced backward, hoping to see another woman. Not that a woman couldn't be a political freakshow who threatens a governor's family. She could. But I still would have felt five hundred percent less nervous to find a woman jogging behind me, especially if she was dressed in running shorts and shoes like me.

It was a man.

That's okay. Men jog. He's dressed appropriately.

Don't let everyone else's paranoia get to you, Callie.

Was it my imagination, or did he start running faster after I glanced back at him?

I picked up the pace. I was sure he did too.

I had almost no chance of outrunning a man of that height. He was easily as tall as Blake. My only chance was to get somewhere with other people before he caught up with me. I

could see a trail offshoot up ahead, one branching in the direction of the main road.

I ran full out toward that branch in the trail, like my life depended on it.

Because it might have.

I took the turn, running at top speed. Unfortunately, that part of the trail had been paved at some point but had fallen into disrepair over time. I tripped on a raised chunk of asphalt and went down hard.

I rolled over, scrambling backward, almost certain the man would be right there ready to fall on me like part of my nightmare come true. But he'd passed the offshoot and was running on the main trail, leaving me in his dust.

He must have passed me right after I branched off. He hadn't even seen me fall, and probably had earbuds in, so he couldn't have heard my *oof* as I hit the ground.

I lay there catching my breath, feeling like a damn fool. Both for coming out there alone and letting my fears get to me.

The back of my upper thigh hit some of the asphalt before my backside hit the grass, and the large scrape welled with blood. I wiped it away with my palm, hissing at the sting.

When I got up, I limped my way back onto the main trail for a few steps to test my ankle.

Then I headed back toward Blake's house as fast as I could, hoping to get inside and get cleaned up before he got home.

“WANT SOME COFFEE, BOSS?” My deputy, Cathy Marks, stood in the doorway, her arms crossed over her chest, hip cocked against the doorjamb. “Or maybe a donut? Something to counter that look you’ve got on your face making it seem like you’re sucking a hundred lemons?”

I sighed and leaned back in my chair to lace my fingers together behind my head. “Got something on your mind, Cathy?”

She sauntered forward and sat in the chair across from my desk. “Gee, what makes you say that?”

I tried not to sigh again. “Shoot.”

“What crawled up your ass and died?”

I snorted. I could always count on Cathy to be blunt. “So, you’re saying I’ve been in a bad mood?”

“Blake, you’re almost always in a bad mood in some way or another. It’s part of your charm. But you’ve been downright grouchy for a few days. You walked by the fresh cut flowers on the counter out front and they wilted. You breezed past my desk and the creamer in my coffee curdled. You—”

“Okay,” I said. “I get it. I don’t need more examples, fun as they are.”

“Is that gal at your place pissing you off every second she’s there, or is there something else going on?”

“She’s fine. I’m just...” I didn’t really want to explain to my second-in-command that Callie Ellis drove me to distraction twenty-four-seven. And that *nothing going on* was a big part of my problem.

I wanted something to go on.

In my bed.

I was starting to feel guilty as hell for wanting her so much. And for ignoring her because steering clear was the best way for me to keep things professional. It seemed like the only way to keep what little dignity I thought I had left.

“You’re out of sorts because you’ve got a beautiful woman living in your house, and you don’t know to handle it. Good thing I know a cure. My cousin’s coming to visit this weekend...”

Damn it. Cathy had been trying to set me up with this cousin for months. I frowned, refusing to even pretend like I was interested.

When she was done and suggested she introduce this cousin to me, I said, “No. And get the hell out of my office.”

Cathy grinned and shook her head. “Try to be less grouchy, Blake. Date my cousin, take up boxing, meditate. Do something, okay?”

“Out.” I pointed at the door.

She walked out humming “I Shot the Sheriff” in the original Bob Marley style and skipped to singing the words during the part about not shooting the deputy.

My phone buzzed, an alert from the motion sensors I’d set up around my house. Probably another damn deer. I scrolled through the various camera views but didn’t see any animals big enough to set off the sensors.

I scrolled through the cameras in the house. I felt guilty every time I did a sweep.

I liked looking at her so damn much, it made me feel a little like a dirty old man every time I checked.

I didn't see her in the house. She was either in the bathroom or her bedroom. I waited a couple of minutes listening carefully for any sound.

Nothing.

I knew better than to assume something was wrong and go off half-cocked. That didn't stop me from heading out of my office while already dialing Callie's phone.

Callie didn't answer. I didn't leave a message.

I called her four more times while I drove like hell, eventually hitting the siren to get past some farm equipment and slow drivers on the highway to my house.

By the time I got home and checked every room, shouting her name, my heart slammed inside my chest like a bass drum that somebody handed to a coked-up monkey.

I started scanning footage on the cameras outside to find the moment when she must have left the property. I needed to see what direction she went.

I needed to see if she left alone. My heartbeat pounded in my ears at the other option. If someone took—

The front door opened.

Callie walked in, ropes of hair that had fallen from her ponytail hanging limply around her face. She glanced up and froze.

I must have looked like I was about to fly into a rage, because she held her hands up. "Before you start yelling at me, I already know what I did was stupid."

I didn't think or consider what I did next. I crossed the few feet between us and pulled her into a hug. The relief upon seeing her walk in okay got the better of me.

I needed to stay the hell away from her. But at that moment, I needed to hold her more.

I had to feel her in my arms, to make sure she was real and unharmed.

"Are you ok?" I asked.

“Yes, I’m fine.” She relaxed against me, then her arms tightened around me. “That’s a lot better than all the shouting I expected.”

I held her a few seconds longer, taking comfort in feeling her breathe in and out, feeling her heartbeat against me. I inhaled the scent of her hair, telling myself it was okay, she was fine. She was safe.

Then I let go, stepped back, and looked her up and down. Her leg was scraped. I didn’t see any other obvious injuries.

Now that I knew she was there and okay, my heartbeat started to slow. And I could finally shout.

“What the *fuck* were you thinking?” I roared.

She flinched, then frowned. “Sorry. I know I screwed up.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Where were you?” I asked, trying to soften my voice.

She licked her lips. “I went for a jog. I was hardly gone ten minutes.”

I ran my fingers through my hair in frustration. “I called your cell multiple times, but you didn’t answer.” I pull her phone from my pocket. “I found it in your room. I thought you’d been abducted.”

“Sorry,” she said, her voice had grown small.

I looked down at her scraped leg.

“Fuck,” I cursed, running my hand down my face. I stepped forward and grabbed her hand. “Come on, let’s get you cleaned up.”

She looked down at her leg and winced. “Yeah, it does look pretty bad.”

She sat on one of the stools next to my kitchen island, her back to the counter with me in front of her. I had one hand on the side of her thigh, holding it still, while I cleaned the wound.

“You’re lucky it’s just some scratches,” I said as I gently daubed the soapy washcloth against the scrape on her thigh.

“You could have broken your ankle. Hit your head. Or actually been chased by someone who hates your father.” I scowled at her. “The entire reason you’re not supposed to pull bullshit like this.”

“I know. I just wanted to get some air. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Clearly fucking not,” I growled.

I could tell Callie genuinely felt bad about the whole thing. I didn’t want to make her feel even worse. But I had to get it through her stubborn head that her safety had to come first.

I used a rinsed cotton cloth to clean the soap away from her scrape, then another one to pat it dry. She had a smaller scrape above her knee that I’d already taken care of. This larger one was high on her thigh, bringing my hands close to her body. I tried to focus and not think about her skin under my fingers.

“This’ll sting like hell,” I warned. Then I wiped the cotton ball soaked in alcohol over the wound.

She hissed and straightened on the stool. “I still think peroxide would have been better.”

“I only have alcohol. Suck it up,” I snapped

She squinted her eyes at me. “It would probably hurt less if I did it.”

“You’d be too gentle. That’s how you get infections,” I grumbled.

“So serious,” she muttered under her breath.

She’d wanted to do it herself, but I insisted. I had a package of large, sticky bandages big enough to cover the whole thing, so I spread the antibiotic ointment over the raw-looking skin and covered it with a bandage.

My fingers slid down her thigh as I used the thumbs of both hands to smooth down the edges.

Callie's legs spread apart another half inch to give my hand room, my knuckles brushing the soft skin of her other inner thigh. If I slid my hand up just an inch, I'd be able to feel the heat of her through the thin shorts she wore.

Concentrate, Blake.

"Thanks, doctor," she said. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes a little glassy as she stared at me.

"Sure you didn't hit your head?"

She shook her head. "I'm sure."

Her gaze fluttered over my features, taking me in.

Her eyes dropped to my lips, and I realized we were mere inches apart. Feeling a drugging pull, my gaze drifted to her mouth, wanting to suck that plump upper lip. Not for the first time, I wondered what she would taste like.

Stop it. Now.

I stepped away to wash my hands and put my first aid kit back in the cabinet.

"I've got some work to finish," I said.

I needed to put some distance between us before I broke all my rules about keeping things professional. I could still feel the skin of her thigh under my hands.

Why the hell did everything about her have to be so tempting?

"If you need anything, or if you feel like you need real medical attention, let me know."

She turned and grinned at me. "I feel like I'm in good hands, Dr. Donovan."

"Callie, I'm serious. Sometimes things don't show up right away, especially if you hit your head—"

"Stop being a worrywart." She stepped up to me and put her hands on my arms, the sudden closeness buzzing through me like electricity. "I'm fine."

Her smile grew, and it reminded me of the sweet one she'd given me when I'd put my fingers under her chin at the gala.

Warmth spread across my chest, down my stomach. I nodded but didn't know quite what to say to that.

I *wanted* to take care of her. Hearing her say that made it damn hard not to pull her close and take care of any other needs she might have while satisfying some of mine.

“Good,” I finally said. I should have stepped away. Instead, unable to resist touching her more, I gently tucked a loose lock of hair behind her ear. “Let me know if you need anything else.”

I watched her swallow, blink a couple of times, then lick her lips almost self-consciously. “Will do, Doc,” she said, her voice huskier than normal.

I managed to step away from her and leave the kitchen. I kept myself busy the rest of the evening.

After I'd gone to bed, Callie said over the intercom. “Good night, Blake. Thanks for taking such good care of me. And thanks again for not yelling too much.”

I closed my eyes and tried to get some sleep.

I might have managed to sleep pretty quickly on an ordinary night. I was bushed after the panic from earlier. But before exhaustion knocked me out, I heard Callie mumble in her sleep.

I hoped she didn't have another nightmare. Both for her sake, and so I wouldn't have to go in—

Callie moaned.

It wasn't a moan of pain or fear. It wasn't any kind of sound she might make if she was having a nightmare. It was a *moan*.

My dick twitched in the boxer-briefs I'd decided to sleep in to be more comfortable. It woke up, listening for more of that delicious sound.

“*Mmm*,” Callie said, almost a whisper, drawing the sound out for a few seconds. “*Blake...*”

My dick stood at attention like I’d been electrified. The way she’d groaned my name was enough to make me want to grab my dick and keep listening. See it through and end up relaxed and sleeping like a baby when it was over.

That felt wrong, like some kind of violation. But when she moaned my name again, a little whimper on the end of it, I turned the speaker off. If she tried to use the intercom, it would chime to alert me, and I’d turn it back on.

I squeezed my cock, unable to remember a time when I’d wanted to jerk off more than at that moment. But it still felt wrong. If she’d been awake while teasing me, I could have. But she’d been asleep and not in control of herself.

I lay there thinking of scenes from action films with gunfire and ugly guys beating the hell out of each other to try to distract myself.



I didn’t sleep well. It was hard to get relaxing, refreshing sleep when my dick kept waking up and reminding me of the sexiest sounds I’d ever heard in that house.

I was never going to forget how Callie had *moaned my name*.

I was in the kitchen sucking down my second cup of coffee when Callie came downstairs. Her bedhead and sleepy eyes were so fucking adorable, it was hard not to stare.

“How’s your thigh?” I asked,

“It’s fine. A little tight.”

Then, despite myself, despite how I should have gotten the hell out of there since she was up, I asked, “How’d you sleep? Bad dreams or anything?”

I was desperate to see if she reacted. Like maybe she remembered a dream about me and would blush at the

question.

She didn't blush. The corner of her mouth quirked up, and she narrowed her eyes. "I slept really well. No nightmares."

"Good," I sighed.

"Actually, had a really nice dream," she said, raising her eyebrows.

I swallowed hard. "Good. Nothing scary, then."

"Nope. Nothing in the dream was scary. I was in really good hands. *Skilled* hands."

I dared to look at her. She had a little grin on her face as she looked back. She sipped her coffee, and her cheeks finally started to get pink.

"Glad it was nothing unpleasant."

"Oh," she said with a little laugh, sliding her fingertip around the rim of her mug. "It was the opposite of unpleasant."

I had to remind myself that she was my boss's daughter. My job assignment, my responsibility.

"Well... have a good day, Callie. See you later." I grabbed my coffee and got the fuck out of there.

I WAS IN MY BEDROOM, engrossed in my book when I heard Blake get home from work. Every time I felt the pull of the tight, healing skin on my leg or got a glance at the bandage, I thought of Blake's hands on my thigh.

I'd gone instantly wet when he'd put that bandage on, my legs falling further open on their own.

Hell, I'd kind of wanted that moment to be like the beginning of a bad porn film. Hot guy tends to woman's injury, then slides his hands up her leg to work some magic with his fingers before dropping to his knees to go down on her.

And if I said the thought of him lifting me onto the counter and fucking me right there hadn't crossed my mind, I'd be a dirty liar.

I was tired of being screwed over by men and not looking to get into a relationship, but that didn't stop me from wanting Blake. He was the sexiest man I'd ever been that up-close and personal with.

Blake knocked on my door and I told him to come in.

"How do you feel?" he asked, leaning on the door frame.

"Perfectly fine. How was your day?" I asked.

"Good," he replied curtly and stopped before turning to leave. "I picked up some chicken salad if you're hungry."

"Okay, thank you. I'll be down in a bit,"

I decided to stay in my room a while longer to read. Blake would probably be hiding out in his office like he had been every other night and I'd be eating alone.

I was so lost in my book, I didn't realize how late it was until my stomach growled in protest. I headed downstairs.

As I approached the dimly lit kitchen, I saw a figure sitting on a stool. I yelped as I clutched my chest, but quickly realized it was Blake.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," he said, his voice laced with concern.

"That's ok." I let out a breath of relief. "I thought you were asleep. What are you doing sitting here?"

"Just having a drink," As he refilled his glass from a bottle of whisky. The amber liquid swirled as he took another sip. His eyes were dark and relaxed like he's had a couple of drinks before I came down.

His gaze lingered on me, and he heaved in a breath before he looked away to the fridge.

"Hungry?" he asked, his voice soft.

I nodded and walked over to the fridge to pull out a container of the salad that Blake had picked up.

"Thank you," I said, holding it up. He nodded.

As I ate standing up by the counter, my eyes drifted towards Blake's glass of whisky.

He must have noticed me eyeing it because he lifted his eyebrows as he tilted his glass. "There's wine or beer if you prefer something lighter."

"Wine sounds good."

He gestured for me to take a seat as he stood to get a glass and a bottle of red from the cabinet. I sat on the stool next to his. After filling my glass, he placed it on the counter before returning to his seat.

He took a long sip of his drink before turning to me and asked, "So, tell me, are you seeing anyone I should know

about?”

His out-of-the-blue questions caught me off guard, so I sipped my wine to stall. The part of me that hoped he was asking because he wanted to hear that I *wasn't* dating anyone started doing somersaults.

“No, no one serious,” I replied, as I tried to gauge his reaction.

He tilted his head, assessing me. “Then just casual dating? Hooking up?” he probed further.

I shook my head as I brought my glass to my lips again.

He cleared his throat. “I’m asking because I need to know if someone could show up here who might make you want to sneak off again and put yourself at risk.”

My somersaulting, hopeful Callie tumbled to the ground.

I sighed, and said, “Nope, not dating anybody even casually at the moment. And casual dating is all I ever do, so there’s no one.”

“Good.” Blake nodded, seemingly satisfied with the answer.

“What about you? Any future Mrs. Donovan on the horizon?”

He smirked as if he was amused by my attempt. “I’m not the one being protected,” he said, almost playfully. “So I don’t have to answer that.”

I rolled my eyes. “Come on, I answered your question.”

He looked away and ran his fingers through his hair as if he was gathering his thoughts before looking back at me again.

“No,” he finally said. “There isn’t anyone.”

It was all I needed to hear to know that the somersaulting Callie was back in business. I tried not to be too obvious about how happy I was. So instead of jumping up and down like I wanted to, I just smiled knowingly and sipped my wine again.

But I wanted to know more. A man like Blake must have women hanging off him.

“Why not?” I asked casually.

“I guess I’m waiting for the right person,” he said softly.

“What would she be like?” I asked, unable to hold back my curiosity.

His eyes narrowed and the corner of his mouth twitched as he eyed me. After a few moments of silence, he finally said, “She’d be around my age, from a small town, maybe a nurse or something.”

Great. That’s just great. Guess I’ll have to change professions.

“Sounds like you have a pretty good chance of meeting the lucky lady in town one of these days,” I replied, trying to mask the disappointment in my voice.

“Maybe.” He chuckled and took a sip from his glass.

“So why are you still single, Callie? I’m sure a beautiful girl like you would have young men lined up, waiting for a date.”

I felt my cheeks flush. “You think I’m beautiful?”

Our eyes locked and time stood still for a moment. His brows furrowed slightly and his jaw twitched.

“Hard not to notice,” he said, his voice gravelly.

I didn’t realize it until then, but both of us were leaning in, our shoulders touching.

He leaned in a little closer and paused, before glancing down at my lips and back at my eyes again. I wanted to kiss him, to taste the whisky from his lips. The tension was thick between us and I knew he felt it too. At least I hoped.

Then he straightened himself abruptly, breaking the moment, and said, “I better call it a night.”

He walked to the sink and drained the rest of his whisky before hurrying up the stairs like the kitchen was on fire. I

stared at the stairs long after he left as my heart raced wildly in my chest.

I SPENT the last few days avoiding Callie as much as I could. After the night in the kitchen, I had to put some space between us. I knew I needed to dial it back.

Spending more time with Callie was making it harder to resist her. I was in danger of reaching a tipping point where I'd be unwilling, or unable, to hold myself back.

But I'd spent enough time thinking about Callie throughout the day that I really needed to work off some of the tension. So I changed into my sweats and went down to the basement to tell Callie I was leaving.

She was sitting on one of the couches, flipping through a magazine. When she looked up to see me at the bottom of the stairs, she smiled. "Hey."

"Hey. Just wanted to let you know I'm leaving, but I'll be back in an hour or so."

"Wait," she said, hopping up from the couch and putting her hand on my arm before I could leave. "You're going for a run?"

"Yeah," I said slowly, hoping she wasn't going to ask what I thought she was going to ask.

"I really enjoyed my jog the other day...until I didn't. But if I go with you, I won't be out there alone."

Damn it. I was already too tempted just seeing her in passing.

Having her that close to me for that long, sweating and breathing heavily, her body bouncing beside me, or worse, in front of me...But I really had no excuse to give her for why she couldn't come with me.

I gave a sharp nod. "Okay. Let's get going before it gets dark."

"Just let me change really quick."

I sighed with what probably sounded like irritation. It was disappointment in myself at how I was already picturing her ass in front of me on this jog.

"I'll hurry, I'll hurry," she said, running up the stairs.

I glanced down my body at my dick. It had already woken up at the thought that she'd be going with us.

"Behave yourself," I growled.



CALLIE

Blake had been avoiding me like the plague since our nightcap in the kitchen. Every time I tried to talk to him, he'd make up some excuse to get away from me.

I was getting so tired of being ignored and alone. I could only rehearse, read, and watch TV for so many hours a day before boredom set in. I was used to seeing my friends, going where and when I wanted when I wanted, even just taking a quick shopping trip or meeting Mac for coffee when I could.

Being alone constantly was getting to me. And the fact that Blake had been avoiding me made it worse.

At least the jog will get me out of the house and hopefully get a chance to exchange more than a handful of words with him. I've been looking forward to talking to him all day.

We started at a slow pace on the same trail where I jogged before.

"Your day go okay?" I asked, hoping to break the ice.

“Yeah.” He kept his eyes focused ahead.

“You haven’t really talked to me in the past few days.”

Blake sighed. “Sorry. I’ve just got things on my mind.”

“What things?”

He flinched back like I’d tossed an insult at him. “Work things. Typical stuff.”

“Such as?”

“Are you going to talk the whole run?” He asked, sounding annoyed.

“Is it that difficult for you to have a normal conversation?”

He shook his head like I’d just tried the last of his patience. I knew I was pushing, but damn it, I was not ready for him to go back to ignoring me.

Finally, he said, “I agreed to protect you. Not entertain you.”

I’d apparently made his reluctance to talk to me even worse.

Great going, Callie.

He preferred that I run next to him and shift behind him when the trail narrowed. I purposefully moved ahead, just so he’d touch my arm and urge me to fall back. After the third time, his frustration was apparent. Even though he was behind me, I knew he was squinting in his typical frown.

“So anything exciting happen at work?” I asked. Along with, “What did you have for lunch? Did you think about me? Are you—”

“Callie!” He stopped, hands going to his hips. “What—”

“Just making conversation,” I said as I paused and turned. “Why is it so hard to get you to talk to me?”

“We’re *running*! I prefer not to talk when I’m exercising.”

“You don’t talk to me most of the time, not just now.”

“What the hell do you want to talk about so badly?”

I opened my mouth, and suddenly my brain disconnected. I couldn't think of a single specific thing to say.

Blake scoffed. "Let's finish this run, and if you think of something afterward, you can tell me then. And stay behind me."

He took off running back toward his house, leaving me behind. I knew he wouldn't leave me too far behind, he couldn't protect me properly that way, but he was clearly staying enough steps ahead he thought he could ignore me.

We'll see about that.

My brain finally engaged again. "You could slow down for a second."

"Catch up," he challenged.

As I watched Blake's muscled ass flexing in his shorts, I smiled. "Hate to see you go, love to watch you leave."

He stopped so fast, I almost ran into him. But I spun and moved around him without having to slow too much. I ran to pull ahead, and then without overthinking it, I ran double-speed to get ahead. "No, *you* catch up."

Blake barked out, "Callie."

He said he wanted me behind in case of a threat. If he wanted that then, he was going to have to catch up to me first. I knew it would piss him off. I knew it would earn me a safety lecture.

But at least he would have to talk to me.

He growled my name again, so I ran harder. And I had to admit to myself that I really just wanted Blake to chase me.

He grabbed my arm, pulling me back against him as he stopped our forward momentum. "What the hell's wrong with you? How many times have I told you to stay behind me? Are you trying to—"

"Watch it," I said. "You're in danger of breaking your record for consecutive words spoken to me at one time."

When he paused to take that in, I twisted out of his grip before trying to run again. He caught me easily, but when he pulled me toward him, I stumbled. I fell back against his chest, much like the first time we met when he caught me as my ankle turned at the gala five years earlier.

“What’s gotten into you?” he asked, though his voice sounded less angry than before.

I stayed there, my back against his chest, and turned my head to look up at him. “Guess I just wanted to be chased,” I said, while still trying to catch my breath from sprinting.

He stared down at me, his brows furrowed. His grip on my arms softened, and I felt him taking deep breaths. His hands slid down my arms, toward my hands.

Then he let go of me and took a step away. I missed the contact instantly.

“I can’t do this,” he said. “You need to understand that right now.”

“This? Getting to know each other? Talking on a friendly jog?”

He glared.

“Or telling me that I’m beautiful, almost kissing me, and then treating me like I don’t exist?”

He huffed. “Your father hired me to protect you. That makes you my responsibility and the daughter of my boss.”

I walked up to him and put my hands on his chest. “What if I wasn’t? Would you—”

He grabbed my hands to pull them off his chest but held onto them. “Don’t. That makes it too hard... I have to focus on my job, or you could get hurt. Worse.”

“I don’t understand how talking to me would make it harder to protect me. Blake, I was so disappointed five years ago to find that you’d quit and moved on. I never stopped thinking about that night. I know you don’t remember—”

“Damn it, Callie,” he said, squeezing my hands. “I remember that night, alright? I remember the way it felt when you fell back against me. I remember your stupid little karate chop. I remember every detail of how you looked in that fucking cocktail dress. And you were just as distracting while I was trying to do my job.”

I couldn't breathe for a second. “You remember?”

“How the hell could I forget someone like you? From the first glimpse of you in that ballroom, I could barely do my damn job. All I could think about was getting to know you better after the gala.” He let go of my hands and took a step back. “Until I found out who you were.”

“I don't understand. Why did you—”

“Why the hell do you think I quit that cushy job protecting your father?”

“He said city life wasn't for you.”

He made a sound between a snort and a laugh. “I couldn't very well tell him the truth. That all I'd have been able to think about was getting his daughter into my bed.”

Hearing those words sent a rush of heat straight down my body. “Blake—”

“I left because I couldn't afford that kind of distraction. You were twenty *and* the boss' daughter. I knew you were off-limits. Nothing's changed.”

I swallowed hard. “Nothing?”

He bit his bottom lip. “It's harder now. I'm trying not to get emotionally attached, and getting to know you is only making it harder. The flirting has to stop.”

I took that as a compliment, something to cheer me up even though I was unhappy that our relationship was going to remain bodyguard/protectee and nothing more.

“Then I'm sorry. Sorry for making it difficult. I'll stop. I'll give you your space.”

He nodded, and after a few more seconds of staring, he sighed. We started walking toward his house.

Part of me was elated that he'd remembered. Part of me wanted to cry that my five-year fantasy really was impossible. When we broke into a slow jog, I fell behind when the path narrowed like he wanted me to, and I at least had the view of his amazing ass to distract me.

BLAKE

THE LAST THING I intended to do was have some sort of confessional breakdown on our run. Now she knew I wanted her the night we met. She knew I'd quit to avoid the distraction. The temptation.

Worse, she knew I was even more tempted than before.

To her credit, she did rein in the flirting. She kept herself occupied with rehearsing in the basement and reading or doing whatever she did in her bedroom. She even ate there.

She was doing exactly what I asked her to.

I fucking hated it.

All along, I'd known the situation was difficult for her. I'd already felt guilty because I knew I could have been friendlier and spent more time with her. If she'd been almost anyone else, I could have done it.

I only avoided her because I wanted her so fucking much, I sometimes felt like I was barely able to keep myself in check around her.

It was bad enough that I couldn't stop thinking about it. But if I gave in to what I wanted, the distraction would be too much. That kind of personal involvement made a person sloppy. It caused stupid decisions. It overrode instincts and common sense.

I knew that much from experience.

A faded image of Rosa flashed in my mind. We'd been so young, just in our early twenties. She was so beautiful, I could barely believe she'd look my way, let alone be my girl.

I thought I was going to marry her. Maybe I would have if things had turned out differently.

If I hadn't let my emotions get in the way when she needed me the most.

I heard Callie's steps on the stairs. I glanced that way to see her turn to go down to the basement. She gave me a tight smile and headed down to rehearse.

I'd pushed her so far away that she didn't even try to make small talk anymore.

It was probably for the best, but it felt like absolute shit.

I opened the box that held the tracking necklace I wanted Callie to wear. I thought it was pretty enough, but I'd let Cathy look at it to make sure. She said it looked artsy, like something handmade.

I knew she wouldn't like the fact it would track her every movement, but it was for her own good. I took it downstairs, ready to insist she wear the necklace for her own safety.

I heard music as I got close to the bottom of the stairs. When I rounded the wall separating the entryway from the living room, I saw Callie, her back to me, dancing.

Her hair was loose, but it didn't look freshly slept on. It hung past her shoulders in soft waves. She wore a tank top, so her long, lean arms were bare and moved gracefully as she danced.

Callie was mesmerizing when she woke up looking like she'd just rolled out of a cardboard box. She looked completely fuckable even in sloppy nightclothes, with her hair sticking up.

Callie *dancing* was like some kind of a drug that made me instantly hot and happy the minute I took it.

Her tights showed off that glorious ass of hers, and those shapely thighs. The way she moved her upper body meant her

shoulders and neck were on display.

She was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

She moved into a pirouette and stumbled when she saw me, stopping herself short with a little yelp.

"Holy shit," she said, gasping for breath. "You startled me."

"Sorry," I said, clearing my throat. "Didn't want to interrupt you."

She put her hand on her chest. "That's okay. Just caught off-guard." She motioned at the TV. "I didn't mean to...I mean I know I have a set-up in the basement...but I was watching the ballet on PBS and got carried away. I'll go back downstairs."

I handed her the necklace. Before my tongue caught up with my brain, she'd opened it and was already holding the necklace up to the light.

"How pretty." She grinned at me, and I wondered if I could get away without telling her the truth. But I could see she was confused by the "gift".

"It's a tracking device," I said, struggling not to have to clear my throat. "I want you to wear it all the time during the day."

Her face fell. "I'm not going to go jogging on my own again, Blake."

"Okay. But if you did, or if you got taken, it could be the difference between getting found...or not."

I'd ruined her delight at the necklace by telling her it was a tracking device. And I'd just one-upped that by saying "if you got taken."

She went from disappointed to alarmed in a split second.

"Have you heard something?" she said, the hand holding the necklace slightly trembling.

"Nothing like that." I put my hand over hers. "I'm just being extra careful. The chance of something happening is

minuscule. But just in case...”

Callie eyed the necklace like it might bite her, then she said, “Well, at least it *is* pretty.” She turned and held both ends up in front of her shoulders, clearly waiting for me to put it on her.

Touching her was not a good idea.

She scoffed and held the necklace out to me, dropping it before my hand was even around it. “I don’t think I can get it clasped.” She turned and lifted her hair with one hand.

I held my breath as stepped close to put the necklace on her. My knuckles brushed her skin as I joined the ends behind her neck and clasped them together. Despite myself, I touched the chain and slid it in place to hang properly around her neck.

I let my hands slide down to rest on her shoulders.

Callie dropped her hair and turned to face me but didn’t move away.

I looked down at where the necklace hung between her breasts. I swallowed and finally brought my gaze back to her eyes.

“Looks good on you.”

She narrowed her eyes and gave me a slow smile. “Giving me compliments again? If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were flirting with me. You better be careful or I might start flirting back.”

I smirked. “I kind of miss it actually.”

Why the hell would you say that?

I cleared my throat. She raised her eyebrows before looking down at her necklace.

“Thanks. I’ll try to remember to keep it on.”

CALLIE

I HEARD Blake's voice and a woman's voice downstairs soon after he arrived, so I threw a T-shirt on over the tank top I wore and headed down.

Blake turned to see me. "Callie, this is my mom, Lisa. The most wonderful woman in the world, who just brought us a chocolate cherry pie."

"Ooh," I said. I shook her hand. "Lovely to meet you."

"Same." Lisa had smile lines and a tiny bit of white hair at her temples. Her dark hair was short and loosely curled, and she had the look of someone who felt at home in a kitchen and loved to see people appreciating her cooking.

"And this is my niece, Elsie." Blake stepped aside to reveal a girl of twelve or thirteen with bright green eyes and her dark hair pulled back in a tight bun. Her mouth was filled with thin metal braces wrapped in rainbow-colored bands. She'd apparently been behind him with her arms around his waist, leaning against him while he cut the pie.

"Hi," she said, bouncing toward me, her hand out. "I'm twelve. Uncle Blake insists I tell people that upfront, sort of as a warning." She grimaced in his direction, and he scowled.

His scowl would give most grown men pause, but Elsie smiled about it.

"You don't look like too much trouble," I said.

"That's what I say, but he disagrees."

She wore a shirt that said “DANCE” on it, and given the bun in her hair, I took a wild guess. “I’ll bet you take ballet.”

Her mouth dropped open, and she spun on Blake. “Did you tell her?”

“No,” he said honestly. He hadn’t talked to me about much of anything at all, beyond all the things I wasn’t allowed to do.

“The shirt and the hair sort of give it away,” I said.

“Oh.” She laughed, covering her mouth with her hand. “Do you like ballet?” she asked.

I laughed and glanced at Blake, who frowned down at the pie. I guess he’d told them as much about me as he’d told me about them. “I guess I do since that’s my profession. I’m a member of Je Ne Sais Quo.”

“Uncle Blake! why didn’t you tell me?”

“I—”

“What’s it like to go on tour with a dance company that famous?” She had a grip on both my arms and was practically trembling in her excitement. “Does Madame Etou actually make you rehearse twelve hours a day? Does—”

“Elsie,” Lisa said. “Don’t bombard Blake’s guest with a hundred questions.”

“I don’t mind,” I said, and it was true. It was nice to have some exciting conversation for a change.

“Could you help me with an audition I have coming up?” Elsie asked, her eyes full of hope.

“Elsie!” Lisa said, shaking her head. “What have we said about things like that?”

“Sorry,” she said. “I’m not supposed to be rude. I just got excited.”

“Actually, I’d love to help.”

She bounced, but Blake said, “You don’t have to let her—”

“No, really. I’m going out of my mind with boredom. I’d be happy to have something else to do anyway, and it’s always

fun to see someone young excited about dancing.”

He looked at me skeptically, still frowning, but a little less intently. “If you’re sure you don’t mind.”

“I want to.”

Elsie grinned at me, then turned and beamed at her uncle. He kept a stern face for a few seconds, then his face broke into the most beautiful smile I’d ever seen. “Okay. As long as Callie wants to do it.”

She spun and hugged me tight like I’d known her for years, then ran to Blake and threw her arms around him. He kept smiling as he bent down and kissed the top of her head.

“Wow,” I said, sounding as stunned as I felt.

Everyone looked at me. Blake seemed to realize that he’d stopped scowling for a minute. He frowned and said, “What?”

“I had no idea you knew how to smile. You should do it more often.”

I had a feeling he did, but only when Elsie was around.

His frown deepened, paired with a sigh. Lisa gave me an approving look. Maybe it was a sentiment she shared.

Then we sat at the kitchen counter and ate pie while Elsie peppered me with questions about the dance company, my auditions, and almost every little detail about dancing that you could only get from someone who had been through the process.

It was the most fun I’d had since I got there. When Elsie helped Blake clean up the dishes, Lisa and I sat in the living room and talked for a little while about her popular bakery in town, The Crumble. Most business owners came in regularly, and it had a string of regular customers too.

My mouth watered at the list of pies, cookies, and cakes she sold on a regular basis. I hoped she stopped by more often, not just for the pie, but for the conversation.

“Jessie was going to come with us, but she had ...” She looked toward the kitchen and Elsie, who was chatting Blake’s

ear off at the sink. “A date,” she mouthed. Then she spoke softly. “Elsie’s dad passed away a few years ago, and one of our regular customers is such a nice man who really seems to care for Jess and Elsie. She insisted she wasn’t ready yet, but I talked her into going. If nothing else, she gets to have some grown-up fun for a change.”

“Oh,” I said. “That must be hard.” I didn’t know what else to say. I couldn’t imagine how hard it was to be a mother at all, let alone a single one because your partner died young. How awful.

She sipped her tea. “Of course, since I helped push her into it, if it’s a disaster, I’m going to have a rough week at work.”

She laughed at that, and it was contagious. I smiled with her, and then she and Elsie were ready to go so Elsie could do some homework.

“Thank you so much for the delicious pie and the conversation,” I said. Then I looked at Elsie. “I’m really looking forward to helping you with your audition.”

“Thank you so much!” she said with a squeal and shot another beaming smile at her uncle, who returned it. His smile made my breath catch in my chest.

I’d known he was gorgeous from the moment he caught me when I tripped at the gala five years ago. But when he smiled at Elsie, his entire face gone full-blown with love for her, he was stunning.

After they left, we moved to the kitchen, where he stood with his back to me at the sink, drying and putting away plates. I got the feeling he was avoiding looking at me because he stayed like that for what felt like several minutes.

“Your mom’s pie was delicious. I hope I get to try several more.”

That seemed to reset something for him, because he turned to glance my way. “I’m sure you will. She or Jessie will probably bring a different kind every time they bring Elsie. They love to feed people.”

“Makes sense. Bakery and everything.”

Blake started to turn again, so I said, “You really should smile more, you know.”

He eyed me with a scowl. “If I said that to you, I’d be considered sexist, wouldn’t I?”

“Fair point. I’m just saying, it’s true. I hadn’t seen you smile like that before.”

He shrugged.

“You realize this is like a challenge now, right?”

“What is?” He straightened and crossed his arms, on guard again.

“Getting you to smile.” I grinned widely.

“I smile enough,” he said flatly.

“Not really.”

He shrugged and tossed the dish towel over his shoulder. “Law enforcement isn’t a job that requires a lot of smiling, I guess.”

“No, I guess not. You know, when I lived in Europe, I got to see Buckingham Palace. Those guards can’t break character for anything. But I made one of them smile. If I could get one of the Queen’s guards to crack, you, Blake Donovan, do not stand a chance.”

He smirked and leaned against the counter again. “You know, if you annoy me too much, I’ll tell my family that you’re on a diet, working hard to keep dancer-fit and all. No more of Mom’s pies.”

“Low blow, but worth it. I’ve already got a spot reserved on my list of greatest achievements. Number two, right below making the guard laugh. *Made Blake Donovan crack a smile.* I’m gonna check that off before you know it, even if you threaten to withhold your momma’s delicious desserts.”

“Don’t hold your breath. I don’t find most things funny.”

“I’m patient.”

Blake leaned closer over the counter, one eyebrow lifting. “I’ve sat through so-called comedy shows without laughing once.”

“I’m stubborn.”

He licked his lips and narrowed his eyes further, focusing on my mouth.

“And messy. You have chocolate on your face.” Blake smirked and used his tongue to lick the corner of his mouth to show me where.

I mimicked his movement, licking the corner of my mouth. He nodded and moved his tongue over his bottom lip, slowly swiping it across.

Watching him lick his lips like that was damned seductive. Or it would have been, under different circumstances. I was going to remember it for a while, at least.

I licked my bottom lip without recovering any chocolate.

He sighed as if annoyed. “Almost. A little to the left.”

I slid my tongue across to the left side. I had to have gotten it, but he still stared at my lips intensely.

“Did I do it?” For good measure, I wiped my mouth with my finger, but it came away clean.

Blake stared at me, his gaze seeming unfocused, his eyes almost sleepy. Then he straightened with a sigh and looked away. “You definitely did *something*,” he mumbled, then he cleared his throat.

“What?”

“Actually, it’s here.” He touched the tip of his nose.

As I reached for the spot, I realized I’d been had. He’d been bullshitting me the entire time.

To get me to slowly lick my lips?

I crossed my arms and glared at him. “Really?”

He shrugged, dropped the dishtowel on the counter like he was dropping a mic, then turned and headed upstairs.

And I could have sworn, right before he turned away, the corner of his mouth turned up into a smile.

BLAKE

MY PHONE BUZZED. A video call from the governor.

I sat upright and answered it. “Governor.”

“Blake. How’s everything there?” He had dark circles beneath his eyes, and his lips were drawn tight.

“Same as my report last night. We’ve had no issues whatsoever.”

“Look at this.” He held some photos up to the camera, one at a time. They were Callie, probably from high school. Most looked like school yearbook photos and posed portraits.

Then he held up a piece of paper with dark block letters:

RESIGN OR SAY GOODBYE

“It came in the mail in a large manila envelope.”

“Have you alerted the police?”

“Yes, Andrew has been the liaison with the authorities. They’re trying to trace it to a source as we speak. The photos are new, Blake.”

“What’s the last shot from?”

“That was in the newspaper when she won a dancing competition in high school.”

“They’re all school photos, formal portraits, no candid shots.” I rubbed my chin. “Nothing that’s not available publicly if someone looks hard enough. That doesn’t help us narrow it down.”

“It doesn’t. Do you think we should move her somewhere else? Does this mean they know where she is and are about to make some sort of move?”

I put aside all my feelings about Callie and how I’d feel if she went into hiding somewhere else. My instincts told me the threat didn’t mean anything was about to happen.

“No, sir. I don’t think that’s necessary. If they knew where she was, they might have sent a photo of her to show you that. They also didn’t claim they knew where she was or say that they’d find her. They might not even know she’s not there with you. They could have chosen publicly available photos that are more recent. I think they chose childhood photos to make the threat seem more sinister, just to scare you.”

“It worked!”

“And they counted on that. It feels like a bluff to me. The overall threat might be real, but this message doesn’t mean they’re any closer to Callie than before.”

He let out a sigh of relief, and I could see him relax as he nodded.

After I got off the phone with the governor, I called a friend who lived an hour away who knew even more about surveillance than I did and bribed him to lend me some equipment so I could wire as much of the surrounding woods as possible. I wanted to see if anyone approached long before they reached my property, just to be on the safe side.

Shortly after he left, Callie came upstairs again.

“Was someone here?”

“Friend of mine, dropping off some security equipment.”

She stretched. “I’m gonna shower. Then I think I’ll go sit by the stream to read for a while.”

I was busy looking at one of the cameras, but I glanced up. She wore dance tights that showed every delicious curve of her body, and her skin glistened with sweat.

I cleared my throat. “I’m going outside to set these up. I’ll lock the door behind me. If you come out, do the same.”

“Of course,” she said, then she went upstairs.

I was setting up a camera on one of the trees next to the start of the trail where Callie and I had jogged, aiming it into the woods and down that trail, when Callie came outside. I could see her near the stream, reading her book. Her hair was wet and hanging loose around her shoulders. She wore shorts and a tank top, the pendant I’d given her visible against her chest.

She was hard to stop looking at it. But I focused on the camera and had it mounted within a few minutes.

I was walking further into the trees, ready to mount the next one, when Callie screamed.

I raced toward her, relieved that I didn’t see anyone or the reason she was screaming.

“What’s wrong?” I shouted before I reached her.

“Get it off!”

She kept jumping, so when I reached her, I grabbed her arms. “Cal-”

Her whole body rolled in a wave-like motion while she pulled at her shirt, then she jerked, and I almost lost my grip on her. Instead, I held on, and she tipped us both sideways into the stream. I tried to help her up, but she was still flailing and making panicked noises, taking herself closer to the middle.

She shouted again and splashed around, pulling at her shirt until she finally had it over her head and off. Clinging to her chest, dark against her pale skin, was a deep green frog.

She waved her hands at her sides like she was afraid to touch it. “Get it off, get it *off!*”

“Alright. Hold on.” Kneeling next to where she sat in the stream, I carefully reached for it.

“Wait!” She yelled.

I stopped short of reaching for her chest and looked down at her panicked expression.

“Don’t hurt it.”

I rolled my eyes.

She waved her hands and held her head up like she didn't even want to see it.

The poor frog was probably more afraid than she was. It was perched on the band of her bra between her breasts.

Lucky bastard.

I reached for it and got my fingers around it, but it was slick enough that it slipped out of my grip and nestled closer to her, getting itself almost wedged between her bra and her breasts.

Callie squealed and wiggled, still whispering *get it, get it*.

"I'm trying. Just hold still." I reached for it, but it gave a slight jump out of her cleavage to the top of her breast. I grabbed it, but it slipped down into her cleavage again. As I tried to catch it, I ended up with a handful of Callie's right breast.

Shit.

I didn't have time to apologize before the frog jumped again, nearly reaching her collarbone and giving me a chance to grab it. It dropped into her cleavage one more time.

"Blake!" She looked at me with pleading eyes.

I glanced at her, the corner of my mouth tugging into a smile.

"I'm trying! He's a slippery little sucker."

The more the frog tried to escape me, the more my hands and fingers kept brushing against her cleavage and her wet bra. The panicked frog finally tried burrowing between her breast and the cup of her bra, making Callie splash her hands in the water and squeal.

So, I went for it. My fingers slipped inside her bra, touching her skin, but I managed to scoop the frog out and keep my grip on it. Until it wriggled free and jumped, bouncing off my hand like a trampoline.

Callie lost it. It had already bounced away and made a splash far behind her, but she was under the water splashing at her chest like it was still there.

I reached for her. “It’s gone, it’s gone!” I said, unable to hold back the smile spreading across my face.

As I tried to help her up, she slipped on the moss-covered stones in the bed of the stream. I grabbed her to keep us both from falling. Every time she put her foot down, she slipped.

She gripped my arms to steady herself, bursting into giggles as she continued to slip. I gave up trying to help her and picked her up instead to get us out of the water. I put her down on the sloped bank and plopped down next to her.

She laughed uncontrollably as I said, “All that for a fucking frog.”

“I didn’t know what it was!” She snorted.

Her laughter was contagious, but I fought it as long as I could.

“What the hell did you *think* it could possibly be?”

She couldn’t answer for laughing, and the more she laughed, the harder it was not to laugh along with her.

“That could have been your Prince Charming waiting for a kiss,” I said, “and you almost smashed it trying to get your shirt off. Poor little bastard.”

I couldn’t help but laugh then, remembering her panicked dance while she pulled at her shirt.

Her shirt, that was now floating in the stream.

Her thin, white bra didn’t hide anything. Her nipples peaked from the cold water shone through it. I’d never wanted to touch anything as much in my life.

Then I got my wits about me and realized how close I’d come, and how that might not be okay.

“Sorry about...” I made grabbing fingers in the direction of her chest. “It kept moving.”

“That’s okay,” she said, trying to get her laughter under control. “Thank you for rescuing me.”

“From a frog the size of a lime.”

“Still. My hero.”

She gazed down at me, and it would have been so easy to slide my fingers around the back of her neck, pull her close, and finally taste those full, pink lips. Then lick my way down to suck one of her pink nipples.

You can't, Blake. You fucking can't.

For the first time since I'd found out Callie was my boss' daughter five years earlier, I wanted to argue back with that logical, responsible voice.

Why the fuck can't I?

I knew why.

I got up and hurried back into the stream to get her shirt. I wrung it out as I walked back toward her, for all the good it would do.

When I handed it to her, she stood and slipped it on slowly, not like someone embarrassed and in a hurry to cover up.

“Guess what,” she said with a soft smile.

“What?”

“I finally got you to laugh.” Her smile turned into a huge, cocky grin as she picked up her book and walked toward the house, giving me one quick look over her shoulder before she went inside.

I watched her go. I rubbed my hand down my face and made my way toward the house for dry clothes so I could finish setting up the cameras.

I hoped and prayed on the way that she'd already gone into her room and wasn't standing there in those wet, clingy clothes. Otherwise, I was pretty sure I'd start peeling them off her.

As soon as I made it to my bedroom, I glanced at my bed, picturing her on it. Naked, her body inviting me to taste, to tease. My cock throbbed.

I still had cameras to install. I needed more coffee. I *needed* a lot of things. Unfortunately, the biggest one was in the bedroom next to mine, changing her clothes while I stood there getting hard over her.

I'd come close to picturing Callie while I jerked off. It had always seemed wrong to do that. But a man can only restrain himself for so long.

I leaned against the door, listening for her, knowing she was just a few steps down the hall, and shoved my hand into my wet clothes.

I thought of her wet and half-dressed in the cold water of the creek, her nipples glowing pink beneath the wet, white fabric of her bra. My hand sliding in, without a frog to stop me, to cup all that glorious flesh.

My tongue wrapping around the hard nipple, sucking it just to hear her gasp.

I was iron-hard in two strokes and biting my bottom lip at how fast I was getting there. I closed my eyes and thought of so many moments between us that made my blood pound through my body.

The way her legs parted when I was cleaning the scrape on her thigh. How easy it would have been to slide my hand up and feel the heat of her.

The sexy black cocktail dress she wore when I first saw her. The way her heart-shaped ass felt against my crotch.

How she clung to me after her nightmare. How she felt in my arms when I carried her out of the creek.

I grunted and squeezed my cock hard as my orgasm hit, stroking furiously while picturing her asleep in her bed, arching her back as she moaned my name.

Callie Ellis was going to be the death of me.

CALLIE

I HAD enough experience with men to know when one was looking at me like he wanted to eat me alive. And the way Blake looked at me was full of that kind of hunger.

And I loved every bit of it.

I couldn't stop imagining how good we'd be together. I wanted him as much as he wanted me.

I wanted all of his protective, manly instincts focused on me that way for a change. Not just hanging cameras and running with me so I wouldn't be tempted to go alone. But focused on me directly. Skin to skin.

I shivered at the delicious thought.

My phone chimed with a notification. Then another.

Then I saw the list of messages from an unknown number. Four more chimes came while I was scrolling the messages already there.

Every single one was a threat.

“Convince Daddy to resign or suffer the consequences.”

“You'll pay for your family's mistakes.”

More messages insisting that I get Dad to resign as governor or they were going to make me sorry. Each one got worse, until some said things like “I see you, bitch” and “Wait until I get my hands around your throat.”

I see you.

They were the same messages I received before coming to Elm Grove. Those messages sent fear rushing through me the first time I received them. But they seemed like just empty scare tactics to me now.

Besides, I was with Blake, who was the biggest stickler about security I'd ever seen.

I went downstairs to see about some breakfast to find Blake already at the kitchen island. As I walked behind him, I saw that he was looking at the Elm Grove Gazette on his phone.

"You take a thermos to work like a 1950s construction worker, and now you're reading the newspaper on your cell phone. You are a dichotomy."

He smirked. "Nobody delivers out here. Or I'd read the actual, physical newspaper and really blow your mind."

"You're like the sensibility of a Boomer wrapped in a thirty-seven-year-old body."

"Thank you," he said, without missing a beat.

Okay, I'd lost that one. I dug in the refrigerator. "Hungry?"

"Nope. Got to get to work. Need me to bring anything home?"

"Nah." My phone chimed again, five times, ten. I knew what the messages would be. It reminded me that it was probably something I should mention.

"Everything okay?" he asked, getting off the stool and grabbing his thermos.

"Yeah. Probably more threat messages."

"More threats?" he said, his voice going deeper. "You've gotten some before this?"

"About ten minutes ago."

He scowled and put his thermos on the counter with a clunk. "Were you going to tell me?" He held out his hand. "Let me see."

I handed him my phone. “I was going to tell you. But I saw you reading a newspaper on your cell phone and got distracted.”

He scrolled through them, his scowl deepening by the second. “These the same ones you got before?”

“Yes, it looks to be the same.”

“Any more like this, forward them to me as soon as you get them.” Blake finished and handed my phone back.

I put my phone on the counter and slipped my hands into my back pockets. “It just seems like someone trying to scare me.”

“Because it is. That doesn’t mean they don’t mean what they say.”

I shrugged one shoulder. “I’m not too worried about it.”

“It’s an escalation.” He glanced around for a second, then scoffed. “Damn it. County inspectors are coming today, so I have to be at the station. We’ll make more runs out here, just in case. And I’ll text regularly to check in, so be sure to answer me.”

“Okay, but I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Blake looked at me like I was crazy. “Callie, I’m glad you’re so confident about that, but we need to take every threat seriously.”

“I know. It’s just... you’ve got everything handled. I know you’re doing everything possible to protect me. I feel safe with you.”

His expression softened as he stared at me for several seconds. Then he cleared his throat. “I’m glad you’re not scared.”

My phone chimed again, but it was a message from Mackenzie. “Not a threat. Just a meme,” I said.

Reluctantly, he headed toward the door. “I’ll check in regularly. Call if you get at all uneasy. I’ll try to get done with the county as fast as I can.”

“I’ll be fine. But thanks.”



A couple of hours later, Blake had texted three times to check on me, and I assured him I was fine.

I’d just finished my uninspired sandwich and a salad when someone knocked on the front door. I was sitting at the kitchen island, in the direct eyeline of the door, and a man’s face was staring in through the window.

My whole body went rigid. Then I recognized the face.

I laughed in relief and hurried to open the door. “Andrew!”

“Hey, Cal.” He grabbed me in a tight hug. “How’s it going?”

“Good. What brings you all the way from Austin? Dad send you to make a report?” I ushered him inside, but instead of sitting down or following me to the kitchen, he stood awkwardly near the door and ran his fingers through his wavy blond hair.

“I’m off today. Just wanted to check on you in person. Maybe catch you up on the latest.”

Andrew was always so sweet to me. I liked a lot of the security team who worked for my dad, but Andrew had always been my favorite. He seemed to treat me more like a real person than a job than any of the others did.

“I appreciate it, Andrew. Do you want to come in?”

“Actually, would you like to go out? Let me buy you a coffee, or lunch if you’ve not had any.”

“Just ate, but a coffee out sounds fantastic. I only get out when we go for runs. Let me grab my purse.” I sent a quick text to Blake to let him know I was getting coffee with Andrew and shoved my phone in my purse. Then we left for town.

We went to a small deli that served breakfast all day and had a bottomless cup of coffee. It was a beautiful day, so we sat in their outdoor seating in front of the restaurant to enjoy the sunshine.

“We have a suspect,” he said, his smile growing. “Some creep burned a photo of your dad in front of the capitol, protesting his stance on immigrants and fracking. There’s nothing concrete to tie him to the threats yet, but it fits.”

“So he’s been arrested already? When?”

“About two this morning he started making a ruckus and pulled his stunt. It hasn’t been in the news yet. So few people knew that we managed to suppress it until we can figure out whether he’s behind the threats.”

“Two in the morning. I got some threats over text nearly six hours after that. He couldn’t have sent them from jail.”

“No, but if there’s more than one, it makes sense. What kind of threats?”

“Oh, nothing really. They want me to get my dad to resign and I’ll be sorry if he doesn’t, that kind of thing. Blake’s got it covered.”

Andrew dipped his head in a nod. I realized I should check my phone. I didn’t have the volume up loud, and it was in my purse.

“I could come more often, Cal. Get you out of the house for pie and coffee. Or whatever you want.”

“Thanks, Andrew. But I know it’s a two-hour drive. That’s a lot. And you don’t need to work on your day off.”

“I’m not talking about work.” He glanced up at me, then reached out and put a hand over mine on the table. “I’m happy to get you out of the house and-”

“Callie!” A booming voice shouted my name from down the sidewalk behind me.

I turned to see Blake, his chin down, his hands fisted at his sides, stomping toward us.

Shit. He looked pissed.

BLAKE

THIS UNAUTHORIZED TRIP out with Andrew would have pissed me off on a good day.

On a day when she'd just gotten a couple of dozen threatening messages, it made me want to punch a concrete wall.

I knew she was with Andrew. I saw them leave. I just didn't know why. I checked the tracker app that followed the signal put out by her necklace, and the second I could get out of the office, I headed toward it.

I saw them at the table on the sidewalk before they saw me. He had a hand over hers in a way that set my teeth on edge.

That explained the hand on her lower back at the airport. I hated that even more now.

Andrew stood before I reached them. "Blake. I realize this is—"

"Why the fuck would you break protocol, Andrew? Today of all days? She had several threats against her this morning, so what do you do, come and set off my proximity alarms, then take her out of my direct surveillance without so much as a head up."

He put his hands up, palms toward me. He knew he'd fucked up too.

"You're right, Blake. But I didn't know about the threats until we were already here. And I should have given you a

heads-up. But I wanted to surprise her,” he said softer than the rest, glancing at her and, I fucking swear, blushing.

“Fuck a heads-up. You should have asked permission, so I could say no.” I glanced at Callie, who was scowling.

“Get in the car. We’re leaving,” I growled.

“You know where I am now. Can’t we—”

I was not in the mood for this shit.

“We can’t,” I snapped.

“Blake, don’t talk to me like I’m a child,” she said angrily.

I glared at her. “Car. Now.”

I turned back to Andrew. “She’s here for me to protect her, Andrew. Don’t ever fucking compromise my ability to do that again. Do you understand me?”

I’d had to dress him down like that once when we worked together. He’d learned from it. I hoped that went for this time too.

“Understood, Blake. I’m sorry. Before you go, I was going to tell you after Cal and I got back, there was an arrest early this morning. Guy burned Vincent’s photo in front of the capitol in the middle of the night. He might be our guy.”

It pissed me off that it happened early that morning, and I was only just hearing about it. That, on top of him taking Cal away from my home without my permission, had me about to blow my stack.

“What’s his info?”

Andrew told me his approximate age, build, and background. And that he’d apparently gotten drunk before pulling his little late night stunt.

“That’s not him. He’s probably not involved in any way.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Whoever’s behind this wants Ellis to resign. They’re going so far as to threaten his daughter. That sound like

somebody who gets tipsy and has a little bonfire at the capitol building when nobody's around?"

He shook his head. "No. Not really."

"Stay on guard. I think they're still out there."

He nodded, and I said, "Drive safe back to Austin. And don't let me see your ass around here again without discussing it with me first."

After he walked away, glancing apologetically at Callie as he passed me, I braced myself for her reaction.

When I turned, she stood there with her arms crossed, and her hip cocked.

"You didn't have to be so rude," she snapped. "Once again, Blake, I'm not a child."

I walked past her and pointed at the cruiser. "Good. Then don't act like one. Get in."

As I got in, she stood rooted in place for almost a full minute before getting into the car. "Fine. But we're not done talking about this."

"You're damn right we're not. But it can wait until we get home."

I called Vincent Ellis to ask about Andrew's recent behavior. I asked about his schedule. His level of concern over the threats. And whether Vincent knew he'd driven to Austin and taken Callie out for coffee with my knowledge.

He didn't.

Callie gaped at me the entire time, hearing every word through the car speakers. She finally couldn't take it anymore.

"Dad, I've been cooped up since I got here. He took me out for coffee and to catch up. Andrew's *fine*."

I let them talk for a minute. Then the governor addressed me.

"Do you think I should take any kind of action, Blake?"

“No. I read him his rights. It was just a lapse in judgment because—”

Because he wanted to see Callie.

I didn’t think I needed to say that out loud.

“He won’t do anything like that again.”

When we hung up, I was satisfied that Andrew had made a bad decision and nothing more. I trusted him, but you can never be too careful.

I wasn’t beyond making mistakes in judgment. And nobody, not even somebody as upstanding as Andrew, was beyond being tempted by a fat payday. He was driving the same car, not exactly late-model, but not as new as he should be able to afford.

Could be frugal. Could be a lot of debt that made buying a new car difficult. Someone offering to pay a good chunk of change for access to Callie could be offering enough to clear up that debt, if that were the case.

“I can’t believe you’d actually suspect *Andrew*. Weren’t you the one who hired him years ago?”

“I was. And I don’t suspect him, not any more than anyone else.”

“You just practically did a background check on the man. Someone you hired, worked with, and I assumed thought of as a friend.”

I pulled into my driveway and cut the engine. “Look, Callie. I didn’t get into security and law enforcement because I trust people. All I did was my duty.”

I got out and slammed the door. She followed me in.

“I just wanted out of the house for a while. I texted to let you know I was going out. You said I could as long as I had an escort, and Andrew is the head of my dad’s security for heaven’s sake!”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were dating him?”

That stopped her short. “What? We’re—”

“The hand on your back at the airport. The hug. His hand on yours, and how he wanted to surprise you.” I growled as I glared at her. “You told me you weren’t in a relationship. I can’t protect you properly if you keep information from me.”

“We are *not* in a relationship.” She looked uncertain for a second, then she shook her head. “We’re just friends.”

I could have told her that he wanted it to be more based on the way he held himself around her. I knew it hadn’t been my imagination when they’d stepped off the plane.

“If that changes, I need to know,” I snapped.

“It’s not going to change.” She tucked hair behind both her ears and put her hands on the kitchen island. “I only want friendship from Andrew. That won’t change.”

The relief I felt on hearing that was enough to remind me how far out of line I was in danger of getting. Who she dated was none of my business beyond needing to know who was in her circle. I shouldn’t have been so pleased to hear her say she wasn’t interested in dating Andrew.

“I know I upset you,” she said. “I didn’t think it would be that big of a deal. I’m sorry. That doesn’t give you the right to talk to me like I’m a child. Anywhere. Let alone in public.”

I’d been harsh with her, and I knew it. The sight of her sitting there with Andrew had me seeing red. But I could admit when I was wrong.

I sighed and ran my hand through my hair. “You’re right. I overreacted. I’m sorry.”

She looked surprised, her bright blue eyes narrowing, then opening wider. “Okay. Thanks.”

“Just understand something. I’ll do what I can to not treat you that way again. But I can’t guarantee I won’t get out of line again when it comes to your safety. I can’t let how I feel, or how you feel, interfere. I’d never forgive myself if something happened to you. And I don’t want any more of that guilt on my conscience.”

Damn it. I didn't know why it came out that way. Naturally, she picked up on it. "Any more?"

"It's not important."

"It is to me," she said, rounding the island to stand near me. "You have some kind of guilt that makes you take all this so personally?"

I didn't talk about Rosa, even to my family. They knew, in general, what had happened, but not how I felt about it.

But for some reason, looking into her blue eyes that stared at me with curiosity and compassion, I wanted to tell her.

"Rosa and I met in college and were together for several years. We had planned on getting married. We were living in Austin and she wanted to move home to Horizon City on the western border, where her family lived. Damn ten hours away. I wanted to stay in Austin and we had an argument."

Remembering the arguments we'd had about it still made my stomach burn.

"I decided I'd make the compromise, because I loved her. I knew she was home, but when I called, her phone was off. I had a sense that something might be wrong. She always answered her phone. But—"

I had to take a deep breath before saying it out loud. "I let my emotions get to me. Decided she wasn't answering because she was pissed. So, I didn't go home to check on her as fast as I should have, because I assumed she was ignoring me."

Callie's face had gone pale. "She wasn't ignoring you."

"I got there in time to keep the bastard from killing her. But he'd hurt her. She didn't like to be touched after that, and despite me telling her I was willing to wait for her, as long as it took, she went home alone."

"I'm so sorry," Callie breathed.

"If I hadn't been so emotionally fucked up about our fight, I'd have gone right away. And maybe I'd have been in time."

“Maybe? You can let guilt weigh you down for years over a maybe. Maybe it wouldn’t have made a difference, Blake.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that I let emotions override my instincts. I worked in security for fuck’s sake. Protecting people was my job. I should’ve known.” I paused and shook my head. “If I’d been any later, I don’t even want to think about what I might have found. There’s no room for emotions when it comes to my job. I need you to understand how I feel about that.”

She nodded, and I got the sense she at least understood. Even if she didn’t agree.

“I’ll try to see it from your point of view, Blake. Thank you for telling me.”

I was still surprised I had. But it felt good to have it out. Really good. I’d do my best to see things from her perspective too.

And I’d make sure she wasn’t tempted to do something foolish again.

Especially with Andrew.

I finished up some work in my office for the rest of the afternoon. When I came downstairs, Callie was reading in the living room.

“Hey,” I said.

Callie looked up and smiled. “Hi.”

“I know you’re stuck here when you’re used to doing what you want. We can go do something. Get you out for an evening so you feel less caged up.”

Her face brightened. “Really? That sounds great. What’s the hippest, funnest place around here?”

I coughed into my fist to hide my laugh. “Hip and Elm Grove... well, there’s BINGO at the senior center. Sometimes the park plays kids’ movies on a projector and people bring blankets and snacks. I’m up for either,” I teased.

“You think you’re funny, but you’re not. I want to go somewhere fun!” A look of horror passed over her face. “Elm Grove isn’t a dry town, is it?”

I chuckled and shook my head. “Nope.”

“Then let’s go to the most popular bar. Bar food for dinner and a couple of drinks at a hoppin’ place sounds great.”

I could tell she was teasing back a little, calling it a ‘hoppin’ place. The most popular bar actually did a pretty good business. Sometimes they had live bands, and a string of drink specials kept them going even in slower times.

I’d been there too many times to count to break up drunken brawls over the years.

“I was thinking more that we’d go have dinner somewhere, not paint the town.”

She held up her thumb and forefinger, squinting at me. “Just a little painting? A little?”

A surge of jealousy ran through me remembering Callie with Andrew, his hand over hers. I told myself it was the professional thing to do. To prevent her from deciding she was tired of staying in and seeing Andrew. Again.

“Fine. We can go, have a couple of drinks tomorrow. As long as it keeps you from doing something like you did today.”

“I’m looking forward to it!” she said, flashing me a bright smile.

I wasn’t looking forward to it. It was going to be fucking hard to keep my distance in a crowded bar. I had to stay close to protect her. And the more time I spent with her, the more I wanted her.

And the less I wanted to hold myself back.

CALLIE

THE NEXT DAY passed like molasses, with Blake busy at work and getting home late. He asked me about any more threat messages—there weren't any—and if anything else out of the ordinary might have happened. It hadn't.

When Blake came in the door, I was already showered, made up, and dressed for a night out.

I wore a black knee-length dress similar to the one I'd worn the night we met with low pumps. This dress was lower cut, so the pendant hung just above the dip in the neckline.

I put my hair up in a loose bun with a few curled strands trailing down my neck on both sides. I felt dressed up, but not too formal since it was a smokehouse and not a fancy restaurant.

“Wow,” he said when he saw me, smiling slowly. “You look...ready for a night out.”

I didn't think that was what he meant to say, but the impressed look on his face was compliment enough. “Thanks.”

“Let me shower and change, just be a minute.”

It really only took him five or ten minutes. He came downstairs in black denim jeans and a fitted grey shirt that showed off his muscular physique.

“You look great. Am I overdressed?” I asked.

He scoffed, tilting his head, like he couldn't believe I'd asked, and motioned for the door. "Nope. Don't change a thing."

The Smokehouse Saloon had a nice atmosphere and a pretty good crowd, especially at the long L-shaped bar.

And it had a dedicated dance floor. It was roped off and empty, but a banner hung on the wall that declared it "Swing Night" starting at eight o'clock.

"Looks like dancing starts in half an hour. I didn't know we'd be dancing." I was even more excited about my night out.

"We won't be. I didn't realize it when I picked this place. Used to only have it on the weekends."

"Come on," I said. "Don't be a spoilsport. You can't bring a dancer to a dance night and expect her to just sit and watch everybody else."

We sat at one of the several tables, Blake pulling out the chair for me, the one with its back to the dance floor. On purpose, no doubt.

Dinner was delicious, and instead of the red wine I might have ordered somewhere else, I ordered the same bottled beer as Blake.

When the music started, I couldn't help but turn around to watch the dancers having fun. After two songs of me watching and absorbing some of the repeated moves, I turned and gave Blake my best pleading eyes.

"Come on, Blake. Dance with me."

He sat with arms crossed. "Not really in the mood."

I watched and clapped and laughed along as different couples broke out and drew crowds as they showed off their skills. Occasionally, I glanced back at Blake with puppy dog eyes, but he didn't budge.

"I'll get us another beer," he said.

He tried to flag down the waitress but gave up and let me know he'd be right back before he went to the bar for the drinks.

The minute he stepped away from our table, a man about my age with shiny black cowboy boots and a crooked, Elvis-Presley smile walked up to me.

"Ma'am," he said in a surprisingly deep voice, "would you care to dance?"

"*Would I,*" I said, before I could bite my tongue. "But I'm here with... a friend." I gestured toward the bar. "Let me see if —"

"No." Blake appeared next to me without the beers he went for.

"You didn't even hear what he said," I scoffed.

"Doesn't matter. The answer is no," Blake said flatly.

"Sorry, Sheriff," the guy said, then he tipped his head at me and said *Ma'am* again before walking away. He obviously knew Blake and wasn't some stranger out to kidnap a governor's daughter.

"He knows you." I crossed my arms and glared at Blake, feeling both confused and a little angry.

Why bring me out here if he wasn't going to let me have any fun?

"So?" Blake grunted.

I gestured toward the dance floor. "What would be the danger in me dancing with him?"

He huffed, looking annoyed. "I don't want you dancing with him. Or out in the crowd. Too easy to lose sight of you."

"In the crowd of mostly middle-aged people dancing? That crowd?" I spread my hands out, palms up, hoping to make him see reason.

Blake scoffed and tilted his head. "Callie—"

“If *you* won’t dance with me, Blake, at least let me have fun by dancing with someone else. This is my one night out,” I tried to reason.

His frown deepened, then he looked past me and scowled even harder. I turned to see another man walking my way.

I turned back to Blake. “I’m going to go ask him,” I huffed and stood, spinning on my heels.

Blake stood at the same time and grabbed my hand, pulling me to him.

“Come on,” he growled with all the enthusiasm of a man being forced to walk the plank.

I let him lead me to the dance floor.

I didn’t know what to expect. But I did think that I was a professional dancer at a swing night with a man who’d probably never danced in his life.

This was going to be interesting, but hey, at least we were going to have some fun.

I moved close to him and swayed to the beat of the music. He hesitated, his face filled with reluctance.

“Come on Blake don’t be such a party pooper. Let’s have a good time,” I spoke over the music. Grabbing his hands, I slid them around my waist. Before he could object, I started swaying my hips, moving to the rhythm of the music.

I smiled up at him and put my hands on his hips, wiggling them back and forth.

“Move with me,” I said laughing.

I twirled, mimicking the moves of the other dancers. When I faced Blake again, he smirked and there was a flicker of playfulness in his eyes.

He put his hand on the small of my back and pulled me close, pinning me against his body. Oh, I liked that.

He looked down at me, giving me a slow sexy smile. His other hand found mine and lifted it over my head as I twirled around.

Wait, did he just spin me?

His eyes met mine and he chuckled at what must have been a look of shock on my face. He led me through the steps, spinning me again to end up pressed against his chest, then bent me back so I could kick a leg into the air.

The man had *moves*. My mouth dropped open.

“You were holding out on me this whole time!” I said with a laugh. “Why didn’t you tell me you knew how to swing dance? You’re amazing!”

“I’m out of practice.”

“It doesn’t show. I cannot believe you can dance like that.”

He scoffed. “Don’t sound so damn shocked. Elsie didn’t develop a love of dance out of nowhere. Mom taught Jessie and me to dance when we were kids. Country swing was her favorite.”

I was delighted by this new aspect of Blake’s personality I’d never even guessed could be there.

After that, we danced to almost every song. The more he danced, the better his moves got, and I was starting to pick up the moves I was unfamiliar with and getting into the rhythm of it too.

It felt fantastic to be out on a dance floor again. It wasn’t like performing, but it was satisfying in a similar way. And was the most fun I’d had in so long. Even before coming to Elm Grove, nights out with friends, dates, dance rehearsals. I hadn’t enjoyed myself quite that way in years.

And to have Blake’s attention directed at me that intensely for a while, that was *fucking amazing*.

His arms were around me so much, his hand against my waist as he spun me, I felt myself even more physically drawn to him. One move he favored, my back against his chest and his arms around me to hold my hands in front, was a favorite of mine too.

They played a slow song. Blake hesitated, and I thought for a moment he was going to lead me off the dance floor.

Instead, he put his arm around my waist and pulled me close.

He took my other hand in his and led me in slow circles. Our lower bodies were pressed together, so I could feel which direction he was going to move toward. When he turned me, his arm went around my waist again, to hold me tight against his body, my back against his chest.

He held my hand against my stomach, his other hand riding my hip. Blake dipped his head, so that his cheek was almost pressed against mine. After several seconds, I realized we'd completely lost time with the music and were just swaying together.

I didn't want it to end.

When Blake turned me in his arms, the way he stared down at me as he pinned my body to his prompted me to lick my lips, because I could practically feel his kiss. I was out of breath even though we were barely moving.

He glanced from my eyes to my mouth and back again.

I couldn't help but stare at him, conscious of the energy between us.

It was the most turned on I'd been since I could remember.

Eventually, the music stopped, and it was time to go.

Blake didn't let go of me right away. We stood there, bodies pressed together. Finally, he swallowed and took a deep breath. "You ready to go?"

"No," I said smiling, "you'll have to handcuff me to get me out of here."

He stared at me just long enough to make me squirm and wonder what he was thinking. "That can be arranged," he said.

"Promises, promises." I laughed.

He sighed and shook his head. "This old man needs to go to bed."

"Bullshit," I said, grinning broader at his shocked expression. "No old man dances the way you do."

“Okay, how about this. If I promise we’ll come back another time, can we go home?”

“Deal.”

On the way out, he put his hand on my lower back. He even opened the car door for me. On the drive home, I said, “Thanks for that. I had a great time.”

“So did I.” He smiled at me, then looked back at the road.

When we got home, I stopped him in the living room. “If we’re going back, you really need to show me a few of those moves again first. I mean, I’m a professional dancer, and I had to try to keep up with you all night. Not great for the ego.” I took his hand. “Show me that double-twirl again.”

Blake pulled me close to him and we danced some more in his living room. All the moves were a little slower because he was demonstrating them to me, and there was no music we had to keep up with.

And I was in no hurry for it to be over.

When his arms came around me from behind, I held his hands there and swayed side to side, not wanting to rush into the next move.

“I can’t get over how good you are at this,” I said softly.

He didn’t try to change position but swayed with me. Our bodies were molded together, leaving no space between us. His hands clasped mine tightly and the warmth of his body radiated through me. I could feel his breath on my neck as we moved in rhythm to the music.

“I’m about to feel insulted at how surprised you are,” he murmured.

I laughed. “Don’t be. You just don’t seem the dancing type. Proved me wrong.”

I turned in his arms without putting space between us. Blake didn’t step back or let go either.

He pulled me tighter to him.

“Not the dancing type, huh?” he whispered, his hands heavy on my hips. “What type am I then?”

I had an arm around his waist, and I put a hand against his chest. “Strong.”

He breathed a *hmm*, dropping his head so that our faces were inches apart.

“Silent,” I said softly. “The strong, silent type.”

With every movement of our bodies, his head seemed to dip lower, our foreheads and noses brushing occasionally.

I moved to put my arms over his shoulders, my hands behind his neck. I suddenly felt bold enough to say something else.

“Strong, silent...and sexy.”

He leaned away just enough to look into my eyes. His eyes were hooded, intense. His gaze lingered on my face as if he was memorizing every feature.

“What type am I?” I asked with a soft grin, still swaying, pressing my body harder against his.

“Callie,” he said softly, almost a warning, but his head started to dip again. His lips stayed close to mine and I could feel the warmth radiating from them.

I couldn't resist myself. “Am I *your* t—”

Blake's kiss stopped me, and the way he inhaled shakily as his lips pressed against mine had my blood pounding through my body in a second.

He felt like he was barely holding himself back, tension thrumming through his body into mine. Yet the kiss was soft and slow, with a controlled intensity. He dragged his lips across mine, and every part of me lit up. His hands moved along my back, a warmth radiating from him that made me ache for more.

Blake gasped softly and pulled back, like he was shocked by what he'd done, before kissing me harder, his hands tightening on my hips to pull me closer.

His tongue traces my bottom lip in a slow caress, and I instinctively arched my back to press myself against him.

As quickly as he'd kissed me, he stopped. Blake straightened, then let go of my arms to take a step back. He licked his lips and gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head before his Adam's apple bounced.

“Good night, Callie.”

He walked away, leaving me there to miss his arms around me and think about how the most tentative kiss I'd ever gotten might have been the best.

BLAKE

WHEN I OFFERED to take Callie out, I had no intention of kissing her.

Afterward, kissing her again was all I could think about. How her lips felt and tasted, how her body molded to mine as she gave herself over to the kiss. And how easily I could screw up and give in to temptation.

My dick was all on-board with screwing up.

Forget resisting, you idiot. Kiss her again. Don't stop this time.

When I got up the next morning, I felt surprisingly refreshed after only a little sleep.

The whole time I showered, shaved, and dressed, I thought about her being off-limits because of the job. She was my boss' daughter, but this was a one-and-done type of job. Not ongoing like before.

When I thought about her being younger, my brain reminded me that she was twenty-five now, not a mere tender twenty. She'd lived abroad for years.

She wasn't a child.

"Damn it," I grumbled.

It was already after eight, and Elsie was coming by nine. So, I had to get through the next two hours without grabbing Callie by the back of the neck and kissing her again.

I could do it. But it wasn't going to be easy.

Callie wasn't in the kitchen, but she'd made coffee, and the smell of bacon filled the room like the world's best incense. A skillet full of cheesy scrambled eggs sat on the stovetop, and the pan of fried bacon sat in the oven. None of it looked touched.

She bounded up from the basement stairs, barefoot and already in her dance tights with her hair in a bun. She looked amazing.

"Good morning," she said. "I was hoping you'd show up soon, I'm starving."

"You didn't need to wait for me." I pulled two plates out of the cabinet.

"I wanted to." She grinned brightly and took a plate, still standing next to me.

Was she waiting for me to kiss her? I wanted to, but I couldn't let it happen again.

I turned away to pour myself a cup of coffee.

"Sleep well?" she asked as she filled her plate.

"Fine. You?"

"Like a baby. Having a night out really helped, I think."

"Good." I sat on one of the stools at the island, and Callie sat next to me.

"You look ready to dance," I said, when she kept staring at me.

"I'm excited. What time did Lisa say they were coming?"

"By nine. She runs early, so anytime." I'd reverted back to answering her with as few words as possible.

"So, you kissed me last night," she said, causing my bite of eggs to stick in my throat.

I coughed into my fist and managed to get them all the way down. I hadn't expected her to bring it up so bluntly. But I guess, given Callie's personality, I should have expected that.

"I did. I shouldn't have."

“Well, I’m glad you did,” she said softly.

“We’ve been through this, Callie. I can’t let myself get distracted while I’m trying to keep you safe. You’re my boss’ daughter. And young. You should be with someone your age.”

She took a deep breath and sighed. “I understand that you don’t want to get emotionally attached while you’re protecting me. I heard you on that, and I get it. But I know my dad likes and respects you, or I wouldn’t be here. It’s not like he’d have a meltdown over the idea of you and me.”

“It’s unprofessional.”

“And our age difference isn’t that big.”

“Don’t do this.” She was making the same arguments I had before I came downstairs. Arguments designed to let me have what I wanted.

“I’m just saying—”

“My extra years have given me a different perspective. And a little more self-control. Because if I was closer to your age, neither of us would have gotten much sleep last night.”

Damn it, it had slipped out, but it was the truth.

Callie’s smile slipped, her expression gone soft, her mouth slightly open. The look of longing on her face damn near scrapped all my plans to keep my distance. Then he spoke, her voice soft and husky.

“What if I don’t want you to control yourself?”

I snapped my head to look at her. “Don’t—”

A knock at the door stopped me from telling her not to play with me.

She’d gone from flirting to outright stating that she wanted me, and I was just a man.

A man sitting next to the woman of his dreams.

I hurried to answer the door, grateful to have that conversation interrupted. Mom and Jessie kissed my cheek on the way past, and the huge hug Elsie gave me soothed my

nerves and brought on Uncle Mode. I went back into the kitchen feeling a hell of a lot less tension.

Callie had cooked enough breakfast that she offered everyone some. Only Elsie ate, then they headed to the basement for Callie to help her with her audition.

“Aren’t you coming?” Elsie asked when I stayed in the kitchen instead of following them.

“Be kind of crowded down there as it is.”

There was plenty of room. I just thought I’d stay away from Callie for a while, to help clear my head. But Elsie looked so disappointed that I wasn’t going to participate.

“I’ll be down in a little while, okay?”

“Okay. But remember that we have to leave for my class by noon,” she said, then she rushed downstairs. I sat at the island, drinking more coffee, calculating what time to go down to see enough to satisfy Elsie without causing myself undue temptation.

“Fuck it,” I said. I buckled up and went downstairs.

To watch *Elsie*.

I was instantly glad I made that choice. Seeing Elsie’s face light up when I got down there made it worth it. Callie ran her through her paces as they warmed up, then they started working on the routine she’d use to get into the more advanced class and get to perform in an upcoming recital.

Honestly, I had no idea whether Elsie was very good or not. Everything she did seemed great to me.

Callie treated her like she was doing a fantastic job, though. Elsie fell once trying to do a type of pirouette she hadn’t tried before. Callie thought she was ready, but it was going to take some practice.

When she fell, she could have been embarrassed or frustrated. She laughed it off and tried again. God, I loved that kid.

She and Callie went through the whole routine multiple times.

“What do you think, Uncle Blake?” Elsie stood, panting, in her final pose after the last run-through of the routine.

“I think they’d be crazy not to let you into the class.”

She laughed. “You’d say that no matter what.”

“Probably. But from when you started until now? Hundred percent improvement.”

Lisa and Jessie agreed and were suitably impressed along with me. And Callie looked so proud of her, I couldn’t help the warm feeling that had built up. She was great with Elsie, and an excellent teacher. Patient, thorough, encouraging.

It was only making it harder not to kiss her again.

They were done earlier than expected. Jessie thought Elsie needed at least a little break before her regular weekly class, so they came upstairs for an early lunch.

Callie pulled sandwich fixings out of the fridge. I couldn’t help but notice how at home she looked in my kitchen. She knew where everything was, and seemed so comfortable around my family that she acted more like a hostess serving lunch than a guest.

I liked that. I liked it way too much.

When they left, I really needed to get out of there for a while. “I’m going to go run some errands, grab a few groceries. Need anything while I’m out?”

“Can I come with you?” she asked, eating the last strawberry out of the carton, her lips pinker after a bite of the fruit.

“I can pick up whatever you need.”

“I’d really like to come, get to shop a little myself for a change.” Her bright blue eyes widened hopefully.

I guess I could have told her that I needed to be the hell away from her for a while. I could have said no. But I’d also

said I'd try to understand how she didn't want to be cooped up all the time.

“Okay, but—”

“Give me just a few minutes!” She bounded upstairs to change.

Instead of getting away from her for a while, she was going to be with me all afternoon in the enclosed space of my car. No getting away from her perfume there.

I tried to focus on the things I needed to buy on the running list I kept in my head. Then she came downstairs in a crop-top and tight jeans that showed off her amazing, heart-shaped ass and breezed by me on the way to the car, smelling like fruit, flowers, and sex. At least, that's how my nose interpreted it.

I grabbed some paper and a pen from the junk drawer to write down what I needed. Because my mind was going to go fucking blank every time she got too close.

CALLIE

AFTER WE GOT BACK HOME, Blake did his best to avoid me. Again.

Every time I got close to him, he had something to do in his office, or he needed to do some yard work. I could have sworn he pretended to get a text he needed to retreat to his office to deal with.

All the time I was trying to find a way to bring last night up again, I was also trying to find a way to bring up Mackenzie's upcoming wedding.

I was going to go. No matter what Blake or my father or anybody had to say about it. But I wanted him to agree without too much of a fight, so I was waiting for the right time.

Blake sat on his porch swing, a bottle in hand. A light rain had started, but it was coming straight down, leaving the porch dry. I went outside and sat next to him.

"Beer?" he asked, gesturing at the six-pack of bottles that sat at his feet. Three were missing.

I took one and drank the whole damn thing before I found the courage to say, "There's something I want to talk to you about."

"Callie, I shouldn't have kissed you. I—"

"I disagree, but it's not about that."

"Oh. Okay." He took another swig and shifted a little on the bench. I suspect he was preparing to get up and magically

have something else urgent to do anywhere but near me.

“My best friend’s wedding is coming up. I’m her maid of honor. And even if I wasn’t, it’s not something I’d ever consider skipping.”

He scoffed. “You’re here so that the people threatening you don’t know where you are. Going to a wedding where they’d expect you defeats the purpose of hiding.”

“It’s a once in a lifetime event. Something we’ve talked about since we were kids. I’m not missing my best friend’s wedding.”

“Once in a lifetime? Not with divorce rates these days. Stand up at her second. Or third.”

I might have picked the wrong time to bring it up. I would absolutely leave without his okay and Uber the entire way there if I had to. But there was no point in telling him that right then. Not with that set of handsome jaw or his tense body language.

I grabbed another bottle of beer and took a sip. I wrapped my arms around myself, surprised by the shiver that ran through me. The rain cooled the air just enough to make me chilly. Without saying a word, Blake opened the deck box next to the swing and pulled out a blanket that he wrapped around my shoulders.

“Thanks.” I pulled it tight in front of me. I was prepared to change the subject, but he brought it up again.

“Your friend wouldn’t want you to show up and have something happen. Imagine she has to spend her life thinking that you coming to her wedding caused you to get kidnapped. Or worse.”

“Her guest list is long. I don’t ever have to be alone. Nothing will happen.”

“You don’t know that. There were a lot of people at your father’s gala when that creep found the exact moment you were alone.”

“I wasn’t as careful as I could have been,” I said. “Besides, nothing happened.”

“It could have,” he added quickly.

I took a deep breath and tried another tactic. I leaned closer to benefit from some of his warmth, and after a few seconds, he put an arm around my blanketed shoulders.

“What if Elsie were getting married? Or better yet, had her premier performance with a national dance troupe, and she wanted you to be there more than anything in the world. But someone had threatened you. You can’t honestly say you’d miss that.”

“I wouldn’t,” he said with a scowl. “But *I* don’t need protecting. I can take care of myself.”

“Self-defense classes, remember?” I held up my hand, straightened and stiff like I was ready to chop him.

He rolled his eyes. “You might surprise an attacker with your attempt, but that’s going to wear off in five seconds, and then you’d be done for.”

“I think I could do better than that.”

He scoffed. “Fine. Show me.” Blake stood up. “You think you can protect yourself, let’s see.”

“Seriously?”

“I’m serious. You’ve mentioned those classes twice. I want to see how much you’ve learned.” He gestured for me to get up.

I shrugged the blanket off and stood. “It’s not fair, because I won’t actually try to hurt you.”

He shook his head. “Try. Do exactly what you’d do if I was that creep at the gala coming at you again.”

“Blake, I—”

“Do it, Callie.” He grabbed for me, so I stomped the top of his foot as hard as I could. The boots he wore were hard as hell, so it seemed to hurt my foot a hell of a lot more than it hurt his.

I brought my knee up to hit him in the groin, but he deflected it with ease.

Then before I could pretend to try to claw at his eyes—I wouldn't have really tried, just in case—he had a hold of my wrist. He spun me and grabbed both my wrists to cross them in front of my stomach, pulling me hard against him.

His chest pressed against my back, and he breathed against my ear.

“Gotcha,” he whispered. “Your self-defense failed. Now what are you gonna do?”

I struggled to free myself, but he held tight to my wrists and bent slightly, as if curling his body over mine. I couldn't get loose. Not even if I'd wanted to, and the more his body pressed against mine, the less I did.

I swallowed hard. “You're trained law enforcement. Most people don't know those moves.”

“More than you probably realize. You think someone who wants to take you isn't at least a little prepared for you to fight back? Think, Callie.”

His lips felt dangerously close to my ear. I tried to turn in his arms the way I had the night before, but he kept me from moving.

“Your self-defense makes you overconfident in your ability to protect yourself. You can't. That's why you need me.”

I gave up trying to turn. Instead, I leaned back harder against him.

“Okay. You're right.” I pressed my ass back against Blake's crotch and caught his quick intake of breath at the pressure. “I do need you.”

His chin brushed my shoulder, and his arms tightened around me, only for a second. Then Blake let go and took a step back to grab the beer from the ground.

“I'm glad you can see reason.” He brushed past me and went inside.

No, he wasn't going to run away from me this time. He'd done that all damn day, and after the fun we'd had the night before, after that kiss, I was not ready to go back to him ignoring me.

I followed him into the kitchen. "I still can't believe you pretended not to remember me at the airport. Especially after stopping that weirdo, it seemed impossible that you'd forgotten how you swooped in out of nowhere to protect me. Twice."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "It wasn't out of nowhere. I saw you in the crowd before that bastard started bothering you."

"Yeah?"

"You were hard to miss," he said, like it made him angry.

"I can see you not remembering me if we'd just met casually or something, but—"

"Callie, you were unforgettable before I'd ever seen your face. There was no way I'd forget you after we spoke. I can't believe you bought my 'forgetting' act. It's just one more reason you're not prepared to protect yourself. Too gullible."

He didn't say it harshly, but he didn't smile the entire time. I knew he was serious.

"I'm not gullible. I'm just not so jaded that I'd assume someone might lie about such a thing."

"I thought it would make this easier." He took a step closer.

"How's that going?"

He huffed. "Not great."

"I'm going to Mackenzie's wedding. I'm not as helpless as you seem to think."

He scoffed and rubbed his hand over his short hair. "I just disproved that on the porch, didn't I? It took me two seconds to grab you. And if I hadn't let go, we'd still be out there with you struggling to get free."

His face was close to mine, so close I could feel his breath against my skin.

“I didn’t really *want* you to let go, so it wasn’t a true test of whether or not I could do it, was it?”

Blake leaned back like he’d only just realized how close we were.

“I’m done talking about this.” He walked past me into the living room to start closing windows and drawing blinds for the night.

“You can’t keep running away from me every time—”

“I’m not running away from you. The conversation’s over, and it’s late.”

The bag Blake took to work every day sat by the front door, next to the tray that held shoes and an umbrella stand. The top was open where he’d dug inside after he came home the night before. I caught the glint of metal, so I went to see, hoping to find exactly what I did.

A pair of handcuffs.

With his back to me, I slipped them out of his bag. And when he turned to go upstairs, so that he wouldn’t see me coming behind him in a window, I hurried up to him and slapped one side of the cuffs around his left wrist.

“What—”

I snapped the other side closed on mine. “I’m not as helpless as you thought, am I? You didn’t even hear me coming.”

“What the fuck?” he said, angrier than I suspected he’d be.

“I’m tired of you running away from me when I’m trying —”

“Damn it, Callie.” He pulled me across the room with him and started digging through the bag.

“What?”

After a few seconds, he stood with a sigh and looked at the cuffs that held us together. The expression on his face explained everything.

Shit. He didn't have the key.

BLAKE

CALLIE'S BODY pressed against mine as she'd struggled to get out of my arms on the porch had damn near undone me. I knew I had to get the hell away from her if I wanted to stay in control.

I was half-hard as I hurried past her back into the house, my intention to get upstairs so she wouldn't know how close I'd come to kissing her again.

How close I'd come to doing so much more than that.

And what had the woman done?

Handcuffed us *the fuck* together.

"I can't believe you did this," I growled.

She scoffed and then laughed nervously. "How the hell would I know you didn't have the key? Why would—"

"I almost always have it. This would be an exception." I rubbed my hand over my head. "What the hell did you think this was going to accomplish anyway? If I had the key, I'd already have these off. It's not like this little stunt was going to do much but annoy me."

"It's the principle!" she said, talking with her hands, which meant mine got lifted and moved around too. "We need to talk about this. You can't just run off and pretend the conversation's over."

"Callie, it is over. Your friend will understand. It's too risky."

“I think you’re overreacting to something that’s not as dangerous as you’re making it out to be.”

“Well, guess what? I don’t care what you think, especially not right now. If you thought handcuffing yourself to me was going to make me more willing to discuss things and see your side, you miscalculated.”

She tried to cross her arms and realized that being handcuffed to me wasn’t making it easy. “You’re pissed and want to hear my side even less, I take it.”

“Brilliant deduction, Watson.”

She scowled, and I scowled right back.

“Blake... Fine. We’ll talk about how I’m going to my best friend’s wedding later.”

“Cal—”

“For now, I guess we’re actually stuck together until tomorrow?” She eyed the handcuffs warily, maybe realizing everything that came with that. Using the bathroom. Sleeping.

Fuck. It wasn’t like we were stuck together in the same room where I could sleep on the floor. We were going to have to share a bed.

I’d be a madman by morning having to lay close to her. Every filthy thought I’d had with her ass against my groin on that porch would haunt me until we could go get the key. That wasn’t going to work.

“I’ve had a few beers, and I just watched you slam two down. So now we have to sit and wait for enough of that to wear off before we can head into the precinct and get the damn key.” I wasn’t trying to hide how pissed off the situation made me. It would have been aggravating at any time, with anyone. “I’m too fucking tired for this,” I said, pulling her toward the couch. I could sit down and try to doze, at least.

“I’m sorry,” she finally said. “But I had no way of knowing you wouldn’t have the key.”

“I know.” I plopped down, and she sat next to me.

“I’m tired too, but I can probably drive fine. Don’t you think?”

“With a guess at your body weight and how fast you drank on the porch, I’d rather not risk it.”

She stared ahead for a few seconds, then she stood and attempted to pull me up by my cuffed wrist. “This is ridiculous. We don’t have to sit here until the alcohol wears off and then drive even more tired into town.”

Thunder boomed, and it seemed like a sign.

“There, see? It’s going to storm. Even more reason to stay in and wait until morning. We can get up early and go in to get the key, easy peasy.”

I didn’t budge.

“We’ll go to bed, and it’ll be morning before you know it.”

“You don’t understand.” That was well and good, but I didn’t think I’d get a wink of sleep next to Callie in a bed. “I need sleep.”

“So sleep. I’m not going to stop you.”

I didn’t really want to sit there for an hour or more before driving into town. As if it was designed to help my decision, the sky opened up. Rain poured down, the sound of it against the roof seeming extra loud as Callie raised one eyebrow in an *I told you so* gesture.

“Okay. But if we’re both still awake after about an hour and a half and the storm has passed, I’m driving us into town for the key.”

“Deal,” she said, looking far too happy about the situation.

I was a gentleman and let her use the restroom first. I kept my back turned, standing as far away as the cuffs would allow. She ran water while she went, but I didn’t feel the need to do that. Then we took turns brushing our teeth, and I led her to my bedroom where I’d be a lot more comfortable.

“I guess we have to sleep in our clothes,” she said, as I pulled the covers down.

“Unless you can figure a magical way to get shirts off with these cuffs on, I guess so.”

I watched her perfect heart-shaped ass slide into my bed and I got in behind her.

After a few minutes of trying to get comfortable, she said, “I can’t sleep on my back.”

“I’m not the most comfortable either,” I huffed.

We settled in a position with her in front of me, her back to mine. But if my arm was down my side, it held hers up in the same position. She liked to bend her arm and have her hand on the mattress, which pulled mine forward.

We quickly realized the most comfortable position was with my arm over her waist. And the easiest way to do that was for her to move closer.

Her ass touched my groin, just barely, but enough that all of my attention, and my blood flow, rushed right to that spot. Thunder boomed again, and Callie scooted back, more of her body pressing against mine.

“Stop moving,” I hissed.

“Sorry. I’m trying to get comfortable.”

Her next hip movement didn’t feel like she was trying to get comfortable. It felt like she was teasing me.

“Callie,” I warned.

“What?” she asked. I could hear the smile in her voice. She was *enjoying* how much I was struggling to maintain my composure.

She shifted again. She had to feel my cock, hard against her, so there was no point in trying to pretend she wasn’t affecting me that way. I tightened my arm around her and pressed my cheek to the side of her neck.

“Stop.”

“Sorry,” she said, sounding anything but. Then she pressed her ass against me, not even acting like she hadn’t meant to.

“Um, Mr. Policeman? Is that your service revolver or are you just happy to—”

“Don’t play with me, Callie,” I said, unable to totally suppress the groan as she pressed back again. It had been a long time since I’d had sex, and I was sure I’d never been as turned on by any woman in my life.

If she didn’t stop, settle down, and go to sleep, my dick was going to get so hard I might be able to use it as a sledgehammer to smash the chain of the handcuffs.

But by that point, removing the cuffs was going to be the last thing on my mind.

Her voice turned serious, barely above a whisper. “I’m not playing.”

Her next movement was with purpose, pressing back and sliding up. She wasn’t playing. She intended to drive me crazy.

“I’m supposed to be protecting you, not fucking you,” I ground out in a last attempt at keeping myself in check.

“You’re a smart man, Blake. Resourceful.” She rubbed her ass against me and made a soft little sound in her throat. “I think you can probably do both.”

If what she said hadn’t destroyed my resolve, that little sound finished off the last of my ability to resist.

With my hand on her stomach, I pulled her tighter against me and ground my cock against her. She whimpered and I slid my hand up to squeeze her firm breast.

The thought of pulling away, putting distance between us, fled my mind. The conscientious bodyguard disappeared, replaced by the Neanderthal who just wanted to feel more of that firm, soft flesh and slide his cock between those shapely legs.

CALLIE

HE WARNED me not to play with him, as if what he was doing wasn't exactly what I wanted. I pushed my ass against him to make my point. His breath caught, and he groaned as he rocked forward, sliding his cock against me. I felt myself melting into his touch, wanting more, and it made my heart race with anticipation.

His hand slowly slid up my body, moving my shirt up with it.

“Damn it, Callie,” he murmured against my neck, his voice thick with desire.

His lips brushed my skin and sent a wave of shivers down my spine. He cupped my breast, his thumb brushing over my nipple under the thin lace bra. Then he gently pinched it, pulling a gasp from me. He began to slowly rub circles around my hardened peak with the pad of his thumb.

I was trembling from his touches, my breath shallow.

He slid his other arm under my waist and then traced his fingers along the waistband of my shorts. As he lightly licked and kissed my neck, his hand moved lower, skipping over my center and going further down, caressing my legs.

My hips moved in response, eager for his next touch.

His fingertips trailed back up over my inner thighs and he moved his hand closer to my center. I gasped at the feeling and wished he would keep going. But his hand didn't linger there. Instead, it moved back up, tracing slow circles on my stomach.

His touches were delicate and deliberate, like he wanted to slowly drive me fucking crazy. I hadn't realized how much I truly wanted to be touched.

"Blake," I murmured, my voice trembling, "I...I need..."

His hands stilled, and he waited for me to finish my sentence.

"You need what, Callie? Tell me." His voice was so deep and rough. He didn't sound like himself.

I tried to tell him what I wanted but the words seemed stuck in my throat. I was panting now, desperate for more of his touch.

Blake patiently waited as I tried to say what I wanted.

"Say it," he demanded, breath hot on my neck.

That was all that was needed for me to finally manage the words.

"I need you," I said, barely above a whisper.

That earned me a quick pinch on a nipple, a slight tug, then his fingers brushed the underside of my breast.

"You need me? To do what?" His hand drifted down my stomach and back up, never moving low enough to satisfy me. I shivered as he pressed against me with his full length. He moved his hand lower this time, slipping it inside my shorts.

I swallowed hard. "I have to say it?"

Blake ground his cock against my behind again and sucked my earlobe.

"Mm hm," he moaned against my neck.

"I need you to touch me," I said, spreading my legs apart enough to make my meaning clear.

He chuckled against my neck. "I'm already doing that. Tell me where."

He licked a stripe up my shoulder and neck, then moved his fingers further down, stopping at my pubic bone.

"Blake..."

“Here?” He asked, as he brushed his fingertips between my legs.

“Yes,” I whimpered, desperate for the relief of his touch.

“Will I find you wet and ready for me?”

Where did this filthy man come from? I liked this version of him.

“Yes,” I panted, “Blake, please.”

His fingers finally pressed on my throbbing clit. His touch wasn't even there for more than a second, but it was enough to send a shudder cascading through my body. I moaned at a surge of pleasure.

He moved his hand further down and hissed as his fingers found my wetness.

“Fuck, Callie,”

Blake grabbed my jaw to turn my face as he rose above me. His mouth covered mine in the hottest, hungriest kiss I'd ever had, so different from the soft and tentative one that had been our first. That kiss felt like something uncertain, something testing the waters.

This was a *fuck me* kiss, a claiming kiss, all confidence and need.

His eyes were intense and dark with desire as he looked down at me.

“Tell me what you want,” he demanded.

“You...I want you, Blake.”

“No, tell me what you really want.” His fingers rimmed my wet entrance, teasing me. “As much as you've teased me since you've been here, I want to hear you say it.”

A surge of heat zipped down my body at the thought of saying it outright.

“Actually, I want you to beg for it,” he rasped.

He kissed me again, his tongue twirling around mine.

When he stopped for a breath, I was so hot and ready, the words almost came out on their own.

“Fuck me, Blake. Please.”

Even in the dim light, I could see the satisfied smile on his face.

“Perfect,” he said.

He stroked down my throat to my breast again, then his hand kept going. He tugged on my shorts to lower them, and I slid them down before tossing them away.

He kissed me again, pulling my hand down as he stroked down my thigh. Then his fingertips trailed down the strip of my panties.

I rocked my hips to rub myself against his fingertips. That made him groan and slide down my body to press his mouth against the fabric.

I gasped in surprise as he pressed his tongue against my clit through the material, then gripped the cloth with his teeth and fingers to pull it down and out of the way.

“I need to taste you,” he groaned, lapping his tongue against me. I spread my legs further apart, as far as the panties would let me. Then he grabbed them and slid them to my knees before switching hands so he could remove them completely. As soon as they were off, he pressed his mouth against me and sucked, and I thought my head was going to float off my shoulders.

I spread myself further, helped by his uncuffed hand pressing against my thigh. I slid my hand through his hair. Then I cried out at the pleasant jolt his tongue sent through me when he flicked it against my clit, then licked down to spear it into me.

Blake fucked me with his tongue, then flicked my clit hard and fast. He sucked at the perfect times to nearly bring me over the edge, but then stopped just before I could gather enough tension in my muscles to get me there.

He knew he was bringing me to the edge each time before he backed off. And damn, he was good at it. Blake licked every part of me like I was his favorite ice cream, and he hadn't gotten to enjoy dessert for years.

Then he pressed a couple of fingers inside me and sucked my clit, and even though it had been building steadily since he first touched me, the orgasm somehow caught me off guard. I arched off the bed and shouted as I came against his sucking mouth, his fingers fucking into me in a rhythm designed to draw it out and keep me moaning for as long as possible.

"Fuck," he groaned against my pussy, giving me little licks as I shuddered and twitched, my body coming down from the high.

He sucked me again, causing me to cry out as another orgasm rocked through me. No one had ever made me come twice that fast.

Blake obviously realized and doubled down again, slowly licking and dragging every ounce of pleasure out of me, chuckling with a final lick.

With speed that surprised me, he had his sweatpants and briefs off. Blake moved up my body and kissed me, hard and demanding. "I should have taken you to my bedroom the second you stepped off that plane."

"I wouldn't have minded." I felt his cock sliding against my lower stomach, my skin wet where he rubbed against me. "We could have been doing this all along. Would have been a lot less boring."

He kissed me again, so I reached down and gripped his cock, then slid my thumb over his leaking head. He was so hard and hot, his warning not to play with him came flashing back into my mind.

I wasn't a virgin, but the size of Blake's cock was still intimidating. Even so, there was no way this night was going to end without me getting to feel him inside me.

Blake thrust into my grip, a low growl in his throat. "Hang on." He rose up and leaned over to open the nightstand drawer.

“You don’t have to worry about that. I’ve been on birth control for years.” I squeezed his cock and rubbed my thumb over the head again.

He groaned and mouthed at my breast. “You’re gonna feel so fucking good.”

Blake’s uncuffed hand pushed my bra up so he could suck my nipple. The wet heat of his mouth pulling at it sent another rush of fire down my body, pooling where his fingers pushed into me, and his thumb rubbed over my throbbing clit. I could feel another orgasm building impossibly fast on the heels of the last one.

“Blake,” I groaned.

“I know, baby. I know.” He licked my nipple again, then slid behind me, his hand on my hip. That solved the problem of my arm being crossed over my body between us, but I instantly missed the kissing. I didn’t have time to complain before his hand was between my legs again, his fingers teasing my clit from the front. He slid them up and down, firm, long strokes.

His cock pressed against me from behind, nestling between my legs so the hard, blunt head of it nudged my opening. He paused teasing my clit to hook his hand around my thigh and pull it back, lifting it so that my leg rested on top of his. Then his fingers slid against me as he rocked forward, his thick, hard cock impaling me inch by inch.

I moaned at the feel of it sliding into me, spreading me open. But even as slick and ready as I was, his cock was a lot to take. I had to relax and force myself not to tighten around it.

Finally, when he was fully inside me, his groin firmly against my ass, Blake made a soft grunting sound.

A satisfied *that’s it* kind of sound.

I squeezed around him, and he groaned.

“Just as tight and hot as I imagined,” he said, his voice so rough and thick with desire. I felt a strange and exciting sense of pride that any part of me could affect him that way.

He pushed forward like he was trying to get inside me even deeper. Then his lips found the side of my neck, his fingers rolled over my clit, and he drew back in one long, slow stroke.

After that, all I could do was hang on and let his cock take me from one level of pleasure to the next. He drove into me, slow, steady, what felt like his full length dragging in and out of me with every stroke. He sucked against my neck and shoulder, his fingers never pausing against my clit.

I could feel his body shudder against mine, like he was barely able to hold back and go as slowly as he was. Strong, silent Blake Donovan fucked the same way he did everything else: with a steady, deliberate pace, never rushing, never letting himself lose control.

At least, that's how he fucked at first. By the time I was approaching another orgasm, his body trembled against mine, and his movements lost some of their steady rhythm. He went from rocking his hips to snapping them.

And every few hard thrusts, he growled against my skin almost like he was angry at himself for letting go as much as he had.

He pressed all his fingers flat against my pussy, sliding them against my clit as he drove into me like a piston gone haywire. I spread myself as much as possible with my leg hooked backward over his and hung on.

Finally, he groaned against my shoulder. "Callie." And he snapped forward, shouting as he came deep inside me. I cried out as I throbbed around him in my third orgasm, made better as he gently slapped his fingers against me and started thrusting again.

He fucked into me a few more times, fast and frantic, before both of us finally relaxed, panting and shuddering in the last throes of pleasure.

When Blake stopped teasing me with his fingers, his cock sliding out of me, he pulled me hard against him with an arm

around my waist. I turned my head enough that he could lean up and kiss me, this time softer, slower than before.

He didn't say anything, and neither did I. What could I say?

We both knew how amazing that was, and we were both still trying to catch our breath. I lay quietly, enjoying the feeling of having been thoroughly fucked, squeezing my legs together sometimes to enjoy it more.

Blake didn't make a sound, didn't even move. Several minutes later, I thought we were about to go to sleep. I shifted, trying to get as comfortable as possible. My ass bumped him, and his arm clamped tight around me.

"Callie," he breathed, sounding like as much a warning as it had before we'd fucked.

"I didn't mean to that time."

It didn't matter. I could feel him thickening and hardening against my ass.

"Already? Not bad for an old man," I teased.

I shifted to rub against him, surprised at how hard and ready he was so soon. I ached, as if feeling him hard again set something in motion inside me too. I turned my head to look in his direction.

He was already sliding his cock between my legs, curling his body against mine. "I warned you not to play, didn't I?"

His mouth covered mine in a hungry kiss before I could answer.

BLAKE

I WOKE UP HARD, as usual. But this time, I came to consciousness with the light scent of floral perfume in my nose, hairs tickling my face. An ass pressed tight against my groin. A hand beneath mine, where my arm wrapped over—

Callie.

My already hard morning wood throbbed at the memory of where it had been hours before. Sex with Callie was every bit as good as I'd imagined it would be. In fact, my imagination paled by comparison.

She'd blown my fucking mind.

I hadn't even been able to face her because of the cuffs, and it had still been an experience like I'd never had before. Every part of her body hung on to me. She was firm and soft and slick in all the right places.

I knew I shouldn't have fucked her. Let alone fucked her *twice*. Not while I was paid to protect her. But I'd have to wait to feel bad about it at another time. The memory was too good, too fresh, to taint it with regret.

What I did have to deal with was how we were going to handle it in the cold, sobering light of day.

My dick hard against her ass was not going to help with that.

And the urge to sink into her again, then and there, wasn't either.

I forced myself to move back enough to get some air between our bodies. But my dick was so hard, it still lay against her, like a magnet to metal. I moved to put my hand there, to press my traitorous dick against my body and away from hers. And forgot about the cuffs.

It jerked her arm and woke her up.

“Sorry,” I blurted, shifting my hips back at enough of an angle to get my dick away from her.

Still groggy, she apparently forgot about the cuffs too. She stretched, pulling my arm up with hers.

“Oh,” she said with a laugh. “I for—”

“Yeah, I forgot too. Ready to use the bath—”

“Yes, I really—”

“Need to go.”

We kept talking over each other like awkward teenagers, which didn't make me optimistic about how the morning would go.

She rolled enough to flash me a smile, maybe at how we kept interrupting each other, or us both forgetting the cuffs. Or maybe for other reasons. Then she sat up, ready to scoot off the bed behind me.

We both seemed to realize that neither of us had pants on, and dressing was going to be a lot more awkward than stripping. We both needed clean underwear. Hell, we both needed a shower, and I was a second away from suggesting we take one. Together. Where I could spend more time exploring every inch of her that I'd touched the night before.

But Callie grabbed her underwear off the floor and got them on without jostling me too much. I did the same, much less gracefully than she managed. We repeated the bathroom routine from the night before, but with more yawns and a silence that felt somehow heavier.

“So,” I said, breaking that damned silence. “We get the rest of our pants on and head to town for the key, then we'll grab some breakfast to bring home?”

“Definitely.”

I was glad, but if she'd been starving we could have eaten before we went. Hell, if she'd wanted to stop and do some ballet, I'd probably have let her drag me along like a marionette while she did.

After the night we'd spent together, I was going to have a hell of a time saying no to her for anything. I hoped she didn't bring up her friend's wedding again until that feeling wore off, at least a little.

I helped her slide across my seat to get in, and we drove in silence to the heart of Elm Grove. Once there, we hurried inside. I hoped like hell none of the town's early risers would be out at that hour on a Saturday, or I knew I'd be hearing about it over coffee, right at my mother's bakery.

Fortunately, we were up early enough that only the dispatcher was in the office, and she was in a different part of the building than the regular precinct.

My toolbelt was on my desk in my locked office, so I grabbed the keys and lifted my hand.

“Sure you want to do that?” she asked, a twinkle in her eyes. “We could get into a lot of mischief stuck together this way.”

I grumbled, “That's what I'm afraid of.” But I gave her a half grin as the lock clicked and our hands were free.

I grabbed us some breakfast with two to-go coffees and drove back to the house, the smell of biscuits and gravy making my mouth water. She'd gotten the same, and I wanted to joke about working up an appetite. I had to keep biting my tongue.

As soon as we were home, she said, “I'm going to hop in the shower before I eat.”

I looked longingly at the bag of food. “I'll wait for you.”

“You don't have to,” she said brightly, then she hurried upstairs.

I felt oddly disappointed. I *wanted* to have breakfast with her, even if it meant waiting another ten minutes. It seemed like the proper thing to do after the night we'd just had.

I knew it was just sex and that we weren't in the grips of some epic romance novel. But having breakfast together afterward seemed like the least we could do.

It would almost make it seem like something more than two horny people stuck together. Working out their lust with each other.

Because, no matter how I looked at it, it was more than that for me.

And no matter how much I wanted it to be different, it seemed like it wasn't more than that for Callie.

I got us plates so we wouldn't have to eat out of takeout containers and put some coffee on. I'd nearly downed mine before we got back to the house, and I was going to need more than one cup to get through the day.

Saturday. I'd almost forgotten that it was the weekend and one of the biggest Saturdays for the farmer's market. I usually stopped by my mom's booth and didn't want today to be an exception. Besides, it'd be a welcome distraction from having to think about Callie and how what we'd done would affect us going forward.

I texted Jessie to confirm the time they were all going to be there. She replied and mentioned how excited Elsie was to see Callie there. I hadn't even mentioned it to her, but I didn't have any reason not to. If she went, that wouldn't be the distraction I was hoping for, but it wasn't like it'd be just us all day.

"Aw, you didn't have to wait," Callie said as she stepped into the kitchen.

"I didn't mind." Now that she was there, I plated my breakfast and tore into it like I was starving. "I'm going to the farmer's market this morning. I usually stop by to check out Mom's booth, show of support and all that. And stock up on veggies for the week."

As I shoved food in, I realized I'd announced that I was going without asking her along. "Want to come along?"

"I do. Sounds like fun," she said as she ate damn near as fast as me.

"Hungry?" I asked, forgetting myself for a minute.

She glanced at me, her grin wicked before it disappeared. "Guess so," she said. And I swore she'd almost said what I'd been thinking, about working up an appetite the night before.

We didn't talk much through the rest of breakfast, then we showered, changed, and headed back to town. The silence wasn't exactly awkward, but it was strange. Callie seemed to be keeping to herself intentionally. Usually, I couldn't stop her from talking. Or flirting.

After we'd had sex, I'd honestly expected more flirting, not less. I guess it was possible she had more regrets than I did.

That was disappointing, but not entirely unexpected.

It was a relief to reach the huge parking lot that served as the Elm Grove Farmer's Market and to spot my family in the still sparse crowd. Elsie greeted me with a hug and then grabbed Callie in a similar way.

Callie clasped hands with my mom and Jessie. I snagged a bear claw from the basket full and winked at my mom. "Put it on my tab?"

"You can't afford the tab you already have," she said with a laugh. Then she motioned to her table full of scrumptious wares. "Callie, have anything you like, on the house."

Callie shook her head and selected a blueberry muffin. "You can put it on his tab," she said, pointing at me.

In no time, Callie and Elsie were talking about Elsie's upcoming dance audition. Mom and Jessie were talking to me about it, too. Elsie wanted to go look at the other booths to get some homemade apricot preserves and some new potatoes and chives for her mom to make for dinner.

“Can Callie come with me?” she asked, already pulling Callie’s hand.

“Not without—”

“Blake,” Callie interrupted, gesturing around her at the booths, all of which were in plain sight of me where I stood in front of Mom’s booth. “Surely I’m safe here. There’s nowhere I can go that you can’t see me and reach me in less than a dozen steps.”

She had a point. It wasn’t like the farmer’s market was vast. It was more of a large ring of tables with a mostly open space in the center. And I figured she’d be careful to stay in my sight the entire time. I thought of the social media threats but also the unlikelihood that the people making them had any idea she was in Elm Grove.

“Okay,” I begrudgingly agreed. “Just stay in sight.”

“Aye, aye,” Callie said with a salute before letting Elsie pull her away.

As soon as they were far enough away that they wouldn’t be able to hear us, Jessie moved next to me and nudged me with her elbow. “So, Bro. Spill it.”

“What?”

“Don’t play dumb with me.”

“Jessie,” Mom said. “Don’t pry. Because that’s a mother’s job. Spill, Blake.”

I gasped and eyed both of them. “Ganging up on me, are you?”

“What’s going on between you two?” Jessie asked.

I crossed my arms and watched Callie and Elsie as they stood in front of a table laden with potatoes. “Ellis hired me to protect her. You know that.”

“Bullshit,” she whispered, drawing another gasp from me. “I see the way you look at her.”

“I look at her like someone who’s trying to keep her safe.”

My mom chuckled. “And like someone who wants a lot more than that.”

“She doesn’t exactly look at you like you’re just her bodyguard either,” Jessie added.

“She doesn’t?” I asked, too quickly.

Jessie’s grin grew. “That sounded hopeful, Blake James Donovan. I knew I was on to something.”

I shook my head and grabbed another bear claw, then zoned in on Callie again as the crowd started to grow. “It’s a professional relationship, Jess. That’s it.”

I’d almost eaten the whole thing when she said, “That’s too bad. I think she’d be awfully good for you.” She wrapped her arms around mine in a sisterly hug. “It’s about time you gave up the bachelor lifestyle.”

“Ugh,” I groaned. Don’t start.”

“I’m just saying!” She sighed. Then an older couple from out of town approached Mom’s booth so we stood aside.

I watched Callie and Elsie picking out potatoes. They both turned to see me watching. Elsie waved enthusiastically. Callie smiled and held up a handful of potatoes. Then they shared a laugh about something I couldn’t quite make out.

Callie was so fucking beautiful, I ached to touch her again.

And I wondered if my sister might be right about leaving my bachelor days behind.

CALLIE

“LOOK AT HIM,” Elsie said, gesturing at Blake. He stared at us, frowning.

“I think he’s trying to work out what we’re laughing about.” It had been a potato that looked like a pig’s face. I’d held it up, and it now sat in Elsie’s bag. She wasn’t sure she wanted her mom to cook it, but she had to buy it to show everyone. The way Blake squinted, even as he returned Elsie’s wave, it was easy to think he was wondering if we were laughing about him.

We went to the booth with the homemade jams and preserves. Elsie said the apricot preserves were to die for, so I bought a jar too. Then we walked slowly, browsing, while Elsie chatted about her upcoming audition, and I encouraged her.

Then she changed the subject.

“Do you like my Uncle Blake?”

“Do—do I—what?”

She grinned, looking far wiser than her twelve years. “Do you like him?”

“Of course,” I said, pretending to examine a basket full of fresh asparagus. “He’s a likable guy.”

“He is.” She ran her tongue over her braces. “I think he likes you.”

I'd never been so close to grabbing a tweenager and demanding every detail of her evidence.

She's twelve. She likes me. Normal wishful thinking.

Somehow, I kept it together. "Yeah?" I said with a calmness I didn't feel. "Why do you say that?"

"He's different around you."

I tested the weight of two apples in my hands and cleared my throat. There was no way she was picking up on anything, surely. It had been one night, and both of us had been a little awkward all morning. It wasn't like we were putting out some kind of signal.

Fortunately, she kept talking before I said something stupid. "When you were helping me the other day, I noticed how different acts when you're in the room." She glanced over her shoulder at Blake, who was talking to his mom and sister but still watching us intently. "And now it's like he's different all the time."

I should have changed the subject to something safer. Back to her audition. Her grandma's baked goods. Her mom. Instead, I said, "Different... good? Or different bad?"

"Good! Even my mom mentioned it."

I snapped my head in her direction. "Your mom?"

"Yeah, after you helped me with my routine, Mom said he's less grumpy with you around."

I laughed. "Good lord. If he's less grumpy now, I can't imagine him before."

"He grinds his teeth a lot. Had to go to the dentist and everything. Mom said they gave him a guard to wear at night, but it turned out he only does it when he's awake." She leaned close and whispered, "And P.Oed."

I mouthed the words, "Pissed off?" She laughed and nodded, so I shook my head. "Hard to believe his teeth aren't worn down to nubs since I showed up. I'm pretty sure I 'P.O.' him on a daily basis about something or another."

She bought a tiny soap shaped like a kitten on a pillow. “But when he’s grumbling and you’re around, his eyes are smiling.”

“Yeah?”

She flashed me a bright grin. “And he went out to dinner with my dance teacher from a couple of years ago. They went several times. And he never once asked me if she mentioned him.”

It took me a few seconds to parse what she was saying. “You mean he asked you...”

“He texted me the night you helped me. I mentioned how great you were and what a good time I had. And he asked if you’d mentioned him.” She laughed at the memory. “It was cute. I think he’s got it pretty bad.”

If I were twelve, I’d think the same thing. At twenty-five, I wasn’t so sure. But I had to laugh at how worldly she suddenly sounded. “Got it bad? What would you know about something like that?” I teased her.

“Robbie DeMoy has it bad for a friend of mine. He makes moon eyes at her every time he sees her and can’t manage to talk without getting tongue-tied. I know what it looks like.”

“Your uncle doesn’t exactly get tongue-tied.”

“Probably because he says fewer words. That’s what I’d do too.” She said it so matter-of-factly, my heart really wanted to believe it. Blake Donovan, afraid of getting tongue-tied around me, clamming up to avoid it. Making himself seem even grouchier than normal.

What if she was right? She knew him better than I did. Maybe...

I was going back to Austin as soon as the threat was over, so it didn’t really matter. It was probably for the best that it wasn’t true, especially for Blake’s sake.

But I did enjoy the possibility. I enjoyed it a *lot*.

Blake stood, his arms crossed, a sour look on his face. “Having fun?”

“We are,” I said, putting my arm around Elsie’s shoulders. “As much fun as a farmer’s market will allow.”

Elsie pulled the pig potato out of her bag and showed it around. I tried to see past Blake’s scowl to the smile Elsie said was there when I was around.

“I held it up, but you probably couldn’t see it that far away.”

“Oh,” he said, squinting at it for another look. “Is that what you were laughing at?”

Elsie covered her mouth with her hand and giggled.

“Yes. Why? What did you think we were laughing at.” I tilted my head and smirked, waiting to hear his answer.

He shrugged. “Nothing. Except maybe...at each other!” He grabbed Elsie in a gentle headlock and rubbed his knuckles against her head, making her groan and pull away from him. You could see the little kid in her, thrilled at her uncle’s attention, warring with the almost thirteen-year-old who thought she was too old for things like being teased in public.

From the doting look on Blake’s face, I thought thirteen-year-old Elsie might as well get used to it. It didn’t seem like he was going to let go of little girl Elsie anytime soon.

Jessie laughed at Blake’s antics and Elsie’s reaction. Then she approached me and pulled me aside while Blake and Elsie were play-arguing about something.

“I’m asking where she can’t hear, because I don’t want you to hesitate to say no if you don’t want to. But we’re free this afternoon, and I was wondering if—”

“Yes!”

Jessie laughed. “What if I was about to ask you to change the oil in my car or something?”

“Then you’d be insane, and I’d have no problem saying no.” I laughed with her. “I’d love to help Elsie more. My days are made up of rehearsing and trying to find other ways to kill the time, so you’re helping me too.”

“I appreciate this so much. I’m happy to pay you for the time because I know how valuable your help really is.”

I was thrilled that she thought I helped Elsie enough to offer to pay, but there was no way I was going to take her money. “Thanks, but not necessary. I’m getting a lot out of it too, aside from a break in the boredom. I’ve been thinking about teaching dance for a while. This is helping me decide whether or not to go for it or stick with performing.”

We talked a little longer, with me soaking up every compliment Jessie gave me about how good a teacher she thought I’d be given how well I worked with Elsie. Then she motioned for Elsie and said that I’d help her later that day if she wanted. Of course, she jumped at the chance. Blake seemed happy about it too and suggested that everyone have dinner at his place.

“You’re not planning to cook, are you?” Jessie asked him.

“I might be. But I can order pizzas if you’re *scared*. Scared of a real man cooking things on a charcoal grill. ”

“I can make something and bring it over.”

“Okay,” he said, throwing his hands up. “Now that’s a threat. I’m still having flashbacks to Easter a few years ago. Your deviled eggs still haunt me.”

She scoffed. “I misread the damn recipe, for the twentieth time.” Jessie turned to me to explain. “I’d never made them before and was in a hurry. It called for three tablespoons of mayo and a quarter teaspoon of salt to taste. I got the mayo right and somehow also thought it was three teaspoons of salt.”

“Common sense should have kicked in,” he said. And I saw it then. That smile in his eyes Elsie talked about, despite how grumpy he sounded about the salty eggs.

“Oh, shut up,” Jessie said with a laugh. “I’d had a busy day.”

Blake laced his hands behind his neck. “Tell yourself whatever you need to.”

She shoved him, and his mask slipped long enough for him to laugh. Then he shook his head. “I’m going to go purchase some vegetables to grill alongside the burgers I’ll make later. Burgers that won’t taste like a salt lick.” He raised his eyebrows at Elsie, who laughed.

When we were about halfway home, Blake said, “I bought enough vegetables that you’d have plenty if you don’t want a burger. I don’t know if I can grill tofu, but I can try.”

“A burger and veggies are fine.” His mom was bringing a pie, so even if I didn’t eat much dinner, I’d be satisfied. “But thanks for thinking of me.”

“Hard not to,” he said quickly, then cut his eyes my way.

“Burgers sound really good, actually. It was nice of you to offer dinner. I really enjoy being around your family.”

“They’re good people.”

“Yeah. The Donovan family seems to be,” I said, purposely including him in that. He caught it, and the corner of his mouth actually rose into a half-grin as he gave me a nod.

“Speaking of good people, my friend Mackenzie is the best. I can’t miss her wedding, Blake. If I can stay alone at your house and walk around a farmer’s market with Elsie—”

His face fell. “Damn it, it’s not the same. People will *expect* you there.”

“I’m going. I have to go. And I looked it up. If you try to stop me, technically that’s a crime.”

He sighed. “Unlawful restraint. I’m well aware.”

I gave him my best pleading eyes. Finally, he groaned. “I’m tempted to handcuff us together again, just to try to prevent this.”

“Wouldn’t stop me,” I said, trying not to look too enthusiastic about being handcuffed to him again. “But you can go as my plus one. I’ll tell people you’re my boyfriend. So, it’ll be like we’re handcuffed together. Figuratively. And I’ll be as safe as possible with you right there.”

“Your boyfriend?” he said, glancing between the road and me. “At least it’s a reason to give people for me to be there. Other than ‘bodyguard,’ which would only draw attention.

I glanced down his body. “You’re going to draw attention anyway. But you’re right.”

He’d definitely draw attention. I was going to be the envy of every single woman there who had a brain in her head and an interest in sex.

He struggled with it for a few more minutes, then he said, “Okay. I don’t want you to miss something this important. We’ll go.”

I clapped my hands together. “Yay!”

“But be prepared. Brush up on your acting skills. Because I’m really going to sell our relationship to your friends.” He glanced at me, and it felt like a dare.

“I think I can handle that,” I said with more confidence than he seemed to expect.

“We’ll see,” he said, then he focused on the road.

BLAKE

JESSIE'S HESITANCE about me cooking dinner meant my pride was on the line. I intended to grill the hell out of some burgers, and veggies, just to prove how full of shit she was.

I also wanted a delicious dinner. And maybe to impress Callie.

The primal, caveman part of me that had given in and slept with her also wanted to show off. Show her I could be a good provider as well as a protector. It was ridiculous.

But I went with it, and after starting the grill and watching Callie and Elsie dance for a while, I headed out to grill dinner and show my sister up.

It worked. She did bring a bean salad, without three tablespoons of salt to ruin it, and Mom brought a cherry pie. Everything was perfect.

And by the end of the evening, Elsie felt like Callie had helped her perfect her routine. It looked fantastic to me, but Elsie always did.

She and Callie got along like a house on fire, setting another ache inside me. Her being so good to Elsie, and so accepted by my family, intensified the pull I felt toward her.

As much as it made me want to storm across the room and kiss her, the presence of my family kept me from it. After they left, Callie helped me clean up the kitchen. And when I wasn't paying attention, she disappeared upstairs.

No cuffs would keep her in my bed tonight. There was no excuse to even bring it up. After I cleaned up and got ready for bed, I almost knocked on her door to wish her good night. Deep down, I had some small hope that she might invite me in. Or grab my shirt and pull me in.

Ridiculous.

I walked past her room and went to my own.

I almost turned on the intercom to tell her good night. To see what she would say. To see if I could find an opening to keep talking to her for a while.

I could hear her moving around in her room, so she'd turned the mic on. If she wanted to talk to me, she would.

I rolled over in my bed to press my face against the pillow where she'd rested her head the night before.

I inhaled deeply, the scent of her light, flowery perfume barely there but clear enough to make my cock twitch. I put my hand on the sheet where she'd been when I woke up.

I tried to fall asleep but kept thinking about how good she felt around me. How she pushed back to take me in and squeezed my cock as she came.

Damn it, Blake.

I got up and dropped to the floor, determined to do push-ups until I stopped thinking about how amazing it had felt to be inside her.

My groin slapping against her heart-shaped ass as I got close. Because I wasn't going to get any sleep if all I did was lay there, longing for something I was damn near desperate to have again.

Eventually, I got back into bed, my arms aching from the exertion. I closed my eyes and focused on the arrest report summary I needed to finish over the next week. It was tedious and unexciting enough that, even with Callie's perfume clinging to the pillow, I managed to sleep.



“No.”

I opened my eyes, unsure if I heard the word or if I’d only dreamed it.

“*No.*”

The whimpered word wasn’t in my dream. It was Callie’s voice coming through the intercom. I raced out of the bedroom and burst into hers, unsure what I’d find. The moon shone through the window enough that I didn’t flip the light on as I passed it. Instead, I rushed to the bed to stop whatever was happening.

She was alone, rolling on the bed, caught in a nightmare. That would have occurred to me if I’d spent a second thinking, but I’d heard her distress and ran instead.

Callie shouted, crying in her sleep. She was damn near about to throw herself right onto the floor, so I grabbed her shoulders.

“Hey,” I said softly. “Callie.”

“No!” She struggled against me, beating my chest with her fists, so I pulled her into my arms and crooned into her ear.

“You’re just dreaming. Hey, Callie. It’s okay.”

She woke enough to realize where she was and tightened her arms around me, shuddering against me. The thin, silky tank top she wore was like nothing between us. Her nipples hardened against my chest, and I thought back to how each one felt under my tongue.

“You’re okay, baby. Just a nightmare.” The *baby* came out on its own. But damn, it felt natural to call her that.

She nodded against my shoulder. I could feel her swallow hard a few times before she leaned back to look at me.

“Thanks, Blake.”

I stroked her cheek and pushed her hair back from her face. “You okay now?”

“Yeah.”

I didn’t move to leave. Last time, she’d asked me to stay. I wanted that.

I wanted to stay there in her bed more than anything.

Much like the time before, she leaned close again and rested her cheek against my neck, as if the nightmare had wrung her out. As if being close to me helped. I held her, letting myself rub my cheek against her hair. I stroked her back, and she pulled herself in, close and tight against me.

Before long, the silky material of her tank top was in the way. I slid my hand inside it to touch the soft, warm skin of her back as I caressed her. She shuddered against me, then whispered in my ear.

“Blake.”

Her voice caught as she said my name, sounding so full of need. I slid both my hands up her back. When she leaned to look up at me, I cupped the back of her neck and pulled her into a kiss.

Callie went boneless, like she was melting against me, and let me explore her mouth with my tongue. I don’t think there’s a man alive with blood pumping through his veins who could have held anything back at that point.

I pushed her down on the bed, intending to take full advantage of the fact that no handcuffs were in the way to make any movement awkward or difficult this time. I dragged my lips down her body until I cleared the hem of her tank top, then I kissed my way back up, pushing the thin material as I went. I cupped her breast, my palm pressing against her hardened nipple. I licked up her long, graceful throat and her jaw, until I could taste her mouth again.

Then I hooked my fingers into the sides of her panties and dragged them down and out of my way. When I settled between her legs and licked, Callie gasped, her whole body twitching. Her pussy throbbed against my tongue, and the

groan that tore out of me sounded like somebody else, somebody desperate and hungry.

I tried to go slow, to draw it out for her, but the rich scent and taste of her drove me wild. Callie was like the finest delicacy, a tiny morsel served in the center of a China plate, meant to be nibbled and savored. But I was a ham-fisted barbarian who felt like he hadn't eaten in weeks. I just wanted to gobble her down and keep coming back for more.

Her clit throbbed beneath my mouth, and her pussy clenched around my tongue when I pushed it as deep inside her as I could. The little whimpers she made caused my cock to jump every time.

I could feel that she was close, so I spread her wide with my thumbs. And I let myself *devour* her.

“Blake!” she cried out, arching off the bed as she came. She was ambrosia against my tongue, a rich elixir that didn't quench my thirst but made me hungry for more.

When her thigh muscles went limp, I didn't stop. I sucked her until they were trembling again, and I knew the pleasure was building to a peak again. Then I mouthed my way back up her body to suck one of her tits and pull at the hardened nipple with my teeth and tongue.

She arched against me, desperate to come again. Her hand wrapped around my cock, and I hissed at just how close to the edge I was already. I kissed her, letting her taste herself on my tongue.

Callie tugged at my cock, her thumb gliding over the head and sending pleasure down to my toes. “Let me,” she said licking her lips.

Damn, I wanted to see her pretty mouth stretched around my cock. Just imagining how that would look was almost enough to make me blow in her hand. But I had to have her, so that particular pleasure would have to wait.

“No,” I whispered against her mouth as I nudged her spread thighs further apart with my legs. I took her hands in mine and pressed them above her head against the mattress.

Then I rocked forward, my cock finding the right angle on its own like a heat-seeking missile that found its target.

I slid home, then I held her hands in place with one of mine and hooked the other under her thigh so I could slide half an inch deeper. I groaned and rested my forehead against hers as she squeezed around me.

“*Fuck*, Callie,” I breathed.

I could have stayed in place a little longer, enjoying the tight warmth pulling at my cock. But her heels dug into my ass, urging me to move.

I blew out a breath with a little chuckle. “You want something, baby?”

“Yeah,” she breathed.

I snapped my hips back and drove deep into her again, a fast stroke designed to let me hear her sweet little whimper again. It worked. “Want more of that?”

“Yeah, Blake.”

I gave her more, a few quick thrusts, then I leaned down enough to drag a nipple into my mouth. Her hands gripped mine, so pushed harder to hold them in place. I sucked the other nipple, teasing it with my tongue, then mouthed at it enough that it might be tender the next day.

I wanted her to feel that tenderness and think of my mouth on her. I thrust hard and fast, then stopped to let her catch up, the soft, broken sounds she made like the sweetest music to my ears.

By then, my control was all but gone. I rocked up onto my knees, hauling her with me, to grasp both of her thighs. Then I braced my hands on the bed on both sides of her and drove into her, completely gone on the need to come and feel her pussy spasming around me as she came again.

As soon as I let go of her hands, they were on me. She stroked my neck. She dug her finger into my back. She grasped my ass cheeks to pull me into her.

“This what you want, baby?” I gazed down at her slack face, her tits bouncing with each thrust, almost in disbelief that anyone could be that fucking sexy. “Tell me.”

“Yeah,” she whimpered. “I want this. Want you.” Her neck arched as she cried out. “Yeah. Fuck me, Blake.”

I felt her tighten, her slick walls sucking against my cock, so I slid my hand between us to thumb her clit. “Come for me, Callie.”

She obeyed.

Callie shouted as she came. When she arched her back, her muscles clamping around me, the orgasm hit me so hard my vision nearly whited out.

“Fuck,” I whispered, my breath catching as I inhaled sharply, and another pulse of pleasure throbbed through me. “*Fuck.*”

Callie pulled me down to her, so I slid my tongue around hers, moaning as she clenched around me again and again, draining me and drawing out the pleasure.

When my breathing started to slow, I rested my elbows on the bed, my hands on both sides of her face. She looked so beautiful with her lips swollen from my kiss and her hooded eyes.

“You’re fucking amazing,” I said, brushing my lips over hers.

She didn’t say anything, but her fingers slid over my cheek, then my lips, before she kissed me again. Then she said, “I know.”

I laughed, and she pressed her palm against my cheek. “There’s that smile. I said you should do that more.”

“So you did.” I nosed at her cheek, inhaling her sweet perfume.

“Stay?” she whispered

“It’d take a team of wild horses to drag me out of here.” I rolled to the side and pulled her to me. And damn, I loved how

she molded against my chest and curled her leg around mine like we'd slept that way a thousand times.

"You're so good to me, Blake," she finally said, kissing my chest. "You even protect me from my nightmares."

I slid my fingers into her hair and held her tight. "I'd protect you from anything and anyone, Callie."

No matter the cost, I thought but didn't say it out loud.

She didn't have any other nightmares that night. And I slept like I didn't have a care in the world.

Like I hadn't just completely lost my heart to someone I couldn't have.

CALLIE

WHEN WE WOKE the next morning, Blake was hard like he had been the morning we woke cuffed together. This time, instead of pulling away from me, he held me tighter.

I thought I'd finally get my mouth on him, but he was like a man possessed. As soon as he realized that I was as eager as he was, he was inside me, on top of me, pressing me down and drawing sounds out of me I didn't know I could make.

He got a call from the station not long after, while we still lay there panting. After he came back, it was as if a wall had gone up again. Blake was back to being a stern bodyguard, busy enough to keep his distance for the rest of the day and the few days after.

It would have been easy to touch his arm, or just cup him through his slacks. Invite him to my bed again. But the thought that I was leaving as soon as the threat was over kept me from it.

I wanted him. I wanted his big, rough hands on me. I wanted his mouth to do things to me I didn't know a man was capable of doing.

But I knew better than to want him.

Our lives were too different, and my track record with relationships should have been enough to discourage anybody. It definitely discouraged me.

Even though I kept noticing the way he didn't smile, his eyes lit up, and feeling a sense of pride that I seemed to be

causing that.

We talked more the day before Mackenzie's wedding. Blake needed to plan and think about the logistics of where I'd be and when.

He wasn't thrilled that it was a destination wedding—Mackenzie loved St. George Island in the Florida panhandle and had always wanted to get married on the beach.

Blake preferred a place he was familiar with, like Austin. But admitted that it might make it less likely that anybody stalking me would show up there.

He also wasn't thrilled that we were going to fly, when Austin would have been only a two-hour drive. But the morning we left, he was in a decent mood anyway. He scowled less than usual, at least.

An hour into the flight, he leaned over and squinted at my Kindle. Then he chuckled.

“Look at you, reading porn in public.”

I scoffed. “It's not porn. It's romance.”

“The passage I just read isn't.”

“You picked the dirtiest one in the entire book. You can't judge the story by one or two sentences. Bethany is giving James a sloppy and enthusiastic blowjob because she'd discovered no woman had ever done it for him before. It's *sweet*.”

He grunted. “Sweet and sticky, apparently.”

I hadn't gotten to do it for Blake. At least, not yet. I wasn't entirely sure that I'd have another chance to try, but I hoped for it. “Sticky sweet,” I stressed with a grin. “The best kind, isn't it?”

I watched Blake's cheeks darken just enough to be noticeable. “Can't argue with that.”

I went back to my book. A few minutes later, Blake said, “But doing it's one thing. Reading about it happening to somebody else... what's the appeal?”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, I’m seriously asking. Why do you read that stuff? I’m not judging. Just curious.”

I didn’t think he *was* judging, but he seemed so genuinely baffled by it. I wondered if more men shouldn’t read books like that. Maybe they’d figure out a few things about women a little sooner than they seemed to.

“First, it’s not about the sex.”

He scowled. “If that were true, there wouldn’t be sex in them.”

“No, not necessarily. The sex comes after this huge buildup of attraction, forming bonds of trust. Each person’s walls break down bit by bit because they find the other person so irresistible. The sex just illustrates all of that. And it’s sex, Blake. Sex is sexy.” I shrugged.

“If it’s not about the sex, then—”

“It’s about the men. In books like this, the men only sometimes seem to be jerks when deep down they just want to love and be loved. They don’t cheat, they don’t betray, they don’t belittle, and they don’t damage the self-worth of the person they’re falling in love with. They’re flawed, they’re not perfect, but the woman they fall in love with becomes the most important thing to them. She’s not just someone to use and cast aside as soon as something, or someone, better comes along.”

I took a deep breath. That had come out, rolling off my tongue, almost like it was a speech I’d planned ahead of time. I said it with an edge to my voice that made Blake stare at me for a second.

“Sorry,” I said.

He shook his head. “No problem. Answered my question.”

“It’s just... I know what it’s like to be cast aside. Betrayed. Made to feel like shit,” I said softer, hoping no one nearby would overhear. “It’s good for my soul to read about a man and woman who treat each other the way people in love should

treat each other. I know it's fiction, but it still feels really good to read it."

Blake stared at me for a long moment. Then he leaned close. "What kind of fucking idiot would ever let you get away, let alone cast you aside?"

I felt myself blush at the compliment. I didn't really know how to respond to hearing something like that. My body responded, though, reminding me how Blake's hand felt sliding between my legs.

"The last one's name was Zander," I said finally. "And I almost fell in love with that idiot. Good thing I caught him cheating before that happened, huh?"

Blake's frown was so deep and intense, I might have flinched back from it if I hadn't known it was for Zander, not me.

"Good thing," he agreed softly. He stared straight ahead, no longer leaning over to read along with me. I couldn't get back into the book because I kept thinking about what he'd said about anyone letting me go.

A few minutes later, he seemed to realize I hadn't turned a page.

"Would you date one of the men you've read about in those books?"

I laughed softly. "Are you kidding? Yes, I would absolutely date a book boyfriend."

"Book boyfriend?" He said the words like they were alien sounds.

"Yep. The best kind, I think. Always there when you need them, but you can close the book and put it aside whenever you want. A book boyfriend won't ever let you down."

He took a sip of his water and seemed to settle into his seat a little more. "So, tell me what your ideal book boyfriend would be like. Let me guess. A dancer probably. World class ballet dancer. Owns a studio. Wealthy, maybe born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Probably foreign, with an

interesting accent. Someone who could talk politics with your dad and sweep you off your feet on the dance floor after some state dinner or political function. Probably with a house somewhere in Europe. Paris, maybe.”

I gaped at Blake. “How much thought have you put into this?”

“Not much. Just guessing.”

“I’m glad you didn’t spend too much time thinking about it, because you couldn’t be more wrong.”

His frown was genuine. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Your ideal book boyfriend, then. Go.” He still said *book boyfriend* like it tasted bad in his mouth. It was almost charming.

It’s not like I’d thought about it too much, either. I didn’t sit around spinning fantasies about the heroes in the romance novels I read. But the qualities of an ideal man sprang to the tip of my tongue like I’d worked it all out in detail a long time before.

“A hard worker. Somebody who does what he’s passionate about and gives it his all. Conscientious. Moral. He’d be strong, confident. I guess the strong, silent type. But not too silent. A good sense of humor. Ride or die for his friends or family, because nothing matters more than the people he loves. Good with kids. A good—”

Dancer. I’d almost said a good dancer. But I realized that everything I’d said, right down to the dancing, described Blake Donovan to a T.

“A good man, all-around,” I finished, clearing my throat and glancing away from Blake’s intense stare.

He took a deep breath. “I see.” Blake rubbed the side of his hand over his mouth. “I thought you were going to describe him. Six-foot-two, blue eyes, that kind of thing. But that’s all...good. Yeah.”

All the things I'd listed were far more important to me in a man than his appearance.

I realized if I had tried to describe my ideal man's appearance, I'd feel even more awkward than I already did. And I could save myself a lot of breath by simply holding a mirror up to Blake's face.

"He'd probably have some advanced degree in anthropology. Or philosophy. Something that would make him a great conversationalist. Especially at those political dinners. Someone who could hold his own against the hoi-polloi," I lied.

I didn't care about any of that. But I had to add something that didn't sound at all like Blake before things got more awkward.

"Sounds like a real keeper," Blake said.

"He does. Too bad he doesn't exist," I added quickly. "He's just a pleasant fantasy."

Usually when Blake scowled or frowned, which was all the time, I could see what Elsie had called the smile in his eyes. But he grinned tightly at me, and there wasn't a trace of anything like that in his gaze.

No lightness. No humor. It was the first time in a long time that I felt like a stranger was looking at me as he said, "I'll keep my eye out for somebody like that, just in case."

I thought it was supposed to sound like a joke. It didn't. He seemed almost angry. Disappointed.

Or I was caught in a bout of wishful thinking.

I almost joked back *Yeah, get his number for me, will ya?* But anything I thought of saying stuck in my throat. I didn't feel like joking about it.

I hadn't said anything else by the time our flight landed.

I was too afraid if I tried, I'd open my mouth, and the truth about my fantasy would slip out. The truth about what I thought my ideal man would be.

He'd be just like you.

BLAKE

I BRACED myself as we entered the hotel. I already knew the weekend was not going to be fun for me.

The hotel was packed with people, many of them draped over the furniture in the lobby like they lived there, chatting and laughing. I braced myself for being around a bunch of wealthy socialites and banker types. I got familiar with people like that after working for Ellis.

I watched Callie smile and wave at someone in the lobby. I admired the line of her throat and her gorgeous profile. It would be easy to pretend to be her boyfriend. What man in his right mind wouldn't want to be with someone as sweet and sexy as her?

I marveled that Callie, the governor's own daughter, managed to turn out okay and not like some upper-crust snob. She wasn't like the people he surrounded himself with at all.

The weekend would be stressful, watching over her in a crowd, but I hoped I'd get to enjoy myself in the hotel room. I planned to play the doting boyfriend to the nines in public *and* in private. I was going to consider our hotel room time my reward for putting up with the crowd.

And I was going to try not to let her intellectual romance-novel hero fantasy bother me. Even though that was about as far from me as you could get.

“Callie!” someone squealed, running toward her.

The person she'd waved at with a couple of other women trailing behind. They hugged while I stood and waited to be introduced, forcing a smile that was as pleasant as I could muster.

"Mackenzie," Callie said, taking my arm, "this is my boyfriend Blake."

We shook hands while she grinned at me, one eyebrow arched. Of course, she knew the truth, but the other women standing around didn't.

"Nice to meet you," I said. I put my hand possessively on Callie's lower back. No time to start pretending like the present.

"Likewise," she said back, and she and Callie exchanged a look.

Callie quickly introduced me to the others and said that we needed to get settled. She gave them quick hugs and said she'd see them later, but we had to stop for her to introduce me to several other people before we made it up the elevator.

I kept my hand on her back, sliding it around her waist each time we stopped to talk, and pulling her closer. She didn't need to point out that I was her boyfriend. I made sure it was obvious.

And I loved doing it.

Once we went into the hotel room, I did a quick sweep of the closet, the wardrobe, and the bathroom. I didn't expect anyone, but I did look closely for any kind of surveillance devices someone might have tried to hide.

I also noticed that she'd booked a room with one king-sized bed. I hoped that was because she had the same thing on her mind and not just that the doubles were booked with other guests who needed two beds.

She sat on the bed, bouncing gently on the mattress. "Feels comfy."

"Looks it," I said.

Callie let herself drop back to the mattress, splaying her arms out. “I wasn’t sure how good an actor you’d be. But I’m impressed.” Her eyes cut my direction briefly, then she looked like she was trying not to smile. “Ever do drama in high school?”

“No,” I smirked.

She rolled onto her side. “I guess we should discuss, what’s the word you’d use, logistics?”

“Where you go, I go. What’s to discuss?” I shrugged.

“Where will you be when I’m with Mackenzie and the rest of the wedding party getting ready?”

“I’ll be outside the room.”

She threw herself onto her back again. “You’re going to pretend to be an obsessive boyfriend?”

“Only way to keep you safe.”

She half-grinned at me. “I didn’t say I minded.”

“Good. Not that it would matter.”

She smirked, then said, “I guess I should warn you that my ex will be here. In case you want to be... pretend jealous or something.”

The way she held her mouth seemed a little vulnerable even though she tried to play it off as a joke.

“Zander, the cheating ex?” I asked. I moved to stand in front of her and bent to hover over her. I kept our bodies from touching while I looked her in the eye.

“Just how pretend jealous do you want me to be? Just enough that he notices, or would you like me to put him through a wall for looking in your direction?”

Her smile grew. “No physical violence at my best friend’s wedding, please.”

I looked down her body and back up to her face. He must be some kind of idiot to have cheated on Callie. I wouldn’t

actually be jealous, because I knew she didn't want him, but the thought of him hurting her made me angry.

"Alright, I won't pound him. He sounds like he's got enough problems if he's mental enough to give you up."

Callie put her hands on my arms. "You can pretend to be pissed, if you want."

"He hurt you, didn't he? I won't have to pretend." I let myself drop a little lower, so her tits pressed against my chest. I put a hand on her hip. "Lot of things this weekend I won't have to pretend."

Callie arched to press herself against me. "I really should take a shower to get ready for the rehearsal."

My nose brushed hers, then I dipped to nuzzle her cheek. "Guess I should too." I was already hard from hovering over her, so I lowered myself enough to press my cock against her.

"We shouldn't waste water," she said as I dragged my lips over her collarbone then tongued the little hollow at the base of her throat. I slid my hand up inside her shirt to cup her breast, then pushed my fingers underneath her bra.

"We could share," she suggested breathily. "And I'm not *properly* dirty yet."

"I'll fix that," I said, pushing her shirt and bra up and out of my way so I could suck her nipple into my mouth.

Her legs went around my hips, so I ground myself against her. Callie pulled me down with her legs and hands, grinning and gasping, all playfulness and blushed cheeks. Then she reached between us and unbuckled my belt, making quick work of my fly. She gripped my cock and pulled it free as she leaned up, parting her lips.

I kissed those perfect, pink lips, moaning as her tongue pushed into my mouth first. She squeezed and stroked me with purpose, grunting softly as I rubbed her pussy through her clothing, focusing on her clit.

When she gasped, I brushed my mouth over hers. I loved hearing her say the words. "Tell me what you want, baby."

Callie licked her lips and whispered, “I want to suck your cock.”

I hadn't expected that. My cock was already hard, but it pulsed in her hand. I shoved our bags onto the floor with a push and rolled to lie next to her. When she pushed me onto my back and rolled on top of me, I sank my fingers into her hair and kissed her. She sucked my tongue like I guessed she was about to suck my cock.

We managed to drag each other's shirts off before she slid down, undoing her bra and tossing it away.

I didn't have a chance to try to get my pants off before Callie had her mouth on me. She pulled my fly open as wide as it would go, pulled out my throbbing cock, and wrapped her lips around the head.

She sucked, and my back bent into an arch involuntarily.

“Fuck, baby,” I groaned.

She swirled her tongue around the head, then licked up the underside of my length. Callie teased me like that, licking and only sucking the head, for what felt like an eternity. Then she stroked my shaft as she lowered her mouth slowly down me to suck me fully in.

I was getting a cramp in my neck from lifting my head up to stare down at her. To watch her pretty face and pink lips moving on my cock. I sank my fingers into her hair, urging her to move faster, take me a little deeper. And Callie kept up, sucking me as hard and fast as I wanted her to.

Fuck, she was perfect. Perfect, and for at least the rest of the weekend, *mine*.

Callie moaned, and every muscle in my lower body exploded in pleasure as I came. I could feel her swallowing around me, taking every drop, and it was the hottest fucking thing imaginable.

She drew it out, finally ending with little kitten licks up and down my shaft, licking her lips like the cat that got the cream.

“Come here,” I growled. I grabbed one of the pillows and shoved it beneath my head. She understood my meaning, because she shed the rest of her clothes on her way up.

I kissed her, deep and thoroughly. Then I urged her to keep moving up, grabbing her hips and waiting for her to put her knees on both sides of my head.

She was a little hesitant, holding herself carefully above me, probably worried about putting too much weight on me. I wanted all of it, wanted to feel her pussy pulse and twitch against my tongue. I wanted to fuck her with my mouth until my cock was ready again.

I pulled her hips down so she was pressed against my mouth. I groaned at how hot and slick she already was. When I licked her, she cried out and spread herself wider. I could feel her thigh muscles tense as she tried to stay up while also pushing herself against my mouth.

I gripped her hips and forced her down so I could do whatever I wanted, sucking and licking, and teasing her clit with my nose when my tongue was speared deep inside her.

I moaned and explored every part of her, my grip firm on her hips, my fingers spreading her cheeks. She got into a rhythm soon enough, rocking against my mouth.

“Blake,” she gasped, an orgasm rocking through her. I moaned against her spasming pussy, sucking her clit and trying to draw it out as long as possible.

The second time she came, she threw her head back and unbalanced herself, nearly falling backward. She ended up laughing and grabbing my sides to keep from topping over completely.

I pulled her to me again and sucked, my cock hardening again at the whimpering sound of pleasure she made.

I could have kept going, but Callie slipped off me and grabbed my hand as she got off the bed. I let her pull me toward the bathroom, and once we got under the spray, I kissed her thoroughly. Then I spun her so her perfect, heart-shaped ass pressed against my groin.

She arched her back, jutting her ass toward me, so I slid my fingers over her pretty pink lips that looked so ready to be spread open.

“You’re just hungry for cock, aren’t you?”

“For yours.”

I slid my hands over her ass, then lined myself up, her heat damn near melting my cockhead. “Say it, Callie.”

“Fuck me,” she said, pressing her hands against the wall. “Please, Blake, I need you to fuck me.”

I knew how ready she was, so I thrust deep in one smooth movement, filling her and burying myself to the hilt. She groaned like it was a relief, like ice held on a burn. Like she’d been aching for it and getting fucked relieved that pain.

I slid my hands up and down her sides, gripped her shoulders, reached in front, and squeezed her full, firm tits. I swirled my tongue over the back of her shoulders and the sides of her throat. All the while, I pounded into her, and she thrust back to accept me every time.

I slid my fingers down her flat stomach until they rested between her legs. Her clit was slick, so I flicked and stroked, groaning as she tightened around me.

“Blake,” she gasped, almost like she couldn’t get enough air to say it louder. Then she clamped around me and came, the sudden tightness and spasms dragging my orgasm out of me at the same time. I thrust forward, exploding deep inside her, her pussy milking me so good I wanted it to go on forever.

We stood there, under the water, linked together and catching our breath until her phone alarm went off in the next room as a reminder of the time.

Then she turned in my arms. She started to say something, but I couldn’t resist her lips for another second. I kissed her softly, slowly, and by the time I was done, she’d forgotten what she was going to say.

CALLIE

BLAKE and I were on time for the rehearsal. We were almost late, because once we got into the shower, neither of us wanted to get out. I had to be the one to use common sense and point out how little time we had left.

I was so proud to walk into the rehearsal on his arm.

He's not really your boyfriend, Callie.

But it felt like he was, and I found myself enjoying the fantasy.

After the rehearsal, we attended the dinner. Then I had to spend some time with Mackenzie and the rest of the wedding party to catch up. Blake stayed nearby without ever intruding. Then it was back to the hotel room.

We fell into the bed, pulling at each other's clothes. Around two in the morning, I insisted we get some sleep so I wouldn't look worn out during the wedding.

The next day, he got ready and followed me, my dress and accessories in my arms, to where I'd be getting ready with Mackenzie.

I'd seen Blake in a suit before. He'd been in a black suit and tie the night we met at my father's gala. But the suit he wore for the wedding had a nicer cut. He looked dressy and yet somehow more casual. That, combined with the spicy scent of his aftershave, had me already looking forward to coming back to the hotel room at the end of the night.

As I walked down the aisle on the arm of Joe, one of the groomsmen, I spotted Blake sitting next to the boyfriend of one of the bridesmaids. I could have sworn his mouth fell open when our gazes locked, like he couldn't believe what he saw. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but he looked stunned.

While I stood at the front, I couldn't help but keep glancing his way.

Every time I looked at him, his eyes were trained on me. And I had to admit to myself that I loved that level of attention.

When the ceremony was over, Blake found me in the crowd and took my arms. He smiled in a way I'd rarely seen from him except when Elsie was around. Then he pulled me toward him and gave me a kiss on the lips.

"You look beautiful," he said, his fingers gliding over my shoulder and down my arm to take my hand in his.

"Thank you," I said, squeezing his hand.

As we walked toward the ballroom where the reception tables and decorations were already set up, he said, "The bride has nothing on you, even in a ten-thousand-dollar dress."

I laughed softly. "I don't think it cost that much."

"It did. She didn't pay that, because the designer was a friend of a friend of the family. But that's the listing price."

When I raised my eyebrows, he chuckled and shrugged. "Her friends and their partners are gossipy. Can't help but overhear."

He held my hand as we went into the reception area, then reluctantly let me go as I took my seat at the bride's table where the other wedding party would eat. Blake's spot was at a round table directly across from us, and he watched me as intently during the dinner as he had during the rehearsal and wedding.

Once the meal was over and people were starting to mingle in anticipation of the start of dancing and other traditional activities, I went to Blake's table and stayed by his side. He'd

explained that it would make the night easier for him, since he was supposed to be protecting me.

I suspected he had other motives, and honestly, so did I. I just wanted to be near him and soak up all his attention.

He played the doting boyfriend perfectly. His hand was always on my shoulder, my back, my leg. He held my hand often. Our chairs were pressed close together so when his arm was around the back of my chair, our bodies touched. From the outside, he looked like a man who simply wanted to be as close as possible to his girlfriend at all times.

From the inside, that's exactly how it felt, too. I tried to make myself stop thinking that way, but it was so easy just to go with it.

I introduced Blake to everyone who approached me. Blake flashed a smile each time he had to shake a hand or dip his head in greeting. No one could have guessed he was there to protect me and only playing the part of my boyfriend. Even Mackenzie remarked on it while we were having dinner. I sat closest to her, being her maid of honor, and she'd leaned her head toward me halfway through the meal.

“Are you sure he's just pretending, Cal?”

I scoffed. “He's protecting me. Playing an attentive boyfriend was the easiest way to pull this off.”

“Uh huh,” she said, narrowing her eyes at me. “Then he missed his true calling. Should have been an actor. He'd probably have a wall full of Oscars by now.”

I'd nudged her with my elbow when she laughed, but I'd noticed what a great job he did too. And part of me hoped she was right. That it wasn't *all* for show.

Soon enough, chairs were being shuffled around to prepare for Randall to remove the garter of his new bride and toss it to the single men in the crowd. Someone told the single guys to gather around over the PA system, and some reluctantly started moving toward the center of the dance floor.

Blake stayed in place, my hand in his where it rested on his thigh. I almost asked if he didn't want to go take his chances.

Then he turned to look at me and looked above my head, his gaze turning instantly suspicious. I was shocked at how easily I could see his mood shift.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned to see Zander standing there. He quickly put his hands behind his back, a mannerism he'd always had when he was nervous.

"Hello, Callie. You look... Fantastic. How have you been?" He tucked his wavy blond hair behind his ear. Zander might have looked fantastic to me too, once upon a time. Now all I saw was how much he'd hurt me by cheating on me.

And I was surprisingly calm about it. I would have expected to feel upset at him talking to me at all. But I was indifferent. He was from a chapter of my life that was over, and I'd moved on.

"I've been fine. You?" I said.

Blake stood, still holding my hand tightly in his. He reached his other toward Zander to shake his. "I don't believe we've met."

"Oh. Zander Cole. How do you do?"

"Zander," I said quickly, "this is my boyfriend, Blake."

"And you're the ex," Blake said, an odd little grin on his face.

"I-uh-yes. I am. Callie, can I talk to you for a minute?" He nodded his head behind him, clearly meaning he wanted to talk to me in private.

I couldn't really blame him for not wanting to say anything else in front of Blake. Blake's glare was unnerving. And the way he'd called him 'the ex' made it clear he wasn't exactly a fan.

"Sure." I turned to Blake, who quickly kissed me and squeezed my hand. "Not too far," he said softly but loud enough for Zander to hear.

I walked about a dozen feet away with Zander, who put his hand on my arm. I wasn't even sure why I didn't tell him to go

to hell, or that anything he wanted to say, he could say while I sat there with Blake. I guessed I really was over him.

“What is it?” I said, as curious as I was impatient to get it over with.

“I just wanted to tell you again how sorry I was about... everything. I never meant to hurt you, Cal.”

“You did,” I said. “But honestly, Zander, I’ve moved past it.” I shrugged. “Better that I found out and got hurt than kept living a lie.”

He nodded. “You know that Sophia and I—”

“Moved in together. I heard. Congratulations. I genuinely hope you’re happy together,” I said, surprising myself at how much I meant it.

“Wow, Callie. Thank you.” He glanced around the room. “It’s loud in here. Can we...” He shook his thumb over his shoulder toward the side door.

“I can hear you fine. Besides, what else is there to say?” I glanced toward Blake, who leaned forward in his chair, eyes narrowed. If I’d tried to go out the door with Zander, I was sure he’d have bounded after me.

“It’d just be nice to talk for a second, somewhere quiet. I ___”

I took his hand and squeezed it. “Don’t worry about it, Zander. I’ve moved on, and clearly you have too. Enjoy the rest of the party.” I gestured toward the dance floor. “Go try to catch the garter, see if you’ll be next in line to get married.”

I turned away, and he said, “Would you come to my wedding if I invited you?”

It was such an odd question. Why *would* he invite me? I answered as honestly as I could. “No, but I’d wish you well.”

When I sat next to Blake again, he instantly took my hand and squeezed it. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Just the usual apologies and regrets.”

Blake examined my face. “You seem fine.”

“I am. I wished him well... and that’s that.”

He surprised me by leaning over and kissing me. “Good.”

We watched the garter throw, Zander didn’t join the crowd, and then it was time for the bouquet. I joined the gaggle of women gathering around to catch the thing with Blake following me. He stood behind me, gently rubbing my arms while we waited for Mackenzie to count and toss.

When he dropped his hands, she threw the bouquet. It came right for me, so I had to reach out to grab it or let it hit me in the face. I suspect Mac had done that on purpose.

As I reached up for it, Mac’s cousin Sheila dashed between me and the flying flowers to pluck them out of the air. Her movement managed to push me backward. She realized and grabbed for me, but I fell back directly into Blake’s strong arms, just like I had on the night we met.

“Caught me again,” I said with a laugh.

He smiled down at me. “So I did,” he said, his voice deep and soft.

I was in his arms for the rest of the night, on the dance floor and off, barely able to think about anything but being in his arms back in our hotel room.

BLAKE

DESPITE TONS of great sex and more time alone with Callie than I'd expected, I was relieved to head home. The stress of the constant crowds of people kept me on high alert.

Even when my eyes were trained on Callie, I remained hyper-aware of everything going on around me. I could barely look away from her beauty, but I also had to keep her safe.

It was my job, but it was so much more than a job. I took every assignment seriously. I'd have been devastated if someone I was hired to protect got hurt. But this was different.

This was *Callie*.

The thought of her being hurt at all, under my protection or not, turned my stomach.

I felt exhausted by the time our plane touched down. As soon as we were at a stop and the captain was making his announcements, I felt some of the tension drain away. At home, I had full control of the environment. I'd had none of that at the hotel.

Callie put her hand on my arm and smiled at me when I glanced at her.

"What?" I asked.

"I thought you might have fallen asleep."

"I could never sleep on an airplane. Especially not when I'm here to protect you."

I reached out to tuck a strand of her reddish-brown hair behind her ear. I always seemed to find an excuse to touch her.

On the way home, every mile I got closer to my house made me feel a little better. When I finally pulled into the driveway, I let out a deep sigh.

“Good to be home, huh?” she said with a broad grin.

“*Excellent* to be home.” Before we went in, I scanned all my motion-activated cameras and looked for any alerts or movements I might have missed. Everything was in order, just as I’d expected.

When she reached for her bag, I shook my head. “I’ve got it.”

She followed me into the house and up the stairs. When she opened her bedroom door, I kept going and walked past it to my bedroom. I put our suitcases on the floor at the end of the bed.

Then I turned to see Callie in the doorway, smiling, her hands on her hips. She glanced at her bag and gestured toward it. “Forget something?”

“Yeah,” I said, walking up to her. “I sure did.”

I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her. It was the kind of passionate kiss that get slowly deeper and more intense. The kind where you bend the woman back and she’d fall if you didn’t have her firmly in her arms.

It was the kind of kiss I wanted to give her every damn time I looked at her.

I kissed her, twirling my tongue around her, making it clear what my intentions were for the rest of the night. When I straightened again, letting her stand again, she slowly opened her eyes to look at me.

“There,” I said. “That’s better.”

She laughed and took my face in her hands. “I’m not complaining, but I only meant that you’d forgotten to give me my suitcase.”

“Didn’t forget.” I pulled her close and laced my fingers together at the small of her back. “I figure there’s no point in you sleeping in a different room every night, is there?”

She bit her bottom lip. “No. No point in that.”

“Good. And I figure there’s no point in me pretending that I don’t want to kiss you like that every time I turn around, either.”

“Definitely no point in that,” she said, stretching her neck for another kiss. “I see you’ve come around from all your ‘keep this professional’ talk.”

I sighed and rubbed my nose against hers. I’d done everything I could to resist Callie Ellis. And in some way, not managing it still felt a little like a personal failing. But my feelings for her won out in the end. “It’s still professional. I’m still protecting you. But the way I see it, pretending I don’t want more than that is only bound to get in the way.”

She frowned lightly as she nodded. “Okay. That makes sense...I guess.”

“If I get tied up in knots with what I want but can’t have, I figure I’m more likely to miss something. Wanting you and telling myself no...is distracting.”

She clearly liked that given how she smiled about it. “Now that does make sense. If I had to protect you, we’d be in trouble. Because you, Blake Donovan, are incredibly distracting. With your arms and your pecs.” She squeezed my arms for emphasis. “And your ass.”

Callie cupped my ass in both hands and squeezed, making me laugh.

“Wow,” she said. “If I’d known all it would take to get a laugh out of you, I’d have squeezed your ass the day I got here.”

“I don’t think I’d have laughed then. But we’d have ended up in bed together a hell of a lot sooner. Probably.” I eyed my comfy, familiar bed. “Speaking of which.”

I walked her backward toward it, kissing her again.

“The nightgown I was going to wear tonight is in my room,” she said, giggling as I nibbled a line down her neck.

“You can sleep naked.” I kissed her shoulder and started emptying my pockets onto my nightstand. “I don’t mind.”

She started undressing, putting her phone next to mine. I was helping her slip her panties down when both our phones lit up. I glanced at mine and decided I’d better reply to it. It was Governor Ellis, asking for an update on how the situation played out at the wedding. As I replied to that, standing there in nothing but my underwear, Callie slipped her panties down and off and slid into the bed, replying to her message.

Ellis wanted me to call him. I didn’t want to, but I knew that would be better than putting him off. “I’m about to call your father,” I warned her, so she could stay quiet if she didn’t want him to realize she was close by.

“Can’t that wait?” she asked, her phone buzzing with another message.

“No point in letting him worry.” I dialed, figuring I’d get it over with as soon as possible. Then I sat on the edge of the bed and waited for him to answer.

Callie put her phone on the nightstand.

“Governor,” I said when Ellis picked up. Callie wetly tongued the back of my neck, making me shiver. I slapped at her bottom and missed. “Yes, sir. Everything’s fine. I didn’t see anything or anyone that raised concern.”

She licked down the center of my back, then she slid her hand up my thigh to wrap around my cock. I inhaled sharply.

“What’s wrong?” Ellis said.

“Nothing. Almost dropped a glass,” I lied, impressed with how quickly the excuse had come to me. “We just got back not long ago, Governor. I was just getting ready for bed.”

He thanked me for calling so late and said a few other things that didn’t quite register, because Callie was pushing her head under my arm so she could get her mouth around my cock.

“Yes, sir,” I said through clenched jaws. “Uh huh. Thank you. Good—”

He’d hung up, so I let myself drop back onto the bed while she sucked me down. “You’re such a brat,” I said, laughing softly. That prompted her to groan and suck a little harder. My phone plunked onto the carpet. Then she kissed her way up my stomach and straddled my hips.

“What did you call me?”

“A brat.” I spelled the word. “But I’m not really complaining.”

“I didn’t think you would.”

She smiled and kissed me, so I gripped her hips in my hands and pulled her tight against me. “Let’s go out tomorrow night?” Callie kissed my jaw and my neck.

“Another night out to keep me from being bored?”

“It might serve that purpose. But I was thinking maybe a date.”

She smiled softly at me. “A real date?”

“Yeah.”

“My message was from Elsie. She wanted to make sure we were going to be at her audition tomorrow. Weren’t we all going to lunch afterward anyway?”

“We are. But you and I can go out to dinner tomorrow night.” I took her beautiful face into my hands and stared into her bright, blue eyes. “Just us.”

“That sounds wonderful,” she said softly. “But what will we do *after* the date?”

I rolled us so that I was on top. “So demanding. Isn’t one real date enough for you? Now you need to know what happens after?”

She slapped at my chest playfully. “Just tell me.”

“No.” I kissed her mock pout. “But I’m happy as hell to show you.”

CALLIE

I SUSPECTED what he was doing when he carried my suitcase to his room, especially since mine was right on the way. But there was always the chance that he'd forgotten, so I'd teased him about it.

That kiss made it clear he knew exactly what he was doing. And I couldn't have been more thrilled.

I'd been looking forward to lunch out with Blake and his family after Elsie's audition. The idea of going on a real date with Blake that night would only make the day even better.

He kissed across my collarbone, grinding his hard cock against my lower stomach. I could barely wait to feel him inside me. But he started kissing down my body, and I knew I was in for something else first. As he tongued around my navel, I ran my hands through his hair in approval.

"This is all I could think about on the plane," I admitted, as his tongue got closer to my throbbing center.

"Reading that book made you horny?"

"Sitting next to a sexy man made me horny."

He must have liked that, because he lapped up my creased and suckled gently against my clit.

I gasped. "Imagining you doing *that* made me horny." I spread my legs a little wider, so he could do whatever he wanted.

Blake didn't disappoint.

His tongue slid over me, around me, inside me, finding every place it could reach. He licked, sucked, and fucked with his pointed tongue. His fingers dug into my hips as he pulled me hard against his mouth to suck my clit in little bursts designed to build me up to a peak before letting me down again.

Blake had an amazing mouth, and I was thrilled to have its full attention.

He pressed a finger into me, quickly adding another, giving me something hard and long to grip around. As he flicked my clit with his tongue, he thrust the fingers into me, and it only took seconds for the orgasm to ripple out from my core.

Blake sucked my clit all throughout my climax, dragging it out as long as possible, wiggling the fingers inside me to add extra sensation and pleasure.

He gave me one last, long lap. "I didn't think about much else on the plane, either." He crawled up and lowered himself against me, licking across my mouth. "But honestly, baby, your pussy is on my mind most of the time."

"That so?" I said with a giggle. "I think about your cock a lot too."

I reached between us and squeezed it. "Almost impossible not to."

He kissed me, and I found myself laughing into the kiss. He could be so sweet, so lighthearted sometimes. So different than the mostly silent but strong type he came across as in almost every situation.

It was lovely to tease him and be teased. And sexy teasing was easily one of the best kinds.

"Since you think about my cock so much," he finally said, brushing his lips across mine. "It'd be kind of mean not to give it to you now, wouldn't it?"

I laughed again, but I stroked it through his underwear. "So fucking mean."

He rolled off me and sat, his back against the pillows and the headboard, while he pulled me with him. I ended up straddling his thighs. I scooted back enough that I could cup my hand over the mound in his boxer briefs.

“There you are,” I crooned. “I thought about you the whole flight. A wonder I didn’t leave a wet spot in the seat.”

He chuckled at that, and while I stroked him through the cotton material of his underwear, he slid his fingers between my legs to stroke my clit.

“You’re so hot. So wet, Callie.”

“Because of you, baby.”

His fingers tapped against my clit, oversensitive from my orgasm, and it pulled a soft cry out of me. “Yeah, baby, I like that sound.” He pressed his fingers into me, then slid them out to tease my clit again.

Having me spread open right there gave him license to touch whatever he wanted and see what kind of reactions he could get from me.

I didn’t mind. And I didn’t want him to stop.

I slid his underwear down and tossed it away before stroking his cock. He groaned when I squeezed the tip.

And despite how amazing it felt to have him stroking my pussy, I slid back to lean down and suck him into my mouth.

“Callie,” he hissed, arching his back. His fingers sank into my hair as I tongued my way up his shaft with little, tentative licks.

When I reached the head, I swirled my tongue around it and pressed the tip against the damp, glistening tip.

He stroked my jaw as I sucked his cock in slowly, like it was a personal challenge to see how long I could draw the process out.

I was finally building up some speed, falling into a steady rhythm, when his fingers tightened in my hair.

I ignored those fingers, because I was thoroughly enjoying feeling Blake's cock throbbing against my tongue. I had such an amazing sense of power, feeling all that strength and heat against my tongue, and feeling the little ripples of desire that went through his body when I did something different.

He was such a sexy, strong man. And I had a real sense that not many women, maybe none, had ever shown him just how amazing he was.

"Callie," he finally said, pulling lightly so I'd lift my head. I let his cock slip out of my lips with a gentle pop.

He pulled me to him and wrapped his arms around me as he kissed me hard. "I need to be inside you."

"But you were," I said, being a deliberate tease.

He grabbed my hips, urging me forward. "*Callie.*"

Before I got into position, his fingers slid into me again, like they'd missed me the whole time and were relieved to find their way back. Then he slid down a little to give me more room, and I lifted up onto my knees, so his cock aimed right at my center.

I lowered myself onto his cock as slowly as I'd sucked him in.

"Fuck," he groaned. And once he was fully buried inside me, I ground down against him, like I was trying to get him even deeper. "Baby," he breathed.

It was like our bodies were meant to find each other. A perfect fit. Hand in glove. Every cliché about how two people formed a perfect whole.

I'd never really believed in that stuff. Even though I read stories like that all the time in the steamy romance novels I always had on hand. I enjoyed reading that happy ending for other people but had stopped believing that something like that would ever be possible for someone like me.

The way Blake looked at me, the way he touched me, the way his body felt so perfectly in sync with mine, had made me start to rethink that.

It was dangerous to think that way. It was a sure way to disappointment.

But it wasn't something I could help, especially not when he rocked up into me and sucked my nipple into his mouth.

Why couldn't a man this perfect actually be the one for me? Why couldn't we make it work, even if he stayed Elm Grove's sheriff and I went on tour with a dance company?

Why couldn't I have it all?

Blake's cock was powerful and perfect enough to make me ask all those questions. I kept thinking that I should know better. That I should stick to focusing on my career and not get ahead of myself.

But when he looked up at me and licked his lips, it was so easy to push all common sense aside and want nothing more than to see him looking at me like that every night.

I was so close to coming when, of all things, I thought of him telling me about Rosa. He'd blamed himself all these years that he'd thought she was upset with him and that's why she didn't answer. I couldn't help but think that maybe she'd blamed him a little bit too, since she stopped wanting to be with him.

And it just seemed so fucking unfair to me that such a good man, a good-*hearted* man, had anybody blaming him for something like that.

Blake deserved so much better than that.

He deserves better than what I could give him too, if I wasn't sure that I could give up my dance career to be with him. I knew this in my bones. It *hurt* to know that.

So I focused on what I could give him in that very moment instead. I squeezed around him and rode him with an intensity that surprised even me.

"Fuck me, Blake." I held onto his shoulder and practically bounced in his lap.

He did as I asked. His arms wrapped around me, and Blake Donovan fucked me for all he was worth. His upturned face

between my breasts was the most amazing sight as he stiffened and bucked up into me. I ground against him, rubbing myself perfectly against his body that I didn't even need him to touch me. My orgasm exploded down my limbs as I looked into his eyes and let my body give him everything it possibly could.

If I couldn't make him happy forever, I was determined to make him happy in that moment and share the feeling with him.

"Blake!" I shouted as another wave of pleasure crashed through me. He pulled my face to his for a filthy, open-mouthed kiss that I knew I would remember for the rest of my life.

When we'd both wrung every ounce of pleasure out of the moment that we could, we ended up in the bed with him spooning me from behind.

I groaned and pressed my ass back against him, hoping that if and when he got horny again, he'd feel comfortable enough to start touching me without saying a word.

Lucky me, that's exactly what he did.

BLAKE

MOM AND JESSIE were already in the auditorium when Callie and I arrived. We slid into the row next to them.

“I’m guessing they’ll all dance the piece as a group, and then some will be pulled out,” she explained when Jessie asked her how it would happen.

“The ones who get pulled out don’t get in?”

Callie shrugged. “It depends on the teacher. Some eliminate dancers that way, while others pull out certain ones to have them dance again, so they narrow it down that way. We won’t know for sure until the first pulls.”

“Not that many people here,” I said, looking around the half-empty auditorium.

“A lot of people would rather their friends and family didn’t see auditions.” Callie squeezed Jessie’s hand. “I’m glad Elsie wanted us here, though. I’m excited to see how she does!”

Her enthusiasm touched something deep inside me. Seeing how much she cared about Elsie and how easy and warm she was with her and my family, made me think things I wasn’t sure I’d ever think about another woman.

In no time, the house lights went down, and a few dozen dancers flooded onto the stage. The woman who was obviously in charge didn’t address anyone in the audience but spoke only to the kids. I guessed that was because what was happening wasn’t really for us.

They danced in sync while the woman walked around, nodding and making notes on her clipboard.

“I thought she was going to do that routine you worked on?” I whispered to Callie.

“If she passes this phase, she’ll get to.”

The woman started touching girls on the shoulder, and they’d step out to stand at the side of the stage. Elsie was the third dancer she touched.

Jessie grabbed Callie’s hand again, and they hung on.

“Is that good?” I whispered. “Is she going to get to do her routine?”

Callie took my hand and squeezed it. “I’m not sure, but I think so. Elsie was doing a fantastic job.”

When the woman had the music stopped, she dismissed the girls who’d still been dancing and had the ones she’d touched come back onto the stage.

Callie shook mine and Jessie’s hands in her excitement. They started the dance again. This time, she made notes but didn’t touch anyone and stopped the music after only a couple of minutes.

Then she motioned for one girl and the others waited on the side. The girl started her routine after squinting nervously into the audience, probably to see where a parent sat.

I distracted myself from my nervousness for Elsie by looking at Callie’s hand wrapped around mine. By watching her genuine excitement as Elsie took the stage and started dancing the routine they’d worked on together. By watching her pride grow with every move Elsie nailed.

She was so gorgeous, and the way she seemed to care so much about my family only made her more beautiful to me.

When Elsie’s dance was done, I tried to get some sense of what the teacher thought by her expression. But she merely nodded, and Elsie bounced off the stage, smiling happily.

I knew we weren't going to know anything for at least a couple of days. But Elsie's happy reaction to her own audition meant our lunch would be one of celebration rather than one trying to cheer her up.

"She did so fantastic!" Callie squeezed our hands. "She absolutely slayed!"

I lifted her hand and kissed the back of it. "With your help."

"Yes," Jessie said. "Thank you so much. I'm sure Elsie will say the same."

"I think she'd have done great even if she'd never met me. But thank you for saying so." Callie smiled happily at me, her kind of smile where her eyes sparkle and her nose wrinkles up. I couldn't resist leaning over and kissing that scrunched up nose.

Once we were outside, everyone hugged Elsie until finally, she stood in front of Callie. Callie grabbed her shoulders and pulled her in tight. "You did such a fantastic job!"

Then both of them were bouncing like they had springs on their feet.

"Do you think I'll make it in?" she asked.

"I think you have as good a chance as anyone in there," Callie said.

I knew she couldn't say yes or no. But based on what we saw and what little I knew about dance, I thought Callie's answer was great.

Jessie piped up. "If you don't, that's okay. You try again next time, remember? Just making the attempt is worth celebrating."

"That's right," Callie said.

"But I did a good job?" Elsie grinned, starting to bounce again.

"The best!" Callie and she hugged again, leaving me and Jessie to grin at each other around them.

“Well, I’m starving,” Mom said. “All that being nervous worked up my appetite. Let’s go get lunch, and afterward, we’ll stop by the bakery for a special celebration pie.”

“Chocolate?” Elsie and Callie asked together.

“Of course,” Mom said, flashing a smile at me.

At the restaurant, I specifically requested a specific table near the back. I didn’t explain why, but I wanted to make sure I had a clear view of the ladies’ restroom in case Callie needed to use it while we were there. If it was out of my sight, I’d have to go with her and wait outside.

Being able to see the door from the table was a lot easier.

Not that she would get to go to the bathroom alone. About halfway through lunch, she needed to. Elsie went with her, practically bouncing in excitement all the way. I suspected the people in the bathroom were about to hear all about the day’s audition whether they wanted to or not.

Elsie’s enthusiasm was great to see. And I really like how much she’d warmed to Callie. It felt...right.

I knew she’d be leaving once the threat was over. And it would probably be sooner rather than later. Many threats fizzled out over time, but more ended when the people responsible messed up and got caught.

She’d be leaving, which would be a relief on the one hand. She’d be safe, the threat gone. But it also meant she had no reason to be away from Austin or to sleep in my bed.

I kept telling myself not to get too comfortable. She was still the governor’s daughter, and had every reason to run back to Austin and restart her dance career. Staying in a podunk small town with an older man couldn’t hold a candle to that, I was sure.

“Whatcha thinking about?” Jessie asked, then sucked soda through her straw with wide eyes.

At that very moment, I’d been thinking about how much I’d miss Callie next to me in bed when she left. I wasn’t going

to tell my sister that.

“Elsie really did a great job, didn’t she?” I shoved a fry into my mouth.

“She did. Thanks to your girlfriend.”

I shook my head. “You know that’s not—”

“Blake,” my mother said, “you can drop all that ‘just a job’ business right now. Maybe it started out that way, but it’s pretty obvious that’s not still how it is.”

“You’re in love with the girl!” Jessie said, shoving my shoulder. “It’s as plain as the nose on your face!”

“Jessie—”

“You don’t have to admit it, bro. But you might as well stop denying it.” She beamed at me, and I couldn’t help but smile back. A little.

“I haven’t seen you smile this much in years,” Mom said.

“I smile all the time.”

“You don’t. You smile and laugh with Elsie, sure. Beyond that?”

Mom and Jessie looked at each other and shook their heads.

“I approve,” Jessie said. “And Elsie absolutely loves her.”

Mom nodded. “And idolizes her.”

I ate another fry. “She’s okay.”

That earned me another shoulder shove as they laughed. And then Elsie and Callie came back to the table. I had to stop looking at Jessie altogether because every time I did, she widened her eyes, threatening to make me laugh.

CALLIE

LUNCH AND PIE afterward at the bakery were so wonderful, it proved a distraction from me thinking about the date Blake wanted to take me on.

If it had been an ordinary day, I'd have obsessed about it for hours. But thanks to Elsie's audition and her family, I didn't think about it until after he dropped me off and went to take care of some things at work.

Of course, I obsessed about it the rest of the afternoon. The only formal wear I had with me was my bridesmaid dress for Mac's wedding. I didn't think our one real date, or as I'd started to think of it, our "One True Date," was going to require anything too formal, but I still wanted to dress up a little more than usual.

I made do with a clingy, short spring dress and low heels dressed up with a scarf tied like a belt. The tracking necklace I still wore also dressed it up and made it seem less like a spring dress and a scarf I'd thrown together, at least.

I heard him come in and run up the stairs. When I went down the hall, I could hear the shower running. Since I was ready to go, I went downstairs to wait for him. I sat on a stool in the kitchen, but thunder boomed across the sky, so I went to a front room window to look out and see if there was an obvious storm on the horizon.

The day had gotten cloudy and overcast throughout the afternoon, but it didn't look like we were in for a bad storm. I turned to go back into the kitchen.

Blake stood in the doorway, staring at me.

I knew that look. It was a hungry, appreciative look. And I loved having it aimed my way.

“Are you...admiring my bold use of a scarf as a belt? Blown away by my fashion savvy?”

“Is it a scarf?” He stepped up to me, his hands sliding over my hips like they belonged there.

“It is.”

“Hm. I was actually admiring your perfect ass.”

“Honest *and* complimentary. I like that in a man.”

“Then how beautiful you look with your hair down this way.” He combed his fingers through my hair, his hand sliding down my shoulder and arm. “You’re stunning, Callie. You just...take my breath away.”

I hesitated for just a moment, unsure of what to say or do. I think I might have been trying to soak up those wonderful words since Blake usually said a fraction of that many at one time.

Before I could even say ‘thank you,’ Blake kissed me, and I was sure our date was going to have to wait for another night. It was a wet, demanding, slow kiss. And *I’m about to fuck your brains out* kiss.

But when he came up for air, he stepped back, hands still on my hips. “Fucking stunning,” he said, shaking his head. Then he held his arm out, like a fine English gentleman waiting for a lady to hook her arm in his. “Ready to go?”

“Um, yes,” I said, though I felt ready for him to peel me out of that spring dress and scarf combo and spread me out right there on the floor. “Maybe we can beat the rain.”

“If not, we won’t melt.” There was logical Blake again, I thought. But once we stepped outside, he said, “And you’d only look hotter soaking wet anyway.”

He opened the door for me, and I squeezed my thighs tightly together. If he was going to keep me that turned on for

the entire date, I'd be wanting it to end early.



I've been on a lot of dates with many different types of men. I'd even been out for a night with Blake, when we ended up swing dancing. But this date of his was probably the most perfect date I'd ever had.

Of course, it came on the heels of a successful audition for Elsie and lunch with his family. So, the day had already been pretty damn good. And then the way he looked at me, the things he said, *that kiss* before we left.

Basically, the date could have been pretty ordinary, and I'd have still counted the day as a major success.

The date was actually nothing terribly fancy, I realized. Dinner at a restaurant slightly out of town. "They have cloth napkins," Blake had said as kind of a joke. Really good Italian food. Candles on the tables. An extensive wine list.

It was nice.

The part that made it special was how Blake pulled me into the booth against him. The way his arm went possessively around me. The way he deferred to me every time the server approached our table.

The way he thanked me for helping Elsie, and the way he asked questions about my life.

He'd asked me plenty of questions when I got there, but those were more about figuring out who might be a threat. Now he really seemed *interested*.

He didn't deflect every question I asked him, either. We had an actual pleasant conversation that wasn't all about what level of danger we might be in just being outside his fortress of a house.

Blake was a fantastic date, and I had more fun on that date than I think I'd ever had with anyone. We didn't dance, but our

bodies touched the entire time. I felt cuddled and protected, like he genuinely cared for me and about me.

And I couldn't deny what my heart had been telling me for days. I was falling hard for Blake Donovan.

He reached out and lifted the pendant onto his fingers, brushing against my breasts as he did so. "That really looks great on you."

"Thanks." I glanced down at it. "It's surprisingly pretty. Not at all what I thought a tracking necklace might look like."

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know. Stainless steel. Maybe a padlock shape or something?"

He laughed at that, so I pointed at him. "Do you know how many times you've laughed today?"

"I didn't keep track." He still wore a half-grin.

"Six. I counted six."

"You're as bad as Jessie and Mom."

"They just want you to be happier. People who smile and laugh more are usually the happier sort." I turned to face him more in the booth. "And when you laugh... you know what you said about me earlier, before we left for the date? Stunning? That's you."

He blinked at me a few times like he couldn't believe what I'd just said. Then his hand cupped my cheek, and he pulled me into a slow, deep kiss.

I wondered if anyone had ever said something like that to him before. And I thought if not, it was a damn shame, because Blake was an absolutely stunning man, even when he wasn't laughing.

When the kiss ended, his arm went around me again and the server came to see if we wanted dessert. I didn't think anything could beat the chocolate truffle pie we'd had at Lisa's bakery that afternoon, so I deferred.

Blake didn't want any dessert either. I was glad. My body was freshly revved up after that kiss. I wanted to go back to his house and crawl into his bed again. I wanted to use my body to show him just how stunning I thought he was.

Your life isn't here, Callie.

That ugly voice kept reminding me that when this was over, I was going back to Austin. I was going to earn my way back into a troupe and tour the country, or maybe the world, if I got really lucky. I didn't want to give Blake up, but what kind of a relationship would it be with him in Elm Grove and me in Austin, gone most of the time on tour.

My heart, and my body, wanted Blake. Wanted to make something permanent of it. But was I willing to give up my dreams to make that happen?

His hand rested on my thigh, and my focus went from my dreams to the feelings stirring in my body at that moment.

"Sure you don't want anything else?" he asked.

"Nothing that's on the menu," I said, raising my eyebrows.

"I like the way you think." He kissed me, then he leaned back. "I know I've said it already but thank you again for everything you did for Elsie."

"I'm telling you, she's really good. I gave her a boost, sure, but she could have also nailed it on her own."

"Maybe. But having you on her side really made her feel special." Blake brushed my hair back from my face. "You have that effect on people, though, don't you? Making everyone feel special."

I understood the kind of compliment he was giving me, but I couldn't help but try to wave it off a little. "Do I? Probably not if you talk to my exes."

"I met one of them. The way he looked at you, I'd say my theory still holds." He slid his hand down my arm to take my hand. "You make me feel special too. You make me feel a lot of things, Callie."

I sensed what was coming, and I could hardly believe it. I wanted it. I was afraid of it. But I wanted it more, even though I wasn't sure I could say it back.

Then Blake squeezed my hand. "I know our lives are different. I know you're here to be protected. But it's only fair of me to tell you, I've fallen in love with you, Callie."

Hearing it was as terrifying and wonderful as I'd expected.

BLAKE

CALLIE'S EYES WERE WIDE, surprised, and so incredibly blue. The phrase 'deer caught in headlights' came to my mind.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly, waving my hand. "I—"

"Don't apologize," she said, looking less stunned.

"I argued with myself about whether I should say something or not."

She chuckled softly. "So you decided to go ahead and say it?"

"Nope. Decided it was too soon. But it slipped out anyway." I'd wrestled with it for a long time before our date. The feeling that I was in love with Callie was so intense, it was almost like I needed to say it just to get it off my chest.

But I didn't want to scare her off. Most people want long relationships, don't they? Not someone going off half-cocked and declaring love mere weeks into knowing someone.

"Blake, I—"

I grabbed her hands and squeezed. "Don't. Let me make myself perfectly clear, Callie. I said it. I meant it. And I absolutely don't expect you to say it back. It was just important to me that you knew."

I stared into her eyes and realized her surprise was completely gone, replaced by something calmer and warmer. Something I thought of as bedroom eyes.

“Well,” she said softly. “Now I know.” She cupped my cheek and let her fingers trail down my jaw, then she leaned over to kiss me. “Thanks for telling me.”

Her sultry eyes shifted into something that seemed a little more confused. Like she was uncertain about whatever she was thinking or about to say. Callie brushed her lips over mine.

“If you feel the need to tell me again, anytime...feel free. I think it does a woman’s heart good to hear it.”

There it was, permission for me to tell Callie I loved her anytime I felt like it. I took that as a damn good sign.

Callie slid her hand over my thigh, down to give it a gentle squeeze, her fingers dangerously close to my crotch. “Want to get out of here?”

“Hell, yes,” I said, already pushing her toward the edge so we could get home, and into my bed, as fast as possible.



Callie kept her hand on my thigh during the drive home, stroking and squeezing. Her fingers stayed high enough that they rubbed my crotch, but she never let herself outright touch me there. Not until we pulled into the driveway.

The truck had barely rolled to a stop when she cupped me through my slacks and gently squeezed. “I can’t believe you’ve stayed this hard the entire drive.”

“I can, since you made sure of it.”

She grinned at me mischievously. “Had to pass the time somehow, didn’t I?”

I cupped the back of her neck and pulled her into a deep kiss. Before I realized what was happening, Callie had gotten between me and the steering wheel to straddle my lap. I popped the level on the steering column to tilt it out of the way.

“What’s gotten into you, woman?” I growled as she ground down against my crotch. “Not that I’m complaining.”

“You, I guess.” She squeezed my shoulders and kissed me, still rocking against me. “You’ve gotten into me, Blake Donovan.”

Damn, I *wanted* into her in that very moment. The only thing that kept me from fucking her right there in the truck was the realization that even though we were at my well-secured home, we were outside, in the open. Not the smartest place to have sex when one person has threats against them.

It was going to take every ounce of professionalism I had to peel her off me and insist we go inside. But I didn’t really get the chance.

“Yeah,” Callie breathed into my ear, and I realized she was about to come. She was getting herself off on rubbing against my trapped cock. “Oh, yeah,” she sighed.

“Baby...” I probably should have stopped her and taken it inside, but she was so close, it wasn’t going to take long. And we weren’t as vulnerable as we would be half-clothed and having sex.

I gripped her ass cheeks and pulled her tight against me to help her along. My hips rocked up each time she ground down. In no time, I was in the same on-edge state that she was, close to nutting in my pants like an overstimulated teenager.

“God, Callie,” I hissed as she rubbed herself hard against me. I pulled her in, and the friction and pressure must have hit her perfectly.

She tossed her head back with a sharp cry, the pressure against my trapped cock damn near painful. I let her ride it out, bucking in my lap, and managed to keep myself from coming, though I’m not sure exactly how.

When she was finished, she slumped against me, her head on my shoulder. It was only then that I slid my hand between her thighs and tested her with my fingers. Her panties were soaked, and her whole body jerked as I stroked a fingertip over her clit.

She whispered into my ear, “I want more.”

We were out of the truck and headed upstairs to my bedroom in mere seconds. Clothes came off as we walked. By the time we were backing up to my bed, I was stepping out of my boxer briefs.

I gently pushed Callie onto the bed and watched her crawl backward until her head was on my pillow. Then she stretched her arms together above her head.

“Want to arrest me, officer?” She batted her eyes playfully at me.

“I want to do so many things to you,” I admitted. But cuffs would only get in the way of what I had in mind for tonight. “Right now, I want you on your stomach.”

“Oooh,” she said, rolling onto her stomach immediately.

There was her perfect, heart-shaped ass where I could see every delicious inch of it. That’s what I wanted—to fuck her while being able to see and touch that amazing ass.

I crawled on top of her, straddling her thighs, to rub my cock on her behind, enjoying the warmth and silkiness of her skin. I grabbed her hips to urge her to rise up onto all fours, but Callie kept her shoulders and head down, jutting her ass even higher in the air.

I playfully smacked one firm cheek, then the other. I was going to enjoy this. I dragged two fingers down her pussy lips, gently spreading them as I did so. I stroked her clit, still pointed and firm from her orgasm.

Then I leaned down and sucked her folds into my mouth while I swirled my fingertips against her heated nub. I fucked her with my tongue, giving her a preview of what I soon going to do with my cock. In seconds, Callie was whimpering and pushing back against my mouth.

But I’d been learning Callie’s body, her rhythms. I wanted to ease her back and keep her on that edge as long as possible, so I could feel this one with me deep inside her.

I licked up, not stopping until I could swirl my tongue around her pretty little puckered asshole. Then I lined myself up between her legs, pressed my cock against her entrance, and pulled her onto me.

The sound she made hardened my cock even more. And the tight heat of her around me dragged a deep sigh from my chest, like I'd been waiting for that moment for years.

I put my hands on her ass cheeks, kneading them, spreading them, touching them any way I wanted to. She bounced back against me, taking me in fully each time, while I got to watch the living miracle that was Callie Ellis' ass smacking against my body.

“So fucking beautiful,” I said, my hand sliding up her spine to tangle in her brunette locks. I gently tugged. “So perfect for me.”

I stroked every inch of her I could reach, often tugging at her hair to urge her to arch her back and open herself up more for me. She bounced on my cock, an air of frustration finally growing as she reached between her own legs to touch herself.

I pushed her arm away. “Not until I'm ready,” I scolded.

Callie whined and focused on grinding against me each time I filled her, trying to get the stimulation she needed that way.

“Easy. *Tell* me what you want.”

She didn't hesitate. “Make me come, please, Blake. Make me come.”

Damn, I loved hearing it. And I was talking a big talk about taking it easy when I was barely able to hang on myself.

So I curled a hand beneath her and, with only a few well-timed taps and strokes, gave her exactly what she asked for.

Her pussy clamped around me, pulling at me, and I was helpless to hold back my orgasm any longer. We came together, Callie straining to push back onto my cock while I thrust as deeply as possible.

Afterward, we collapsed onto the bed together, with me pulling her back tight against my chest. She fit so perfectly like that in my arms, her ass nestled against my crotch. I held her hand between her breasts, her heartbeat thudding out, slowing as we relaxed.

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

I was relieved when she squeezed my hand tighter and snuggled harder against me,

She’d given me permission to say it again, so I figured I might as well take advantage of it. If I said it a hundred times, I wouldn’t be any more heartbroken when she went back to Austin than if I’d only said it once.

CALLIE

AS I WENT through my day, I kept finding myself distracted by the memory of Blake telling me he loved me.

I suppose I hadn't reacted the best way I could have. Stunned silence probably wasn't what he'd been hoping for. But he'd seemed so sincere when he insisted I didn't have to say it back. I was grateful for that.

I could have said it back, though. I knew I was in love with Blake. *Him* knowing that didn't seem ideal, however, so I kept it to myself.

The thought of going back to Austin and not seeing Blake every day had started to weigh on me, like something you know is coming and that you dread but can't stop.

When I thought of the tour I was missing because of the threats against me and tried to imagine my life, going city to city, performing, it held less appeal than it once did. I kept thinking of my one-on-one sessions with Elsie and how gratifying it had been to watch her improve with each repetition.

All the things from my life before seemed less ideal, while thoughts of teaching and staying close to Blake had poured in and taken their place.

Maybe I should have told him that. Maybe it was unfair to keep it to myself. I wasn't sure. But I also thought it would be worse to tell him and decide to go back to my old life than to say nothing at all.

When he got home from work, I stepped out of the kitchen to stand in the doorway to the living room to greet him.

He nodded at me as he dropped his bag by the door. Then he strode toward me, looking so incredibly hot in his uniform, and cupped my face in his hands.

Without a word or a moment of hesitation, Blake kissed me so thoroughly, my knees went a little soft. I twisted my hands in the back of his shirt and hung on.

“How’s my girl?” he finally asked.

“Um, a lot better now,” I admitted, still with my arms around his waist. “Did you have a rough day?”

“Nope. Average.” He kissed me softly, then took my hand to lead me to the kitchen. “What are you thinking for dinner? We can fix something or go out, whichever you prefer.”

I liked this new openness. Blake was still a man of few, carefully chosen words, but I was enjoying how he didn’t try to hide his attraction.

“I’m up for either,” I said. Then I pressed my mouth against his shoulder from behind while he was staring into the fridge. “I’m up for anything you want.”

He chuckled and turned to wrap his arms around me. “Careful now. *Anything* covers a lot of ground.”

“It’s okay. I trust you.” I said it in a teasing way, but I was stunned to realize that I actually meant it. I not only trusted him to keep me safe, but I also trusted him to take care of my heart. He seemed to be the exception to my standing rule of believing that men weren’t faithful or trustworthy.

Slow down, Callie. You’re getting ahead of yourself.

Blake seemed to realize what I’d just said, how I meant it more than I was letting on. He dipped his head to kiss me again, softer and slower than before. “How hungry are you?”

I smiled against his mouth. “Oh, I’m hungry, but not for food.” I lead him by the hand toward the stairs. “We can go out for dinner later, can’t we?”

We'd just started up the staircase when my phone chimed. It was the distinctive sound I'd set for my father, so I'd always know if it was something I needed to take as soon as possible. Blake's phone went off at the same time.

This was either good news, or something very bad.

Blake answered his phone as I read my text: Arrests were made a couple of hours ago. You're no longer in danger. Andrew will come and collect you in the morning.

I sat on the stairs, letting relief wash over me. The nutjobs who'd threatened me were in jail. It was over!

I beamed at Blake, who frowned as he spoke on the phone.

"And you're sure the suspects are the ones who made the threats?" He paused. "You're sure it's all of them?"

Blake listened intently for another minute, then said, "I can bring her back to Austin tomorrow, Governor. I don't mind the drive. Okay, a flight is fine, too. No, sir. I insist. Thank you, sir."

Blake hung up. "He asked that you call him now."

I stood and hugged him tightly. "It's hard to believe it's finally over."

"I'm glad you're safe." He stroked my hair, then leaned back to kiss my forehead.

I called my dad, but before I'd said more than a few words, Blake disappeared into the kitchen. I stayed there to finish the conversation, which was about how relieved we both were that the ordeal was finally over.

Five people had been arrested, the IP addresses of their devices matching the ones from where the digital threats and messages had been sent. Finally, I could get back to my life.

I stared at the kitchen doorway. "Blake's bringing me home tomorrow?"

"I was going to fly Andrew in, but he insisted on bringing you back. I think the flight's at ten, but I'll have Sally Ann

send him all the necessary information.”

We talked a little longer, then I went into the kitchen to see Blake staring into the refrigerator.

“I think we do need to go out to eat if you want to have some sort of celebratory dinner,” he grumbled.

I put my hand on his shoulder, but he didn’t look at me. “Blake.”

“Maybe we should order in? Or go to Giovanni’s in Castle Brook. Something fancier for our last dinner out.” His voice got tight on those last words.

I shook my head. “Who said it’s our last dinner out? You’re going to have plenty of opportunities to wine and dine me, mister.”

Blake looked at me then, skeptically. “I really am happy that you’re no longer in danger, Callie. But that’s the only thing I’m happy about.”

I took his face in my hands and kissed him. “I’m relieved it’s over but not that I’ll be leaving. I’m going to miss being here with you. But Blake, this isn’t ending. I have no intentions of letting you go just because I’m going back to Austin.”

He gripped my waist. “You’ll go back to your dancing and your life – like you should, Callie – and you’ll forget about me soon enough. That’s how it was always supposed to happen.”

He brushed my hair away from my forehead. “But I’m never going to forget you.”

I gave him a gentle shake. “Stop talking like that! I’m not going to forget anything. I don’t want to *stop* anything.”

He kissed my forehead and turned away, like I was some young, naive child who just didn’t understand how the world worked.

I wrapped my arms around him from behind. “Please don’t do that. Don’t shut me out this way.”

He hesitated for a few moments, then he turned and pulled me into a tight embrace. “I’m sorry. I’m just... I’m afraid of losing you. I don’t want this to end either, Callie.”

I glanced up at him, tears in my eyes. “We can make it work, you’ll see. Nothing has to change much, except I’ll miss your grumpy, scrunched-up face in the mornings before you have your coffee.”

Blake sat on a stool and hauled me into his lap. “I’m not going to miss the wet towels on the floor. But I’ll miss the way the bathroom smells after you shower. What’s that—”

“Lilac Showers bodywash. I’ll keep a bottle here.”

“Okay,” he said, embracing me again.

We sat there, holding each other for a long time. I wanted to go back to Austin, but I also didn’t want to go. I hadn’t expected to feel that way when the time came, but at least I knew he was willing to try to make it work without me giving up my dreams.

BLAKE

“Boss?”

“Yeah.” I glanced up from my laptop to find Cathy squinting at me.

“I can almost hear you typing from the front door. You want to go easy on that thing? They don’t come cheap, you know.”

I was what Cathy called a ‘tense typer’ who pounded the keys harder when I was under stress. I guessed she was right.

“Yeah, I’ll watch it.”

She started to say something else, but one glare had her thinking better of it. Instead, she tipped her and backed out of my office.

I wasn’t officially working that morning, but I had a couple of loose ends to take care of on some recent cases before I drove to Austin.

I hadn’t seen Callie in six days. Hadn’t gotten to kiss her pouty lips or feel her body under my hands for almost an entire week. It had been hell. I hated it. So I was going to spend the rest of Saturday and Sunday with her before coming home Sunday night.

We’d talked on the phone and texted every day, but nothing compared to having her next to me. I had my doubts about our two-city relationship before it started. After a week of it, I was more convinced than ever that she’d meet

someone, someone her age, and it wouldn't be long before I was just a memory.

The thought of that made my heart clench and my lungs refuse to draw a breath. I loved Callie. I wanted her more than anyone in my life. But with us living separate lives, it was only a matter of time before we were separate too.

If I'd been a brave man, I'd have said all that and ended it before we were pulled apart by other things. End on a high note, so they say.

I wasn't brave. I was desperate to touch and taste her once again. I was going to make the most of my time with Callie, even though every kiss was going to make it that much harder when it ended.

I had meant to text her when I was done with my paperwork and leaving, but I was so focused on getting on the road I forgot. I only realized when I was about five miles outside Austin, so I called her.

"I'm ten minutes away. Sorry I forgot to let you know when I left."

"Fantastic! I thought you'd really gotten bogged down with work and wouldn't be here for hours. I'm rehearsing but I'll go take a shower and change."

"No, keep dancing. You can show me what you've been practicing when I get there."

I really missed watching Callie dance. More than that, I missed watching her and Elsie working together in the basement. Damn it, I just missed her being around, whether she was dancing or cooking her tofu or annoying me in some way.

She greeted me at the door by jumping into my arms and kissing me. "Blake Donovan, you are a sight for sore eyes."

"You look damn good yourself."

"We're dramatic," she said with a laugh. We FaceTimed yesterday."

“Not the same as getting to touch you.” I nuzzled her neck, enjoying the feel of the slightly damp hairs at the base. “Been giving yourself a pretty good workout?”

“Yeah. Audition prep.”

I knew she planned to audition for at least one company that was set to do a national tour in about eight months. She’d found a second possible audition a few days earlier, too.

I was torn every time I thought about it. I wanted her to achieve her dreams. I wanted her happiness more than anything. But if it hurt this much not to be with her for six days, being apart for months while she was on tour was going to be torture I didn’t even want to imagine.

Not to mention all the buff dancers Callie’s age that she’d be spending every day with on her touring adventures. I wasn’t sure my ass stood a chance. Her happiness won out every time I had a fight with myself about it, though.

“Let me see?”

Callie led me to the room in her apartment that was set up similar to the one in my basement, with a wall of mirrors and a barre.

“Elsie was tickled to death when I told her I was leaving the ballet room in place. She uses it to practice all the time now.”

“That’s great! When I come to visit, she and I can practice together.”

I nodded and sat to watch Callie’s routine. I didn’t really think she’d be coming to visit very often. Her life was a lot busier than mine, especially while she was trying to find a new dance company. She stayed busy with friends and the occasional social obligations that went with being the governor’s daughter.

My life was pretty laid back, so I didn’t mind being the one to make the trips. But I hoped she did come back from time to time. That would make Elsie really happy.

I watched Callie dance, no longer feeling the need to rein myself in like I had to when she'd first come to Elm Grove. Instead, I watched her fluid moves with open appreciation. Her long, toned legs were on full display, no tights in the way, so I could see every little muscle ripple as she made difficult poses and movements look as easy as breathing.

The outfit she wore was just like a one-piece swimsuit, and her hair was up in a bun, wrapped around with a green scrunchie.

When she finished, I applauded, but she scoffed.

“That wasn't a very good run-through.”

“Looked excellent to me.” I stood and turned her in my arms so she could look at us in the mirror. Then I walked us close enough to the mirror that she could touch the barre if she wanted. “Do that leg-up pose you did, that slow kick where you held it.”

Callie's arms bent into little arcs as she reached them behind her, around my neck. Then she lifted her knee, holding it almost flat against her body, and slowly extended her leg into the air.

“Damn, that's impressive.” I kissed her arm, then cupped her ankle to hold her leg in place. “And you make it look so easy. But I can tell that it takes so much muscle control.”

I slid my hand down her calf, her thigh, finally gliding my fingers against her inner thigh. She held the leg in place.

“I can feel the tension right here.” I brushed my fingertips high on her inner thigh, barely touching the strip of material between her legs. Then I stroked her inner thigh before dipping low again.

She chuckled. “*Lots* of tension. Are you sure you don't want me to take a shower first.”

I nuzzled the back of her neck. “I don't mind a little sweat, do you?” I slipped my fingers beneath the strip of material and stroked her clit.

Callie sucked in a quick breath. “Not at all,” she breathed, already curling her body for more contact with my fingers.

“You’re already so wet for me, aren’t you?” I dragged down the shoulder strap of her one-piece then cupped her tit in my hand, pulling at the hard nipple with my fingers and thumb. The tracking pendant I’d given her hung between her breasts. She’d turned off the device with the tiny switch on the back after the threat was over. But I liked that she still wore it.

I kissed her neck as I teased her that way, letting my fingers dip closer and closer to her entrance but never quite pushing inside her.

“It’s been almost a week,” she said with a groan.

I’m not sure what I expected, but her reactions to me at that moment were exactly what I’d hoped for. When I pushed my fingers inside her, she squeezed around them and licked her lips, staring into my eyes in the mirror.

I couldn’t wait any longer. I used one hand to unfasten my fly and pull my cock out, then I grabbed the crotch of her leotard and hauled it to the side to make room. I hooked her upturned knee under my arm and slid my cock into Callie in one fast thrust.

We both gasped, staring at each other in the mirror. It was almost too much eye contact, I was tempted to look away, but I held it because it deepened the experience somehow.

I drove up into her and let my fingers glide down to her clit again.

“I’ve missed you so much,” she said, her fingernails scratching the back of my neck.

“I’ve needed this, baby. Needed you so much.” I sucked against her throat, beneath her ear, and rolled my hips to fill her again and again.

More of her weight rested on me as she got closer to her orgasm. Finally, I sensed that she was there, so I stroked circles on her clit and tapped in a frantic rhythm.

“Say it, Callie. Say it for me.” I thrust into her in a pounding rhythm, about to find my own pleasure.

“Need you... to make me come, Blake.”

I flicked her clit faster and lifted her leg, spreading her wider. “Come for me, baby,” I demanded.

Callie cried out as she came, unbalancing herself so that if I hadn't been holding her so tightly, she'd probably have fallen. As her pussy dragged against me, it pulled an orgasm from me that felt like it made me ten pounds lighter, almost like my head was floating above me for a minute.

She finally dropped her arms to grab the barre, smiling at me in the mirror, which was half-fogged from our breath. Carefully, I let go of her leg so she could fully stand.

When she turned to kiss me, she said, “I definitely need a shower *now* if we're going to go out. Care to join me?”

“I will never say no to that.” I chuckled as Callie pulled me by the hand toward her bathroom. I didn't think I had another bout of standing up sex left in me, but I'd never turn down the chance to run my hands over her wet body.

CALLIE

AS SOON AS Blake appeared in my doorway, I realized how much I'd really missed him.

I knew I missed him. It was awful not seeing him every day. But once he was in my arms again, I understood the depth of it.

And before we'd said a dozen words, I was already dreading watching him walk out my door again.

He was spending the night, planning to leave late Sunday, so we had the rest of the day and most of Sunday to do whatever we wanted. But it didn't feel like nearly enough.

I'd gotten so used to his routine, seeing him in the morning and after work, spending time together, that it was hard to face the thought that he'd leave again tomorrow and I wouldn't see him again for at least a week or two, Maybe longer.

I was going to have to take a long, hard look at my schedule and figure out when I could go back to Elm Grove. I missed the place. I missed Elsie. I even missed Lisa and Jessie.

Elm Grove suddenly felt more like home than Austin. I tried to tell myself that it was just because it was new and fresh, but I was starting to think that wasn't really it. It felt like home because that's where Blake was.

After we'd showered, we went out for lunch and to enjoy the sights and sounds of Austin. Blake wasn't a tourist, so I didn't feel the need to show him around the way I would

someone unfamiliar with the city. We hit some local hotspots and found a second restaurant for dinner when the evening rolled around.

After a couple of drinks and some live music at a favorite club, we headed back to my apartment. And honestly, it was a relief to have Blake all to myself again. As much as I loved my city, I just wanted to be with him. We decided to curl up on the couch to watch a movie together.

Not long after the opening credits rolled on the original Jurassic Park, my phone vibrated on the coffee table. It was Andrew.

I felt on high alert all of a sudden. Andrew texted and called occasionally, we'd grabbed coffee once during the week, but I still thought of him as security. A call from him could spell trouble.

“Andrew, what's up?”

“I just wanted to see if you had plans for tomorrow. Thought we could grab brunch or coffee or something.”

I could feel Blake stiffen beside me. Andrew didn't have a loud voice, but we sat close enough he could surely hear what he said.

“Blake's visiting this weekend. Maybe some other time?”

“Oh sure, sure. Tell him I said hello, and I'll catch you later.”

When I hung up, Blake stared at me until I said, “What? We're friends.”

“He said he wanted to date you.”

“And I made it perfectly clear we were only going to stay friends. Besides, he knows you and I are together now. He's just being friendly.”

Blake shook his head. “How often does he invite you out?”

I shrugged. “We went for coffee in the middle of the week. But it's something we've always done, so it's nothing out of

the ordinary. Occasionally, we'll grab a meal together." I squeezed his hand. "I promise, there's nothing going on."

"Babe, I believe that you think that's true. I'm not so sure about him." Then he took a deep breath. "That man's jacket in the corner. That his?" He gestured toward the jacket Andrew had left after he came to see me the day I returned.

"Damn it, I forgot to mention it to him. He dropped by the day I came home, brought some bagels. He was just relieved I was safe and the whole ordeal was over."

Blake didn't look convinced. I snuggled close and put my head on his chest. "You don't have any reason to be jealous. I'm not interested in anyone but you."

He kissed my hair. "I'm not jealous. Just...concerned."

I was glad he couldn't see my smile. He was jealous, and even though it didn't make any sense at all to be jealous of Andrew, I kind of liked it.

"You know that's the oldest trick in the book, right?"

"What?"

"Leaving something behind that you have to come back for later. A hat or umbrella or jacket. It's another excuse to show up again and take another crack at it."

I chuckled. "Or Andrew can be forgetful and would lose his head if it wasn't screwed on. I know he's good security, but when it comes to his personal life, the guy's a bit of a mess."

I knew Blake couldn't really argue with that one. It was more likely that Andrew had ADHD and trouble keeping track of things than that he'd left his jacket as an excuse to show up again. Especially since he seemed to have forgotten it existed.

"He did lose three walkie-talkies in two months," Blake grumbled. "If he wasn't so damn good at everything else, I'd probably have canned him." He stroked my hair, his hand gliding down over my shoulder to my hips. "But it could be that you fluster him too much, and that's why he forgot it."

"How do I become less flusterable?"

“Maybe don’t brush your teeth or comb your hair when he’s around. Burp sometimes.”

“Blake Donovan,” I said, digging my fingers into his stomach. “Making jokes.” He wasn’t ticklish, so he merely stared.

“Nah,” he finally said, a slow smile spreading across his face. “It wouldn’t work. There’s nothing that can make you not the most beautiful fucking person on the planet.”

He kissed me and pulled me down against him on the couch. We forgot about the movie and Andrew and everything else but each other until it was time for bed.

BLAKE

WAKING up with Callie again chipped away at everything that had weighed me down over the last week without her. I slept better with her body pressed against mine.

It was hard, but I tried not to think about how soon I'd be leaving. How I wouldn't have her in my arms that night or in the next several to come. I tried to embrace the moment without dreading how I'd feel after I left Austin later in the evening.

We went out for a late breakfast and planned to stay out until we ate a late lunch. Then we were going to hang out at her place, maybe have a light dinner, until I left in the evening.

Elsie texted both of us while we were at breakfast with the good news. She'd gotten in!

After we ate we went to a local park and joined Elsie on a video call to properly congratulate her.

She looked so happy she could cry. "I can never thank you enough for helping me, Callie. I'm so excited!"

Callie leaned against me. "It was all your hard work, sweetie. But I'm glad I could help in some way."

"Congrats, kiddo." I couldn't wait to see her in person and give her a big hug. I was having a truly proud-uncle moment. And seeing Elsie so happy always did my heart good.

While Elsie and Callie were chatting, I spotted someone under a pavilion across the park. His back was to us, and his

short, buzzed hair didn't look familiar. What was it about him...

"I can't wait until you come back so we can dance together again," Elsie squealed.

"I'm looking forward to that too."

Jessie took the phone from Elsie to thank Callie some more. I watched the man under the pavilion, trying to figure out why my hackles were up all of a sudden. It could be nothing. It could *always* be nothing. But I'd learned that it was always better to assume it was something, just in case.

"By the way," Jessie said, "not that it's any of my business, but I'm glad you two are still seeing each other."

"Jessie," I groaned, hoping we weren't about to have an embarrassing conversation.

"I'm serious, Blake. You've been grumpy as hell since Callie left. Cal, we were hoping he was going to visit you this weekend or vice versa. He's been a bear since you've been gone."

"Exaggeration," I groaned. While they laughed and talked, it dawned on me why I was noticing the man. I'd seen him at the restaurant where we'd had breakfast.

That didn't mean anything. The restaurant was close to the park. He might have come here after to enjoy the day, same as us. But I tried to memorize everything I could about him, and I wished he'd turn around so I could get a good look at his face.

He didn't turn or glance our way once, as far as I noticed. I was probably being paranoid. Still, I filed his appearance, what I could see of it, at least, away.

We finally got off the phone and decided to hang out in the park for a while, getting a vendor smoothie bowl later instead of lunch. It was okay, but it seemed more like a dessert than a meal. I figured it was something more aimed at sporty twenty-five-year-olds than someone like me, but I didn't complain.

When we were leaving the park, arm in arm, Callie said, "We'll have a bigger dinner." Then she winked at me. I

guessed she'd picked up on the fact that a smoothie wasn't going to hold me all afternoon.

Once we got back to her apartment, it didn't take any time before we were in bed together again. I think knowing that I was leaving in mere hours gave us both a sense of urgency, even though we'd made love at least three times since I'd been there.

Later, I tried not to angry-stare at Andrew's jacket, still in the corner. I almost offered to take it to him, but that would be running the risk of acting like I didn't trust Callie.

I did trust her. Andrew, I trusted less.

Maybe, being a man, I understood how some men thought a little better than Callie. Or maybe I was just...jealous.

I hated to think it, I'd never been the jealous type, but the idea of them hanging out, coffee and brunch, rubbed me the wrong way. He should have been the bigger person and stopped doing it, knowing we were together. Surely knowing that I knew he'd wanted to get closer to her.

Since he hadn't given up seeing her, I saw Andrew as a threat, as someone ready to swoop in the minute Callie decided she didn't want a long-distance love affair anymore.

Callie was in the bathroom, and I was laying on the bed in sweatpants. We'd made love and taken a shower, and we planned to bum around until dinnertime. Her phone lit up on the nightstand.

Andrew's smiling face pissed me right off. His text read: I keep forgetting to mention my jacket. Let me know when I can swing by and grab it.

Andrew was her age. A good-looking guy. And obviously a persistent one. I felt like if I'd lived in Austin, it would have been a fairer fight. But with me hours away in Elm Grove, and him forgetting jackets and inviting her for coffee under the guise of "friendship," I wasn't sure I stood much of a chance.

I sighed and stretched out on the bed, determined not to spend my last few hours near Callie feeling sour about some other man who'd set his sights on her.

I heard Callie coming and opened my eyes in time to see her leaping through the air. She landed straddling my waist with her knees.

“Gotcha!”

“You’re a little crazy, you know that?”

“Am I?”

I combed my finger through her hair. “Good thing I like crazy.”

She hugged me, and we lay there saying nothing for a long time. I didn’t mention seeing Andrew’s text and in fact, pushed all thoughts of him from my mind.

Doubts were starting to creep in, but they could stay away another few hours while I had Callie in my arms.

CALLIE

IT HAD BEEN two weeks since Blake's visit and Elsie's fantastic news, and I still hadn't managed to find the time to get back to Elm Grove. I had my planner spread open in front of me, filling with appointments, obligations and auditions, and I talked to Mackenzie while I tried to figure out which I could remove or move to give me a couple of days back at Blake's house.

She gave me the latest gossip from our friend's group, because I'd also been pretty bad about catching up with everyone. I'd spent time with her, but hardly anybody else.

"Are you finding the time to go?" She asked about visiting Blake.

"In two weeks, I think I could maybe do a Friday and Saturday. I hope to squeeze in some time with Elsie, too. She's such a great kid."

"And she seems to idolize you."

She really did, and honestly, I loved it. I could hardly wait to dance with her again. To teach her again.

That reminded me of something I hadn't told Mac yet. "I've been looking into some teaching jobs around Austin."

"Yeah? Finally got the teaching bug and ready to give up performing?"

I sighed. "I don't know about that. But I did really love teaching Elsie. When she nailed that audition, it was the best

feeling in the world, knowing I played a small part in that. It's satisfying to teach. I think I want more of that."

"I thought you would, once you got a taste. You have the right temperament."

"I'm just not sure about giving up performing. But in a national dance company, it's impossible to do both."

"So join a local company. You can perform without going on a tour."

Mac was telling me everything I'd already considered for myself, but it was nice to feel validated.

"Maybe. You know, I looked for something local that's—"

"Closer to Elm Grove?"

I laughed. "How'd you know?"

"Because it's so obvious you're head over heels for that man, I knew you would have by now. I think it's a great idea. You should follow your heart, Callie. I've never seen two people who looked more meant for each other than when you showed up with him at my wedding."

"Really?" She hadn't said anything like that to me before.

"Really. I was a little worried about how this fake dating thing was going to work, and if I was going to look like a schmuck for going along with it. But there was nothing fake about the way you two looked at each other, girl. Grab the brass ring, Cal, and don't let go."

Someone was buzzing my apartment. "I've got company, Mac. I'll talk to you later. And thanks. You're the best."

"I am! Call me when you get a chance."

I pushed the button to see who wanted to buzz in.

"It's Andrew. I was going to grab my jacket, if that's okay."

"Oh, sure."

I let him up and opened the door to find him with a bag from Mabel's in one hand and a tray with two drinks in the

other.

“I hope you’re hungry? The smell grabbed me when I was walking by, and since it’s lunchtime...”

I was actually starving, but it seemed a little forward to me that Andrew showed up to get his jacket and brought lunch on the off-chance I hadn’t already eaten. Even my best friends texted or called before they showed up.

I thought of Blake and how he’d been after Andrew had shown up and taken me into town. But he was naturally suspicious.

I did have Andrew’s jacket, and it would be rude to turn him away. And he *had* bought me lunch.

“Thanks,” I said, stepping aside so he could come in.

We sat at my kitchen table, unpacking the fresh burgers, veggie burgers for me, and fries. “Mmm,” I said at the rich aroma. “I haven’t had Mabel’s in a while. I should have taken Blake there last time he was here.”

“Couple of weeks ago, wasn’t it?” Andrew asked, shoving a fry into his mouth.

“Yep. He noticed your jacket, and I realized I’d forgotten to say something while we were on the phone.”

Andrew nodded, looking deep in thought. He didn’t seem to react in any sort of way to me mentioning Blake, which was a relief. Maybe he was just a thoughtful friend who came to get his jacket and brought me lunch.

“So, what’s the word on the group that was arrested for threatening me and my Dad?”

“They were arraigned within a couple of days, all pled not guilty, but the judge opted to deny bail.”

I knew if they’d gotten out on bail or some technicality, someone would have told me, at least, but I hadn’t heard any details yet.

“I’m glad they didn’t get out. Who knows what someone like that will do if they feel like they’re already in deep

trouble.”

“Exactly.”

The rest of our conversation focused on Dad and the level of security he needed, and what the likely sentences might be for the people who’d been arrested.

Right before I was about to clean up from lunch, Andrew took a sip and pulled his straw out a little, but the lid was only partly snapped on. As he pulled the lid off, he tried to grab it and prevent a mess, but his soda splashed over his chest.

“Oh, damn it,” he said, standing quickly and trying to dab himself with napkins. “I should have known that would happen.”

“Hang on, I’ll get a towel.” I rushed into the laundry room to grab a fresh one from the stack I’d folded that morning and had yet to put away. I gave him the towel, but the shirt was so wet in front, it didn’t help much.

“Leave it to me,” Andrew said with a smirk. “I’ve got to be back at the capitol in twenty minutes. I don’t even have time to run home for a fresh shirt.”

“You can borrow one of Blake’s, then. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind, since you’re in a bind. I know the look you’d get if you showed up to see my father in a stained shirt.” Dad was a stickler for being prepared. He’d wonder why Andrew didn’t carry a clean suit of clothes with him for just this kind of thing.

“Thanks, Cal, that’d be great.”

I wasn’t entirely sure Blake would be thrilled about Andrew borrowing a shirt, but if he knew the circumstances, he’d probably offer the same thing.

Then I remembered what Blake had said, that he was sure I believed Andrew was just being friendly, but he wasn’t sure Andrew believed that. It did seem kind of a cliché to spill something on your clothes and have to take them off to try to get a woman to look at your body, though, didn’t it?

It was too cliché, in fact. It had been a simple accident. I loved Blake, but I tried hard not to be as suspicious as him. I gave Andrew one of his shirts. It'd be a little big on him, but not so much it would look sloppy.

The front door buzzer sounded. I frowned because I wasn't expecting anybody. "I'm awfully popular today," I said with a grin and went to see who it was.

Blake's voice came through the intercom. "Hey, baby. I hope you don't mind. I missed you and wanted to surprise you."

I squealed and buzzed him in. In my excitement, I forgot all about Andrew several feet behind me. I swung my door open and met Blake in the hall as he got off the elevator, jumping into his arms and kissing him.

"Whoa," he said with a chuckle.

"I missed you too," I said. "I was just trying to find a weekend to come visit."

"We'll find it together," he said, and his smile was the sweetest thing I'd seen since he'd been to visit me last.

That smile disappeared as we reached my apartment door.

Andrew stood on the other side of the room, pulling Blake's shirt on.

BLAKE

ANDREW STOOD there pulling his shirt on.

Pulling *my* damn shirt on.

I'm suspicious by nature. Skeptical. It comes with the job. But I didn't for a minute think that he was shirtless because he and Callie had been doing anything. Her reaction to seeing me was all wrong for that, anyway.

She was so sweet and naive, I don't think she realized how the situation looked. But the thing was, I knew she wasn't naive. She just trusted Andrew far more than she should have.

"Blake," Andrew said, as he buttoned up. "Cal loaned me your shirt since I spilled pop on mine."

"He came to get his jacket and brought lunch," Callie said, looking between us.

"Are you *done* with lunch?" I asked, never breaking eye contact with him.

"Yeah," he said. "We're done. I need to go get back to the capitol anyway."

How could she not see him trying to maintain some kind of ownership of her? Showing up when I wasn't around. Finding reasons to take his shirt off. I don't care how much pop he'd spilled. A few paper towels to sop up the worst should have been enough.

"Thanks for lunch," Callie said as Andrew passed us to leave.

“Your jacket,” I said, realizing he still hadn’t grabbed it. Probably to have a good excuse to show up again later.

“Oh, yeah.” He dashed back in and grabbed it. “Thanks. I’ll drop off the shirt as soon as I can.”

Damn it. There was his excuse. My shirt. I should have told him to keep it.

When the door was shut behind him, Callie put her arms around me again. “You’re staying at least one night, aren’t you?” She leaned against me and smiled.

“Yeah.” I put my arms around her too, but I couldn’t shake the tension that hit the minute I saw Andrew in her apartment. Shirtless. “He couldn’t wear a slightly damp shirt? Or go change at home?”

Callie tilted her head, narrowing her blue eyes. “He was headed to see my dad, so I offered a clean one.”

“Babe, don’t you realize he probably spilled his drink just to get his shirt off in front of you? And angled to borrow a shirt to have another reason to show up?”

Callie straightened but shook her head. “I saw it happen. The lid wasn’t on properly and he—it doesn’t matter anyway. He didn’t ask for your shirt—I offered. And even if he’d stripped down naked, it’s not like anything would have happened.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t try that, spilling it on his pants too,” I said sarcastically.

She took a step back, glaring at me. “Is that what you’re thinking? That maybe we had a little something going when you showed up?”

“No, Callie. That’s not what I thought at all,” I huffed.

“Good. Then why are you so…” She gestured up and down at me, as if she couldn’t find the right word.

“Pissed?” I snapped.

“Yes!”

“Why is he always showing up here? Always calling and texting you?”

“I told you. We’re friends. He came to get his jacket and—”

I gently took her shoulders in my hands. “Callie, he’s angling for a chance with you. It wasn’t even like he jerked his shirt on and got the hell out of here. He took his time, made sure I saw him before he got it on. He’s challenging me, because he thinks he can get you.”

Callie laughed. “Is this a man thing, being jealous like this? Andrew is just...Andrew. You’re reading way too much into everything.”

Was I? Maybe. But I’m not the jealous type. If someone didn’t want to be with me, why would I get jealous about that? I figure a person is better off knowing if someone isn’t fully committed.

I didn’t want that to be the case with Callie. I *desperately* didn’t want that to be the case with her.

“I think it’s more that you’re not seeing what’s right in front of your face. He knows we’re together. That alone should have him back off at least a little, not find excuses to stop by and undress for you.”

Callie scoffed, and I wanted to kiss her pretty, pouting mouth, but I was still far too worked up. “Blake, you’re being ridiculous. You’re acting like Andrew and I are having some kind of affair behind your back.”

I laced my fingers together behind my neck. “Does he think you are?”

“*What* are you talking about?” She put her hands on her hips. “Of course not, since that’s just not true.”

“I trust you. You say nothing’s going on? Okay. But he very well may think there is. What with you letting him come over, and all. You offering him my shirt. You texting and talking so often with him. He might think he’s on the path to hooking up with you even though he knows you’re with me.”

She crossed her arms and blinked rapidly. “I haven’t led him on, if that’s what you’re saying.”

“I’m not saying you’ve done it intentionally. But I think that’s the message you might be sending, even though you don’t mean to.”

“So I’m...you know what? This is starting to sound like an accusation. And I don’t appreciate that.”

“Baby, I’m not accusing you. I’m trying to make you see reason.” I took a deep breath. “Maybe I should have gone caveman on his ass, tossed him out by his ear, to make sure he understands.”

“You can’t just barge in here and treat a friend like—”

“I’m *barging in* now? I thought it was a great surprise.”

“It was! But not with the way you’re acting now.”

Everything had gone from happy to total shit. Though finding your girlfriend with a shirtless man who has feelings for her would cramp most people’s styles, I knew part of the problem was me. I was acting jealous, because I was, and the whole thing just felt wrong.

“You know what?” I held my hands up and grabbed my bag. “I’m sorry I didn’t let you know that I was coming. I think it’d be best if I headed out.”

“What?” She threw her hands out. “You don’t have to leave, Blake. We can talk about this.”

“The more we’ve talked, the worse it’s gotten. I shouldn’t have shown up unannounced. Won’t do it again.” I stormed out the door with her following behind me.

“Blake, don’t leave like this! Let’s talk when we’re calm.”

I wanted to. I really did. But I didn’t think it would help at that point. But I did cup her cheek, to touch her one more time just in case it was the last chance I had.

“This was a mistake. I’ll talk to you later.”

“What do you mean it’s a mistake? Blake!”

I didn't answer her. I left her in the hallway, hating myself with every step.

I tried to block out the whole situation on the drive home. I played the radio loud enough that it was hard to think about Andrew being shirtless in her apartment. Or of what I should say or do to smooth things over. Still, I managed to think of little else but how happy I'd felt after I got there and how fast that had disappeared.

I didn't stop on the way back. I had enough gas, and I didn't have an appetite even though I hadn't eaten for hours. By the time I pulled into my driveway, the jealousy had eased a little bit.

I was still pissed that Andrew was daring to insert himself into Callie's life the way he was. And I was irritated that Callie just wouldn't see what he was doing. But the jealousy that had made me turn around and stomp back home had passed.

Is loving Callie really all it took for me to lose my cool like that? I didn't like that part of myself who wanted to grab Andrew by the short hairs and throw him down a flight of steps. I felt almost like I was losing myself, becoming someone I didn't know because I loved this woman so much.

That had been one of my biggest fears since my hurt feelings kept me from checking on Rosa earlier, letting my feelings interfere with my logic and instinct. That had been one of the biggest reasons I'd resisted Callie in the first place.

And wasn't that happening in spades right now?

Like it or not, I had some soul-searching to do.

I texted her, and I suddenly remembered that I'd left my gift there on her table. It didn't matter. I still thought taking some time was the smart thing to do.

I told her that I was sorry. It wasn't like me to be so jealous. And that I thought a lot of my frustration came from not being able to be near her while Andrew was there and could see her anytime.

Then I texted the hardest words I'd ever had to type.

I think I need some space and time to think things through.

I went inside my dark, lonely house and immediately turned my phone off. If she texted immediately, I didn't want to get into a back and forth. I really did need some time.

And if I'd acted like such an ass that she didn't answer me at all, I didn't want to know that, either.

CALLIE

ABOUT AN HOUR AFTER BLAKE LEFT, I'd had a good angry cry and cleaned up the table from the lunch Andrew brought.

Andrew texted me. He thanked me again for the borrowed shirt. And he hoped Blake finding him at my place hadn't caused any problems.

It did cause problems. Serious ones. I didn't answer him. Because something about the tone of it, the timing, made me start to wonder if Blake wasn't right about his intentions.

I still didn't like the accusatory tone in some of his questions. I'd done nothing wrong, and I wasn't about to let him make me feel like I had. But I thought I had been a little more trusting of Andrew and his motives than maybe I should have been. I could admit that much.

I didn't text Blake because I knew he'd be on the road for a couple of hours. I almost called, but I thought as angry as he'd been, it was probably better to wait.

Then I got his texts. The last one took my breath away. I sat on the couch, staring at it, wondering if it meant what I thought it would end up meaning.

Time and space. Think things through.

Those were code words for *it's not you, it's me*, weren't they? That was where they were going to lead? I'd been through enough break-ups that reading that text sent a cold chill through me.

I didn't know what to reply, so I didn't say anything. I needed a little time too. To figure out what the hell to do to keep Blake in my life. Because if nothing else, our argument had made it really *clear* to me that I did want that. More than anything.

I knew we could get past this Andrew nonsense if we just talked about it calmly. The question was, would we have a chance?

I got up to get a drink of water and spotted the little box on my dining table. It felt somehow wrong to open it after everything, but he hadn't taken it with him. And he could have.

If nothing else, curiosity got the best of me. Resting on a bed of crumpled pink satin, a pair of handcuffs gleamed under the light. The kind with fluffy fur around the cuffs.

I opened the notecard to read his careful, neat script:

A reminder I'm always with you.

Even when I'm far.

And if you ever want a repeat performance...

He'd added a winking face at the end.

I sat on the couch, holding the handcuffs, laughing at his sweet and cheeky note, and crying again, but not angrily this time. Blake had been so aloof in the beginning, so determined to keep things professional, and now this dear, sweet man gave me handcuffs, so I'd always feel close to him.

It worked. I did. But I did even without them, and he needed to know that. Not through a text or a phone call.

In person.

I'd been agonizing over my schedule earlier, looking for an opening that would give me time to visit. But now was the time for decisive action.

I would leave in the morning to surprise Blake at his home this time. Maybe the whole surprise visit wasn't the greatest

idea after the way this one had turned out. But I thought since I was showing up with a surprise apology, it might be alright.

I needed to look him in the eyes and finally tell him that I loved him. Even if it was too late and he'd started to have second thoughts.

I thought about the space and time text, but I refused to let it change my mind.

Please don't let it be too late.



The next morning, I left for Elm Grove. I packed a bag, optimistic that I'd be staying overnight. And the handcuffs with the note sat in the passenger seat next to me.

I didn't tell anybody I was leaving. Not my dad or Andrew or even Mac. The threat had passed, and I was a grown woman. I didn't need to provide someone with my every movement ahead of time anymore.

Halfway there, I drove through a restaurant for a breakfast biscuit and thought I recognized a car two behind me.

"Blake's suspicions rubbing off on you," I said to my reflection in the rear-view mirror.

I went over how I was going to say everything to Blake I wanted to say on the drive. I felt like I needed the moment to be just right. I'd stop him from saying whatever he started to say and blurt everything out.

If nothing else, he'd hear everything I felt. Then he could decide if being with me was still worth the trouble or not.

Please don't let me have screwed this up.

When I pulled into Blake's driveway, I realized his truck was gone. He probably went to work early like he sometimes had, though he'd done it less and less as we got closer.

That's okay. I could say everything I needed to say to him at the sheriff's office as easily as at home.

I started to back out, but a car whipped in next to me. I recognized the car from the drive-thru earlier that morning.

It was Zander's Toyota. What the hell was Zander doing in Elm Grove?

I got out. "Zander? What—"

He rushed toward me, shoving me back into the driver's seat. "Get in, Callie." He grabbed the keys.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I started to stand again, but he leveled a pistol in my face.

"Don't fight me, Cal. I don't have any desire to hurt you. But I will." He closed my door, keeping the gun trained on me as he walked in front of the car and got into the passenger side. He grabbed my wonderful gift from Blake and threw it into the backseat so he could sit.

Blake.

I clutched the pendant I still wore, hoping it looked like a nervous gesture to Zander. I used my thumbnail to flip the tiny switch in the back that turned the tracking device back on.

"Call your father, Callie. He can take a private plane and be here in no time. There's an abandoned furniture warehouse fifteen minutes outside Elm Grove."

This was Zander. A boy I thought I could fall in love with who'd broken my heart by cheating on me. What the hell was he doing?

"I won't call him. What are you doing? What's wrong with you?" The horrible truth started to dawn on me. Had it been Zander, all this time? But they'd arrested the group of people who wanted my father to resign.

"Don't take it personally, Cal. None of this was ever about you. It's your father we want."

None of it was about me? So not even dating me, cheating on me, was about me? "I was just a means to an end for you all along?"

“Yes. Collateral damage. This is a war against the powers that be, and sometimes innocent people get hurt in the crossfire. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. Now call him.” He pressed the muzzle of the gun to my temple.

“You won’t shoot me.”

“I’ll shoot you and text him from your phone. That’ll work just as well for our purposes. But there’s no need for you to get hurt if you cooperate.”

How had I ever looked at him and thought he could have been for me?

The only thing that convinced me to call was the sense that Zander’s threat was very real. I wanted to live to see Blake again. And I believed there was still a way for everyone to be okay in the end.

Dad’s cell went to his secretary, and I explained that no matter what he was doing, I needed to speak to him. It only took a few minutes for him to answer. Zander fed me exactly what to say. Then he grabbed the phone and said, “Be there on time or she dies. No cops or she dies.”

I could hear my father shouting to speak to me when Zander hung up and dug the pistol into my side.

“Drive.”

I touched my pendant again, sure either Dad was calling Blake already or he’d seen the tracking device activate in his driveway.

Hurry, my love. Hurry, Blake.

Despite having a man in the car with me who seemed ready to end my life at a moment’s notice, I felt stronger than ever that I had to tell Blake how much I loved him, no matter what happened.

BLAKE

I'D JUST LISTENED to a ten-minute rant from Cathy about how the local pancake house wasn't as good as it used to be when my phone buzzed in my pocket.

Thank God, I thought. I didn't care what it was as long as it changed the subject.

I'd come in early so I wouldn't have to sit at home and think. I didn't tell Cathy anything about my surprise trip to see Callie and how that had gone to hell. Apparently, I didn't need to. That woman could read me like a large-print book. She didn't know what was wrong. Just that something was.

And she hadn't stopped trying to distract me from whatever it was since I'd walked in the door.

I glanced at my phone to see the tracking device I'd given Callie. The one she'd turned off after her father called and told us the perpetrators had been arrested. Now it was on again. And it was pinging her...at my house.

“What the—”

For a moment, I thought maybe this was some type of apology. Callie, surprising me by showing up and signaling me with the tracker. Then I realized that it couldn't be. She would call my phone when she found me not home. Or she'd come to town.

She would never turn on that tracker for anything that wasn't serious. Because she knew how seriously I'd taken it when I'd given it to her. *In case you're taken...*

Her signal started moving, leaving my house, and heading back out of town.

“Cathy, Callie’s in trouble.”

My deputy went from someone bitching about overcooked pancakes to a woman on a mission just that fast. She stood. “Full gear?”

Sure in the knowledge that Callie wouldn’t use that tracker for anything but the direst circumstances, I nodded. “Full gear. Let’s go.”

We took separate cars, riding with our lights off, to follow the signal. I was in the lead, Cathy taking her directions from me. What the hell was Callie doing in Elm Grove? A hopeful part of me thought maybe she’d come after our blowup the night before. But to show up and then this, whatever this was, didn’t make any sense.

I was dialing Vincent Ellis’ number when his call rang through for me.

“What the hell’s going on, Governor?”

Vincent explained the situation. Kidnapped. Demanding a swap, him for her. Every word ratcheted up the level of rage I felt. The more he talked, the tighter I gripped the steering wheel. My knuckles ached, I squeezed it so tight.

“They were so confident they’d arrested the whole group,” he said, sounding distraught. “They dated for such a long time! All in the hopes of getting to me.” Then he ranted about political extremists for a few minutes while I focused on the road ahead.

“I’m touching down in the next ten minutes, Blake. I trust you’ll get there before me. We understand that the only objective here is—”

“Keeping Callie safe. Yes, sir.”

“Good. Just so we’re clear.”

“And just so we’re clear, governor, I fully intend to keep her safe without sacrificing you.”

“Do your best, Blake. I just don’t want my daughter harmed under any circumstances. Even if it means—”

“Just show up. Cathy and I will take care of the rest.”

I wasn’t going to discuss the possibility of letting Zander kill Ellis. Callie’s safety was my top priority, but I fully intended for both to leave that warehouse alive.

I relayed the warehouse meeting place to Cathy, who took a more circuitous route to come in on the side rather than from the front, like me. Zander had said ‘no cops’, but he’d met me at the wedding as Callie’s boyfriend. As long as he believed that was true, seeing me even in uniform with a cruiser shouldn’t raise the same alarm as a bunch of police officers rolling up.

Seeing only me would help too. As long as Cathy could stay out of sight and approach him from the side or behind, we’d at least have the element of surprise.

I drove up to the warehouse slowly, with my windows down so I could hear. I stopped about a hundred yards away from the building, parking next to Callie’s car. And then I saw movement from the entrance that was in shadow because of the angle of the early morning sun.

Callie took a step into the light. The fear in her eyes hurt my soul and made me want to get my hands around the throat of anyone who made her that afraid so I could squeeze the life out of them.

Zander stepped out behind her, a hand on her arm.

I opened my door and put my hand out, up in the air, followed by my other hand, so he could see I wasn’t armed and pointing anything in his direction.

“I just want to talk,” I shouted.

“It’s Ellis for her. Nothing to talk about. I told him not to call the cops.”

With my hands up at my shoulders, I slowly approached them. “He didn’t. I’m not here as a cop. I’m just here for

Callie. The governor is on his way, so why don't you let her go?"

I knew it wouldn't work but keeping him talking to give Cathy time was the most important thing.

"Don't come any closer," he said through clenched jaws. Then he stopped me in my tracks by cocking his pistol and holding it to Callie's temple.

I froze.

"Put the gun down," I said, as calmly as I could even though I was shaking with rage.

I wanted to shout threats at him, tell him what I'd do to him when I got a hold of him, but I held my tongue.

How dare that sleazy motherfucker hold a loaded gun to Callie's head.

How fucking *dare* he.

"Back off and I will."

I took a few steps backward, because I'd have done anything to get him to lower that gun and keep her out of immediate danger.

"It's all making sense to me now," I said, trying not to give away the fact that I could see Cathy coming around the building from the side. "If he'd been really dating you, Callie, he wouldn't have cheated."

I leveled my gaze with hers. "Nobody in their right fucking mind would have you and ever let you go."

She looked like she was going to cry, and I had so much more I wanted to say, but Cathy had her gun out and was coming fast from the side. I wanted to make sure he stayed focused on me.

"Especially not some limpdicked little loser like this guy," I spat.

He laughed, sounding shocked, and waved his gun in my direction. "Who the fuck do you think—"

“Freeze!” Cathy shouted as soon as Zander’s attention was on me and not Callie. At the same time, I motioned for Callie to stake a step back and managed to draw my pistol to aim it at Zander.

Callie was out of his immediate line of fire and both me and my deputy had our guns aimed at Zander.

“Drop it and kick it away, and put your hands on your head,” Cathy commanded. And honestly, if I’d been Zander, I might have shit my pants. She sounded ferocious.

He hesitated, and I prepared to blow him away where he stood if he made the tiniest move toward Callie. But he eventually dropped the gun and kicked it in front of him.

I motioned for Callie to run around him at a distance. She jumped into my arms with a sob. I didn’t know it was possible to feel that much relief. I could have crumpled to the ground with it, but I held her tight, still aiming my gun at Zander.

“It’s over. It’s finally over,” I said, kissing Callie’s ear.

Then I pulled her into one arm and started to approach Cathy and Zander to help her cuff him, if necessary. Right before I reached them, still holding Callie tight against me, the little bastard dove away from Cathy and grabbed for the gun he’d dropped.

She threw herself onto him, but I saw his hand grab it before they wrestled with it. Then I saw it lift toward me and Callie.

I shoved Callie behind me, instinct kicking in, and pushed forward to try to stop Zander before he did something stupid.

Too late.

I damn near felt the pain before I heard the shot that took me down. When it hit my chest, it threw me backward with a force like being picked up and slammed by the world’s angriest linebacker.

The bullet’s impact knocked the wind out of me. Whatever was left, hitting the ground drove out too. I gasped for a

breath, looking up at the sky, cringing against the pain. The last thing I heard was Callie screaming my name.

CALLIE

THE SHOT RANG OUT.

He went down right in front of me, grunting as he hit the ground. His eyes fluttered for a few seconds, and then he didn't move.

"Son of a bitch," Cathy growled as she wrestled the gun away from Zander. He cried out in pain that she'd broken his wrist. "Good," she yelled.

I could hear the handcuffs she put on him clinking. I could hear sirens growing louder in the distance and the approaching thump of helicopter blades. But as Blake stopped moving and I threw myself against him, pressing my ear to his chest, the one thing I needed to hear most, I couldn't hear.

His heartbeat.

Time sped back up to normal all of a sudden, and I screamed. "Blake!"

I shook his shoulders. I held his face in my hands. I kissed his mouth, his cheeks, his closed eyelids.

"Blake, wake up. Please!" I begged and pleaded with him to be okay. I was so desperate for him to open his eyes. He had to know I loved him, that I wanted to be with him.

"You have to be okay, Blake. I love you. Do you hear me? I love you."

As I stroked his face, I sobbed.

He didn't move.

“Blake. I love you. Please...”

Through my tears, I saw the corner of his mouth twitch.

Had I imagined it?

Then a subtle smile slowly emerged on his gorgeous face.

“Blake?”

“Say it again, baby,” he whispered with his eyes still closed.

One corner of his mouth turned up in a half-grin. He finally fluttered his eyes open and cupped my cheek to pull me down into a quick kiss.

“What—I don’t understand, you were—”

With a loud groan, he sat up and opened his shirt, then rapped his knuckles against it. “Kevlar.”

A bulletproof vest? That hadn’t even occurred to me. I threw my arms around him so suddenly that we both went down. He laughed and groaned.

“Easy, woman! I just got shot.”

I was laughing and crying at the same time because I was so relieved that he seemed okay. I took his face in my hands. “I’m sorry,” I said, smiling and crying as I said it. “I’m sorry for everything.”

Blake ran his fingers into my hair, his thumb brushing my cheek. “Me too. Now what were you saying to me while I was half-conscious on the ground?”

I could tell he was teasing, at least a little. “You didn’t hear it all?” I teased back.

“I did. But I want you to say it again.”

“I love you,” I said. Then I kissed him and said it again and again until the EMTs arrived and wanted to check Blake over.



Blake sat, shirtless, in the back of the ambulance while the EMTs took his vitals and ran a few quick checks to make sure the impact hadn't done any serious damage. He was already bruising, and it would apparently look like he'd been through a meat grinder this time tomorrow. But thank God for the Kevlar that kept the bullet away from his heart.

My father and I stood about twenty feet away, surrounded by some of his staff and a few police officers. I couldn't stop looking at Blake, though. I was so relieved he was only bruised.

"You should have told me," Dad said.

I did finally have to look away from the ambulance to talk to my father. "He insisted for a long time that nothing could happen between us because it would be unprofessional. You know, that's why he quit so suddenly after that gala five years ago?"

Dad shook his head. "I'm not really surprised. He's one of the best who's ever worked for me. It makes sense that he'd try to avoid mixing his business and personal lives." He grinned at me. "You have my blessing. Not that you really need it, Callie. You've always been capable of making your own decisions."

I hugged him. "Thanks, Dad. It's still nice to know that you approve."

"Not only did he protect you the night you met, but he also let you live with him to keep you safe. And he just threw himself between you and a bullet. Approve isn't strong enough a word, honey."

We walked over to the ambulance where the EMTs looked just about finished assessing Blake. He opened his arms for me, so I hugged him, so relieved everything had turned out okay after all.

I stood with my arm around Blake's back as he looked at my father. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Nonsense, Blake. I might have been a little miffed at first to find out you were dating, but I can't imagine anyone I trust

more with my daughter than you.” He held out his hand to shake Blake’s. “It’ll be nice to see you in the mansion from time to time as my daughter’s partner instead of as a security detail. Which is my way of hinting that you need to come to family dinners when you can. I can always send a chopper or the plane if you don’t want to drive.”

He gestured toward the helicopter waiting in the center of the large parking lot. Coming by chopper had been faster than a small plane, and he meant to go back that way too.

“You’re good, sheriff.” The EMT closed the large red case that sat next to him. “As long as you feel okay, I think you’re just looking at serious bruising. If anything changes, of course, let us know immediately.”

Blake thanked them and carefully pulled his shirt back on. I tried to help, then got my arm around his waist as soon as possible. After seeing him unconscious on the ground, it was as if I couldn’t touch him enough just to make sure he was really there and okay.

“Cathy, bring Matt out here later to get my cruiser, will you? I’m going to ride back with Callie.” He stopped and looked at me. “As long as you feel steady enough to drive.”

“Yeah, I do. And I’m not ready for us to be in separate cars yet.” I hugged him tight, sighing when he rubbed his cheek against my hair.

We walked toward my car, which was also in the direction of the helicopter. Andrew had been one of the staffers who flew with him. He’d walked most of the way toward us by the time we reached my car.

“Ready, Governor?” Andrew said.

My dad gave me one last hug. “I’m so sorry about all this, Callie. Thank goodness it’s finally over.”

“I’m glad you’re safe now, Dad. Have a safe flight too.”

Andrew nodded at Blake, who nodded back. And instead of hugging me like he might ordinarily do, Andrew gave me a quick nod. “I’m glad you’re okay, Cal. Glad you were in good hands.”

He looked a little ashamed, but he also seemed sincere. I guess Blake had been right about him challenging Blake's relationship with me the whole time. I'd just been too naive to see it.

We watched them head for the chopper and take off, then we got into my car. Blake groaned as he got into the passenger seat.

"Should you maybe lie down in the back or something?" I suggested.

"No. But as soon as we're back at my place, that's what I'm going to do. Getting stiff as a board."

I put my hand over his. "All I want to do the rest of the night is lie in your arms and be grateful that you're okay."

He kissed my hand and buckled his seatbelt. "Sounds like the best night ever."

It did to me too. After my dad took off for Austin, I drove us back toward Blake's house.

BLAKE

CALLIE LOVED ME.

That was all that mattered. Any other obstacles or petty grievances or disagreements could be fixed. As long as that woman loved me, all was right with the world.

She held my hand while she drove. I needed the contact too. It was hard to stop thinking about Zander holding that gun to her head, threatening to hurt the love of my life. That mental image was going to stick with me for a while.

The only thing that would keep it from being a recurring nightmare was the fact that I intended to fall asleep and wake up with Callie in my arms as often as possible.

When we went in, Callie took my arm like I was a feeble old man. I chuckled. "I can make it, babe. My legs are okay, it's my torso that's stiff."

Once she was convinced I could walk, she took her bag upstairs and got us some cold water. Then I stretched out on the couch with a groan and kicked my shoes off.

"Oh, that's better."

She looked down at me with raised eyebrows.

"What are you doing?" I said, reaching for her. "Come here."

Careful of my sore chest and ribs, she stretched out against me on the couch and rested her head on my shoulder. "Is this okay?"

“This is perfect.” I kissed her forehead and closed my eyes.

“Blake, about last night, I’m—”

“Baby, you don’t need to say it. I’m sorry too. I acted like an ass and never should have left that way.”

She leaned up to look into my face. “But you were right. I didn’t realize it until we were leaving the warehouse. The way Andrew looked at you and how distant he was with me...he knew what he was doing. You saw it, and I didn’t.”

I nuzzled her temple. “Maybe for all your ‘don’t trust men’ thinking, you give people more credit than you think and that’s why you didn’t realize. Or maybe it’s just a man thing. We can recognize it in each other easier than you could.”

“Maybe. But I’m sorry anyway.”

I took a deep breath and sighed. “Yeah, me too. I never meant to accuse you of anything. I knew better than that. I don’t know what came over me, because I’m not a jealous person. I guess that’s a reaction I’m going to have any time you’re near another man. I’ll do my best to rein it in, though.”

I stroked her cheek. “Know that I do completely trust you, even if I act like a big asshole.”

“You weren’t quite *that* bad. And a little jealousy is okay, I guess.” She snuggled down against me.

“So you were coming to surprise me when he showed up, huh? I noticed you packed a bag. Figured you’d be spending the night?”

“I was counting on it.” She leaned up then, frowning, looking suddenly stricken with a horrible thought. “What if he’d hit you in the arm or leg? Or head? What were you thinking walking up to someone with a gun when you were only protected from here to here.” She tapped my collarbone and my hip.

I smiled and kissed her. “That’s just the risk cops take all the time. But if it had hit me in the head, I might still be okay.”

“What? How?”

I rapped my knuckles against my skull. “It’s pretty damn hard.”

She blew out a breath and pressed her cheek against my shoulder again. “That’s not funny. Don’t even joke about that.”

I chuckled.

After a few more minutes of resting, Callie said, “Can I come back?”

“What?”

“Can I move back here with you? I know it’s sudden and everything, but I want to be here. With you.”

She rose up to look down at me, so I cupped her cheek. “Baby, I never wanted you to leave.”

Her beautiful face broke out into a huge smile, and she kissed me.

“I didn’t want to leave you, either. I just thought I should get back to auditioning and try to pick up my life where this whole threat business upended it. And after you left last night, I realized I don’t really want any of that. I just wanted to... come home. This place feels like home to me because you’re here.”

She sniffed, and I brushed my thumb over her cheek. “I’d decided all that, more or less, on the drive here. But then when I saw you on the ground, not knowing if you’d be okay, everything became crystal clear. I want to be wherever you are. Nothing is more important to me than that.”

Callie kissed me. “I just love you so much, Blake Donovan. More than I ever thought I could love anyone.”

“I love you, baby.” I sank my fingers into her hair and kissed her the way I’d imagined kissing her all night after surprising her at her apartment. The way I hadn’t gotten to because of the dust-up about Andrew.

I was relieved he seemed to understand his place now. And our relationship was out into the open with her father. Now that we wouldn’t have to try to make it work between two

towns, it seemed there was nothing that could stand in our way.

I spent much of the day recuperating on the couch with Callie stretched alongside me.

We'd been watching an old black and white movie on TV when Callie moved against me in a way that dug directly into my fresh bruise. I hissed, and she leaned away.

"Sorry! Maybe we should get you into bed? At least there's more room there, so it's less likely I'll batter you."

I let her help me sit up, then I stood with a groan. I'd been shot once before with a vest on, but it was an abdominal shot at a much greater distance. This chest shot at close range made me feel like my muscles might tear apart if I moved too quickly.

We made our way upstairs, and I painfully removed my shirt and pants. Callie had put her bag in my room, which made me smile. As I sat on the edge of the bed, she got on her knees behind me and hugged me.

"How tired are you?" She kissed my neck.

I was sore as hell, but thanks to a lot of naps throughout the day, I was awake enough.

"What did you have in mind?" Something soft snapped closed around my wrist.

"You opened it. I'd almost forgotten all about that."

"I didn't forget." Callie nibbled my earlobe. "That was the hottest sex I've ever had. And I'd like an encore, if you're up for it."

I turned to pull her into my arms and kiss her. "I'll do my best, baby, but you may have to take the lead this time, with me as stiff and sore as I am."

Callie gently pushed me onto my back in the bed and straddled my hips, already in nothing but little panties and a thin tank top. She leaned down, careful of the dark bruising on my chest, and kissed me with a growing heat.

“I’m sure I can handle it.”

She rolled her hips and rubbed herself against me.

I was sure she could handle it too.

EPILOGUE

9 Months Later

“PLIER, MICHELLE. MIND YOUR PLIER.” My newest student stood at the barre and practiced this basic move a few more times before attempting to combine it with a delicate, curved arm. “Very good. You’re improving.”

Class was officially over, but a few students always stayed after for ten or fifteen minutes to practice with the barre, something most people didn’t have in their homes. I didn’t mind. It gave me time to give them some individual instruction and help where I could.

Elsie had her foot on the barre while she bent her knee and tried to make the movements more graceful. She practiced a lot with the barre in the basement, but she never missed an opportunity to practice in class, either.

“Alright, girls,” I said, clapping my hands. “Time to clear out for Miss Kate’s class.”

They ran around, gathering their things, and we all headed out as a group. “Is your mom at home, or do you need to go to the bakery?”

“Bakery. Besides, Mom said she has a pie for you and Uncle Blake.”

“Whoa, don’t want to miss that! I hope it’s chocolate.” We both said chocolate at the same time.

I’d been teaching at the Valley Spring Dance Academy since I moved in with Blake. It had only taken a few weeks to

apply, get an interview, an audition, and get hired. I'd been worried I might still miss performing. Getting dozens of girls ready to perform in their recitals seemed to fill that void.

I also danced with a small, local troupe thirty minutes away. Most were amateurs that didn't go on to dance professionally for reasons that had nothing to do with their skills. They'd chosen a different lifestyle, like me.

The pie Lisa made for us was chocolate—she knew what I liked—and I gratefully brought it home to Blake's. His truck was outside, not the cruiser, so I knew he was off for the rest of the night. And I looked forward to a night in with chocolate pie and my sexy hunk of man.

"I'm home," I crooned as I opened the door. I left my bag and the pie in the kitchen and looked around the house for Blake.

I touched the pendant he gave me. I wore it often and thought of it as a good luck charm. It had certainly been good luck at least once.

A pair of handcuffs hung on the bedroom doorknob, our signal for sexy times. The first time Blake had put them there, I thought he'd forgotten and hung them in a weird spot. He said, "No, it's like when you put a sock on your doorknob to let your roommates know you need privacy."

That was all news to me, but I had a good laugh about it. Now, I stared at the handcuffs, heat already building inside me. Who would have ever guessed that my gruff, grumpy bodyguard slash sheriff was such a romancer at heart?

I whipped the door open, wondering if he'd be waiting for me already naked on the bed. Maybe already wearing handcuffs. Instead, he wore a suit, and was down on one knee.

"Oh," I gasped.

Was he really doing this? We hadn't even lived together for a year. Not that I cared. I'd have married him if he'd asked me that day Zander kidnapped me. But he seemed to care so much about facts and logic and care, it caught me completely off-guard to think he might be ready that fast.

“I hope that’s a good *oh*.”

I put my hands up to my mouth. “It is. I think it is.” I couldn’t stop the giddy laugh that came out then. I felt such joy at the thought of being his wife. “I mean, it is. Yes.”

He grinned one of his most beautiful grins. The kind I’m so proud to be able to get from him. “Woman, I haven’t even asked you yet.”

I waved my hands between us. “Oh, then ask me. Hurry up and ask me.”

“Will you marry me, Callie?”

“Yes!” I bounced up and down, and Blake stood to embrace me. He kissed me hungrily, though we were both still laughing.

He lifted my left hand, but instead of putting a ring on my finger, he clicked a handcuff into place. It was very thin, like a child’s toy from a cops and robbers set.

I laughed again. “Seriously? Are you going to handcuff me to you after I walk down the aisle? I think the crowd will talk.”

He lifted the cuff that dangled with one finger, and I understood why it was such a thin, plastic pair. A diamond ring had been threaded onto that one. It glinted beautifully in the light.

“It’s perfect.” I held it up, barely able to believe how lucky I was to have a man like Blake. “You’re perfect.”

He pulled me into his arms and unlocked the plastic handcuffs so he could slide the ring onto my finger. “I can’t wait until you’re my wife, Callie. I love you so much.”

Blake kissed me until I couldn’t see straight. Then we made good use of the pair of handcuffs he’d hung on the door.



Thank you for reading **Protected by My Grumpy Hero**.

If you loved this book, then you'll love [Pretending for the Grump Next Door!](#)

It's a steamy heart-warming story about two neighbors that fall in love despite the challenges they face. It's filled with fun, flirty, and swoon worthy scenes!

SNEAK PEEK

PRETENDING FOR THE GRUMP NEXT DOOR

**The last thing I need is a sassy city girl next door.
But she keeps on ending up on top of me. Soaking wet. It's
not just from the rain.**

My dream of tearing down the eyesore next door turns into her renovation project.

The gloves are off, but I rather it be our clothes.

Her damn bubbly attitude and smart mouth drives me crazy.

Then she falls on top of me, drenched in her skimpy robe.

All I want to do is throw her over my shoulders and take her to my bed.

She pretends to be my girlfriend to keep my matchmaking sister at bay.

A night at my family's house forces us together.

I can't resist and I tell her how much she turns me on.

I thought she'd slap me and walk away.

Instead, she asks me to show her how much.

One night of unbridled passion and I can't go back.

She says it's out of our systems and we're now done.

I say we're just getting started.

Her project is coming to an end, and it's time for her to leave.

I can't ask her to stay, but I can't let her go.

An ex-marine mechanic meets a sassy city girl in this small town enemies to lover romance. Filled of flirty banter, steamy love scenes, and off the charts chemistry. Get ready for passion and sizzling slow burn tension with a swoon worthy happily ever after

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Excerpt

Leah

I watched Carter take his pillow and leave the room. And I wanted to yell out for him to stop.

To stay. And touch me already.

When I bumped him with my leg a couple of times, it had been intentional. I didn't think he'd be annoyed with me and leave. I wanted him to turn around and kiss me, put his hands on me again. I'd never been so damn turned on in my life.

He didn't seem angry, but I wasn't sure if the reason he left was because he wanted me.

At the very least, I had to know for sure that he hadn't rushed out of the bedroom because I'd done or said something wrong. I felt pretty sure that wasn't what was going on, but I'd already said and done a lot of wrong things when it came to Carter.

I quietly padded through the house to see where he had gone. Maybe he'd headed to the kitchen for a snack. I noticed light coming through one of the dining room doors. It opened onto a corridor, and beyond that sat a screened-in porch.

Carter sat stretched out on a lounge chair with a blanket over his legs and a pillow tucked behind his head, looking out into the night sky.

He looked uncomfortable as hell.

I stepped out onto the porch, being quiet to not wake him just in case, but he turned his head toward me. His jaw tightened and he heaved out a deep breath.

“Leah, what are you doing?” he asked softly.

“Couldn’t sleep.” I sat on the chair next to his, crossing my ankles and lacing my fingers together on my stomach. “Stargazing?”

“Can’t see that much from here.” He pointed toward the trees at the edge of the yard. “Sagittarius is up there behind the trees.”

“Scorpius is up there this time of year too, right?”

He glanced at me and smiled. “Yep. You like astronomy?”

I shrugged. “A little. I don’t know much beyond the biggest constellations, but when you spend a lot of time outside as a kid, it’s easy to get interested.”

He rested his head against the pillow, nodding.

“Carter, you can’t sleep out here.”

“I can. It’s fine, Leah. What I miss out on tonight I’ll catch up on tomorrow night at home.” He reached over and squeezed my hand. “Go back to bed.”

I grabbed his hand before he could pull it away. “Are you upset with me for anything? I’m worried I said or did something—”

“Of course not. You were wonderful. I couldn’t have asked for anybody to play the part of the girlfriend better than you managed it.” He looked away as he said that, staring out the porch again.

So he hadn’t been upset. The reason he’d left the room might have been what I suspected. To avoid making a pass at me.

“It’s not like it was a hardship,” I said. “Your girlfriend would be a lucky gal.”

His head snapped toward me, so I figured it was then or never. I swallowed hard.

“You’re not going to be comfortable out here. Come back to the bedroom, Carter.”

He didn't move or say anything for such a long time that I thought I'd made a huge mistake. Then he dropped my hand and turned away.

"Leah, you don't understand. I appreciate you being willing to share, but I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because—" he huffed, shaking his head. "I can't stand having you that close to me. Just go back inside," he said with a low growl.

My breath caught. "Carter—"

"Do you even know what you do to me? Having you in the house next door is bad enough. But in the same bed?" He glanced at me again, his jaw tightening. "Being next to you was driving me fucking crazy because I wanted to touch you so badly. I promise, I'll get a lot more sleep out here."

My heart fluttered, and I felt a little dizzy for a few seconds hearing what I'd hoped to hear. Hearing *better* than I hoped to hear, because the way Carter said it, with a growl behind his voice, sent heat straight between my legs.

I could feel my heartbeat in my clit, so I squeezed my thighs together. I wanted him so much that my desire gave me the courage to stand up.

"I don't care how much sleep you'll get, Carter." I stood next to his chair for a second, then I stepped over him to straddle his thighs and lower myself to sit in his lap. "Because I wasn't inviting you back inside to sleep."

He stared at me, his dark gaze intense, his chest rising as he heaved in a slow breath.

Feeling seductive and eager in a way I never had with anyone else, I slid my hands up his arms. "You said you wanted to touch me so badly."

"Leah," he said, making it sound like a warning.

"So show me."

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