

RAISING

The Bar



STEPHANIE ROSE

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That's What She Said Publishing, Inc.



Raising the Bar

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Cover Design: Najla Qamber Designs

Cover Photo: © Shutterstock

Editing: Lisa Hollett—Silently Correcting Your Grammar

Proofreading: Jodi Duggan

Sensitivity Reader: Kathy Hong Kobzeff

ISBN: 979-8-88643-933-2 (ebook)

ISBN: 979-8-88643-934-2 (paperback)

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CONTENTS

1. [Claudia](#)
 2. [Claudia](#)
 3. [Jude](#)
 4. [Claudia](#)
 5. [Jude](#)
 6. [Claudia](#)
 7. [Jude](#)
 8. [Claudia](#)
 9. [Claudia](#)
 10. [Claudia](#)
 11. [Jude](#)
 12. [Claudia](#)
 13. [Claudia](#)
 14. [Jude](#)
 15. [Jude](#)
 16. [Claudia](#)
 17. [Jude](#)
 18. [Claudia](#)
 19. [Jude](#)
 20. [Claudia](#)
 21. [Jude](#)
 22. [Claudia](#)
 23. [Claudia](#)
 24. [Jude](#)
 25. [Claudia](#)
 26. [Jude](#)
 27. [Claudia](#)
 28. [Claudia](#)
 29. [Jude](#)
- [Epilogue](#)
- [What to read next?](#)
- [Author's Note](#)
- [Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by Stephanie](#)

For Atlee,

I hope that Claudia was everything you wished for.

CLAUDIA

“YOU HAVE GOT TO BE FUCKING KIDDING ME,” I SIGHED WHEN I noticed the blue and red lights in my rearview mirror and the shrill *whooping* sound in tandem with the sirens.

Gravel crunched under my tires as I maneuvered my car onto the side of the highway. Other than my car and the police cruiser pulling over behind me, I saw nothing for miles but asphalt and woods on either side of the road. So much for using the drive to calm myself down before I arrived at my best friend Peyton’s house. I shut my eyes at the footfalls coming from behind my now-open car window.

I’d always loved the drive from Brooklyn to Kelly Lakes. Once I made it out of the New York City boroughs, the traffic would ease for the most part, and it would be only me on the open, quiet road. I’d enjoy the long miles of nothing but my own company before I spent a few days with my best friend and her adorable family.

As I’d white-knuckled the steering wheel for the past almost-three hours, the low hum of the engine and my own exasperated sighs the only things filling the silence inside my car, this drive had been anything but relaxing. In fact, with every mile that had ticked by, the more time I’d had to think about what had just happened and to let it all sink in. A flurry of emotions had barreled over me after the initial shock had faded, coming out in the nail marks on my steering wheel and my lead foot on the gas pedal.

Thirteen years. Thirteen fucking years. My friends had all job-hopped after we graduated from college—except for

Peyton, until her own professional life had imploded and she'd escaped to what I called the country, Kelly Lakes. Every time I'd come to visit, I got a kick out of the small Upstate New York town that always reminded me of a Hallmark movie set.

Sure, moving around would have meant bigger salary increases, but I had been happy where I was and never wanted to leave. Maybe I'd gotten too comfortable, but why would I leave a job I liked and that I was good at? Maintaining sales quotas and new business pitches was stressful, but I loved the challenge and the people I worked with.

When the company had changed hands last year, we'd all been a little nervous, but I'd never had any fears or doubts about keeping my job. I had the highest revenue in our office, my clients loved me and would often refer new prospects to us, who would ask for me specifically. The new group of executives had been every bit a boys' club, but I'd endured the mansplaining during our weekly staff meetings and grinned while setting them straight that I knew what the hell I was talking about.

I had always been outspoken, even as a kid. My father said that smart women had to be louder than mediocre men in order to be heard, and while he'd get exasperated each time I'd gotten into trouble for talking in class, I was never punished for it.

I'd learned early on to be polite but unyielding. And in the past year, that attitude had pissed off upper management enough to endure an undercurrent of tension whenever I came into the office. My friends had left the company one by one, and I was all that was left of the original staff. I knew deep down I'd have to leave eventually, but I'd thought it would be on my terms.

Once I'd spotted the meeting invitation from HR—with no explanation—when I'd opened my inbox this morning, I'd known. I'd had fifteen minutes to let it sink in before I was called into the conference room with my boss and a terrified HR manager.

“You’ve been a great asset to the company, Claudia. This isn’t performance-based. We just want to go a different direction,” my boss had said. That different direction being a fresh out of graduate school sales rep—whom I’d caught calling my boss “Uncle Greg” on his first day. They’d asked me to bring him to client meetings and lunches for him to *shadow me and learn*, but after I’d had to shut him down a few times for promising things that he didn’t fully understand yet and couldn’t deliver on, he began shadowing his uncle in executive meetings instead.

He was young and arrogant without experience, but I supposed he’d thought that since he had a penis, he would automatically know better than me. I’d always laughed it off when I met guys like him, but I’d never thought I’d lose my job to one.

My foot had come down even harder as I’d thought of all the late nights and weekends, all the anxious Sunday nights I’d spent worrying if the week would go well. My love life had always been a mess, but I’d nurtured my professional one and made it my priority. All those years of hard work seemed like time squandered as I looked back from where I was now.

My parents had reiterated from the time I’d had a summer cashier’s job to save twenty percent of each paycheck because “you never know,” and to shut them up, I’d let my father set up a savings account for me. My plan had been to go on a bucket-list vacation or buy the house of my dreams someday with all I’d accumulated over the years, never thinking it would become an emergency fund.

I had severance and unemployment to fall back on for the next few weeks, and I had enough contacts to get feelers out, but the very thought of meeting with recruiters or going on interviews exhausted me, and I wasn’t ready to even think about any of that yet.

Not now, and maybe not period.

The thought of starting over pissed me off, and what for? Just to be back here again someday? I had been loyal to my company and had given my all every single day, and one

morning, they'd discarded me like yesterday's garbage. The anger and disappointment were raw, but deep enough to shift the mind-set I'd always had.

After that one fifteen-minute meeting, all my years of hard work had equated to nothing.

My stomach had turned in disgust at the realization, until it'd dropped when I'd realized I was being pulled over.

"Do you know how fast you were going?" the police officer growled in my ear.

"What difference does it make? I'm the only one on this road."

That was the wrong answer and wouldn't help at all, but frustrated petulance had taken over for my common sense.

"Almost thirty over the speed limit. License and registration, please."

"Look," I said, plastering on a wide smile as I sucked in a slow breath. When I turned, I found an at least six-foot-tall Adonis with narrowed blue eyes, a chiseled jaw covered in just enough stubble to stay on this side of clean-cut, holding out his toned forearm.

"I know the chief," I stammered, clearing my throat when my voice came out scratchy. "His niece is my best friend, in fact."

"Chief McGrath wouldn't like the idea of you speeding on his roads, no matter who you are and what time it is. License and registration," he requested slowly, as if I were a child and he'd just run out of patience.

And it was hot as hell.

Something I shouldn't have noticed in the cop I was in trouble with—and definitely not after the day I'd just had. I'd jumped in my car and torn out of my spot in front of my Brooklyn apartment building to escape to a friendly place where corporate assholes didn't exist and there were little parlors dedicated to ice cream.

I had been so dead set on getting as far away from my problems as possible, I hadn't thought about anything else—or realized that I was doing close to ninety on the highway. Still, there was something about this guy that was impossible not to notice. He had a presence, a quiet intensity that I supposed most cops were trained to have, but those steely blue eyes had me fumbling my words, a problem I'd never had before.

“Listen, Officer...” I peered up at him, squinting at the badge pinned to his wide chest as I handed him my paperwork. “Oh sorry, Sergeant. I promise I have respect for the law. I'm...having a really bad day,” I said, flicking my eyes up to his icy ones. He was built but not in a meathead way, a man who could lift and throw but didn't seem like the type to spend hours in a gym. Maybe fighting bad guys gave him that body?

“Davis.” He shifted his torso toward me, the muscles in his shoulders working under his shirt. “If you want to take down my badge number, you can, but the chief is going to side with me.”

I lifted my head to his raised brow, embarrassment bleeding into my heated cheeks. I wasn't this person, the one who speed-raced down an open highway and got snippy with police officers.

“No, it's fine. I deserve a ticket,” I said as I blew out a long breath and let my head fall back. “Uncle Keith would totally side with you.” I turned, expecting Sergeant Davis to be scribbling on the pad in his hand. Instead, I met his narrowed eyes as he searched my gaze.

“A bad day isn't an excuse to be reckless. Maybe there aren't a lot of cars out here, but something could jump out in front of you, and at that speed, you wouldn't be able to steer around it.”

All I could do was nod. I'd had my share of minor fender benders, but I'd never earned even one speeding ticket. He was right. A bad day was no excuse to put myself and anyone I came across on the road in danger. The rage I'd headed here with had now dissipated into shame and regret.

“I lost my job today, Sergeant Davis. It’s no excuse, but I’ve been there for thirteen years and worked my ass off every single day. And this morning, they gave my job to a little asshole who isn’t half as good as me just because his uncle is the boss and he has a penis...”

I cringed when his brows popped up.

“No offense. I’m not trying to talk myself out of a ticket... anymore.”

I smiled and swore I spotted a tiny curve of his lips for a split second.

“You’re right. And I shouldn’t have mouthed off to you just now. That’s not who I am—or, not who I usually am. It’s just...a bad day.” I peered up at Sergeant Davis, expecting an eye roll or a blank expression for the city chick speeding down a country road. Instead, I found a softer expression when I caught his gaze, almost as if his eyes were holding mine and not glaring at me as I would have expected.

“Tell Uncle Keith I’m sorry. Or maybe don’t tell him at all. I’ll pay the ticket quickly and quietly, and he doesn’t have to know that I endangered his roads. I love Kelly Lakes and would hate not to be allowed back.”

I sputtered out a sad chuckle as I propped my elbow onto my car door and raked my hand through my hair. I’d come here to calm down, but I didn’t want anyone other than Peyton to see me in the middle of a breakdown.

My gaze drifted to the still-empty road ahead when I caught Sergeant Davis start to hand back my license and registration in my periphery.

“If I hand this back and forget I ran into you, can I trust you to go the speed limit for the rest of your trip into town?”

I nodded and straightened in my seat.

“Yes, absolutely,” I said, taking my license and registration from him. I was happy, relieved, and a little unnerved at the spark from where our fingers brushed. The man really was beautiful and not only in a broody, hot cop sort of way. If I’d run into the good sergeant at a bar, I would have annoyed him

until I could make him crack a smile, but now was not the time for flirting—regardless of how difficult it was not to focus on the flex of his biceps as he shoved the pad back into his pocket.

“Thank you. And I mean that.”

His gaze slid to mine, his expression softening for another millisecond before he nodded, blinking his long lashes as he took a half step back as if he were flinching at something. I searched his face, his very handsome face, as he shook his head. Everything about him screamed no-nonsense authority—other than deciding to let me go—but something in his tiny, quick expressions drew me in. As if he had so much to say behind those soulful eyes.

Or I was that tired and he was a pretty mirage that I’d latched on to in the midst of my shitty day.

“Be careful, Ms. Ng.”

“Oh, you can call me Claudia.” I waved a hand, my fingers quivering at the dip of adrenaline mixed with relief. “And I can call you...” I lifted a brow. There was no harm in flirting a *little*, right? I might have been depressed and despondent, but I wasn’t dead inside. As he leaned forward, I spotted a thin gold chain hidden under his collar, right above where his broad chest pulled at his uniform shirt buttons. I took my awareness of the sexy and surprisingly benevolent cop who had pulled me over for reckless driving as a good sign that my current life crisis hadn’t dulled all my senses.

“Sergeant,” he said as he backed away from my open window, his eyes still fixed on me but his gorgeous features now flat and unreadable. “Drive safely, Ms. Ng.”

“Right,” I said on a sigh, giving him a two-finger salute. “No more trouble from me. I promise.” I cut my losses instead of pushing my luck and started the engine, allowing myself to enjoy Sergeant Davis’s walk back to his car in my rearview mirror, his uniform pants hugging the globes of his ass the same way his shirt sang the praises of his broad chest, before I pulled my car back onto the highway.

Sergeant Davis disappeared into his cruiser, but he stayed parked behind me until I couldn't find him in the distance.

At least one man hadn't screwed me over today. I'd get to Peyton's house, pass out on her basement futon, and start to figure out what the hell to do with my life.

CLAUDIA

“HEY, CLAUD,” PEYTON WHISPERED, A SAD SMILE PULLING ON her lips as she held her front door open for me to step through.

After she pulled me in for a hug, I spotted the time on my smartwatch and cringed.

“I am so sorry to come here this late on a school night.” I sighed, dragging my hand down my face. “I’m not making the best decisions today.”

“You’re allowed,” she said, lifting a shoulder. “I was a little worried about you making the drive at night, but I know how it is to want to jump into your car and get as far away from where you used to work as soon as possible.” She squeezed my wrist. “And I would have been up anyway. I have workshop lessons to plan. It’s the last week of school, so they’re letting the guidance department fill up the time now that the core classes are done and finals are over.”

Peyton was a guidance counselor at the local high school here. She’d loved her job in Brooklyn as much as I’d loved mine, and while the school she’d worked for hadn’t fired her, they’d made it impossible for her to stay. She’d uprooted herself from Brooklyn to her favorite uncle’s hometown and ended up marrying his best friend.

“I still have some of those crazy teas that you brought up here if you’d like a cup. Not that lavender tea leaves would help.”

“No, they would.” I set my bags gently by her door. “I’m sorry. I need to get my shit together. I was fired. Happens,

right? I need to suck it up and grow up.”

“You were fired from the job you had for over a decade. Give yourself a break. If you didn’t feel like shit today, you wouldn’t be normal. You’ll figure it all out.” She looped an arm around my shoulder. “Come into the kitchen. My niece and I made cookies the other day, and I still have a tin left. Maybe a few misshapen chocolate chip cookies and a slug of bourbon in your tea will help.”

“I don’t know about that, but it’s a great fucking start.”

She laughed as I followed her into the kitchen. Her daughter’s baby things took over half of the living room. A mountain of toys and stuffed animals peeked over the top of her play crib. I looked forward to Keely’s giggles tomorrow as I tried to forget the shitty turn my life had just taken.

“Before I drown my sorrows in lavender and booze, I need to call my parents.”

My parents had smothered me in love for my entire life, but sometimes that love came with hovering and a slight but constant push. I was their miracle, a baby who’d shown up late in their lives when they’d given up hope of having children. I had been given the best of everything, but sometimes a person needed space, not hovering, to solve their problems. I’d tried to explain, but they never understood. So I’d respectfully put distance between us when I felt this way.

Being their only child came with extra expectations, but no one cheered for me louder than my parents did. I’d once overheard one of my great-uncles whisper to my father what a shame it was to have “just a girl.” My father had lashed back in loud Cantonese, his words coming so fast that I’d only understood half of it, telling him that not only could I do anything the boys in this family could do, but I’d do it better, and that I was his prize, never his shame.

I did everything I could to make them proud, and although it wasn’t my fault, losing my job seemed like letting them down.

I needed recovery time and to be away from my apartment in Brooklyn and any reminders of my upended daily life, but I couldn't make them understand that. They'd argued with me as I zipped my suitcases as to why I had to leave *right then and there* without taking a night to calm down and think. My father had gone so far as to offer to come get me to stay at their house because he was afraid of me driving anywhere upset. While it had been tempting to let my parents baby me for a night, the babying would only lead to more well-meaning questions and suggestions I didn't want to answer or think about, and I'd have ended up feeling guilty and awful for inevitably snapping at them.

And yet, I still felt awful and guilty for proving them right when I'd gunned up here at ninety miles per hour and mouthed off to the sexy cop who'd stopped me.

"Oh, thank God." My mother's heavy sigh reverberated through Peyton's kitchen. I put the call on speaker and set my phone down on the table. "Are you at Peyton's, or did you stop anywhere? You're not at one of those rest stops at night, are you? They traffic people there."

"Traffic?" I heard my father's hearty laugh. "Where did you hear that, Mei? You watch too much *Dateline*."

"It's true!" Mom fired back. "Claudia is so pretty. She'd be exactly what they'd be looking for, and I've been sick thinking about it."

Peyton bit back a laugh when I met her gaze.

"I drove straight here. I didn't stop, and I wasn't trafficked. I'm fine and about to have a cup of tea and settle in for the night."

"Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Ng," Peyton called out.

"Ah, Peyton. How's the baby?" Mom gushed. "Did she like the giraffe we gave her?"

"Keely's a toddler now, although we all still call her 'the baby.' She loves it, thank you so much. I know she's going to be thrilled to see Aunt Claudia here when she wakes up in the morning."

“I think we can all get some sleep now,” Dad said, his warm chuckle the first thing to make me smile tonight. “Sorry for trying to stop you. I should have known my Claudia wouldn’t let her emotions change how she drives.”

I winced, both at my father calling me “his Claudia” and then complimenting me on the level head that I absolutely had not had behind the wheel tonight.

“Yes, you both need some sleep. I love you.”

“We love you too.”

I shut my eyes, the relieved crack in my mother’s voice triggering more guilt. “And don’t worry, you’ll find something much better. I have no doubt.”

“Neither of us does,” Dad agreed. “Love you.”

I pressed the end button and let my head fall on Peyton’s kitchen table with a soft thump.

“What was that about?”

“You have a helicopter mother well into your thirties, too, and should get my plight more than anyone.”

“I do. Although my mom isn’t nearly as sweet and adorable as your parents. I caught a wince just now. Did something happen on the way up?”

“I need some bourbon tea before I go into any of the details of my day from hell.” I rubbed my eyes and let go of a yawn. The adrenaline that had fueled the long drive here was plummeting fast.

“Did they give you a decent package, at least?” Peyton asked, as she set up the electric teakettle. “I hoped they would do right by you in that respect, if nothing else.”

I shrugged, grabbing the tin of cookies and popping off the lid. “One week of severance pay for each year I was there, and then I can collect unemployment.”

“So, that’s thirteen weeks, right?” Peyton asked, adjusting the messy brown bun on top of her head. “I’m sure you’ll find something way before then.”

“That’s the thing. I don’t know if I want to.”

Peyton studied me as she leaned back against her marble kitchen counter. She had remodeled the kitchen after Keely turned a few months old, and it looked like something out of a magazine. I guessed having a husband who owned a contracting business had its perks.

Jake was also hot as hell, tall with broad shoulders and arms only men who worked with their hands seemed to have, and eyes solely for his wife. Even though Peyton was hard on herself for running from Brooklyn to start over, she’d hit the jackpot in Kelly Lakes.

“You don’t want to go back to work?”

I set my giant glob of cookie on a napkin. “I *have* to work. I have a decent-sized savings account, but it’s not something I can live on for the rest of my life. I feel like I wasted so much time.”

“Just because you were fired? You did nothing wrong. Didn’t they tell you that?”

Peyton moved closer to the table, and a smile lifted the corner of my mouth as she studied me. This was why Peyton was so good at her job and why I’d rushed up here without thinking about it. I needed her level head to quiet the fury and uncertainty clouding mine.

“I could jump in my car and come up here on a whim because it’s always been just me, not even a cat in Brooklyn for me to worry about. Other than when I’d sneak up here for the Hallmark experience, my job was always my main priority.”

Peyton’s shoulders shook with a chuckle.

“Nothing wrong with working hard and enjoying your job.”

“But for what? Bosses who resented me for being smarter than they were and booted me out the minute they had a chance?”

I exhaled a groan and took a big bite. Despite how it looked, this was a damn good cookie.

Peyton smiled with a slow nod as the teakettle went off behind her.

“It’s fresh. You’re still in shock. I felt the same way when I quit. They left me no choice, but I was so angry that, in the end, all my hard work had been wasted.” She set a steaming mug in front of me. The scent of lavender and vanilla wafted up my nose, and I took in a long breath.

Nope, still upset and pissed off.

“What I’m saying is...” she began, handing me the small bottle of bourbon. “What I’m trying to say anyway is that you’ll land somewhere they’ll appreciate you. You’re amazing at what you do. Take some time off to clear your head.”

“I am good with numbers,” I mused, giving my tea a generous pour of liquor before closing the bottle and picking up the steaming mug. The fumes from the alcohol didn’t change my feelings, but they were at least starting to take the edge off. “That was another thing rumbling around in my head all the way up here. I make money making money for already rich people. *You* make a real difference.”

“Well, if there’s something else you want to do, give it a try.”

I scoffed after taking a sip. I wasn’t sure if lavender and bourbon went together, but the warmth spreading through my chest and settling in my belly made it the perfect combination.

“I’m in my thirties, never been married, and am now jobless. I’m too old to learn new tricks.”

“Claudia, you can do any damn thing you want to. Whether it’s another job like the one you had or something else. This feels weird, right? Usually, you’re the voice of reason calming me down.” She grinned and tapped my ankle with her slipper-covered foot under the table.

“Oh, honey. I’m no one’s voice of reason. At least not now. I was pulled over for speeding right before coming into town.

The cop felt bad enough for me to let me go after I told him my sad story over losing my job because I don't have a penis."

Her head fell back as she burst out laughing. "I bet that made his night."

"I could barely get him to crack a smile. Sergeant Grumpy had a romance-cover face and drool-worthy arms. If I hadn't been in the middle of a meltdown, I would have flirted a little harder. I took it as a good sign that I'm at least not too far gone."

"Did you get his name?" Peyton asked with a chuckle. "And, yes. The fact that you still flirted with a hot cop even a little after you were laid off and drove here in enough of a rage to speed makes me feel better too."

"Davis. I asked him what his first name was, and he said Sergeant."

"Ah, yes. Davis works with Jake on his days off."

"Why would a cop need a side job?"

She grimaced. "He's been taking care of his dad since his mother died. He grew up in Kelly Lakes and was a few years behind Jake and Uncle Keith in school, but he moved away and only came back into town about six months ago. His father is a diabetic and lost his leg, so he can't live alone. Davis told Jake that he moved back into his house because he didn't want his father to live in a facility when he could take care of him. I'm not sure if he works with Jake for the extra money or the break. I've always found him more quiet and reserved than grumpy."

"I have that effect on people, I guess. Probably didn't help that I tried to invoke Uncle Keith's name to get out of it at first. Hopefully he doesn't tell on me."

She laughed when I flicked my eyes to hers.

"Uncle Keith would be more concerned about you than mad, if that's what you're afraid of."

"I didn't even realize how fast I was going. The more I thought about things, the harder I pressed on the gas pedal."

Sergeant Davis saved me from another possible disaster.” I broke off a piece of cookie, guilt now swirling with all the other emotions simmering in my gut. “That’s commendable to take care of his father like that.”

“You’d take care of your parents in a heartbeat if you had to,” she said, a smile twitching at her lips.

“As much as they’d drive me crazy, yes.” I smirked around the rim of the ceramic mug, the liquor relaxing me enough to chuckle when Peyton met my gaze.

“I love that we have the kind of friendship that we always unload bad news to each other first. It’s nice.” Peyton crinkled her nose at me.

“Same. Thanks for being my safe place.” I glanced around the kitchen. “Both figuratively and literally.”

“Anytime. I think wherever you land next will be right where you’re supposed to be.”

“Or I’ll dig a bigger hole. Either way, it’s something different, right?” I wrapped my fingers around the handle of the mug and held it up in salute.

“You won’t dig a bigger hole. You’re the smartest person I know.”

I nodded, my mind drifting to Sergeant Davis. After learning his backstory, I felt even worse for looking like a brat having a tantrum when he’d pulled me over.

“He works with Jake a lot?”

She tilted her head from side to side.

“Not a lot. Once or twice a month, maybe. Jake uses him for renovation jobs more than repairs. He said Davis has a good eye for craftsmanship. He helped a lot when we redid the kitchen.”

I nodded, pursing my lips as I scanned the space, the gleaming marble countertops now almost taunting me. I had no plan for how long I would be staying with Peyton, but I had the feeling that I’d run into him again at some point. This town was too small not to see everyone all the time. I only came to

visit for a weekend every month, and even I knew most of the townspeople by name.

But not the hot cop who now, thanks to my lousy first impression, I was sure thought I was a hot mess. Why did that bother me so much?

“Hey, Claudia.”

I swiveled my head to Jake’s voice, his deep timbre laced with sympathy.

“Hey, Jake.” I pushed off the chair and gave him a quick hello hug. “Thank you for accepting a last-minute, late-night houseguest.”

“You aren’t a guest.” Jake shook his head as he draped his muscular arm across his wife’s shoulders. “You’re family. And Keely is going to be very happy to see you.” He smiled as he pulled Peyton closer. “Mike and I straightened up the basement tonight, and it’s all yours for as long as you want it. I’m sorry about your job.”

I sighed, lifting my shoulder in a slow shrug. “It happens. I guess. And thank you for all of that. I’ll stay out of your way and not cause any more trouble while I’m here.”

“*More* trouble?” Jake’s brows pulled together.

“Davis pulled her over for speeding on the way in, but he let her slide when she told him about the day she’d had.”

“Does anyone know his first name? He told me it was Sergeant.”

Jake chuckled. “If it makes you feel better, I only know it because he grew up here. Everyone has always called him Davis.”

“Oh,” I said, tempted to ask Jake what it was, but something held me back. Not asking or saying what I wanted was rare for me, but for reasons I couldn’t explain, it seemed wrong to pry. If he didn’t want to tell me, I didn’t want to know. “Peyton told me that he’s more quiet than grumpy. I think I may have gotten him to almost smile, but it lasted less than a second.”

“Sounds like Davis.” Jake chuckled. “He’s not a bad guy at all, just intense. He’s very cut to the chase and doesn’t pull any punches. I’m actually surprised he let you off. He gave his own uncle a ticket not too long ago.”

“Really?” Why *did* he let me go? He did seem to be all business like Jake said but then let me off with a warning. I was thrilled but still confused.

A man I’d met for fifteen tense minutes intrigued me more than he should have. I still felt the tingle from the intensity of those crystal-blue eyes seeping through me.

Maybe I just needed more bourbon to reset my system from any big feelings or thoughts that I couldn’t process. Fixating on a mysterious and gorgeous stranger was probably easier on my nervous system than the other thoughts I’d been trying to avoid for the past few hours.

“I’ll have to apologize to Mike for taking away his gaming sanctuary.”

Jake shook his head. “He can scream over the headset just as easily in his room, and he’s not home all that much lately.” He cut a look to his wife.

My brows shot up. “Does Mike have a girlfriend?”

At seventeen, Mike was already good-looking like his father, so a girlfriend wouldn’t be a shock. When I’d first met him, he was a sweet and quiet fourteen-year-old and still blushed whenever I called him handsome.

“We think so, although he hasn’t come out with it yet. He mostly hangs out with his friends, but we hear one girl’s name a lot.” Peyton shrugged. “Maybe while you’re here, you can get more information out of him than we can.”

“Finally, something to look forward to.” I grinned as I looked between them. I’d never envied Peyton or any of my other friends who’d settled down with a family over the years because, while I was happy for them, it wasn’t my path.

I brought the mug to my lips again, the scent of the liquor wafting up my nose along with the lavender, as the most upsetting thing about today crystallized in my frazzled head.

For the first time in my life, I didn't know what my path was or how I was supposed to find it.

JUDE

“STOP STARING AT ME,” MY FATHER GROUSED AS HE SLID HIS black checker over to the next square on the board.

“I’m just figuring out my next move.” I crossed my arms and leaned my elbows against the wooden table. The sweltering June sun beat down on the back of my neck as I studied my father, something I couldn’t seem to stop doing and only pissed him off.

“No, you’re staring at me. Or babysitting me. Why don’t you take a walk? Meet a girl to focus your attention on instead of an old man with one leg.” He tipped his chin to the board. “I see three easy moves from there—if you’re paying attention.”

I scrubbed a hand down my face and nodded, letting out a long sigh before I was tempted to pick up the same argument we had almost on the daily. My father was still adjusting to his artificial leg and moved around with the assistance of a walker with a built-in seat he never liked to use.

When I’d suggested coming here today, I’d known better than to suggest his wheelchair, even though the park was full of hidden gravel and hills. I lingered behind him after he got out of the car as we made our way to one of the tables, biting back a smile every time he swiveled his head to check for me.

He tried to hide it, but I caught a couple of relieved exhales when he met my gaze until we sat down. I was proud of how he took his new limitation mostly in stride and that he was still the relentless, ballbusting father who’d raised me, but he still

needed help. He could snap at me all he wanted and get on me about my boring life, but I wasn't backing off or going anywhere.

I craned my neck and scanned the park around us between moves. As a cop, I found it was a mix of instinct and habit no matter where we were. We chose a bench next to the playground to take advantage of the shade from the trees, not that it mattered with the stifling humidity today. On a busy Saturday afternoon, the squeals of children lining up for the slides and swings were a big contrast to the grumbling back and forth at our table.

“Most fathers would appreciate having their only son around.” I flicked my red checker, eyeing my father as I tried to figure out if he was making it easy for me to win and get it over with or if he was out of it. The sour frown pulling at his lips told me that he was looking to end the torture early, as my father never let me win at checkers.

He drew in a long breath through his nostrils and lifted his head, his eyes more concerned than annoyed as they met mine.

“I do appreciate it. But, son,” he said with an audible sigh. “There is more to life for you than work and watching my every move to try to pinpoint what else could be wrong with me. Or, there should be.”

“Once you get on your feet, we'll see about getting me a life. Okay?”

A rare chuckle slipped from his lips.

“Jude, I only have one real foot, so this is the best I'll get. I can manage for a night and the morning after. Maybe getting laid would help you relax for once.”

I squinted at my father, both from the shock of hearing him actually tell me I needed to have sex and the unexpected sting of not being able to remember whom I'd had it with last and how long ago that had been. My divorce had been brutal enough to deter me from pursuing anything other than a casual handful of dates with women.

Ever since my mother had passed away and my father's diabetes had progressed to the point of discussing amputation and possible dialysis, even casual was too much. I'd moved into my old bedroom in my father's house after the surgery. At least in his own house, everything was on ground level and he didn't have to worry about climbing stairs once he was inside. He had a home health aide when I was on shift, and he was only by himself on the Saturdays I did contracting work.

Most of the friends I'd grown up with had kids to look after, and I supposed I did now too. But instead of watching the person I was taking care of grow, I watched for different kinds of milestones, and I was always tense as I dreaded all the complicated possibilities.

But Dad was all I had left. I'd hover as much as I thought was necessary to make sure he was okay.

"Hey, Davis. I thought that was you."

Before I could figure out how to answer my father about my lackluster love life, I found Peyton Russo standing next to our table.

"Hi, Peyton." I stood to give her a quick hello hug. "Dad, you remember Jake's wife, right?"

"You mean the wife of the man who gives me peace a couple of Saturdays a month?" He planted his hands against the table and slowly rose to stand. "Of course. Nice to see you, sweetheart." He picked up Peyton's hand and pressed a kiss to her wrist.

She giggled and kept hold of his hand as he sat back down.

"Nice to see you too, Mr. Davis. We'd better stop flirting or it will get back to my husband," she teased, patting his hand before she let go. "You know how this town is."

He waved a hand at her wry grin. "I knew your husband and the police chief back when they were kids in high school. I'm not afraid of him."

Peyton chuckled. "Uncle Keith is on duty and Jake will be away at a landscaping job until tonight. My best friend is in town for a while, and we're trying to tire out my daughter for

the afternoon.” She tipped her chin to the playground behind us. My stomach dropped when my eyes landed on a familiar profile.

Our encounter had been brief, but those dark eyes and full lips were impossible to forget. Her throaty laugh ran through me as she made faces at Peyton’s daughter, holding on to her swing as she pushed it back and forth. The baby squealed every time she came close to Claudia’s face, and I couldn’t help the smile drifting across my mouth.

Last night had been an easy shift and boring enough to be forgettable, until I’d clocked someone doing ninety in a sixty-five zone and pulled her over. As much as it annoyed me and didn’t make sense, I’d folded when she’d regarded me with all that remorse and regret. True contrition was rare when I pulled people over. Fear and panic were what I saw reflected at me when they’d roll down their window. Going more than twenty miles over the speed limit was an automatic ticket, no matter what her reasons were, but I’d been as surprised as she was when I’d backed off and let her go.

I had a strict policy of never giving empty warnings whenever I pulled people over, especially in a small town like this. Women who tried to seduce their way out of a ticket from me always failed, but something about her forlorn expression had gotten me right in the chest, and I couldn’t find it in me to make her day any harder than it already had been.

I’d watched her drive away, safely and within the speed limit, as I tried to make sense of why of all the drivers I’d pulled over in my lifelong career as a cop, she’d gotten to me enough for me to let her go.

When she lifted Peyton’s daughter out of the swing and turned around, a smile spread across her mouth, lighting up her entire face and draining the air right out of my lungs. Maybe Dad was right. It had been way too long, and a beautiful woman shouldn’t have rendered me so powerless, no matter what her story was.

Maybe I was getting soft in my forties, but nothing about me was soft as I fought to keep my eyes above her neck and

not allow my gaze to roam over the dangerous curves of her body.

“I’d call her over to introduce you, but I think you’ve already met. She told me about her almost-ticket.”

“I was going to say,” my father said as he sputtered out a laugh. “I haven’t seen you...recognize anyone like that in a while, son. And *almost*-ticket?”

I threw my father a glare as his shoulders shook with a chuckle.

“Claudia is having a hard time right now,” Peyton whispered. “Please know she’s not usually reckless like that. She feels terrible about it.”

“I already threw out the ticket, no need to do any more convincing.”

“You threw out a ticket?” Dad gaped at me.

“I pulled her over for speeding and let her off with a warning,” I explained, holding in a groan when my father’s jaw went slack.

“Did you now?” Dad brought his fist to his mouth in a failed attempt to stifle a laugh.

Peyton looked between us and squeezed my wrist. “Well, she appreciated it, and so do I.”

“I think this little lady may need a diaper change.”

Claudia came up to Peyton, bouncing the little girl as she rested her against her hip. She tilted her neck and gently peeled the baby’s fingers away from the gold hoop hanging from her ear. When she pushed her sunglasses up to hold back her silky black hair, her tank top inched up her stomach as she handed the baby to Peyton.

I dropped my gaze back to the grass after getting a glimpse of the perfect swell of her ass in those denim shorts and those long legs that seemed to go on for days.

Jesus Christ. I was having a heatstroke. That had to be it.

“Oh, hey,” Claudia said, flinching when she spotted me. “God bless Kelly Lakes. You run into everyone.” The corner of her mouth tipped up. “I didn’t recognize you without your badge, Sergeant.”

“You can’t escape anyone in this town.” I shrugged, no clue what else to say. There were women in the park today with a lot less on than Claudia, but I hadn’t given them a second glance. I hadn’t had an interest in anyone in months because I’d been too distracted by everything else. But this woman had distracted me from the moment our eyes had met, and the fight to tear my gaze away from her was as frustrating as it was embarrassing.

First, I’d thrown away her ticket, and now I was ogling her in front of everyone—including my father—despite my best efforts to look elsewhere.

“I’m sorry, the heat is making me forget my manners.” Claudia stepped up to my father. “My name is Claudia. I’m squatting at Peyton and Jake’s house for a while before I go back to Brooklyn. You must be a friend of...Sergeant?”

My father laughed, grinning wider than I’d seen him do in a long time as he stood.

“I’m Sergeant’s father,” he said as he took Claudia’s extended hand.

“So, he won’t tell you his first name either,” she replied in a loud whisper as she craned her neck in my direction.

“My mysterious son.” My father shook his head, a smile playing on his lips. “You can call me George, sweetheart. Very nice to meet you.”

“Same,” she said, and the same breathtaking smile I’d spotted moments ago spread her mouth and triggered a ridiculous jolt of jealousy because it wasn’t directed at me.

Yep, this was definitely heatstroke. I swiped my half-empty water bottle off the table and tipped it back, the water more tepid than cool as I drained it.

“In your son’s defense, we didn’t meet on the best terms.” Claudia turned to me, wincing when her gaze found mine. “I

promise to go the speed limit for the rest of my stay here, and Peyton drove to the park today. I solemnly swear not to be a danger to any Kelly Lakes residents while I'm in town."

I nodded, taking a half step back. I had the feeling if I got too close, she'd be a danger to *me*. The women I'd dated over the past few years hadn't had me this out of sorts in only two meetings, and it was a flashing warning sign to keep my distance.

"We'll let you get back to it. Looks like an intense game going on." Peyton tipped her chin to the checkerboard on the table. "I think Jake said you're working with him next weekend."

I nodded. "Yes, the Brewers' old house. Should be nice to get lost in cabinets for the afternoon."

"I know he appreciates the help. I better go clean this one up."

Her little girl scrutinized all of us as she gnawed on her fingers. Even she probably noticed I was acting like a gasping fish out of water.

"Nice to meet you, George." Claudia squeezed my father's shoulder and looked back at me. "And good to see you again under better circumstances...Sergeant."

I couldn't help the smile tugging at my lips as she followed Peyton.

"Well, that was interesting." Dad snickered.

"Peyton's friend is...attractive. I'm human and I noticed, so let's leave it at that." I climbed back onto my side of the bench and focused on the checkerboard. "Don't make this a big deal."

"No, Peyton's friend is stunning. I'm also human enough to notice, but I didn't have to wipe the drool off the corner of my mouth as I watched her walk away." He folded his arms, still laughing at me. "Do you know the shit I've gotten over the years because you've never let anyone out of a ticket? Your uncle is still annoyed."

“Uncle Bob had an expired inspection sticker, broken taillight, and believes that turn signals are optional. He thinks people should just move out of the way and that he’s better than everyone. Just because he has a cop for a nephew doesn’t mean he’s above the law, so I really don’t care if he’s mad at me or not.”

“How fast was Claudia going?” Dad narrowed his eyes at me.

“Doesn’t matter,” I grumbled, staring at the last drop of water in my bottle as I swirled it around, not wanting to look him in the eye.

“That fast? And you thought your Uncle Bob was more of a danger in his old Dodge than a woman racing down the highway?”

“Look, Dad...” I scrubbed a hand down my face. “I don’t know why I let her go. You’re right. It’s been a while, and I’m driving us both crazy by watching you every minute I’m not working.”

“Yes, you are. Which is what I’ve been trying to tell you for months.” The corner of his lips twitched. “I would have let her go, too, if I’d stopped her, if that makes you feel any better.”

“It doesn’t.” Dad and I shared a rare laugh.

“Go ask her out.”

“No. Make a move.” I pointed at the checkerboard.

“No, *you* make a move.”

“She’s only in town for a short time anyway.”

“So?” My father shrugged. “I didn’t say to marry her. Take her out for a night. Leave me to watch the Yankees game in peace.”

“If you want me out of the house for the night, just say so.”

Dad straightened and regarded me with a slow nod.

“I want you out of the house for a night. And she’s not only gorgeous, she seems like a spitfire. I bet you’d have fun

with her if you actually let yourself *have* any fun. I'd take her out myself, but I lost my driving leg and I'm still learning how to navigate my fake one."

"We're in the middle of a game."

He leaned forward and jumped my red checkers three times until his black checker resided on my end of the board.

"Now we're not. Done. And I want to believe that Claudia distracted you enough that you didn't see that coming, not that you're a police sergeant slow on the uptake and putting all the town at risk."

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. I needed a drink to cool off and have the energy to continue this exhausting conversation. Yes, Claudia seemed like she was fun, and it didn't matter if she was in town just to visit, but we'd started out on a weird dynamic. I'd never had the option to date someone I'd pulled over before since they'd drive away pissed they'd gotten a ticket.

"I'm getting some water," I said, pointing to the snack stand behind the playground. "Want anything?"

"I'll take some water before we go. If I'm going to argue with you about your nonexistent social life, the porch is cooler."

A smile snuck across my lips as I stood. Dad was right, although I'd never tell him that. I was in a rut, but I'd become accustomed to it enough to be comfortable. I wanted more out of life than working and hovering over my father in my spare time, but Claudia didn't seem to be someone to just pass a night of time with like the other women I'd dated since my divorce. I'd met her twice, and she was already a distraction I had to shake off.

To avoid a woman for fear of growing to like her too much was ridiculous, but it held me back all the same.

"Two bottles of water, please," I said to the teen cashier at the stand, scanning the playground as she made her way to the back to the refrigerator. I didn't spot Peyton or Claudia anywhere. It was difficult to actively seek something out yet

ignore it at the same time. I agreed with my father—our empty porch was looking pretty good right now.

“Any signs of criminal activity?”

I swiveled my head to find Claudia next to me. Her tank top drooped off one shoulder, teasing a red bra strap. I held in a groan, both wishing I could make a quick escape and wanting to rake my eyes up and down her beautiful body.

The best use of the water I was about to buy would be to pour it over my head to cool off enough to think.

“No, just looking around. Usually on a nice day, the whole town is here.” I nodded a thank you to the cashier when she set the bottles on the counter, handing her a bill too large for two waters, but I didn’t stick around for change as I shifted to go back to my father and get the hell out of here, as he’d suggested.

“Yes, Kelly Lakes seems to be good like that. Helps that there is only one of each thing here. One park, one diner, one pharmacy. There’s so much beauty in simplicity, you know? A real sense of community. It’s why I love visiting so much.”

“How often do you visit?” I asked, shocking myself by not giving Claudia the slip as I’d intended. But I spotted that same look from when we’d first met—the sadness that halted her wide smile from making it to her eyes.

“Every month or so, depending on how busy I am. I’m surprised I’ve never run into you before.”

“I’ve been...busy with my father over the past year. Now that he lives with me instead of a rehab home, I can at least get out of the house for some air sometimes. That’s a long trip to make once a month.”

And now I was making small talk, something I didn’t usually do. But again, my feet were rooted into the grass.

“It’s a nice drive. Well—” she squinted at me “—it usually is. I’m really embarrassed about last night. All kidding aside, I could have really hurt myself or someone else, and a bad day is a shit excuse for being so reckless.” She pursed her plum-

colored lips at me. “I don’t blame you for trying to get as far away from me as possible.”

My chest pinched when her grin shrank. For some reason, I hated being the reason it did. She’d made a mistake, but unlike others to whom I actually gave tickets, she’d owned it and felt badly about it after. My urge to get away from her had nothing to do with how we’d met. I was freaking out over my visceral reaction to a woman I didn’t know.

“My father and I are going to head home. It’s hot as hell today, and the heat makes us both cranky. Believe me, we argue enough.”

She chuckled, the sweet sound reverberating through me.

“We may head back too and put Keely in the kiddie pool in their backyard. Jake said that he won’t put a real one in until she’s old enough to know how to swim, but this one is big enough for us to climb in with her and cool off.”

The image of Claudia in a bathing suit was not helping the sweat already pouring down my back.

“Davis, hello. I thought that was you.”

I clenched my eyes shut at the sound of the familiar, nosy voice.

“Hi, Mary,” I said, trying to sound polite yet unapproachable. Mary owned the coffee shop in town and had been the focal point for all Kelly Lakes gossip for as long as any of us could remember. I had been coerced into taking her divorced daughter out once after I’d taken my father to have lunch at her shop one day. She’d suggested it, and my father had agreed in the spirit of pushing me out of the house. The minute I’d picked up Renee, it was clear that we didn’t even have enough spark between us to make a night-light flicker. Renee was fine with not seeing each other again, but her mother couldn’t accept it.

“I’m not used to seeing you out of your uniform. Renee said she had a great time with you that one night. You both should go—” Her smile faded when her gaze landed on Claudia. “Oh hello, Claudia. Back for another visit?”

“Yes, I’m—”

“Yes, I was just asking her what parts of Kelly Lakes she hadn’t seen yet. Not that there’s much to begin with. She’s a longtime visitor, but I thought I’d try to find some to show her.”

I shot Claudia a grin and wondered what the hell I was doing.

Claudia’s brow pinched for a moment before she flicked her eyes to Mary. Recognition bloomed on her beautiful face as a slow grin spread her mouth.

“I haven’t been on the back roads,” she purred, sliding her arm into the crook of my elbow. “We can pretend I haven’t been to the ice cream parlor because I’d love to go there later.”

She beamed up at me, her playful smile matching the wicked gleam in her eyes. I didn’t have to ask her to play along for her to get the hint. I also didn’t have to lean into her as she cuddled into my side, the scent from her fruity shampoo wafting up my nose when she rested her head on my shoulder.

“Do you have anything to suggest, Mary?” Claudia asked when she turned her head. “Maybe we can get one of those milkshakes that Mike always talks about tomorrow after Sergeant Davis’s shift. You’re open in the evenings, right?”

Wow, she was good at this. With no prompting at all, she’d left Mary speechless and darting her eyes around the park as if she were looking for a quick exit.

“I am. Feel free to stop by. Give my regards to your father, Davis.” She nodded to where Dad sat behind me, probably taking all this in to give me shit over it later.

“Well, that was interesting,” Claudia whispered, her breath fanning hot against my neck and triggering a rush of goose bumps down my arm. “Is it like Kelly Lakes town lore that Mary offers her poor daughter up to everyone?”

“Seems to be,” I said, locking eyes with Claudia for a long moment as she pulled away. “Thanks for being a good sport.”

“No problem. That was fun.” She dropped her gaze to the ground, the bashful smile curving her lips making her more beautiful, if that was even possible. I’d been so captivated by her that I’d barely given her an ounce of acknowledgment, yet she’d pretended to be with me in front of Mary without a second of hesitation.

“It’s just that she never—”

“Wants to let it go. Yeah, I got that. You seem like you have your hands full.” Claudia nodded back to my father. “I didn’t mind giving you a moment of peace. I’m really into the small-town hospitality thing, even though I’m a *longtime visitor*.”

She pursed her lips, and I couldn’t help another smile from drifting across my mouth.

She was something. And everything I wasn’t ready for.

“It was nice to meet your father. Try to stay cool.”

I reached out to grab her wrist when she shifted to walk away.

“It’s Jude.”

She stilled, pinching her brow at me.

“Jude?”

“My first name. It’s Jude.”

The side of her mouth curled into a smirk.

“As in Hey Jude, you make sad songs better?”

Her smile deepened as she inched closer to me. That same danger I’d sensed from her from the beginning—and wanted to avoid—flashed red.

“As in Saint Jude.” I hooked my thumb into my chain and lifted my Saint Jude medal from where I always kept it hidden under my shirt.

“Ah, yes.” She bobbed her head in a slow nod. “The patron saint of the impossible.”

My brows popped up. “I’m impressed that you know that.”

She held my gaze, her grin still wide. “I went to Catholic school in Brooklyn.” Her dark eyes turned a light chocolate under the sun. It was easy to get lost in them, and in her, and the realization had me taking a half step back on instinct.

A shiver ran through me even under the heat of the sun, and it was past time to go.

“Nice to see you again, Claudia.” I shot her a grin despite myself.

A blush stained her cheeks as she gave me that smile, the one that sucked the air from my lungs when she wasn’t even directing it at me.

“Nice to finally meet you, Jude.”

CLAUDIA

“I’M GLAD YOU’RE TAKING A BREAK, BUT WHEN DO YOU THINK you’ll be home?” my mother asked me as I lounged on a chair in Peyton’s backyard.

“We aren’t rushing you,” my father added before I could respond. “We understand that you need some time, but you’ve been there for a while now, and we don’t want you to fall into a rut.”

I nodded even though they couldn’t see me through the phone. I’d been staying—or hiding out—at Peyton’s for a couple of weeks, and I didn’t have the slightest interest in going home. Usually when I’d come to visit, I was ready to head back to work in a couple of days after I’d had my fill of country goodness. But now that there was no work waiting for me, it seemed as if *nothing* was waiting for me.

The realization hit me hard, and it sucked.

Nothing was waiting for me except my parents, whom I called every other day without fail to repeat the same conversation.

“I’m not. I just need to clear my head before I figure out what I want to do.”

“Well...” My father’s soft chuckle filled my ear, and I both cringed and smiled at what I knew he was about to say. “You know we always need a good numbers person. And who would be better than you?”

My father owned a Chinese restaurant in Brooklyn. My cousin Eric had worked alongside him since he’d graduated

college with a business degree and was set to take it over when my father was ready to retire, which we all knew wouldn't be until he took his last breath. He never pressured me, but he would hint at times at how great it would be if I worked with him.

The restaurant was our family's main source of income and held a lot of great memories for me, but it wasn't something I wanted to make my livelihood. He understood, and I couldn't blame him for trying sometimes.

"I appreciate that, Dad. I have enough severance to hold me over for a little bit, plus the savings you made me keep up with since I was a teenager gives me a decent cushion for a while. I won't take too long, but for right now, I think I'm still too angry over what happened to think clearly."

"Of course you are," my mother said. I could picture her nostrils flaring. I looked more like my mother than my father, other than her not quite five feet of height. Still, she, not my father, had been the parent to fear if I ever got in trouble and the one you didn't want to cross under any circumstances.

She'd worked as a nurse in the same nursing home for almost my entire life until the arthritis in her fingers had forced her to retire. She helped at the restaurant now, seating the customers and handing out menus. My parents still liked each other enough not to mind being together most of the time.

I knew if I ever took my father up on being his "numbers person," they'd be overjoyed to have me with them every day.

Every. Single. Day.

I adored them both, but even in all the uncertainty swirling around in my brain, that was the one thing I was a thousand percent sure that I didn't want to do next.

"I know you like going up to the country." Dad chuckled. "We support you taking a break and whatever you decide to do next."

"It is nice and relaxing here. I'll bring you up with me to visit next time if you ever take a day off. It's just like those Hallmark movies Mom loves."

Aside from the hot-as-fuck cop I couldn't stop thinking about. After barely getting a hello, I hadn't expected to be his stand-in girlfriend at the park. Even though our mild PDA had been fake, I savored the hell out of the memory. He was an almost-welcome distraction when he'd pop into my brain those few minutes every hour when I wasn't lamenting over being a nomad with no job.

The tight T-shirt stretching across his chest, clinging to his broad frame every time he moved, the tease of chest hair when he showed me the chain around his neck, and how he made even khaki shorts seem sexy had all lived rent-free in my head since I'd left the park with Peyton. But what got to me the most was the adorable way he told me his name. It felt like a reward, just like the smile I'd finally gotten him to crack right before I walked away.

It had been a minute since I'd dated anyone or at least had sex, and whenever I thought of Sergeant Jude Davis, I wanted to do very un-Hallmark-like things to him if I ever had the chance—like dipping my tongue into that sinful mouth if his lips ever touched mine and all sorts of delicious ways to turn that perpetual frown upside down.

Despite the shiver rolling through me at my silly fantasy, it would be wrong to make it reality. I was here on a breather for now and would only be back for random weekends once I did go home. I'd spotted a ton of turbulence behind those blue eyes, and I doubted he'd be interested in anything, even something temporary.

I had to sort out my own shit before I could figure out what I did or didn't want to do to someone else. Yet, my mind drifted there all the same.

“I'll be home soon. I promise.”

“When you're back, we'll make you all your favorites. What do you kids call it, having your feelings for supper?”

I burst out laughing at my father. Although, when an intern had called something “mid” at a meeting and I'd had to look it up afterward, I'd felt the sting of regret at all the teasing my

cousins and I had put my father through over the years for trying to sound *hip*.

It hurt to have confirmation that I was heading into the uncool stage of my life—which was a pretty shitty time to have to start over.

“It’s cute that you still think of your thirty-five-year-old daughter as a kid. And the expression is eating my feelings, which sounds amazing. I’d love some lo mein and dim sum when I’m home.”

“I’ll make you a feast. We love you.”

I nodded, biting my lip at the sudden burning in my nose.

“Yes,” Mom said. “We love you very much. Calm yourself at Peyton’s and then come home so we can take care of you.”

I thought of Jude and his father playing checkers in the park, his dad introducing himself with a smile despite struggling to stand. It had been hard to watch my parents age over the years, but I was blessed to have them as healthy as they still were. After a wave of sympathy for Jude and his father barreled over me, I managed to hold back the tears enough to tell them goodbye and hang up.

“I’m guessing that was your parents,” Peyton said as she set the baby monitor and two cold bottles of something on the glass table next to me.

“It sure was. And please say there’s alcohol in whatever you brought outside.”

She chuckled as she twisted the top off one of the bottles and handed it to me. I’d been sitting in the shade since I’d come outside, but the humidity was still stifling as hell.

“Some. One of Jake’s customers gave him a six-pack of wine coolers to take home to his wife as a thank-you.”

I sputtered around my first sip. It was nice and cold, but the sweet taste of berry-flavored liquid almost made my back teeth ache, reminiscent of my teenage years in Brooklyn. We’d snuck these into my high school best friend’s basement,

feeling really fucking cool even when we burped up the aftertaste.

“They gave him wine coolers for you? Not wine?” I asked as I swung my legs around the side of the chair and stood to join her at the table.

“I wasn’t sure how to take that either.” She eyed the bottle in her hand. “They’re an older couple. I think they were either in the grocery store and spotted them where they always keep the wine coolers by the register, or they think since I’m so young, I still enjoy wine coolers and Shirley Temples.” She shrugged, smirking around the rim of the bottle as she took another sip. “I’m in my thirties, so it’s not like I’m a teenager. But since Jake is almost fifty and I’m the police chief’s niece, I think some take me for younger than I am.”

“Hey, that’s not the worst thing. Every time I walk down my block and weave past the young girls hanging out on the stoops outside, I feel old as fuck. Another nice thing about the country, it keeps you young.” I raised my bottle and took a long swig. I’d need five of these to even get an inkling of a buzz.

“I took the nice gesture at face value. Either way, they’re actually not bad and surprisingly refreshing on a hot day. I’ll take it as a compliment.”

I nodded, focusing on Keely’s blow-up toys wafting back and forth along the surface of the small pool in the warm breeze. As kiddie pools went, this one was top-notch. It had high walls on either side and could fit three adults plus a baby. It had no filter, but I had just filled it up with the hose before I’d called my parents, so it had to be at least a little cool still.

“How sad would it be if I took my wine cooler into the kiddie pool with no kid?”

“My kiddie pool is your kiddie pool.” Peyton laughed and tipped an almost-empty water bottle toward the pool. “Go for it.”

I stood to pull off my cover-up and kicked off my flip-flops, padding quickly along the steaming grass to step into the

pool. It was still nice and cold as I sat down and stretched my arms along the sides.

“My God, this feels good.”

“Stay in as long as you want. Keely should be asleep for the next forty-five minutes. Aunt Claudia tires her out.” She smiled, grabbing the monitor and plopping into the lawn chair I’d been lounging in. “We may never let you leave.”

“But I will. I promise. I know I can’t hide out here forever.”

“You can stay as long as you want, and there is no rush. I’m off for the summer, and it’s nice to have my best friend around. Take all the time you need.”

“My father offered me a job as their numbers girl.” I cocked a brow at Peyton before I tipped back the rest of the wine cooler.

“Again?”

I bobbed my head in a slow nod.

“Always. If I didn’t think they’d drive me crazy all the time, I’d almost consider it.”

“Seriously? I would think you’d be bored at a job like that, whether you worked with your parents or not. You love your job.”

“*Loved*. Even before I was asked to leave, that was getting further and further in the past tense.”

For the last couple of months, the stress at work had been choking me. I’d thought it was because of the asshole new management, but maybe not. I’d had nothing but time to think since I’d arrived, I couldn’t muster up any motivation to go back to what I’d been doing, whether it was for my old job or another company.

I’d enjoyed the challenge and sense of accomplishment, but after months of feeling as if I had to fight for a position I’d more than earned, and then was let go anyway, the thought of doing it again somewhere else exhausted me.

Hiding out at my best friend's house for an indeterminate amount of time wasn't a solution either, but I couldn't make myself get back in my car and go home.

I was stuck—in place and in my head.

“Hey, Peyton. Aaron and I are going to the lake.”

I swiveled my head to Peyton's stepson's voice. Mike headed up to Peyton, hands stuffed into his sweatshorts as he came closer to the table. He really was all his father, tall and lean with the same chiseled jaw and blue eyes. If he did have a girlfriend, she was one lucky lady. Mike was well on his way to being a stunner.

“Good. I'm glad to see you out on a sunny day instead of on the headset.”

“That's my fault, Mike. I'm sorry I took away your gaming space.”

Mike turned around and quickly averted his gaze from mine, darting his eyes all around the yard except where I was sitting in the pool.

“It's fine. I just moved the stuff to my room,” he mumbled, clearing his throat with his chin to his chest. The blush bleeding into his cheeks was adorable, although I wasn't sure if embarrassment or heat were the cause. Mike had always been a sweet and quiet kid, more into gaming with his friends than girls yet, Peyton had said, even though he was heading to college in the fall. But I couldn't help feeling awful for being the possible reason why he seemed to be itching to escape his own backyard.

“I'm very glad you're getting the most out of summer,” Peyton said, reaching over to tap his arm.

Mike still wouldn't drag his gaze from the ground as he nodded.

“Go have a good time.”

“I won't be back late,” he said, clearing his throat. “Aaron is driving.”

“Text us if you need a ride back.”

“I will. Bye, Claudia,” he said, still not looking in my direction.

“Have a great time, handsome. Ah, to be young again.”

He turned his head to me for a split second, a tiny but tense smile pulling at his lips, before heading back into the house.

“My poor stepson,” Peyton said with an exaggerated sigh as she grabbed another wine cooler and ambled to the pool.

I glanced down at my bathing suit. It was a two-piece showing my stomach, but not a string bikini. I had decent-sized hips and boobs, so I never went too skimpy in the summers other than on a trip to Bermuda when Peyton and I were in college. Now, I was overly conscious of anything riding up or slipping out when choosing a swimsuit.

“I just had a flashback of my summer in Kelly Lakes as a teenager and trying to escape Jake like that.”

I took the bottle from her hands.

“You saw Jake in a bathing suit?” I lifted a brow as I took a sip.

“Oh God, no.” Her face twisted in a cringe when she sat back down. “I mean, I was fifteen at the time, younger than Mike. But I was old enough to notice Jake’s broad chest and watch his biceps flex when he was fixing something for my uncle in his yard. Seeing him shirtless back then—” she took in a long breath and let it out with a deep sigh “—would have most likely made my brain short-circuit.”

I laughed and draped my arm back along the soft wall of the pool.

“I never thought it would be possible to feel flattered and ashamed at the same time. Another reason why I should leave. I don’t want to make Mike uncomfortable in his own house.”

“You’re not. I think this is his first summer of girls, so to speak—if my hunch is right and there’s one he’s not telling us about. He noticed you in a bathing suit because...that’s what he does now.” She shrugged. “Part of the whole coming-of-age thing. He’s a little older than most kids when it happens,

mostly due to how the poor kid grew up, but he's definitely"—she tilted her head from side to side—"coming into his own now. You remember those days. The excitement mixed with terror."

I cracked up as I set the bottle next to the pool.

"I don't remember a time *not* being boy-crazy as a kid. Maybe that's why I can handle men now. I got the big humiliations out of the way early, and now they're just there."

"Just there, huh?" She narrowed her eyes as she leaned back in the chair.

"Yes. I haven't had anything more than a casual date or two in months, and it's probably pathetic how little that matters to me. I should go adopt a cat when I get back to Brooklyn."

Work had sucked the life out of me enough to deplete any kind of energy I had to date. Jesus, how much of a rut was I in lately? My standards were so low, I never realized they were almost nonexistent. I needed to raise the bar in my life—if I could figure out what I wanted out of it.

This facing-reality bullshit was taxing.

"Was the broody cop you were chatting with at the park *just there*? You looked kind of cozy by the refreshment stand."

"That was for Mary's sake. The cozy went away when she wasn't looking."

Peyton didn't reply as I took another swig. After a long minute, I shifted in the pool to face her and lifted a brow.

"What?"

"I caught the way he was looking at you. It didn't seem that fake to me."

I rolled my eyes. "He was playing it up for the show."

"I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about *before*. When you were playing with Keely on the swings. Even Mr. Davis noticed him staring."

"He was staring at me?" I crinkled my nose at Peyton.

“Maybe it has been a little too long for you, Claud.” She laughed and shook her head. “Let me put it this way—he stared at you for so long that when you finally came over to us, he couldn’t look you in the eye because he knew his father and I had noticed. It was pretty cute. Poor guy.”

“He was probably making sure I wasn’t doing anything reckless by the children.” I didn’t acknowledge anything Peyton said as I stood from the pool and trudged over to the table, appreciating the soft grass under my feet that didn’t seem so scorching after a dip in the pool.

I didn’t think my lousy first impression had made a difference with Jude, or at least not anymore. But if he were really that interested in me, he wouldn’t have been so quick to pull away from our pretend cuddle.

“It’s so damn hot. I thought it was supposed to be cooler in the country.” I laid one of the beach towels Peyton kept outside flat onto the other lawn chair and sat on the edge. “Maybe if I drip dry, I won’t feel so hot so fast.”

“Hey, ladies. Don’t mind us.”

We turned to the screech of the screen door. Jake stepped through, setting down two bags of something on the other end of the deck before coming up to his wife and dropping a kiss on her lips.

“I hope you both are staying cool. It’s hot as hell today.” He wiped the sweat off his brow and let out a long breath. He was drenched in sweat and grabbed one of the towels to wipe his face down. “I may take a dip in the kiddie pool myself once I unload the truck,” Jake told me, a smirk tipping up the side of his mouth.

“You should. It’s nice,” I said, stretching my legs out as I leaned back on the chair.

“I think this is it, Jake.”

I cringed at the familiar voice coming from inside the house. Jude didn’t glance in our direction as he dropped two bags in the same corner.

“Thanks, Davis. Let me get you something to drink before you go,” Jake said, turning back toward the house. “Glad to see you’re making use of the wine coolers,” he said over his shoulder, nodding at the empty bottles on the table.

“They aren’t bad. Drinking them in the kiddie pool made me feel surprisingly young,” I joked.

Jude stilled and slowly turned his head, sweeping his gaze over Peyton and me.

“Hey,” was all he said as he lined up whatever they’d brought outside.

“Hey, Jude. I bet you get that a lot.”

His tank top clung to him like a second skin, beads of sweat glistening in the sun and trailing down his muscular arms. I’d only gotten a glimpse here and there of his torso, and even when I’d been panicking about getting pulled over, it had been the first thing I’d noticed. But seeing him basically shirtless and soaking wet was a shock to my system I wasn’t prepared for. When he turned back around, I let my eyes drift lower, to his perfect round ass supported by strong, muscular thighs.

“Not really. I’ve been just Davis to most people since high school.” He held my gaze for a long minute before tearing it away. “You’re the first one to bring up the Beatles in a while.”

“Why don’t you like people calling you by your real first name? Jude is nice. Better than Sergeant.”

“I suppose.” He shrugged. I had to blink to tear my eyes away from his perfect shoulder muscle.

“The pressure to make sad songs better can be a little tough.” He flicked his icy-blue eyes to mine, his lips twisting as if he were stifling a smile.

“I won’t tell anyone you cracked a joke just now. I’ll keep your broody rep intact, Davis,” I said, loving the chuckle slipping out of him as he shook his head at me.

“Here you go,” Jake said, handing Jude a bottle of beer. “Thanks again. Renovations go a shit-ton faster when I have

you.”

“Don’t mention it,” he said, grabbing the bottle and taking a long pull. My eyes followed the bob of his Adam’s apple as he swallowed. He even swallowed sexy.

The ice had melted a bit between us, but he still didn’t seem like a talker, even with Peyton and Jake. But me being me, I couldn’t help trying.

“How’s your dad?” I asked.

Jude shrugged. “Happy I’m out of the house, I suppose. He seemed to like you.”

It might have been the glare of the sun, but I swore I spotted a smirk tilting those perfect lips.

“Well, he didn’t have to pull me over when he first met me, so maybe I started on a better foot than I did with you.”

“Don’t let it get around that I let you go,” he said, the smile or smirk or whatever I thought I’d seen gone so fast, I wasn’t sure if the heat was making my mind play tricks on me.

“I’m only passing through,” I said, holding up my hands. “I won’t let it get around if you think it’s going to ruin your image.”

A burning need to know exactly what his image was in Kelly Lakes simmered in my gut, along with jealousy of the neck of the beer bottle as he took another swig.

“I don’t have much of an image. I just don’t feel like hearing any shit that I’m a soft touch for a beaut—for anyone speeding.”

When I’d told Peyton that men were mostly just there to me, I meant it. But Jude stopping himself from calling me beautiful sent a wave of goose bumps over my neck even as the relentless rays of the sun beat down on my skin.

“I am sure no one in this town thinks of you as a *soft* touch, Sergeant.”

I scooted to the edge of the chair, holding in a hiss when my ass hit the hot metal between the strips of vinyl. Poking at

Jude's resolve was the most I'd felt like myself since I'd jumped in my car and headed here, and my fingertips tingled in exhilaration.

Keely's gurgling over the monitor halted the sparring between us—or the sparring I was trying to instigate.

"I'll get her," Jake said. "I'm mostly dried off, and I haven't seen her all day."

"Thanks, Daddy," Peyton told Jake with a glint in her eyes. "After she gets changed and has a bottle, I'll put her swimsuit on." Peyton had enough heat in her eyes to make me almost cringe. I was thrilled for my best friend, but while staying at her house over an extended period, I spotted the foreplay between them a little too easily.

"I'm going to head home," Jude said when Jake disappeared into the house. "As much as it will disappoint my father."

"Tell him I said hello," I said, cracking a wide grin. Usually, men smiled back at me when I did that, but Jude only nodded.

"I will." He nodded a goodbye to both of us and jetted back inside.

"So, Davis is just...there?" Peyton asked, raising a brow.

"Shut up," I said, wrapping the towel around me as I stood.

"I think you'd be good for him. He hasn't had it easy. Between his parents and his divorce."

"Divorce?"

She nodded. "He didn't live in Kelly Lakes while he was married and he divorced before he moved back into town, but I remember Uncle Keith saying it was bad."

"That's terrible, but I think I make the guy a little uncomfortable. You saw it."

She cracked up. "I saw you make two men uncomfortable in this yard today for, I would bet, the same reason. You fluster men of all ages."

I let out a long, frustrated gust of air.

“Who knows how long I’ll be here anyway. He doesn’t need my problems on top of his own.”

“Or maybe you can figure it out together.”

My eyes thinned to slits as I came up to Peyton.

“You’re just so ridiculously happy that you project it onto people. And I’m thrilled for you. Although, please don’t call Jake *Daddy* again while I’m here.”

Peyton laughed as she stood. “Sometimes we end up where we’re supposed to be when we’re forced into it. Before you make your next move or assume things, think about that.”

I watched as she shifted toward the screen door.

“Are you trying to guidance counsel me?”

She chuckled. “Maybe. I tend to do that. But what I’m saying is—” she squeezed my arm “—there is no harm in staying put when you aren’t sure where you want to go next. Before you rush home, take some time to read the signs and figure it all out. The country is good for that.” She shot me a smirk and headed back inside.

My grandmother had once told me that sometimes the big decisions in life were made for us. Maybe that was why it didn’t seem like I was supposed to be here, but I couldn’t find it in myself to go back.

JUDE

“HEY MAN, THANKS AGAIN FOR YOUR HELP,” JAKE SAID AS HE came out to where I was climbing into my truck in his driveway.

“Of course,” I said, stepping out of the truck for a moment to face him. “Renovations are actually relaxing for me, believe it or not.”

He laughed, nodding as he adjusted his daughter on his hip. “I remember when I welcomed a long, complicated job because it gave me a few hours’ break from having to think.”

“It’s helpful,” I agreed, a sad laugh slipping out. “It’s been... It’s been a year. A couple of them, actually. Let’s put it that way.”

“I know it has.” Jake’s smile faded as he stepped closer. “Even though you were away for a while, you have a lot of friends here. You don’t have to take on so much on your own. I’m happy to give you as many renovation jobs as you want on your days off, but you’re always welcome to come visit here with your father. I can put the huge grill I just bought to use so my wife doesn’t give me any more shit for it.”

“We’ll see. He’s still getting used to the new leg, but he did fine at the park. The yard looks pretty level, so maybe,” I said with a shrug. “Thanks for the invite.”

“And listen,” Jake said as I stepped back into my truck. “I know you and Claudia may not have met on the best terms, but please don’t judge her by that night.”

“Who said I was judging her?” I cleared my throat when I realized how defensive my words came out. When I thought back to that night, the immediate pull that drew me to her was what stuck out more than how fast she was going. What I thought about now—a lot—was her body so close to mine as we pretended for Mary in the park. The way she peered up at me, so convincing and so fucking sexy, made me jealous of every guy who didn’t have to play a game to get that close to her.

“This is none of my business, but I’ll say it anyway. Claudia is like family to us. Whenever she comes over to our house, she has a way of making you forget your problems for a little while. If you got to know her, maybe...” He trailed off, bouncing his daughter on his hip when she started to fuss in his arms.

I’d run into Claudia three times, and every time, she messed with my head to the point that I couldn’t concentrate, which, I agreed with Jake, wasn’t necessarily a bad thing.

“My problems aren’t so easy to forget.” I chuckled and shook my head. I hadn’t always been this guy. I’d laughed and had fun as much as anyone else at one time. Time blended together when I looked back, blurring in my mind. My mother became ill, then my father’s doctor started bringing up amputation, and my wife decided in the middle of all of it that it was too inconvenient to stick by me. Work had been the only thing that had brought me any kind of peace.

“I know, man. But maybe a distraction could help.” He shrugged. “Claudia is here for the rest of the summer—at least, I’m pretty sure. I’m not trying to play matchmaker like the older ladies in town always do.”

“You’re not?” I snickered.

“I just see two people who could have better things to do for the summer than babysit.” Jake stepped closer, lifting a brow. I had to laugh when his daughter stretched out her chubby hand and tried to slap my shoulder.

“See? Even my daughter agrees,” he said, kissing her chubby cheek. “Tell him, K.”

I'd thought that would be me at one time. Maggie and I hadn't discussed children in any serious sense, but I'd thought I'd have someone to come home to every night, someone who loved me enough to take their vows seriously even when they couldn't be the center of attention.

My father wasn't the reason—or only reason—I hadn't given another woman a real chance in a long time. He was a good excuse to keep myself isolated, but he wasn't going to let me get away with it for much longer.

“Hey, guys,” Claudia called out from the front door as she shuffled down the driveway. “Sorry to interrupt. Peyton and I decided the wine coolers aren't cutting it, so I told her I'd drive into town for something I could mix into a cocktail.”

As she cinched her long black hair into a ponytail, I spotted the black strap of her bathing suit droop down her shoulder. I still couldn't shake the image of her at the park in a tank top and shorts, and now I'd be tortured by the picture of her in a bathing suit, wet, along with the headache from holding my eyes back from tracking the drops running down every beautiful curve on her body.

She had been impossible to ignore from the moment I'd laid eyes on her, and it both thrilled and exhausted me.

“It's so convenient that your one liquor store is next to your one supermarket.” She twirled her keys around her finger, a wry grin pulling at her lips. “I can get all I need for drinks and snacks in one trip. I only had one and a half wine coolers and promise to go the speed limit, in case that's why you're staring.”

I let my chin drop to my chest as I laughed to myself. I was too captivated by what was under her dress to wonder whether she was okay to drive, but I couldn't admit that.

“I'll wait for you to pull out since you're blocking my car.” She motioned to the dark blue SUV I remembered from last week.

“I can give you a ride,” I said before I realized it.

Her smile faded as her brows pulled together.

“You don’t have to do that. I’m really fine to drive.”

“I have to stop there anyway.” I made my way over to the passenger side and opened the door. We only live two streets away from here, so taking you to the market and back isn’t out of my way.”

“Um, okay. Sure.” She shot Jake a look before she climbed into my truck. I shut the door and headed back to the driver’s side, rolling my eyes at Jake’s smirk before I climbed back in.

“Thanks again for your help, Davis. Enjoy the market.”

He gave me a mock salute and headed back to the house.

Maybe I still had heatstroke from the last time I saw her, all those hours working in the hot sun making it worse. Or maybe it was the woman I couldn’t tear my eyes away from—despite my best efforts—since the first moment I’d seen her.

“I appreciate the ride, Sergeant. I promise I won’t take too long.” She smiled at me as she clicked her seat belt, her grin not as wide as the one from the park but real enough to kick up my pulse.

I shouldn’t have had heart palpitations from a woman I hardly knew or have tracked her smiles enough in the short and few times I’d seen her to rate them. I was losing it. But for the next hour or so, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to forget to care.

“You don’t have to call me sergeant,” I told her as I started the engine.

“Sorry, Davis.” I caught the corner of her mouth twitch after I backed out of Jake’s driveway.

“I told you my name was Jude.”

“But no one calls you Jude.”

I turned to her pursed lips when I rolled up to the stop sign at the end of the street.

“Maybe I like it when you do.”

A smile broke out on my face when I noticed a bit of the bravado drain from her expression. She chuckled to herself as

she fell back in the seat and gave me a slow nod in my periphery.

“Then, sure...Jude. And you should do that more often.”

“What?” I asked. “Let people call me Jude?”

“Well, that. But you should smile more. It lights up your face. I know you’re the broody arm of the law, but I bet if you let a smile slip out sometimes, it wouldn’t hurt.”

I shot her a glance as we turned down Main Street, a real laugh escaping my lips as I shook my head.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Whether she was here for the summer or not, I still didn’t think starting anything up with her was a good idea. It annoyed me how I still couldn’t shake the remnants of the worst moments of my divorce or the bitterness buried so deep inside that it seemed like a permanent part of me now.

But I could take a beautiful woman to the supermarket and allow myself an hour or two before I had to convince myself that I wasn’t supposed to enjoy it.

CLAUDIA

OKAY, THIS WAS RIDICULOUS.

In between sneaking glances at Jude as he drove, I tried to remember the last time anyone had made me nervous. Well, maybe not nervous, but definitely anxious. Other than when Jude had pulled me over, I couldn't recall anything before it—at least not in my adult life. Maybe that was still it. He would always be the cop pulling me over for doing something wrong, so anytime I'd be in his presence, I'd always feel somehow on the spot.

When I let my gaze linger on him as his strong fingers flexed on the steering wheel, I was sucked into the masculine beauty of his profile. Jude could've been on a magazine or on one of the covers of the books Peyton had gotten me into. He had a strong jaw with a delicious, cropped layer of stubble, bottomless blue eyes, and the most gorgeous smile I'd ever seen for the three glorious seconds he'd shown it to me.

He was a picture-perfect mystery that I couldn't figure out, but I had the burning need to keep trying, if for no other reason than to get him to smile again.

I was so fixated on him and why he was giving me a ride in the first place, I was surprised when we pulled into the gravel-covered parking lot behind the market. I'd never had any issue making conversation, but I hadn't said a word to him after he'd asked me to call him Jude.

“Well, that was quick,” I chirped, shooting Jude a grin before I stepped out of the cab. “Like I said, I'll only be a

minute.”

“Take your time,” he said, not looking up from where he was texting on his phone. His brows furrowed until something on the screen made him shake his head.

“Everything okay?” I asked, keeping my distance so as not to be tempted to glance over his shoulder to see who he might’ve been texting.

I shouldn’t have been so interested in a text message that was none of my business by a man I barely knew. Was it a woman? Peyton said he’d had a bad divorce but never mentioned if he was seeing someone. He didn’t seem like the type of guy who would offer a woman a ride if he was taken, but this was just a ride. We were two people heading to the same place, not on a date. I rolled my eyes at myself as I smoothed the edge of my sundress.

I shouldn’t be reading so much into a polite gesture. Jude intrigued me, but at the same time, I was afraid to push and press my luck. Poking into things that didn’t concern me was not only natural to me, it was a favorite pastime. I had been having fun in my attempts to goad Jude in the yard, but I needed to tread lightly or he’d avoid me altogether.

Why did the thought of that sting?

“Checking on my father and asking him if he wanted anything else besides what I told him was on the list.”

“Is he okay?” I asked.

Jude nodded and let out a long sigh.

“He said to make sure I took my time, so I assume so.”

I couldn’t help the laugh slipping out of me. Jude’s mouth tilted into an almost crooked smile.

“He’s not wrong. The both of us need space. He wants to move into the assisted-living facility in town, but he needs to be better on his feet before he can do that,” he told me as he shoved his phone into his pocket.

“Listen, about the park, I’m sorry if I offended you or made you uncomfortable.”

I squinted at him. “Did I look offended and uncomfortable? I told you, it was fun and I didn’t mind. Mary always gives Peyton and me these looks of disdain when she sees us.”

“Does she?” Jude cocked a brow at me. “For what?”

“I think she’s mad at Peyton for ending up with Jake, and now I’m driving down the back roads with *you*.” I batted my eyelashes. “She thinks we’re corrupting the whole town, and it’s pretty cool to think about.”

“Well, be that as it may,” he said, a tiny smile ghosting across his mouth, “I shouldn’t have pushed you into that without asking. It’s not only Mary’s daughter. Everyone seems to want to save me from being single and...” He trailed off, raking a hand through his gorgeous dark hair that somehow looked even better after he messed it up.

“You don’t want to be saved. Well,” I said, lifting a shoulder, “I don’t know when I’m leaving, but I can help you out when you need it.”

“Help me?” He squinted at me. “Claudia, it’s nice of you to say that, but I can’t make you—”

“You’re not making me. I’m offering. What’s the big deal?”

Other than that pretending with Jude would only make me more attracted to him and he’d just told me he was off-limits? Not a big deal at all.

“That’s nice of you, but I can’t ask—”

“Just give a signal,” I said, throwing him a wink as I headed toward the market entrance. “Like I said, happy to give you a little peace. Does your father always give you grief when you try to help him?”

“Only all the time.” He let out a sad chuckle as we walked inside. “But he can grumble at me all he wants. I make sure he’s okay and taken care of, whether he likes it or not.”

“You’re a good son, and I’m sure he thinks so too.” I grabbed the one last cart after we walked inside. Jude kept in

step beside me, throwing in various items as we shopped.

This was...different. I wasn't inexperienced when it came to men, but I'd never shared a shopping cart with one. There had been only one cart left, and he didn't want to carry the few things he had to buy. This wasn't an intimate thing, but it seemed strange, nonetheless. We ambled past the produce as I finally remembered I was here to buy things, not dissect Jude's every word and action, and I grabbed a small bag of limes to throw into the cart.

"Don't take offense, but do you only eat the boring cereals? I mean, can't you throw in a box of Lucky Charms just to level it off?"

I stopped laughing when I spotted his wide grin.

"My father is diabetic and has kidney issues. These cereals are all part of the low-sugar, renal-friendly, and boring-as-fuck diet he has to follow and hates that I make him." He pointed to the box of peanut butter chocolate cookies. "Someone has a sweet tooth."

"I do. I've been eating my feelings since I arrived. I keep trying to forget this market has a fresh bakery aisle. My shorts are tight enough. In case you haven't noticed, I'm on the curvy side." I craned my neck around and met Jude's gaze.

"If by curvy, you mean perfect," he said in a throaty whisper, "then, yes. I noticed."

I swallowed, wanting to say something snarky to get rid of this stupid pinch in my chest, like "save it for the show," or accuse him of laying it on too thick. Instead, I smiled and breathed out my thanks.

"I'm sure your dad appreciates you taking care of him, even if he doesn't show it. I have the opposite problem. My parents want me around all the time. If I moved in with them, it would be their dream come true."

"And I guess that would make you crazy?" he asked as we strolled to the next aisle.

"God, yes. I mean, I love them dearly. And we get along. Mostly," I said, my heart almost skipping a beat when I caught

Jude's shoulders jerk with a tiny chuckle. "I'm an only child. They had me late in life, so I was the lucky sole recipient of all their love and expectations."

"I know how that goes," Jude said on a long sigh. "My parents were older when I came along too. All my cousins are at least ten years older than me. I was babied for a while, and I never thought I'd say that I would rather that than this," he mumbled to himself. "When your parents are older, they get sick sooner."

I nodded. "Mine are in mostly good health, thank God, but they've aged quite a bit over the past few years. It's hard to see, so I can't imagine what you've been through."

He shrugged without turning his head.

"It was easier when my mother was alive. He was always the sicker one, and she knew how to handle him. Once she... Well, we lost the buffer between us. Without her to calm us both down and get in the middle, we bicker all the damn time, as you may have noticed."

He swiveled his head and raised a brow at me. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this."

"Hey," I whispered, pushing the cart ahead to catch up to him. "I'm a pretty good listener, when I'm not speeding down highways." I got another tiny mouth-tilt from him as I pursed my lips. "You can tell me anything you want." Before I realized what I was doing, I draped my hand over his shoulder. "You sound like you've been holding that in for a while."

He stilled a moment, flicking his eyes to mine before he nodded. "I guess I have. If I brought this up to anyone in the family, they'd just tell me to put him in a home. And as much as we drive each other crazy, I don't want to do that. My mother wouldn't have wanted that either. Once he can get around better, and if he still wants to go into that facility and have his own apartment, that's different. I can't explain why, but it is."

"I get why," I whispered, my hand still on his arm. I squeezed his shoulder before I pulled back, clearing my throat

when I realized how hard the muscle was under my fingertips. He was hot enough when he was just grumpy and broody. The vulnerability pulling at his features was as intoxicating as it was irresistible.

“I wouldn’t want my parents in a home either if I could take care of them. Maybe it would be easier, depending on what they’d need, but I’d be too worried they weren’t being cared for the right way and feel guilty for letting someone else do it when they’d want me, even if they fought me about it.”

I spied a tiny nod as he took slow steps away from me.

“I can read people pretty quickly, and your father seems like a good guy who cares about his son, even if he was giving you shit that afternoon. Maybe you both just need to retreat to your own corners for a bit and give each other some room.”

I shot him a big grin, the hairs on the back of my neck standing straight up when he smiled back, wide and gorgeous and almost relaxed.

My God, he was beautiful. And I was getting too involved.

It seemed like he was all alone, and I hated that for him. Whether it was because of this ridiculous yearning for Jude to smile at me, or the squeeze in my chest from the sadness pulling at his perfect features, I wanted to be the one to make him feel better. If only for the afternoon.

I was too mentally exhausted to take stock of my issues or state of mind and figure out whatever I was doing or why I was doing it.

We made our way through the market, picking up what we needed and tossing it into the cart while keeping a comfortable silence, and we headed to the checkout. I held in a laugh when I spotted the six-packs of wine coolers by the register.

“Claudia, I didn’t realize you were still in town.” Mary came up to us, her thickly filled-in red brow raised as she looked between Jude and me. “Are you moving here like your friend?”

“I wish,” Jude said, draping his arm across my shoulders. “I’m working on convincing her while we get some shopping

done for my father.”

“Ah yes,” she said, so softly it was almost a whisper, as she fixated on us. “Is Mr. Davis okay?”

“He’s fine at home,” Jude said, the jolt from where his thumb drifted back and forth over my shoulder ricocheting across my body. “We’re just picking up a few things.” He flicked his eyes to mine for a second with a hint of a smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth, and I couldn’t resist cuddling into his side.

“I was just telling Jude how George probably appreciates having the house to himself, so I’m helping him enjoy his time away.” I draped my arm around his waist and shot him a wide smile. I worried for a moment that I’d gone too far until a grin stretched his mouth as he leaned into me.

My sad teenage heart jumped in my thirty-five-year-old chest at being both so close to him and enjoying this game we were playing in front of Mary. By sunrise tomorrow, word would be out that Jude and I were a twice-confirmed thing. It was wrong—and confusing—to get such a kick out of that, but I couldn’t help enjoying the moment, as fake as it was.

“Well, um, tell your father hello for me,” Mary said, still eyeing us as she backed away.

“I will,” Jude replied with a nod, the corner of his mouth twitching as if he was stifling a laugh.

He leaned over as if he was about to kiss my cheek. I was all in for this game of pretend, but I stiffened as he came closer. Whenever I got back to Brooklyn, I needed to go out with someone, anyone. My heart and my lady parts shouldn’t have been this overexcited by a potential kiss on the cheek.

“You’re good at this,” he whispered into my ear, his breath hot on my neck and sending a wave of goose bumps down my back.

I cleared my throat and met his gaze with a quick nod.

“So are you,” I replied in a breathy whisper.

If we did date, my almost-ticket would make for a good meet-cute story, but we couldn't. Jude deserved more than a good time from a confused woman who was just passing through.

No matter how tempting it was to make the offer.

After we each paid our bills and I ran to the liquor store for some tequila and rosé, Jude pressed his hand to my lower back and led me toward his truck. Was he still in pretend mode in case anyone was looking, or was he being polite? Or, did he have the same urge to touch me as I'd been fighting to touch him all afternoon?

Jesus. My crush on the grumpy cop who'd pulled me over only worsened when I realized he wasn't grumpy at all. He was just a guy with a lot going on who seemed like he could use some help. I was quick to offer myself as his fake dating partner to give him a break, but maybe I could really help him while I was here.

Maybe I could just kiss all the tension out of him.

I needed a straw for the tequila bottle I'd just bought and a cold pack for my vagina.

"From what I know of Mary, everyone is going to think we're actually dating. What happens if you find someone you really want to go out with, and she thinks you're off-limits?" I cleared my throat when I heard the breathy dip in my voice.

"Like I said, I'm not...up for that yet. Wasn't then and not now. So if it stops people from asking if I'm single or who I'm dating for a little while, even better."

I nodded, confused again, but this time by the disappointment stinging my gut at his admission.

"And having the town thinking I'm dating someone like you isn't a hardship." He went over to the passenger side of the truck and opened the door.

"Someone like me? I'm honestly not sure how to take that."

He lifted a shoulder. “Beautiful. Bold. Not afraid to say what she’s thinking or what she wants.” He darted his eyes around the parking lot before bringing them back to mine. “I meant it as a compliment.”

A sheepish smile played on my lips, my cheeks heating as I stepped into the cab. I watched him go around the truck and head to the driver’s side, this time not bothering to pretend not to look.

If he only knew what was in my head right now. But for both of our sakes, I had to keep it all to myself.

JUDE

I SAT AT MY DESK AND SIFTED THROUGH THE PAPERWORK FROM last week. The most action I'd seen was a call to break up a party after the neighbors complained about the stench of weed drifting into their yard.

Weed was legal now, but the neighbor lived a good half a block from the party, and the same skunky smell hit us hard the minute we got out of the car to check things out. The best we could do was ask the party host for a little consideration and to slow down the smoking, and explain to the neighbor who'd called in the complaint that there wasn't much we could do, as we couldn't control the law or the wind.

We had the occasional domestic disturbance, and sometimes crime traveled up and down the highway like the carjacking trend I'd heard about a couple of summers ago. But the department stayed close to the residents and was able to nip most things in the bud. That was all Chief Keith McGrath.

He had been a few years ahead of me in school, but even back then, he'd had a presence. Something about him made people take notice and listen to everything he had to say, and I hadn't been surprised when he'd been appointed one of the youngest chiefs in town history.

I'd entered the police force here but transferred to the department of the town I'd moved to when Maggie and I were married. When I'd ended up back in Kelly Lakes and asked to rejoin the department, Keith hadn't hesitated to hire me back. He even allowed me to keep the rank I'd been promoted to

right before I'd caught Maggie in our bed with her best friend's husband.

Everyone had welcomed me back home except for the only parent I had left.

I filed everything else away, aside from the marijuana complaint, as I had the feeling one of us would need to refer to it soon, and tried to ignore the snickers and whispers of a few of the guys behind me.

I kept social distance between the guys and myself to maintain some semblance of authority, and I had no interest in who was hooking up with whom around town, but I was getting a full report whether I wanted one or not.

“She's cute. A little clingy but cute. I'll see her again.”

Ron, one of the officers who'd just made it past rookie, chuckled as a few of the younger cops looked at him with rapt attention. He wasn't bad at his job, but he was full of himself when it came to women, from what I'd seen and—as much as I didn't want to at the moment—heard. The smirk on his face when I glanced back annoyed me as much as the guys who were hanging on his every word.

I had been one of those cops once upon a time. Maybe I hadn't been so loose-lipped about it, but I'd dated around enough before I'd married Maggie. I'd tried not to be a jerk about it since running into everyone was inevitable, but I'd had good times and good memories in Kelly Lakes before my life became a black hole of resentment and dread.

My last-minute trip to the market with Claudia had been a short reprieve from all that. The rumor mill had been activated, and while that had been my intention, I didn't have the energy for the interrogation I'd get from anyone about the new woman I was dating. Claudia didn't seem to mind keeping up with the ruse while she was here, if that's what I ended up doing, because she didn't plan to stay. Once she went home to Brooklyn, no one would know or care who she'd fake-dated upstate, and she'd be free to go out with whomever she wanted.

Why did that irritate me so much?

“I heard Sarge had a good weekend.”

I didn't feel like turning around to what I was sure would be widened eyes and Ron's smirk.

“What did you do?” Mitch, one of the rookies, asked me, his eyes shining when they met mine.

“Unlike Ron, what I do when I'm not in uniform I like to keep my business.” I stood and tossed my empty cup of coffee into the trash.

“That is a shame. If I were dating Claudia, I wouldn't be able to keep it to myself.”

My head whipped to Ron, and I narrowed my eyes.

“That's the difference between you and me. I don't need the audience. And you can brag about what you did or didn't do when you're off the clock.”

I didn't confirm or deny, but when Ron chuckled at my reaction and reply, I guessed I didn't have to. People believed what they wanted to as long as it made for a good story.

“Who's Claudia?” Mitch asked.

“She's the chief's niece's best friend. She lives in Brooklyn and visits from time to time, but she's been staying in town for a few weeks. Maybe staying for *someone*.” Ron smirked when my narrowed eyes met his.

Jake had told me that Ron had tried to date Peyton when she'd first come to town but would never get the hint every time she'd shot him down. Jake had set him very straight one day, and I enjoyed watching Ron almost piss himself whenever he ran into them both.

“I hate to interrupt teatime or whatever this is. But don't any of you have work to do? If not, find me and I'll give you some.”

I smiled at Keith's voice behind me.

“You got it, Chief.” Ron gave him a mock salute before they all dispersed into the office.

“We were all that young once,” Keith mused as his gaze followed their departure. “But I really hope I wasn’t that kind of asshole.”

“I was just thinking the same thing about when I was their age. But you weren’t, Chief.”

“Neither were you. But I’m going to have to watch the boys as they get older. Thank God the twins are only freshmen in high school and I have time.”

I laughed at his exaggerated grimace.

“I ran into your father the other day. I was on your street, and the aide had him walking around. He looks good.”

“Getting there,” I said, not wanting to think about all the dialysis research I’d done on Friday evening after his doctor had mentioned it as a possibility at his last appointment. I had been grateful to work in silence with Jake on Saturday and for the unexpected distraction after.

“Mr. Davis is a badass. Give him a few more months and I’m sure he’ll be walking all over the place.”

“I hope so,” I said, dropping my head into my hands and pinching the bridge of my nose. “He told me this morning that he looks forward to the day he’s well enough to throw me out.”

“Sounds like Mr. Davis,” he said, a laugh rumbling through his chest. “He looked like he was doing well when I saw him. It’s hard not to worry. I did the same when my parents were sick. But if you worry too much, both of you just end up miserable.”

“Yeah, too late for that.” A sad chuckle slipped out as I stood.

“I took the family into town yesterday, and Aiden wanted one of those shakes from Mary’s.”

I shut my eyes and nodded, anticipating what was coming next.

“I think I know what you’re about to say, or what you’re going to tell me you heard.”

“Listen, I didn’t bring it up to give you shit over it. We love Claudia, and from what Peyton told me, she’s having a hard time. This is good for both of you, and I was happy when I heard about your cozy market trip.”

“Wow, Mary didn’t spare any details, I guess.”

“You know that’s what she lives for. Although, Mary wasn’t so happy when she told us. She’s going to run her daughter out of town herself if she doesn’t stop trying to pawn her off on any single man she can find. You’d better tell your father to start walking faster.”

A laugh escaped me as I stood, adjusting my gun belt and pushing my chair against my desk. “That she is.”

I turned back to Keith, unsure what else to say. I didn’t want to tell him it was an act in case anyone overheard, and, like Jake, he seemed to be pushing me in Claudia’s direction. For someone who didn’t live here, she’d sure made a lasting impression on a lot of the residents. That didn’t surprise me because I couldn’t see how anyone wouldn’t notice her.

When I allowed myself to get close to her in the name of pretend, I could feel the heat between us and the jolt from wherever our skin touched.

When Dad yelled at me to get rid of the doom cloud over my head when I tried to talk to him about what the doctor had told us, Claudia popped into my head.

For a couple of hours, my life hadn’t seemed so dark and dull. And then I’d dropped her off, and intrusive memories of the demise of my marriage had sailed through my head and I was reminded of why I kept to myself.

“Claudia is only visiting for the summer. I know the town probably has us engaged.” I scoffed and shifted toward the door.

“You’re probably right,” he said, his shoulders shaking. “But even if she’s only here for the summer, she visits my niece all the time. And Brooklyn isn’t Mars. It’s not like she’s going that far when she goes home.” He exhaled a long sigh, shaking his head. “I just think you could use a break, Davis.”

Keith shrugged and padded toward me, dropping a hand on my shoulder.

“And from what Peyton told me, so could Claudia. So what’s the harm in a little fun? You could use some, I think.”

Keith was a bighearted, good guy who looked out for everyone, but how much of a loser did I appear to be if Jake and Keith were this invested in my personal life? My marriage had blown up a couple of towns over, but Maggie and I had both had enough connections in town that the details had traveled over. Between that and the concerned gloss in everyone’s eyes when they asked about my father, I was sick of being the Kelly Lakes focal point for town sympathy.

Whether I started up anything real with Claudia, maybe the idea of it would get people off my back. The interest in my father and me—or most of it—came from a genuine place, but it was beginning to choke me.

“Fun wouldn’t be a bad thing,” was all I said, not sure which one of us I was trying to convince.

“Exactly.” Keith slapped my back. “Be careful out there, Sarge.”

I wasn’t sure if he meant out there in the small crime element of Kelly Lakes or with Claudia. I nodded in agreement, hoping not to give him encouragement to clarify. I was always ready to do my job, but Claudia? I had a feeling casual and distant wouldn’t work when it came to her. But faking it, if she was still on board...maybe we could do that.

The consideration I was giving to the notion of fake-dating a woman—a woman I couldn’t stop thinking about—just to get people off my back and stop regarding me as some down-on-his-luck charity case was beyond ridiculous, yet somehow practical enough to give it serious thought.

Practical other than my pulse kicking up whenever I thought of Claudia snuggling her gorgeous body against me like she had for show. *Just* for show. If I went along with this stupidity, I had to make that clear enough for both of us.

I waved to the other officers and headed out. The only thing I could agree with both Jake and Keith on was that, at some point, I really did need a damn break.

CLAUDIA

“ARE YOU SURE YOU DON’T MIND?” PEYTON ASKED, EYEING me as she packed Keely’s diaper bag.

“As much as I love the kiddie pool, I need to get out,” I said, bouncing Keely in my arms while Peyton packed her stroller as if we were never coming back. “A nice long evening walk would be good for the both of us. Right, girlie pie?”

Keely squealed in my arms, flashing me a wide grin as she kicked against my stomach. I loved playing with her whenever I came to visit, but now that I was here for a while and she was used to me, I looked forward to her baby giggles every morning and how she’d squeal at the sight of me when I’d come upstairs.

She was a joy and a bright spot in this very confusing summer. Basking in Keely’s sweet innocence took my mind off all the uncertainty waiting for me back in Brooklyn.

“Mike is out for the night, so we’ll take a walk and give you and Jake a little time to yourselves.” I set Keely down in the stroller and strapped her in. “I’ll text before I come in, in case you’re enjoying the alone time a little too much.”

Peyton pursed her lips as she opened the door for us. “She’s already in her PJs. If you get her to doze off, she can go right into her crib.”

“And you packed all this if she’s just going to bed when she gets home?”

“You never know. My mother always says you can’t leave anything home, even if it’s a short trip.”

“And you listened to her?” I sucked in an exaggerated gasp. “Oh man, the heat is getting to you, isn’t it?”

Peyton kissed Keely’s cheek as I made my way out the door, carefully maneuvering the stroller down the steps.

The sun was setting into a pretty twilight. I’d take a nice stroll around the neighborhood and head home, hopefully tiring us both out.

“Aunt Claudia needs some air, babe. How about you?” She smiled when I tickled her neck, and she let go of a loud yawn before she nestled her head against the stuffed animal in her hands.

“Bailing on me already?” I chuckled as I grasped on to the stroller handle and made my way down the block. Once again, it was just me and my thoughts. Maybe I’d come up with a plan for my life by the time I made it back to Peyton’s front porch, but all this time to think hadn’t netted out to any type of resolution so far.

Maybe I could be their live-in babysitter. I’d have a few years before Keely started pre-kindergarten and kept the same school hours as her mom. I wheeled the stroller past all the spacious homes that, after a few blocks, started looking exactly the same, other than the varying distances between them. The sky turned a darker blue as I continued, still without a single cloud—aside from the one that had been lingering directly over my head since I’d arrived.

My loud sigh echoed on the quiet street, my only reply from the universe.

“Something wrong, sweetheart?”

I swiveled my head to a familiar, gravelly voice. I recognized Jude’s father as he waved to me from his front porch.

“Hey there. George, right?” I asked as I turned the stroller around and headed in his direction.

“Good memory. And you’re Claudia.” His smile widened as I came closer.

“I am,” I said, pulling the carriage up to his front steps and setting the brake on the back wheel. Keely hadn’t stirred or made a peep for two blocks and was officially out cold. Her perfect bow lips were parted as she took deep, openmouthed breaths. I smoothed the wayward brown curl off her forehead and smiled at her sweet sigh.

“To sleep that peacefully,” I whispered. “It’s been long enough to be a fuzzy memory,” I mused and took a seat on the bottom steps.

“I can relate to that,” George agreed and took a long sip from the silver can in his hand. “I’d love a long, dreamless sleep. Want one?” He shifted the can in his hand to show me the label. “It’s one of those flavored alcoholic seltzers because my therapist says they don’t have a lot of sugar. They’re mostly terrible but decent enough to pretend it’s a real drink.” He motioned to the cooler next to him. “I feel rude not bringing it to you, but by the time I make it over there—”

“Don’t be silly.” I climbed up the steps. “Thank you for the offer. Want another one?”

“I’m not supposed to, but I haven’t had the chance to have a drink with a pretty lady in a long time. Jude can gripe when he gets home if he chooses to count the damn things.”

“Fair enough,” I said and lifted the cover on the cooler. “Does raspberry or lemon matter?”

“No, honey. Unfortunately, it doesn’t.”

I snickered as I dug out two frosty cans, glancing over at the carriage before I took the chair next to George.

“Cheers,” I said as I tapped my can to his.

“Cheers, indeed.”

“This is a beautiful house,” I said as I swept my gaze along the closed-in porch. “I’d love sitting out here every day.”

“You’d think,” he scoffed. “It would be nicer if sitting out here were a treat, not all I had to do after I got done with

therapy. My home aide went home an hour ago, and when it's not too bad out, I like to get a little air until my son comes home."

My gaze snagged on the hem of George's shorts. They went past the knees, and other than the stocking on his artificial leg, I didn't see a striking difference between that one and his real one.

"The leg is fake from the knee down."

"Oh, I'm..." Shit. I hadn't meant to sit there and gawk at his leg, and shame washed over me for being so obvious about it. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been—"

"Stop." He shook his head and reached over to squeeze my arm. "It's there. It's hard not to notice. No offense taken, sweetheart. I'm happy for the company. Well, the company that doesn't get on my case before he sets his gun belt down."

I laughed as George flicked his wrist to glance at his watch.

"Should be due any minute now."

"I think it's sweet that he worries about you."

"He does. Too much." George nodded, glancing at Keely's carriage as he chuckled to himself. "It's a little strange when your kid ends up taking care of you." He exhaled with a groan as he set his can down on the small table next to him. "So what's got you so frustrated?"

"You heard my dramatic sigh?" I joked, a little embarrassed that George had caught me.

"I don't know about dramatic, but you look frustrated about something." He crossed his arms as he examined my face. "If you want to talk about it, I have nothing but time."

"Well." I leaned back, crossing my legs as I brought the can to my lips. I tasted more fizz than alcohol. "I lost my job and came up here to stay with my best friend and her family until I figured things out, which I can't seem to do. When Peyton moved up here, I'd always tease her about living in the country because it was so different from where we lived in

Brooklyn. I thought the small-town vibes and quiet would help, but I've been here for a while, and I still can't figure out what to do next."

"Nothing wrong with that. Taking a break to figure things out is the smart thing to do if you can."

"But I can't stay here forever. Every time I say I'm going to head back, something stops me."

"If you're not ready to go back and you can afford the extra time here, why not just stay until you are?"

I shrugged and lifted my head to George's kind gaze. I saw so much of Jude in him, with his light-blue eyes and strong jaw. I'd bet he could've passed for Jude's twin in his younger days, but the biggest difference between them wasn't age—it was George's easy smile. I'd seen Jude smile, but if I blinked, I would miss it.

"You're wise."

"Happens when you get old. The body may be breaking down, but the mind—" he tapped his temple "—razor-sharp."

"I forgot you lived so close to Peyton and Jake. Jude mentioned it when he drove me to the market, but I didn't think you were that close."

"The house Jake grew up in is on this block too. I could tell you stories about him and the police chief as dopey kids getting into all kinds of trouble before they both grew up to be big shots."

"Well, I'd love to hear some if you have the time."

"Oh, you'd be here all night. All the boys have stories. Even mine liked to have fun sometimes." Sadness flitted across his face and squeezed my chest. "He's been through a lot. He could use someone to pull him out of the rut he's dug himself into."

I nodded until I spotted the half smile pulling at the corner of George's mouth.

"Um, if you're thinking that person is me, I don't want to disappoint you, but no."

“Do you know that you’re the first person in history he’s pulled over and let drive away with no ticket? And I do mean the first. Hell, when he worked with the department here before he moved, even I tried to stay out of his zone when I knew he was on shift, just in case.”

“I’m sure I just looked extra pathetic, and he let me go. I gave him a sob story about losing my job.”

He replied with a slow shake of his head.

“Maybe he didn’t want to make your day worse, but that hasn’t stopped him before. You got to him. I saw it at the park. I selfishly hope you stay even longer to figure things out since you make him nice and uncomfortable.”

“I make him nice and uncomfortable?” I burst out laughing. “Now that is what every girl wants to hear about a man.”

“For him, it’s a good thing. I promise. If anyone has a hope of getting him to both open and lighten up, I’m betting it’s you.”

“He did tell me his first name and showed me his medal, but he’s been mostly tight-lipped other than that.”

I left out the part at the market when Jude talked about how rough it was taking care of his father because he didn’t make it easy sometimes.

“Did he tell you why his name is Jude?”

“He said he was named for Saint Jude after I asked if it came from the Beatles song.”

He nodded and leaned back in his chair, slowly crossing his ankles.

“For a very long time, we couldn’t have kids. And we figured that was life.” He shrugged. “Until one day, after we’d lost all hope, my wife found out she was expecting. We didn’t know what to name him until after he was born. He was this perfect little guy, a miracle we’d never thought possible.”

George’s voice was almost a whisper at the end, the love for his son so evident in his gaze, it scratched at the back of

my throat.

“So you named him after the patron saint of the impossible.”

“That’s right.” He pointed at me and smiled. “Very good.”

“Catholic school.” I shrugged. “That’s a very sweet story.”

“Then he grew older and became impossible in different ways. And especially now, but I can’t totally blame him as he’s had a rough few years.”

George scrubbed his hand down his face but didn’t offer up any more details.

“He always thought Jude was an old-fashioned name and made his friends call him Davis. Only we were allowed to call him Jude. And now you. See, I told you.” He pointed a finger at me. “You got to him.”

“I’ve only seen him a few times.” I shook my head. “I doubt I *got* to him.”

“Sometimes it only takes once. I knew about my wife in the first ten minutes after I met her.”

“He asked for my license and registration in the first ten minutes after he met me.” I leaned forward and patted his hand. “Not exactly the same.”

George cracked up as an SUV pulled up in front of the house. My heart skipped a beat when I recognized Jude’s truck, and I watched him step out of the driver’s seat, so damn hot in that uniform, and head toward the front steps.

He slung a backpack over his shoulder and stilled when he noticed Keely’s carriage by the steps.

“I’m entertaining a guest. She’s enjoying the night air and one of those shitty seltzers with me. Want to join us?”

“I took Keely for a walk, and your dad called me over for a chat and a drink,” I explained and jiggled my now-empty can. “They aren’t so terrible. Thanks for the drink, George.” I pushed off the chair. “Hi, Jude. I’ll take Keely home so her parents can put her to bed.”

“Come back anytime, honey. My son will walk you back.”

“That’s not necessary. I’m sure Jude just wants to relax after a long day.”

“Jude has good manners because that’s how I raised him. Isn’t that right, son?”

I laughed when Jude clenched his eyes shut and nodded.

“I would have offered, Dad. Give me a chance once in a while.”

“My mistake. Have a wonderful night, Claudia.”

His eyes darted from me to his son, and I had to laugh at his sly smile.

“I will. Thanks again.” I lifted the brake on the carriage and started back toward the house, not looking to see if Jude was following me since the heat from his presence already confirmed it.

“So, did my father complain to you about me the whole time?”

“No, not the whole time.” I turned my head and let myself look at him. His mouth curved up in not quite a smile, he shoved his hands into the pockets of his gloriously fit uniform pants as he stepped beside me. “I’m sorry he put you on the spot like that. I really can walk back alone. It’s Kelly Lakes, so —”

“I don’t mind.” He lifted a shoulder, keeping a slow pace next to me with his long legs. “I probably could use a walk before I try to ask my father how therapy went today. And it never hurts to be a little cautious.” He lifted his arm and pinched the back of his neck, letting go of a groan as we made our way up the first block.

I tore my gaze away from how his bicep strained against the material of his shirt. I’d bet a sculpted chest was behind that badge, too.

“I guess you would know better than me. Being a high-ranking law enforcement officer and all. Nowhere is totally safe, right?”

“It’s safe for the most part, but like I tell the new cops who come in, don’t take it for granted and get sloppy. I’m sure it’s a lot quieter than you’re used to.”

“That it is. It’s never this quiet anyway. Whenever I visit, for the first night or two, I find it hard to sleep without the sounds of sirens or at least cars going back and forth outside.”

“And after being here for so long, you’ll probably have the opposite problem when you go back. Everything will be too noisy.”

“I guess.” I sighed again. “Whenever that is.”

I pulled Keely’s stroller next to the front porch and settled onto the bottom step.

“Thanks for the walk back,” I said, lifting my head to the now-black sky full of stars. “Sorry I sidetracked you.”

“You didn’t sidetrack me. Just delayed the inevitable fight over the kind of potatoes I’m making for dinner.” Jude peered down at me, his eyes translucent even under the soft glow of the porch light. “Can I sit?”

“Sure. The stars are one thing I’m not used to here. All the city smog dims them back home.”

Jude and I sat in a comfortable silence for a minute among the low hum of cicadas around the lawn.

“What’s stopping you from going home?”

“I don’t know. I was a financial planner for thirteen years. And I was good at it. But it didn’t matter. In the end, all my hard work was for nothing, and my job ended up—”

“With someone with a penis?”

I whipped my head to Jude’s smirk and burst out laughing.

“Please don’t hold anything I said that night against me. I’ve gotten texts and emails from recruiters, but I haven’t had the urge to answer any of them. I keep thinking, why? For what?”

“Are you happy at home?”

Jude's question dangled between us.

"I thought I was. But what else am I going to do?"

"You could do something else if you wanted to. The owner of Halman's is closing the doors because he doesn't feel like running it anymore."

My jaw dropped. "Larry is closing the only bar in town? Is he crazy?"

"I never really spoke to Larry, but a few cops told me he's just sick of it. It happens."

"I bet not to you. You were probably born with a police hat on."

He rested his elbows on his knees as his gaze traveled my face. "Why do you say that?"

"You're just a natural at it. It's the understated but intense air of authority, but you care about people. You even sounded concerned about me that night that I'm not allowed to bring up anymore."

He dipped his chin to his chest, the bashful smile on his mouth making it so damn hard not to grab his face and kiss him.

"And you love your dad. Enough to buy him cardboard cereals and make him probably mediocre potatoes."

"He wouldn't see that as love, but yes." Jude was still smiling when he looked over at me, but it was sad this time. I could almost deal with just thinking Jude was the hottest man on the planet, but now he was giving me these glimpses of the man inside that I didn't think he showed anyone else.

That, I knew I couldn't resist.

"I better get Keely inside." I stood over Jude. "Thanks again for the—"

I stepped into the dip in the grass Peyton had warned me about every time I came here, and I lost my balance, catapulting myself right into Jude's open arms when he pushed off the step.

“Sorry,” I said, clutching his shoulders for purchase. We stood almost chest to chest as Jude’s concerned eyes searched mine. “I knew about that hole and managed to avoid it until now. Thank God I was with an officer of the law with excellent reflexes.”

I coughed out a nervous laugh as he frowned at me.

“Are you okay? You didn’t twist anything, did you?”

He dropped to his knees in front of me and squeezed my ankle. His fingertips were rough as they pressed into my skin, the soft scratch sending a zap shooting up my leg.

Men didn’t give me zaps or change my heart rate just from their proximity. My head was so screwed up that I was probably hallucinating all these weird feelings for someone I hardly knew.

Fuck, I was in trouble. Normal me would find him attractive since normal me would still have a pulse and be human, but this frazzled me was too damn captivated by him for it to make any kind of sense.

“I think I’m okay,” I said, tapping his shoulder. “The only thing I bruised was my ego.” I tried for an easy smile and hoped my flushed cheeks weren’t so obvious under the night sky. His hand drifted from my ankle to the back of my calf, my muscle twitching a second against his palm as he peered up at me. The humid air grew thin between us as our eyes stayed locked. Jude nodded but didn’t get up, and my feet were stuck in the grass as time and everything around us seemed to freeze.

“Is everything okay?”

I recognized the timid voice of Peyton’s elderly next-door neighbor, Mrs. Nolan, behind us. She peered out her kitchen window, looking us both over with a pinched brow.

“I’m fine. I just tripped and was lucky to have a police sergeant around to catch me,” I glanced at Jude, his eyes still on me as he stood, looking me over with an expression I couldn’t decipher. Lust, indifference—I couldn’t tell as his baby blues were as unreadable as they were gorgeous.

“My hero,” I said, roping my arms around his neck and kissing his cheek. I told myself it was for the show, that I didn’t mean what I said or want to feel what it was like to have him in my arms.

Jude didn’t press into me, but he didn’t move away. His gaze locked on mine and drifted to my mouth.

“Good evening, Davis. My regards to your father.” We turned to her scrutinizing glance before she shut her window.

“I thought I’d make my clutzy fall work to your advantage,” I chirped, trying to lighten the weird mood.

“Advantage?” he asked, squinting at me as more confusion spread over his features.

“She probably thinks we’re dating too, so you should be golden until I go home. And as I said, I have zero clue when that’s going to be, so...”

He nodded, sweeping his hand through his hair as if he were mulling something over. Just as his mouth opened as if he was about to say something, the door creaked behind us.

“Everything okay? I thought I heard you out here.”

Peyton stepped down from the porch, eyeing us both as her neighbor had a moment ago.

“Oh, sorry. I tripped in that dip in the grass you warned me about, and Jude caught me. I ended up having a drink on his father’s porch after Keely fell asleep on the way, and Jude walked me back here.”

“Oh,” was all she said, her nose crinkled as she unstrapped her daughter and gently rested her against her shoulder.

“Let me get this one in bed. Nice to see you, Davis.”

“Same,” he said, clearing his throat and taking a quick and long step back. “Have a good night, Claudia,” he said with the same dry and distant tone as when he’d told me, “Drive safely, Ms. Ng.”

“You too. Thanks for the walk back.”

He nodded and headed back up the block toward his house.

“Did I miss something?” Peyton whispered, patting Keely’s back as our gazes both drifted to Jude’s quick departure.

“That’s a good question,” I scoffed, a sting I couldn’t explain twisting low in my gut as the walk to clear my head ended up doing exactly the opposite.

CLAUDIA

“THEY ARE FUCKING ADORABLE,” I WHISPERED IN PEYTON’S ear as I watched her newly married sister-in-law, Kristina, and her husband, Leo, make out in a far-off corner next to the bar. There was nowhere they could go and not be seen, other than if they snuck into the back room, but I had an inkling they’d already done that or were heading there.

“They are,” Peyton agreed, a wistful smile curving her lips. “They deserve to be.”

“You know, more weddings should be like this. Or whatever this is. Have the ceremony however you want by yourselves and celebrate with your friends and family at the local bar.”

“For sure.” Peyton laughed. “But I would not have been able to get away with eloping, as lovely as it would have been.” She shook her head, her face twisting into a grimace. “Not with my mother.”

“Oh, hell no. She already didn’t speak to you for like a week when you told her you weren’t getting married in church.”

“Because she’s *so* religious...” Peyton rolled her eyes, a small smile tilting her mouth as she lifted a shoulder. “It sounds terrible, but that was a nice, quiet week.”

“But you still had your wedding your way. Simple. When my cousins got married, it was like the damn Academy Awards, complete with mid-event dress change. Just being a guest was stressful.”

Weddings in my family were taxing for so many reasons. My aunt and uncle wanted to make a statement about their success, and my poor cousins had to go along for the ride. I was happy for them, but it was hard to stay respectful when my relatives looked me over with obvious disapproval and aggravating sympathy simply because I'd had the nerve to arrive alone.

I'd never brought a date because my family would all jump on whatever poor dude I'd brought with me and would grill him for the entire night. Plus, I never wanted the hassle of having to explain what happened to my *friend* at the next family function.

Kristina and Leo had been married back where they'd first met, at a resort in the Florida Keys, with only Kristina's daughters in attendance. I had a feeling they'd chosen Halman's bar in town to celebrate with their family and friends after they'd returned because Kristina had claimed Leo right next to the beer tap with a passionate kiss one very crowded night. But again, like most things in Kelly Lakes, this was the only bar in town. They'd invited their family and friends to an open-bar party, but almost everyone I'd come into contact with in Kelly Lakes was here.

"I could actually see you having a wedding in a bar."

"Right?" I said, slamming my almost-empty bottle of cider onto the table. I'd always joked about leaving my errant city life ways and ending up with a hot Kelly Lakes local, but I sobered for a moment and drained the rest of the bottle when said anonymous local flashed in my mind, this time with Jude's face. I cleared my throat in an effort to reset my brain.

"My parents wouldn't be thrilled, but my father would see the practical side of not having to wipe out his savings for his daughter's wedding. It would be beyond perfect."

"Too bad Halman's is closing. Unless Larry finds someone to buy it." Peyton shrugged.

"I still can't believe he wants to close. What are you all going to do for a bar?"

“There is one by the highway exit, but it’s more of a sports bar and grill. We’ll have to go out of town for something like this.”

“That’s terrible.”

“What is?” Jake came up behind where Peyton sat, giving the back of his wife’s neck an affectionate squeeze.

“That Halman’s is closing.” Peyton leaned back as Jake came up behind her. “It’s a shame. You all have serious history here.”

I’d visited enough times to soak in how in love they were, but after living in their house for the past few weeks, I’d noticed that Jake and Peyton were never in the same room without touching. He always took the seat right next to her and pulled her close, and she’d cuddle into him on instinct. It was so natural between them that I was sure they never even realized how much they gravitated toward each other.

It was nice to watch but intensified the loneliness I’d never had before, yet now couldn’t shake. It was like a growing fungus since I’d come here.

Jake shrugged, pulling out the seat next to his wife.

“It happens. Not everything lasts forever,” he said as he sat down.

I loved the atmosphere of Halman’s. It was plain and simple, with gray walls and black floors, the lack of updates over the years giving it a cozy, old-time feel. The wooden seats were uncomfortable as fuck, but I always wondered if that was done on purpose for patrons to get up and mingle. They had an old jukebox, but I’d only seen customers dance when they were extra tipsy, and they’d trip all over one another since the space was too small to have an actual dance floor.

“But I don’t understand why Larry is shutting the place down. It can’t be for lack of profit because it’s the only bar in town, and every night I’ve come here, it’s always packed.”

“I think Larry just doesn’t want to do it anymore. He took over the bar from his parents when he was in his twenties, but

his kids moved away with his wife after they split, and they don't want to move back to manage it. He told me the other day that he's looking to retire somewhere outside of Kelly Lakes and the long bar hours are exhausting."

I nodded, holding in a laugh. Closing time for Halman's was eleven p.m. The bar around the corner from my apartment in Brooklyn was open until three, and there was always noise from last-call patrons closing the place, even on a weeknight. It was one of the many things Kelly Lakes did differently from the city. I didn't doubt that running a bar was hard work, no matter what the hours were, but giving up Halman's seemed like a wasted opportunity for a sure income.

"I'm getting up for a refill. Want anything?" I asked Jake and Peyton.

"Nah, I have all I need." Jake popped his brow as he brought Peyton's hand to his lips.

"Of course you do," I said, shooting Peyton a grin before I shifted toward the bar.

It was heartwarming yet taxing to live with the poster children for small-town romance.

I sauntered up to the counter and ambled around Leo and Kristina, still lip-locked and hardly registering anything or anyone around them. Jake's sister had had a rough divorce and had sworn off men to me every time I'd seen her after. She'd ended up on a solo vacation and had a fling with a handsome part-time bartender, never expecting him to end up working in the same hospital as she did, months after she returned.

Leo and Kristina's love story had everything, including fate bringing them back together.

If you believed in fate. I never had and had always been taught to make my own luck. But after the luck I'd worked so hard for had run out, I seemed to be depending on fate or some kind of greater power to tell me what to do since I couldn't think of anything on my own.

"Oh sorry," Kristina said to me when she finally came up for air and noticed me standing behind them.

“Do *not* be sorry at all, Mrs. Reyes.” I shot them both a wry grin as I squeezed next to them at the crowded bar. “Make out all you want. I feel special I was here that first night.”

Kristina dropped her head against Leo’s chest, her shoulders shaking with a chuckle.

“That’s my favorite memory of this place,” Leo said, rubbing her back. “The night that my wife couldn’t let anyone else have me, so she claimed me in front of the whole damn town. I get a chill just thinking about it.”

Kristina lifted her head and locked eyes with her husband, the love between them so palpable it squeezed my cynical heart. Everyone had been fascinated by the new fireman/nurse who’d moved into town, but he’d already been taken when he’d arrived.

“Say ‘my wife’ again,” Kristina whispered before their lips fused back together.

Even I swooned in their presence. I needed to lay off Peyton’s romance novel bookcase for the remainder of my stay and stick with serial killer stories and murder mysteries. There was love everywhere I looked, and while I used to tease them all about it, not having any of my own bothered me now in a way it never had before.

Maybe because before I had something to focus on. Before I’d left Brooklyn, I’d had a goal and a purpose to work toward. Love was never necessary for me, and I was more than okay with occasional lust.

All this time on my hands was warping my brain, and I didn’t recognize myself anymore.

“Yeah, that kiss was big news in here for a while,” Larry, the soon-to-be ex-owner of Halman’s, said behind me. “I heard about it for weeks, and every time, the tale got taller. I was tempted to add to it and see how far I could make it go, but I would have hated if rumors about the two of you in the back room made it to one of Kristina’s kids.”

“I appreciate that,” Kristina said, beaming as Leo pulled her away toward the back room maybe sparked by Larry’s

suggestion. I was thrilled for her despite the confusing jealousy swirling around in my gut, and I needed more alcohol to numb the sting and mute the weird voices in my head.

Larry's mouth curved into a slow smile when he spotted me. "Hey, gorgeous. I didn't see you come in. I heard you were staying in town."

He was in his early sixties if I had to guess, with his full head of gray hair cropped short, and he was still in great shape. He always flirted with me whenever I came in, and although I could never tell if he was kidding or not, I went along with it and enjoyed our sparring back and forth.

Under all that teasing, he was a big teddy bear of a man who always had a wide smile and a hearty laugh for all his customers. He seemed to genuinely enjoy running the bar, and I would never have guessed he wanted to sell it.

"I've been in the crowd for a while. So, I heard this place is closing. Where are all those big claiming moments supposed to happen now?"

"Oh, they'll happen, just maybe not with so many to witness it at once. But word gets around fast enough." He threw down a napkin in front of me. "Glad you were able to visit and make it here one more time. What can I get you?"

"A refill, please." I lifted my empty cider bottle and set it on the counter. "Seriously, you're going to make the residents of Kelly Lakes travel to another town for a good bar? That's a travesty, Larry."

A laugh rumbled through his chest.

"My kids don't want it, and I'm looking to retire. Unless you want to buy this place and keep it open."

He set the new bottle down on the wood, and my gaze caught on the drop of condensation sliding over the label as I absorbed what he said in a way I didn't expect. I reached into my purse and dropped a twenty down next to the bottle before I picked it up.

"I wouldn't know the first thing about running a bar."

“I bet you still could. I could see you doing a lot of things.”

Larry held up his hands when my brows jumped.

“I mean, if anyone could give new life to this old bar, it would be you. I didn’t mean it how it came out.” He slowly backed away after a bartender called his name. “Not exactly anyway.”

I glared back at his smirk and shook my head at his departure.

Of all the random career changes I’d considered since I’d come to Kelly Lakes, Larry’s ridiculous suggestion was the first one that had made me take a serious pause.

Whenever I considered job searching, thoughts of all those meetings and moments of being on the spot to prove myself flashed in my mind, and the only concrete decision I’d made since I’d lost my job was that I never wanted to do that again. I had burned out on corporate life long before I’d been pushed out of it, but what else was there for me to do? I didn’t know the first thing about owning and running a business.

But I had watched my father run his own business for my entire life. His restaurant was his life, not just his livelihood. Even in the toughest of times, his business was his focus and why he’d never give up his restaurant by choice. Running my own place—whether it was a bar or somewhere else—and making it mine had a sudden but undeniable appeal.

One of my favorite things about Kelly Lakes was the diversity of its residents, and I’d never heard an off-color comment or a joke about my Asian heritage from anyone here—as I’d had at work from time to time. But how would they take to a new female owner of their town’s oldest establishment? Would some of the older residents resent me or, worse, call me “sweetheart” and pat me on the head if I tried to enforce any rules?

I never shied away from anything, but the idea of buying my way into another situation like that exhausted me. Wouldn’t that defeat the purpose of this unemployment

sabbatical I was on? Why would I put myself into another aggravating situation where I had to prove I was good enough?

And how much did bars cost? It had been the question rolling around in my head ever since Jude had mentioned that Larry was selling it. But that was nuts, right?

The actual consideration I was giving to this crazy idea made my head hurt. I cupped my forehead and shifted to go back to Jake and Peyton's table, when I bumped into someone's hard shoulder, almost dropping my drink.

"Sorry about that. I didn't mean to sneak up on you while Larry was flirting with you."

Jude's voice had an unfamiliar hint of humor in it. He darted his eyes behind me before bringing them back to mine, something new in his features I hadn't seen before and couldn't quite pinpoint.

Almost like jealousy. Interesting.

"Larry likes to bust my chops, and I do it right back. I don't know if you'd call that flirting." I shrugged, crossing my arms as I searched his face. His brow knit together, a sarcastic chuckle falling from his lips.

"He busts everyone's chops but doesn't give them a once-over like he gave you."

"And you were watching us long enough to spot a once-over? How observant, Sergeant Davis. Oh, wait." I pressed a hand to his chest, his hard as granite and probably chiseled enough to be drool-worthy chest, as I glanced over his shoulder. "Are we fake dating here too?" I whispered into his ear, the woodsy scent of his cologne or aftershave or maybe even just him tempting me closer. "I told you that you need to give me a heads-up if we are so I can act accordingly. In case anyone gives me another *once-over*."

I pursed my lips at him as those icy-blue eyes bored into mine.

"*Everyone* gives you a once-over. You're probably just too used to it to notice."

“Well, fake boyfriend or casual lover or whatever we’re playing—” I cleared my throat as I shook off the rush of heat up my neck “—I’m surprised to see you tonight. I know you don’t like to leave your dad alone.”

“My uncle stopped by for the night, and even though he’s a jerk, at least I can relax knowing he’s there. Leo and Kristina asked me here tonight, and I didn’t want to miss it. I grew up with the Russos, and Leo always went the extra mile for my father on his shifts at the hospital. Coming tonight was the least I could do.”

He shrugged, tipping back his beer bottle and attracting my eyes once again to the sinful roll of his throat.

“I need to get used to my father fending for himself, even if it’s hard to relax. He deserves his peace, and so do I.” His crooked smile stole a little air from my lungs. “The circumstances of coming back sucked, but I have to admit it’s good to be home.”

“I’m glad to hear that. And if we are fake...something, interested in a couples’ game of darts?” I nodded toward the corner, spotting the same group of men laughing around the board that had been there since I’d come in.

“You play?” he asked, arching a brow.

“I do, and I’m pretty damn good,” I whispered in his ear.

“I bet you are,” he rasped, his voice dipping husky and low enough to make me tighten my hold on the bottle in my hand. Jude was hot enough in that brooding and aloof way I’d noticed since we’d met, but when he’d let himself go even a little, he was sex on legs—or he could be if he dropped the mask for longer than a few seconds.

“But good luck trying to get a game.” He tipped his chin toward the wall. “Those three never leave the dart board.”

“Maybe someone needs to teach them how to share.” I made my way around Jude and strutted up to the three men. I recognized one as Larry’s brother Lou, but I didn’t know the other two. The stockier one of the three aimed his dart at the

board, throwing it way off target, despite his cocky stance before he let it go.

“Hey there, I’ll take next game,” I said, leaning against the wall. All three swiveled their heads in my direction, the man in front of the board eyeing me with a smirk. He was a couple of inches taller than me with salt-and-pepper hair and a short beard, regarding me as if I had just made a ridiculous request.

“Darts are sharp, honey,” he said, rolling his eyes at me before he threw another one at the board, this one managing to at least come inside the outer rim.

“Are they?” I pressed my hand to my chest. “I should get some gloves, then. Hey, Lou.” I nodded at Larry’s brother, a smirk curling his lips too but not in the same condescending way as his friend. He’d witnessed enough of me giving his brother shit on random nights to know I wouldn’t shrink away like the delicate and clueless flower this guy seemed to be mistaking me for.

“Okay, sweetheart,” he said, heading to the board to pluck the darts off. “You can try if you want.”

“Thank you so much,” I gushed as I took them from his hand. “Which way do you throw them? Oh, I’ll figure it out.” I waved a hand. “Here, honey. Can you hold this for me for a minute, please?” I handed my drink to a wide-eyed Jude and kissed his cheek, lingering a few seconds longer than I needed to and dragging my lips away. “Thanks, babe.”

Holy hell, he smelled good up close, but I needed to focus.

“Thank you for giving me the chance to play.” I stepped back from the board, and I swept my gaze over the three men. The one who’d handed me the darts shook his head as he leaned back against the wall, his arms crossed.

“You’re welcome. If you could please try to get it over with so that we can actually play, that would be great.”

“Oh right, I guess girls can’t *actually* play darts.” I giggled for effect. “I don’t think I got your name.” I tilted my head to the side, loving the impatient huff falling from his lips.

“Artie,” he said. “And you seem to know Lou, and this is Dan. Now that introductions are over, let’s go.” He nodded to the board.

“Ah, right. Do you know what my favorite thing to do is, Artie?”

I shot him a glance before I went back to the board.

“I don’t,” he said, his irritated tone making me smile wider.

“My older cousin had a dart board in his basement. And he also thought since I was a girl, it was a waste of time letting me play. But then,” I said, launching my first dart right into the bull’s-eye, “I practiced.” My second one hit right where the first hung from the board. “And I ended up better than all of them.” I grinned when the third one landed with the other two. “Fancy that, right?”

I grinned wider when I caught Artie’s glare.

“In fact, he took me to bars with him when I was *almost* of age, and I was good enough to be an underage hustler. It became a little dangerous one night, so we stopped. But I forgot how much I loved the rush”—I bunched my shoulders as if I were about to let out a squeal—“especially when someone with no real talent at something tries to intimidate me. Being underestimated is my favorite pastime.”

I sauntered up to the board and pulled all three darts from the bull’s-eye.

“So, thanks. And here you go, *sweetheart*. I noticed you were having some trouble keeping them on the board, so I’ll let you keep practicing.” I dropped the darts into his hand. “If you need some pointers, my man and I will be at a table in the back.” I winked and smiled, the tic in Artie’s jaw as his friends snickered behind him giving me that flood of elation bursting in my chest that I hadn’t realized I’d missed.

I grabbed my bottle out of Jude’s hand and slid my palm against his to lead him toward the tables. When he didn’t move, I stopped and turned around.

“What? Too much?” I asked, referring to both the darts and the fake-couple show I might have been leaning into a little too hard tonight.

Then it happened. Jude laughed. He dropped his head back, his chest shaking as the wonderful sound reverberated right through me.

“That was fucking incredible. Artie is a pompous douche, and you pretty much ruined his night,” he said, his smile so wide and beautiful I had to suck in some of the oxygen he’d stolen out of my lungs to make words.

“Well, sorry about that.” I shrugged.

“No, you’re not. And you shouldn’t be,” he whispered as he eased toward me, draping his arm around my waist and pulling me almost flush to his body. Real desire zinged through me and down my legs at both his proximity and sexy-as-hell change in attitude. We were close enough for me to feel the vibration of the laugh rumbling through his chest. “You were amazing. *Honey.*”

“Well, thanks,” I said, ticking my eyes up to Jude’s, more heat rising up my neck from the fake term of endearment he’d thrown back at me. Our eyes locked long enough to thin the air between us. “Excuse me for a second.” I cleared my throat and slipped out of his hold, missing the warmth of his arms, even though his embrace—like everything else that happened between us—was just for show. “Jake and Peyton are still back there at a mostly empty table. I’ll join you guys in a minute.”

“Okay,” he said, his voice a delicious, low rasp as he took a couple of slow steps back and shifted toward the cluster of tables. I stole one quick glance at his perfect ass before I rushed back up to the bar.

“That was a good fucking game,” Larry whispered, leaning over the counter when I strode toward him, a wry grin lifting his cheeks. “And the highlight of my night.”

“Yeah, thanks. Listen,” I said, leaning closer before I lost my nerve. “How much are you selling this place for?”

“You want it?” He crooned as he leaned in. “Or do you want to convince me to stay?”

“No, I’m asking for a purely business reason. So please get that creepy smile off your face.”

He blinked a couple of times before his eyes grew wide. “You’re serious?” He splayed his hands on the counter. “Well, okay. Come see me tomorrow. I don’t want to talk numbers with so many nosy ears listening.”

“I have competition?” I whispered back.

“No, gorgeous. You don’t.” He laughed, squinting at me. “But you really want to leave the city and take up residence in this sleepy little town?”

“I might,” I snapped back. “What time should I come?”

“Be here at eleven tomorrow. I’ll explain the numbers.”

“I’m great with numbers, so you don’t have to explain. Just tell me what they are, babe,” I said.

Larry laughed at my wide grin and shook his head.

“No one is going to see you coming, and I fucking love it. See you tomorrow, gorgeous.”

I registered a serious stink eye from a woman at the bar as Larry headed her way, but I was too focused on the shock over what I’d just done. What I was *doing*.

I strolled back to the table, exhilarated in a way I hadn’t been in a long time. This was all batshit crazy to even consider, but it thrilled me all the same.

“Everything okay?” Peyton asked. “What were you talking to Larry about?”

“Long story, but for now, how about another game of darts?” I sat next to Jude and elbowed his side. “I think I scared Artie off since no one is over there now.”

My smile and my stomach fell when he didn’t react or even acknowledge my presence. He shook his head, and he tipped back the beer bottle in his hand.

“I can’t. It’s late.” He slammed the bottle onto the table and popped off his seat. The almost playful ease I had enjoyed from him only moments before was now gone. I studied his profile, noting the clench of his jaw as tension radiated over his entire body, a huge contrast to just minutes ago. What the hell just happened?

“I better get home. Good night, everyone. Call me if you need me this weekend.” His words came out in a fast mumble as he nodded to Jake and stalked out the door.

Peyton and Jake shared a look before regarding me with wary eyes. One step forward and three steps back as usual with Jude, and I was over the whiplash. The only man who’d managed to get under my skin almost instantly was the one I’d never figure out.

“I’ve only had a couple of drinks. I’ll head home too. I mean, back to your house.”

“Claudia, what’s going on?” Peyton stood. “Is everything okay?”

“I-I...” I stammered as my eyes lingered on Jude’s departure. “Fuck if I know.” I threw my hands up in what felt like final defeat.

“What’s going on with Larry? You guys looked pretty... friendly.” Peyton scrunched her nose.

“Friendly? What? No, I asked Larry how much it would be to buy the bar, and I’m coming back to talk to him about it tomorrow.”

“*Buy* the bar?” Jake fell back in his seat, his eyes wide and jaw slack.

“That’s what you were talking to Larry about?” Peyton asked.

“Yes. Why? What did you think we were talking about?”

She tilted her head. “It looked like more than talking for a minute,” she said, flicking her eyes to Jude’s empty chair.

Did he leave because he was jealous? Wait, no. He was my fake boyfriend. Sort of. Which sounded more ridiculous every

time I repeated it in my head, and I'd obsess over all the ways I hated it later.

"You're serious?" Jake asked, still gaping at me.

"Looks like it. I mean, I have no idea how much it costs or what the hell to do with it, but..." I trailed off as I surveyed the crowded space, still scared and clueless but shocked at my sudden excitement.

I'd never thought raising the bar in my life would mean buying a bar, but nothing had felt this right in longer than I could remember.

"Yeah, I think I'm serious."

CLAUDIA

“CLAUDIA, WHAT’S WRONG?”

“I’m fine, Dad,” I said, cringing when I realized it was seven a.m. My parents were both up early, but a call from me at that hour of the morning would automatically put them on alert. “Sorry for making you panic.”

I smiled at his audible sigh of relief. “Well, that’s good. So, if nothing is wrong, what’s the reason for the call so early, ladybug?”

I laughed at his old pet name for me as I traced my finger back and forth over the touch pad of my laptop. I hadn’t gotten much sleep, if any, for the past couple of days. I put business plans together for a living, but when it was *my* business plan, I was so lost in the weeds of the Excel rows, I’d had to force myself to put it aside and close my eyes.

“You love running the Palace, right? You’ve never regretted it?”

“Well, we’ve had some rough times, especially when we had to shut it down and only do takeout orders a few years ago. But regrets, no. You know that restaurant is almost as much of a child to me as you are. Are you saying you’re thinking about working with us?”

“No.” I winced, both at my immediate reply and having to shoot down the excited lilt in my father’s voice. “I’m thinking about buying my own business. Up here. The only bar in town is for sale, and I think it’s a great opportunity that’s being wasted if it closes its doors.” I sucked in a deep breath when

my news was met with silence. “I don’t know much—or anything—about running a bar. But I have watched you over the years, and I worked at the restaurant during enough summers to have a good idea about the service industry.”

My heart strummed in my ears in a way it never did when I spoke to my father, even during all those times I’d gotten into trouble as a kid.

“I think I have enough savings to qualify as collateral for a small business loan. The place is in good shape, but I’d like to do some renovations to make it my own. Maybe not right away, but eventually. Peyton’s husband would give me a good contractor’s price—at least, I’m pretty sure he would.”

More silence from my father after my nervous chuckle made my stomach bottom out. Before I’d been laid off, I hadn’t been an indecisive person at all. I just did what felt right and never pondered much beyond the current moment. But I’d been in a strange limbo ever since I’d arrived—until Larry cracked a joke about buying his bar and I couldn’t think about anything else after.

“What are your ideas?”

I was taken aback by his first reaction. I’d expected something along the lines of “So that means you’re moving up there?” or “It takes a lot to own and run your own business. Are you sure about this?” The fact that he didn’t immediately attempt to talk me out of it was a happy jolt to my exhausted system and—I prayed—was another sign I was on the right track.

“I want to change the name and some of the decor, but the bones are good. I won’t do anything too drastic. I’ll keep it as a bar, but it wouldn’t hurt to make some things a little more modern. The wooden seats are uncomfortable as fu—hell. I’d like to update that and maybe add some couches and small tables to make it cozier.”

I let a long moment of silence go by before I continued.

“It’s literally the only bar in Kelly Lakes, and everyone in town goes there at one time or another, from all different

generations. Larry, the owner now, said the staff would probably stay for a new owner, so I'd have some help right from the beginning."

"That sounds like a solid plan. I'm not going to lie and say I don't hate the thought of you moving, but I want you happy. Wherever you are. Since you lost your job, and even before that, you sounded so defeated every time I spoke to you. Now, you sound like my Claudia."

"And what does your Claudia sound like?" I asked around the sudden lump in the back of my throat.

"A woman who can do anything she wants better than anybody else. And you sound like you want this. I'm behind you a hundred percent, and your mother will be too. We'll miss you, but we'd rather you be happy and far away than miserable and close by."

"Thanks, Dad. That means a lot." I blinked away tears. This decision was monumental enough to make me a sap. "It helps, especially when I'm about to make an appointment with the bank."

"Unless you've touched it, you should have plenty of money to put up as collateral, with some left over. Let me know how much they tell you that you need, and I'll contribute."

"No. I have plenty, thanks to you. And if not, I'll figure something out."

"Listen, you don't want to start out a business being in the poorhouse."

I laughed before it hit me.

The Pour House. Halman's was the name of the twice-previous owners, and Larry said he'd kept it because he couldn't come up with anything else. He stressed how all his customers, no matter what their ages were, just wanted a good pour. Maybe it was a cheesy play on words, but I loved it. When I took over, all of Kelly Lakes could still come in for a good pour.

I stilled at my second epiphany. *When* I took over, not *if*.

Maybe there was a greater power leading me to where I was supposed to be. How else could I explain tearing up here after I was fired and lingering for weeks, as if something were keeping me here?

“Does your plan include staffing?”

“Yes. Larry gave me a ballpark of the rate he pays his employees and how many hours a week they put in.”

“Sounds like you have it all figured out.”

“Oh yeah, Dad. I’m flying by the seat of my pants with this, but you’re right.” I slammed the laptop shut and ran my hand through my tangled hair. “This is the most like me I’ve felt in a long time.”

“So you finally live in the country.” I heard the smile in my father’s voice. “I had a feeling you would eventually. You visited Peyton quite a bit the past couple of years. You seemed to gravitate up there.”

“Maybe that’s what I’ll call the bar. Claudia goes country,” I joked.

“Claudia can do whatever the hell she wants. Keep that in mind when you meet with the bank. If they don’t want to finance you, someone else will. You never liked hearing no, and when you take on something like this, you have to refuse to.”

“So what you’re saying is my experience at being a relentless pain in the ass will be an asset in owning my own business?”

“Very much so, ladybug.” I smiled at his chuckle in my ear. “Love you.”

“Love you too,” I said, pressing the end button on my screen.

“I thought I heard Aunt Claudia.”

Peyton’s loud whisper drifted from the staircase, followed by Keely’s sweet little giggle. She shot me a wide grin when she noticed me and held out her arms.

“Aunt Claudia didn’t get any sleep, sweetie pie.” I scooped Keely out of Peyton’s arms and buried my head into her neck to blow raspberries across her cheek. She laughed and kicked her chubby feet against my hip.

“So, you’re really going to do it? You’re going to buy the bar?” Peyton’s brown eyes were wide and bright when they met mine.

“I think so. If the bank approves my loan. I’ll stop by to see Larry again later to make sure I have all the details right. Since you sleep with a contractor, maybe he can give me a good price for renovations.”

“Oh, stop,” she said, shaking her head at me.

“Well, from what I hear at night sometimes, you really don’t *sleep*, but you know what I mean.” I sat on the futon and set Keely on my lap. “I can say that since you don’t know what that means yet.” I pressed my finger to my lips.

“Jake would absolutely give you a good deal on renovations. And I’m sure Davis would jump at the chance to help.”

I glared at her raised brow.

“Yes, you mentioned how my fake boyfriend who hates me likes the distraction of renovations.”

“Um, nothing looked fake about how pissed he got when you were talking to Larry.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “He couldn’t even hold a conversation with us because he kept looking back. In his defense, it seemed intense between you and Larry, not knowing what you were really talking about, so I can’t blame him.”

“Blame him? He told me he wanted to pretend to date me so he wouldn’t have to date *anyone* and get people off his back. You’re projecting again,” I sang as I bounced Keely on my lap. “I thought we’d had a moment, a few moments, but he didn’t say a word to me when I came back to sit with all of you, and he barely said goodbye.”

“Were you not listening? He was jealous. It was so obvious that even Jake noticed and kept asking him what was wrong.

We half expected him to charge up to the bar and drag you away.”

“He was probably worried about his dad or something. And how my fake lover and I feel about each other is going to have to be a thought for another day. I need to finalize this plan and figure out financing before I ponder the intentions of hot and confusing cops.”

I smiled when Keely cuddled into my neck, her blue eyes searching my face before she reached out her chubby hand to pat my cheek.

“Thanks, K.” I kissed her forehead and swept my gaze around my makeshift bedroom. “Who knew I’d start a new life in your basement?”

“Hey, I started a new life living in my uncle’s basement when I first got here. Call it a Kelly Lakes rite of passage.”

“My father is even on board,” I said, standing when Keely squirmed in my lap. “He said I sounded like his Claudia again. I guess I was too complacent in my shitty life to realize just how much it sucked.”

“I am so damn excited you’re going to stay, but I had a feeling you would end up here.”

“Dad said the same thing. So how about a little coffee before I start the unofficial first day of my permanent country life?”

“I can even make breakfast for us. Jake is out at an early job, and Mike won’t be up until eleven, most likely. So it’s just us girls.” She wiggled her finger under Keely’s chin to tickle her neck. “It may be the start of a new life for a few people today.” She clicked her tongue against her teeth and headed up the stairs.

I couldn’t think about Jude or why he might or might not have been jealous or the heat crackling between us whenever I pushed the game of pretend.

Country life wasn’t as simple as it seemed when you made it real.

JUDE

“TOO BAD I CAN’T TAKE THIS HOME,” DAD SAID AS HE PUSHED the shopping cart through the market. “Better than the damn walker. Maybe they’ll let us.” He craned his neck to where I stood behind him, the hopeful glint in his eyes reminding me of roles reversed thirty-something years ago when I’d beg for two boxes of Devil Dogs in this very same market.

“The carts lock if you try to take them out of the parking lot. And it wouldn’t fit into my truck anyway. Sorry, Dad,” I said, coming up next to him to survey what he’d thrown in the cart so far.

“What good is it to have a cop for a son if I can’t break the rules sometimes? These carts are probably the same ones from when you were small. You can fit furniture and a whole bunch of other shit into the truck when you work with Jake. What’s the difference?”

“If the wheels are locked, it will be of no use anyway, and no one here ever knows how to unlock them. Even if I use my police training to fix them, a big shopping cart isn’t conducive for walking around the house,” I said, picking up the box of fried rice he’d managed to sneak in to get a look at the label.

“Jesus,” he growled, grabbing the box out of my hand and throwing it back into the cart. “Nothing in the cart breaks this goddamn diabetic and renal diet. My therapist said that brand is low sodium if I want rice that tastes like it almost has flavor to it.”

He shook his head and heaved out an audible sigh.

“This is why my biggest thrill is walking with a shopping cart. My life is boring as hell, and my son watching me like I’m one of his perps as I shop only makes it worse.”

I clenched my eyes shut and followed. He did have a point about the cart. He was moving around much easier since I’d folded up his walker and let him drive the cart through the market. Shopping with my father was aggravating for both of us, but it got him out of the house and off the block. He never seemed to appreciate it much and I always ended up wondering why I’d made the effort, but we still made the trip once per week.

If I didn’t get him out, that made him a recluse. And as much as he fought me on it, neither of us was ready to think of him in those terms. His therapy was progressing well but slower than either of us liked, and I longed for the days of dropping him off at someone’s house without obsessing over what they could have that could make him fall and sustain another injury he’d have to fight back from.

Today, my bad mood wasn’t only from our usual struggle. Every time my mind drifted to Claudia, huddled in some secret conversation with Larry, my insides twisted tight enough for me to growl at anyone trying to speak to me, just as they had when Claudia had finally come back to the table without a single mention of what she’d been talking to Larry about.

It was none of my damn business, but I hadn’t been able to get rid of the irritation all week. While she had no problem hanging on me to ward off anyone who wanted to date me or set me up with someone, we weren’t anything real. We weren’t even friends since I barely knew her, yet the thought of her as one of Larry’s conquests made me see red and ball my hands into fists on instinct.

Larry had divorced his wife so long ago I barely remembered her, and he dated women of all ages who stepped into Halman’s. But again, why did I care? Claudia could more than handle Larry or anyone else in town. I smiled despite myself, thinking of how she’d put Artie in his place in front of everyone and strutted away with a sexy-as-fuck confidence that went straight to my dick every time I thought about it. Her

lips on my skin had sent tingles down my neck that I hadn't been able to shake off for the rest of the night.

Then, without thinking, I'd brought her into my arms as if it was the most natural thing in the world, and I hated it when she backed away. Our fake display sparked real fantasies that wouldn't stop. Whenever my mind drifted to that night, thoughts of turning my head a few inches and capturing that gorgeous smart mouth with mine as she pressed her beautiful body against me plagued the shit out of me.

Then she'd walked away from me and strutted right up to Larry, huddled up close enough to him to ruin the rest of my night.

I pinched my neck and exhaled a slow breath. If she wanted to have a fling with Larry, she was free to do that and whatever else she wanted until she went back to Brooklyn.

And unless I found the balls to do something about it, I had to let it go.

I wasn't having much luck so far.

"Are you all right?" Dad stilled, leaning on the handle of the cart as he studied me.

"Fine, why?"

The corner of his mouth curved up. "I can almost hear your teeth grinding, and your whole body is stiff as a board. Either something is bothering you, or food shopping is getting to you even more than it's annoying me. Which it shouldn't since it's not like you have to eat the same crap as me." He motioned to the cart and trudged ahead. I kept two steps behind him as we continued.

I laughed to myself as I scrubbed a hand down my face. I didn't know Claudia—not really—but she'd captured my attention from the moment we met. And although it didn't make a lick of fucking sense, it pissed me off knowing that someone else may have held her attention instead.

"George? I thought that was you," a familiar voice chirped in front of us.

As if I'd conjured her up, I caught sight of Claudia over my father's shoulder. She was in a white tank and cutoff denim shorts that showcased her tanned and toned legs. I stayed behind my father, my gaze too tempted to venture both higher and lower, from the way her full breasts pressed against the neckline of her top or to how her perfect ass filled the back of her shorts.

Eye level should have been safer, but those dark eyes that seemed to see right through me were even worse. There wasn't an inch of Claudia that didn't draw me in, and I should have been staying away from her rather than going along with this stupid game of pretend I'd suggested.

The truth of it all—a truth that I'd loathed to admit—was that Claudia had distracted me from the moment we met. The fight to stay away when I'd wanted to get as close as possible to her exhausted the fuck out of me. That frustrating struggle was probably why I'd suggested that we pretend to be into each other in the first place—even though *I* was never pretending. I'd asked the woman I wanted to fake being with me because the old hurts and resentments were too raw to make anything real.

“Hello, Claudia. Nice to see you.” Dad snuck a glance at me over his shoulder. “You remember my grouchy sergeant son.”

“I do,” Claudia said, her smile so breathtaking and beautiful, I could only manage an inaudible *hi* like I was fourteen not forty-three.

“The Russos left me alone in their big house while they visit Jake's mother for the weekend. It's been a long week, so I decided to make myself some comfort food from back home.”

“What are you making?” Dad asked, trying to peek into her cart. “Whatever it is, it has to be better than the boring shit we have to buy.”

Her shoulders shook with a chuckle, my gaze once again drifting to the deepening slope of her cleavage. Being overly observant was an occupational hazard as a cop, but I tracked everything about Claudia every time I saw her. No matter how

hard I tried not to look, I couldn't help myself because she was all I could see.

"I'm making my father's chicken lo mein. Or trying to with whatever I can find here. He owns a restaurant in Brooklyn, but I helped him make it at home growing up. I'm just not smart enough to know how to cut the recipe to just two servings." She laughed and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear.

"I haven't had good lo mein in years. Sounds better than the low-sodium rice cardboard in our cart."

"I'm happy to share. I have a great idea. Why don't you come by?" Claudia grabbed Dad's arm. "That way, I won't have lo mein for days and clog up Peyton and Jake's refrigerator."

"Real food is outside my approved diet, but I think it's been long enough that I could splurge. Right, boss?"

Dad turned to me, his lips curving into the first real smile he'd had all day.

"Oh, that's right. He's your ride," Claudia said in a loud whisper as her gaze drifted to mine, pursing her full lips as Dad gave her a slow nod.

"Unfortunately, yes. I don't have a real driving leg anymore." His eyes ticked to me and back to Claudia as he let out an exaggerated breath.

"Well, I'll have enough for both of you. How's seven?"

"Fine with us," Dad said before I could say anything in reply. "Not like I've had plans for the past couple of years. What can we bring?"

"Yourselves. But I wouldn't be against some dessert." She squeezed his shoulder, her smile shrinking a bit when her gaze caught mine. "Jude knows the address."

"So do I, and no problem. We appreciate the invite. My son keeps telling me that time out of the house is good for us, and I have to agree." He raised a brow at me.

Jesus.

“Not exactly what I meant, but yes, it’s good.”

“I promise I’ll make it worth it. It won’t be as good as my father’s would be, but he taught me well enough.” Her smile had dimmed from when we’d first run into her. I hated thinking I might have been the cause, but space between us was for the best, even if neither of us liked it.

“You can come straight to the back. We can eat outside since it’s not supposed to be too hot. I look forward to seeing you both later.” She cracked a wide grin before turning around and heading back up the aisle, my eyes glued to her departure despite my best efforts to tear them away.

“Son,” Dad said, my eyes still fixed on the now-empty path of Claudia’s exit. When I brought my gaze to his, I was surprised to see a little sympathy reflected at me. “I know you have your reasons, and I’ve been trying to ignore how you’ve been using taking care of me as an excuse—”

“An excuse for what? I’m sorry if trying to keep you healthy and get you back on your feet pisses you off.”

“It actually doesn’t. Our arguments keep me sharp, and believe it or not, I appreciate you and all you’ve done. And your mother would too.”

I nodded as I tried to swallow away the sudden lump in my throat. My mother should’ve only seen what we’d turned into.

A sad smile drifted over his mouth as he shifted toward me. “If you keep yourself this closed off, they win.” He tapped my shoulder and pushed the cart forward.

“Who wins?” I asked, keeping slow time next to the cart.

“Not you.” He patted my chest. “Give your mind and your good heart to people who deserve it, rather than hold on to a grudge that’s only screwing *you* over, all over again. Now, let’s find Claudia something good and sweet like she is. And maybe we’ll go next door and pick up a bottle of something that loosens you up enough to forget who you are, so that maybe you have a little fun. Even if you’re going to cramp my style during my dinner with a beautiful woman.”

“Very funny, Dad.” I couldn’t help the tiny smile pulling at my lips for a second. The intrusive thought of Claudia making dinner for Larry at some point made it dissolve into a hard line as my jaw clenched.

What the hell was wrong with me?

“Do me a favor tonight,” he said when we arrived in the bakery aisle. “Leave the game up to me.” He looked me up and down and shook his head. “It’s sad that you’re the one more out of practice.”

CLAUDIA

“YOU’RE SURE YOU DON’T MIND?” I ASKED PEYTON WITH MY phone cradled into the crook of my neck as I set her patio table. “I realized after I invited them that it was a little rude without asking you first. I think I’ve been mooching off you guys for so long that I’m getting too comfortable.”

“You are not mooching. We want you here, so stop it,” Peyton said, laughing in my ear. “And of course I don’t mind. It’s not like you’re having a party. It’s Davis and his father. And even if you were, as long as there’s no damage, have at it.”

I stepped back to look. I’d grabbed a couple of fake candles that operated with a switch at the bottom from the display next to the register at the market. I wanted to give the table some ambiance as the sun set and not have to worry about them blowing out. The humidity from the hot day still lingered, but the breeze was cool enough to make dinner outside a nice enough option.

My chicken lo mein was done and covered on the stove to keep it hot until my guests arrived. I wasn’t nervous but definitely jumpy, as if I really was having a party and not eating with my sometimes fake-dating partner and his father.

“I’m actually surprised Jude agreed to come, not that his father gave him much of a choice.”

“I am *sure* he doesn’t mind.”

I checked my watch and plopped down on one of the chairs.

“You didn’t see him in the store. He barely looked at me, and just like that night at the bar, he couldn’t get away from me fast enough.”

“Because he’s probably still mad, thinking that you have something going on with Larry. Really, Claud? Are you this distracted that you can’t see it?”

I settled into one of the chairs and stretched out my legs, letting my head fall back with a sigh. If Jude hated me for some unknown reason, it shouldn’t upset me this much. At least, not to the point of fishing out the fancy bowls from Peyton’s cabinet and changing my sundress three times before six thirty in a dopey effort to impress him.

“That’s dumb. Larry and I were only talking. I talked to a lot of people that night.”

“Claudia,” she started with a long sigh. “I know you’re fighting hard to downplay this thing brewing between you and Davis, but you are far from dense. Larry always tracks you every time you come to Halman’s with us.”

“He tracks *every* woman who comes into the bar. Well, maybe not you because Jake would get all alpha possessive and kick his ass, but he’s a natural flirt. That’s all.”

“But I’ve noticed him go out of his way to flirt with *you*, more than once. You were whispering to each other at the bar and huddled up close, and Davis wasn’t the only one staring at the two of you. Hell, even I questioned it.”

“It was loud, and I had questions to ask.” I rubbed at my temple as I considered what Peyton was trying to say. And if Jude was pissed, maybe it was only because looking like I had something going on with Larry blew our cover for this fake-dating thing between us that he was trying to allude to, and that I was all too happy to push when I had the chance.

Thinking of Jude truly jealous over me gave me a sad but real thrill. Either reason would explain the one-eighty he’d made in disposition that night, but my head ached too much to keep pondering silly what-ifs or whys that didn’t matter.

“I don’t have time to spend this much effort caring whether Jude likes me. If I want the bar open the way I want it, I have a shit-ton I need to do and figure out if the loan comes through.”

“It’s not a sacrilege to like a guy. Even if you’re a new business owner, I bet you could find a little time for that. Multitask.”

If I was becoming a permanent resident of this town, there would be no escaping Jude and whatever was or wasn’t between us, so I needed to make peace with it. The time for a flighty head full of distractions was over.

“Speaking of multitasking, I need to finish getting the yard ready for my company. Tell Mrs. Russo I said hi.”

“I’ll tell her and let you go back to obsessing over how Davis feels about you. And, here’s a thought, maybe you could like...ask him?”

“Because that’s not pathetic.” I huffed out a laugh as I dropped my head back. “Great idea. I’ll say, ‘Hi, Jude. Do you act like you hate me because you like me or because you hate me?’ I’m too old for this shit, Pey.”

Worrying this much over any man was not me. But I hadn’t been me in a long time. Old Claudia would have shrugged him off and moved on, but this one was too busy fixating and scrutinizing our every interaction and conversation to let it go.

“It’s not pathetic to ask, but it’s mature—and you’d have much less of an ulcer over it if you at least knew where you stood.” Her heavy sigh filled my ear. “You know how I loathe the miscommunication trope.”

“I don’t have an ulcer over it. I’m fine.”

“Yeah, you sound fine.”

I groaned, hearing the smirk in her voice.

“Peyton, this isn’t a romance, so stop troping it or whatever you’re doing. This is simply two people who met under very weird circumstances and can’t seem to avoid each other because the town is so damn small.”

“And have enough sparks between them to start a forest fire.”

“Please stop projecting,” I said when she laughed. “I know it’s hard not to while being with your hot husband on a perfect little family getaway, but really, I’m begging you, please stop.”

“I think I’m more observing than projecting, but I’ll let it go while you have guests to entertain. Go play hostess. And have fun.”

“Thanks,” I said, ending the call and rolling my eyes. I needed to pull myself together tonight and in general. Jude was just a guy who put his pants on one rock-hard muscular leg at a time over his ass of perfection, and I needed to stop being so damn flustered in his presence.

“Anyone home?”

I turned my head to George’s voice. He smiled at me as he gingerly rolled his walker across the grass. I popped up to greet him, heat running up my neck from the intense stare of the man behind him, but I was going to ignore all that tonight.

Somehow.

“I’m so glad you could make it. Dinner is ready and keeping warm on the stove,” I said, placing my hand on George’s back to help guide him to a chair.

“He usually shoos me away when I do that,” Jude scoffed as he followed his father.

“That’s because she’s far more enchanting than you trying to micromanage every step I take,” George said, throwing me a wink as he trudged through the yard and toward the table.

“I can’t argue with that,” Jude said in an almost whisper. My head whipped to him, a half-smile blooming on his lips. I swore I spotted his eyes drift lower before he tore them away. He stayed close enough to us for me to get a whiff of his cologne or whatever magic he used to always smell that damn good.

It had been a long time since I’d had a crush on anyone, and I guessed that was what this was, although I couldn’t

remember the constant distraction of it being this fucking exhausting.

But this was no big deal, or I'd work to stop making it one. I was attracted to Jude. Very attracted. But I didn't know anything about him or what made him run so hot and cold with me. What I was feeling was just plain lust and not based in any kind of reality.

My panting over Jude was simply a chemical reaction like indigestion or the headache that hit me sometimes when I had too much wine. I could handle this tonight and in the foreseeable future when I officially moved here. I threw him a quick smile as we both eased George into one of the chairs.

"This is a nice setup," George said, sweeping his gaze over the yard as Jude slid his walker behind him. "I haven't been back here in a while. Jake does good work. He's a show-off about it, but I wouldn't begrudge him."

"Yes," I said, the nervous chuckle bubbling out of my chest already annoying the shit out of me. "I've enjoyed hanging out back here for the last few weeks. It's the perfect place to do absolutely nothing. The best I had in Brooklyn was the stoop in front of my building, but I wouldn't describe that as peaceful."

I grazed my hand down my neck and slid it over my clammy shoulder, my strapless blue dress now feeling small and flimsy as Jude scrutinized me from the other side of the table, almost as if I were too exposed. The dress was snug around my chest but loose and flowy from the waist down, coming up to just above my knee. Maybe it wasn't the dress that made me feel on display. I could have slipped on a potato sack and still felt naked in front of Jude.

This fixation withdrawal was going stellar so far.

I ticked my eyes to his and finally took him in. How could a man be that hot in a dark T-shirt over khaki shorts? It was a challenge not to focus on the stretch of cotton over his defined chest or the vein popping out of his forearm as he held on to the back of one of the chairs.

“Help yourself to the salad on the table. Peyton had five bottles of dressing, so I pulled them all out since I never asked what you both liked. I have drinks in the cooler for whatever you want.” I turned toward Jude. “You can start plating while I grab dinner off the stove.”

“My son will help you with that,” George offered. “And we’ll wait to eat and drink until you sit down. The least we can do after your generous invitation is to be polite guests. Right, son?”

I bit back a smile when he turned to Jude, his eyes narrowed at his son. That look made me homesick for my mother, who would always nudge me in the same way, putting me on the spot with people I couldn’t talk back in front of so I would do whatever she wanted without a hassle.

“Right,” Jude said, clearing his throat while he tore his gaze from mine as if he was in the same weird trance I was for a minute. “Ladies first.” He jutted his stubbled chin toward the door. I noted the extra day or two of scruff before I shot a smile at George, and I headed back inside.

“I just need to scoop the lo mein into a bowl and get a hot plate onto the table,” I said, not looking back as I made my way to the stove and shut off the burner. I tucked a stray piece of hair that had fallen out of the messy-looking-but-really-complicated-bun on top of my head as I dished out the chicken and noodles into a serving bowl. The lock of hair came loose again, tickling my nose despite my efforts to blow it out of my eyes.

“Like I said, not as good as my dad would serve in his restaurant, but I learned enough from him to be dangerous with a wok.”

I lifted my head when I was done and found Jude watching me, just like I thought I’d seen on our walk back from his house that night. His gaze was intense and heavy as it searched mine, and I didn’t know if it was because he resented being here or if he was about to kiss the hell out of me.

If it was the latter, I’d let him without hesitation, regardless of where dinner was or who was outside or the exhausting

mixed signals he was throwing in my direction. His tongue darted out and swiped his full bottom lip when he nodded, as if he'd read my mind.

Between the hormone surges and the confusion they left in their wake, I was dizzy and frustrated. Men never made me stupid in their presence, yet this one had me losing brain cells all over the place.

“Better get this out there before it gets cold,” I said, pulling out a couple of potholders from the kitchen drawer and grabbing the bowl on both sides to slide it to Jude.

He inched closer, his eyes still on mine, and he tucked the loose piece of hair behind my ear, huffing out a soft chuckle as his finger grazed my jaw before he dropped his hand and took a half step back.

“I got it,” he whispered, raising the heavy bowl as if it were nothing but a feather. My gaze lingered on the flex of his biceps as he headed to the open screen door. “Thank you. For having us tonight. I don't want you to think I don't appreciate the invite too. Dad is kind enough to always point out when I'm being a dick.”

A real laugh slipped out of me, and Jude grinned, his smile relaxed and easy.

“You're not being a dick. You're intense. Don't apologize. It works for you.” I gave his shoulder a light squeeze before I could help myself.

Once my fingertips sank into the hard muscle, I knew this fight to not be so damn affected by the beautiful man in the kitchen would be a waste. The best I could do would be to work on not being as obvious about it until my weird feelings—hopefully and eventually—passed.

I grabbed the hot plate as Jude followed me outside, still feeling the jolt from the graze of his skin against mine.

A drawback I hadn't anticipated in my consideration of moving from Brooklyn to a small town was the probably limited number of single men within the town limits. I needed to get laid—badly and soon.

Hooking up with anyone in Kelly Lakes was probably something you couldn't do without everyone finding out. City living could be cold, but I already missed the anonymity.

An attractive man picking up a bowl of noodles shouldn't have triggered a throb between my legs. I hadn't given much thought to my unintentional dry spell. Now I was sexually dehydrated, and my quest for relief was making me see and want things that probably weren't there.

Jude was a sexy oasis in my self-created desert.

"I made it with chicken since you never know who is or isn't allergic to shrimp," I offered after Jude set down the bowl, sucking in a quick, deep breath to slow down my words and stop rambling. "Like I said, I never know how to cut a big recipe, so there's plenty."

I gave the noodles a stir before grabbing George's plate and filling it up. "I like extra bean sprouts and green onions, so I hope that's okay."

"It's all great, sweetheart. We're happy to be here."

George beamed at me when I set his plate down in front of him, the friendly smile he regarded me with triggering a flood of warmth through my chest. I didn't really know George either, but he seemed so genuine and full of life, which said a lot about the type of man he was. My chest pinched a bit when my eyes fell on the walker folded next to him. From the little I knew of his story from Peyton and Jude, he'd had a rough few years. If he were my father, I would probably hover enough to piss him off too.

George wasn't the enigma his son was, but in those precious but short moments Jude had relaxed with me, I'd spotted that same goodness. I still didn't doubt it was real, that a nice guy was in there somewhere under all that grumbling.

I just never knew which Jude I would get.

CLAUDIA

“THAT WAS DELICIOUS,” GEORGE MUMBLED AROUND A mouthful. “Your father taught you well.”

“He will be happy to hear that,” I said, settling into my own chair. “Do you want more water?” I asked when I noticed his empty bottle. I’d relaxed a little after we sat down, making small talk and enjoying Jude’s reluctant chuckles and eye rolls as his father busted his chops all through dinner.

“I’ll get it.” Jude’s chair screeched against the deck as he stood.

“As much as I’d love a beer or some wine,” George said, swirling his fork around his last mound of noodles, “real food is as adventurous as I’ll get with my diet tonight.” He winked at me as he took another bite.

I chuckled and nodded. “I can understand that. Would you mind grabbing another bottle for me? They should still be nice and cold.” I ran my hand down my neck again, wishing I could blame the sweat beading on my skin on the heat instead of the fight not to ogle Jude’s ass as he bent over the cooler.

“I don’t mind,” Jude said, setting a bottle down in front of me. I noticed his fingerprints in the condensation before I took a long swig, hoping to cool off or shock myself out of my turbulent, boy-crazy thoughts.

Even though my thoughts weren’t about a boy. They were about the gorgeous man at the end of the table who intrigued me enough to make me a little crazy.

“What’s the name of your father’s restaurant in Brooklyn?” George asked before taking a pull from his water bottle.

“Park Palace. We live in Park Slope, and he thought it was a fun name play. He opened it a few years before I was born after working a ton of different jobs for years to save for his own business. He always jokes that I was his second child after the Palace, and I always tease back that the Palace is his favorite kid.”

“Ah, so you’re an only child like Jude. With skills like this, you could take the place over.”

“I don’t know about that. Like I told Jude before, I know enough to be dangerous.” I watched Jude twirl his fork with gusto, almost halfway through with his second plate already. If he didn’t enjoy me, I was happy that he at least enjoyed my cooking. “It’s a little weird for me to eat this with a fork, but I only found one set of old chopsticks in their kitchen drawers.” I picked up my own fork to eat. “But no, my dad has already got my cousin lined up to succeed him. Which is good and a relief, especially since I won’t be living in Brooklyn anymore.”

“Where are you going?” Jude asked, dropping his fork next to his plate as he squinted at me from across the table.

“No one knows this but Jake and Peyton...and Larry,” I said, sucking in a long breath as I looked between Jude and George. “If the bank approves my loan, I’m buying Halman’s. And moving up here to run it.”

“That’s fantastic news.” George’s eyes were wide as he reached over the table to squeeze my hand.

“Really? You don’t think it’s nuts?” I asked, swallowing away the scratch at the back of my throat at the pure happiness in his eyes, a deep blue like his son’s but so much brighter. But I wasn’t brave enough to look his son’s way just yet.

“That bar is old and tired. You could give it some life.”

My cheeks heated. “You hardly know me.”

“I know enough. The day I met you in the park, you were brighter than the sun. This town could use your light.”

“Wow,” I whispered, my hand flying to my chest as I fell back in my seat. “That may be the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. And I needed that.” I squeezed George’s hand back. “I really want to do this but am mostly clueless as to how.”

George snuck a look at his son. I caught Jude’s eye roll and the shake of his head, and I wondered what I was missing between them.

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out. What did you do before?”

“Before I was laid off, I was a financial planner. I helped clients finance crazy ventures like this, although on a higher and more corporate level most of the time. I was good at it, but ever since I raced up here the day I was let go”—I bit back a smile when Jude’s eyes narrowed at me—“I couldn’t find it in me to go back. Kelly Lakes seemed like a vacation whenever I came here to visit, and I always joked to Peyton about leaving the big, bad city and staying for good. So now I guess I’ll be living the dream.” I raised my water bottle in a mock toast.

“Is that what you were talking to Larry about that night?” Jude asked. “At Leo and Kristina’s party?”

“Yes, I asked Larry how much he was selling the place for, and he agreed to meet with me about it once I convinced him that I was serious. He was too distracted and too busy to iron out all the details since he’d had a date lined up for later that night, so I met with him the next day to get all the info I needed.”

The last part wasn’t totally true—or I didn’t know it for sure. A woman at the bar was pissed enough at me as Larry and I spoke, and he went right over to where she was sitting when I walked away. I’d assumed but never confirmed, so I embellished.

When I spied the relieved drop in Jude’s rigid shoulders, I felt good about my white lie.

Maybe I wasn’t being direct as Peyton had suggested, but if I pushed aside any suspicion Jude might have had of something going on between Larry and me, I could clear the

way a little bit better to see what I was dealing with. A guy who didn't like me talking to other guys or one who just didn't like *me*.

“Congratulations. I agree with Dad, Halman's could use some new life.” A slow smile drifted across the mouth I couldn't seem to ignore. It was gorgeous enough to make me shift in my seat to shake off the butterflies ricocheting around my belly.

“Thanks. The fact that you both don't think I'm crazy makes me feel better. I know there are licenses I have to get, but I'm hoping that growing up in a restaurant will make the learning curve a little less steep, at least for the basics. Once I get the loan and Larry formally accepts my offer, I'll figure the rest out.”

“Do you have any ideas yet?” Jude asked. “That place has been overdue for an upgrade since I was a kid.”

“Some. Comfortable seats are all I have on the list so far. I've been flipping through one of Jake's architecture magazines, and a few things caught my eye. I'm afraid to get my heart too set on anything until my loan comes through.”

“A few simple changes would make a big difference. New paneling on the walls, maybe some new flooring that looks like it comes from sometime this century. I'm excited to see what you do with it.”

His lips curved up, regarding me with something like awe. I could only nod, gulping a few cold slugs of my water bottle to drown those butterflies in my belly that were now out of control. I smiled back despite the thud of my heartbeat against my rib cage.

“If this comes through, I'm hiring Russo's Contracting to make the upgrades, so you'll probably get to see whatever I do before anyone else. You help Jake in all his restorations, right?”

“Most of the time, but I'd ask to work on this. It would be a fun one,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest as a slow

smile crept across his mouth. “A new and improved Halman’s with *much* better ownership.”

My cheeks heated again, preening over his compliment. I hadn’t preened or blushed before I’d met Jude, and while it still annoyed me, I couldn’t help leaning into it.

“Larry said the name was inherited from twice-former owners and there are no Halmans in town, so I’d want to change the name. The Pour House is what I came up with since I’d still keep it just a bar where residents could get a good *pour*.” I leaned back and squinted at Jude. “What do you think? Too silly?”

“Not at all. I think it’s a good start to the upgrade.” There was that raspy edge to his voice. I was almost certain Peyton was right. The ice I’d felt from him at the end of the night at the bar and in the market had been because he was irritated about the possibility of something between Larry and me.

But he still didn’t want to date me or anyone, so what did I do with that?

“What I should do is go there and take a really good look at the place. Maybe figure out what I want to change and what I could leave alone, at least for now. Would you want to come with me one night? I could use a designer’s eye.”

The offer came out in a rush. Maybe I *did* know what to do with that. Ballbusting and relentless Claudia was still in there somewhere.

“I think that would be a great idea,” George said, nodding as he looked between us. “You can help Claudia figure out what needs to be done, and I get a night to myself. I fully support this.”

“And being out together may be good for exposure. Keep the single ladies and moms of the single ladies away,” I blurted out, pushing and not leaving well enough alone, which, again, was my old self. It was helpful in business but not so much in my personal life.

“Exposure?” George asked, glaring at his son.

“I asked her to pretend we were together in front of Mary, so she’d stop trying to set me back up with Renee and use her big mouth to keep everyone else off my back,” Jude said, the playful husk of his voice and tease of a smile gone as he went back to finishing his plate.

George fell back in his chair, shaking his head with a humorless laugh.

“Well then, a night at Halman’s to help her figure things out is the least that you can do for her in exchange, right?”

“Yes,” Jude agreed, his tone flat. “We could go Tuesday night if you have no plans. It may be easier to look at the details of the place without the weekend crowd. You can see where you’d want to spend the loan if you get it and what you can keep for now.”

“Sure,” I said, clearing my throat when my voice squeaked. “I haven’t had plans since I came into town,” I joked, but it did nothing to ease the tension simmering between the father and son at the table. “Thanks, I appreciate it.”

I rose from my chair, almost flipping it over when one of the legs caught in the dips in the grass.

“I am going to bring all this inside and get dessert out. I was eyeing that apple pie in the bakery aisle, so I’m glad you brought that.” I sniffed in a quick breath. *God, could I stop fucking rambling?* “Stay here and relax.” I scooped up the almost-empty bowl and jetted back into the kitchen.

Once I was inside, I dropped my head into my hands and pinched the bridge of my nose. I had to let this go. If I was truly starting a new life here, chasing after someone while trying to decode how they really felt about me was a waste of time—and not the right way to start anything.

JUDE

“YOU’RE A FUCKING IDIOT,” DAD WHISPERED WHEN CLAUDIA was out of earshot.

“Dad, it just happened. You know how Mary doesn’t let up about her daughter. It wasn’t a big deal, and Claudia didn’t seem offended to go along with it a few times.”

“A few times,” he scoffed. “Being two steps away from a recluse, I don’t hear the chatter around town, which before now was a blessing. I actually thought something was brewing between you two, but not an act. A woman like that shouldn’t be treated as some kind of deterrent just so no one pressures you to have a damn social life. Really, what the hell were you thinking?”

I scrubbed a hand down my face, shame hitting me from all directions tonight. At the time, when we’d been at the park and Mary had come up to us, pretending to be with Claudia was natural and easy. I looked forward to the relief of not being hassled about my lack of a love life and for Mary to finally stop trying to set me up with her daughter again. My oblivious stupid ass never considered how it might’ve made Claudia feel or what she’d thought of me when I’d explained my reasons.

When I’d walked her back to Jake and Peyton’s house that night, she’d flung herself into my arms, and I’d been almost too stunned to react. Whether or not she was milking it for their neighbor’s sake, her body so close to mine and her soft lips on my cheek triggered a craving that was too real to deny.

Yet, I kept doing it.

When she'd pretended to be with me at the bar that night, I'd caught the lust simmering in her dark eyes when she pulled away. Then, I'd watched her cozy up to Larry—or what I'd thought was cozying up—and very real anger had roared in my veins.

I'd spent most of this evening watching her with my father. She helped him without making him feel embarrassed and laughed with him all night at my expense. It triggered a jealous pang that she wasn't that comfortable around me—and that was my fault. Maybe it was how we'd met, that no matter how many times I'd told her to forget about it, she still saw me as someone who judged her.

But more than that, my mixed signals didn't help. I'd gone from acting like I didn't want to be near her to not being able to stay away. And now, she wasn't only visiting for the summer. She'd live here and would own the only bar in town.

I'd run into her all the time. And when everyone who hadn't met her yet fell in love with her, I'd be reminded over and over again about the shitty way I'd treated her. And I'd have to deal with being on the outside looking in because I'd been too much of a chickenshit to ask for more when I'd had the chance.

“How long do you think she's going to stay single here?” Dad asked, prodding me. “Did you think she'd keep playing this ridiculous game you suggested if she met someone genuinely interested in her?”

“It's not that I'm not gen—” I stopped when Dad's brows popped up. “I can't give her anything. I have too much going on, and she deserves someone who can give her all his attention.”

“You seemed to be giving her a lot of attention tonight. In fact, I don't think you've taken your eyes off her once since we got here.”

I started to say something but shut my mouth. What was the point of a denial when I knew how obvious I was? I

couldn't help it. She was so damn gorgeous. Dad nailed it when he said she was brighter than the sun, but I was afraid to be in her orbit for fear I'd like it too much. That I'd like *her* too much. But resisting was a fight I seemed to be losing more and more every time I saw her.

"Listen to me," Dad growled as he glanced back at the screen door, most likely checking for Claudia's return. "I will move myself into a home if you keep doing this. What Maggie did to you was awful, and you have every right to be angry. I keep telling you this but you don't seem to want to listen, so I'll say it again. I will not let you use me as an excuse not to have a life."

"I don't want you to go into a home, and Mom wouldn't either."

"Well, I don't want *this*. Son," he said, searching my gaze with a slow shake of his head. "I lost the woman I loved, and there is nothing I wouldn't give to have her back for even one more day."

"We don't... It hasn't..." I trailed off as I tried to find my words. "We haven't known each other that long. I don't think I can compare Claudia to what you had with Mom."

"Do you like the idea of Claudia moving here and then finding someone else, someone *not* scared shitless to be with her, and then having to see *and* hear about it all the damn time?"

"No. I fucking hate it," I blurted out with a certainty that took even me aback.

Dad dropped his head, a laugh rumbling through his chest. "Then it looks like you have a choice to make." He tilted his chin toward the door. "Pretend I raised you to be a decent guy and go help our hostess clean up and bring out dessert. And maybe in between, you could apologize for—"

"For being a fucking idiot?"

He nodded. "Start with the little things, but overall, yes."

I chuckled to myself and stood, grabbing our plates and the empty water bottles and headed inside, letting my gaze settle

on Claudia for a long minute before I slid the screen door open.

It was unfair for a woman to be that damn beautiful. I'd already lost myself with her in the kitchen earlier, touching her because I couldn't help my damn self. I wanted to come up behind her, slide my arm around her waist to pull her gorgeous body to mine, and drag my lips over those bare shoulders that had driven me fucking crazy since the moment I'd seen her tonight.

Her head whipped to me as I stepped inside.

"You didn't have to do that," she said, rushing up to me to take the plates. "You're my guest."

"Exactly," I said, my voice dropping to almost a whisper as I handed her the plates. "You were nice enough to make us dinner. It's good manners to help clean up."

"Ah, that small-town charm." Her eyes flicked up to mine, a bashful smile spreading on those plum-colored lips. "I look forward to experiencing it on a daily basis soon."

The thought of any other man showing her small-town charm—and how could they not?—made my blood boil. But if I was keeping her at a distance, I couldn't blame her or anyone else when that eventually happened.

"I was thinking." I leaned against the edge of the sink, crossing my arms to numb the tingle in my fingertips I couldn't shake when I allowed myself to really look at Claudia. My gaze fell on the graceful slope of her neck and the loose strands of hair that framed her delicate cheekbones. "How about dinner before we scope out Halman's? If you have no other plans that day."

"You mean other than sitting in the kiddie pool obsessing over this crazy decision I'm charging ahead with? I can fit dinner in. Where did you have in mind?"

"I assume you've been to Salma's already."

"The burger place with the good cocktails?" Claudia's eyes danced when they met mine. "I love that place. Jake and Peyton have taken me there a few times."

“Good,” I said, reaching into my pocket for my phone and unlocking the screen. “Put your number in, and I’ll text you what time. I’m off early on Tuesdays, but sometimes I get stuck. Let’s plan for around seven.”

“Sure,” Claudia whispered, hesitating for a minute before she took the phone out of my hands. “Look at us. Exchanging numbers and everything.” She punched in her number, a smirk tipping up the corner of her mouth when she lifted her head. “We’re fake dating for real, I guess.”

My stomach sank when she handed the phone back, her wide grin not reaching her pretty eyes.

“Listen, Claudia—”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought that up in front of George. I could tell he was upset, and I’m sure you guys bicker enough.” She chuckled as she slid the pie out of the bakery box and set it on the counter. “From now on, we’ll just leave that between us.”

She squeezed my shoulder, and I felt even worse. My father was right. I was a fucking idiot.

“I shouldn’t have asked you to do that in the first place.”

Her head shot up from where she was digging forks out of one of the kitchen drawers. “I didn’t mind. Happy to be your shield against the matchmaking contingent of Kelly Lakes.” She elbowed my side before she lifted the pie off the counter. “If you wouldn’t mind bringing the napkins and forks out, that would be great. I made a pitcher of iced coffee since I figured it would be too damn hot to make an actual pot, but I’ll come back in for that.”

“I’ll take this and the forks and napkins.” I scooped the pie out of her hands. “And you shouldn’t have to act like some loser’s shield. My father is right—you’re brighter than the sun, and you need to be shown off.”

Claudia blinked at me before her eyes went wide.

“Wow, you and your father are killing me with the compliments tonight.”

A blush stained her cheeks and ran down her neck, and she was so fucking cute I couldn't take it.

“Okay,” she said, the corner of her mouth twitching, “take this, and I’ll get the iced coffee.” She roamed her eyes up and down my body, a wry grin splitting her mouth during her obvious perusal. “You’re pretty blinding yourself.”

JUDE

“SALMA’S WAS THE BEST YOU COULD OFFER HER?” MY FATHER asked as he lingered in the doorway of my bedroom. I didn’t have to turn around to see his look of disdain already so evident in his voice.

“Salma’s is two blocks away from the bar. The whole point of tonight is for her to have a chance to take a look at the place and see what she would want to do with it once she officially owns it.”

“Oh, is that the whole point of tonight? My mistake.”

Dad glared at me when I turned around, resting his hand against the doorjamb as he shook his head.

“Look, this may not seem like it to you, but I am trying. You were absolutely right, and I have a lot to make up for. I wanted us to get to know each other without all the weird complications between us. And making me second-guess my choice of restaurant isn’t helping.” I smiled at my father as I fastened my watch around my wrist.

I’d raced home from work and had taken a quick shower, turning the water to almost ice-cold at the end to both cool off from sweating in my uniform all damn day and to maybe delay my cock’s normal rock-hard reaction whenever I was near Claudia.

I was grateful my father had waited to give me shit and hadn’t seen me change my shirt three times. As much as I was attempting to keep tonight casual, it still seemed like a big deal. This wasn’t my first date since my divorce—if I could

even call what Claudia and I were doing tonight a date. But it was the first time I'd made plans with a woman as more than just a mutually agreed upon way to pass the time for an evening.

What *more* I was capable of, I still wasn't sure. But for Claudia, I wanted to try.

I'd been officially divorced for a while, but if I was honest with myself when I looked back, we'd been separated long before that. I'd never considered staying in that town after Maggie and I were over. It had been her home more than mine, and the stigma of what had happened between us would reach too far and wide to escape it. In a small town, although where we'd lived wasn't as small as Kelly Lakes, word got around fast, and I didn't need the looks of pity everywhere I turned. I got them here too, but they were more out of concern than judgment.

When Dad's health had started to decline, I'd known I had an impending decision to make since I was in Kelly Lakes most of the time anyway. It was easier to focus on my father than to dwell on the fact that I had nothing keeping me in the house and town I'd called home for almost a decade.

I was as sick of my mundane life as my father was of witnessing it. The thought of Claudia ending up with someone else if I didn't get my head out of my ass infuriated me enough to shock me awake.

My father's easy smile surprised me as his gaze slid to mine.

"You look good. Not as good as Claudia will look, but—"

"Well, that's a given." I laughed as I stuffed my wallet into my jeans and came up to my father. Whatever it meant or what would come out of it, I looked forward to spending tonight with the beautiful woman I couldn't stop thinking about. I'd try to leave the fear and worry at the door and enjoy it.

"I know you're going to call me a pain in the ass, but leave the phone close by. Don't ruin my dinner by not answering a text and making me race home."

“And don’t ruin your entire night by worrying about your father for most of it. I’m fine, and I’ll even lift your curfew for the night. Stay out until dawn if you want.”

We shared a rare laugh.

“Well, thanks, Dad. Let me get you settled, and I’ll head ___”

“Stop it.” He put his hand up. “Jolene made dinner before she left for the day, and I’m fine. I’ve mastered getting in and out of a chair when I need to, albeit slowly. Just go and don’t keep her waiting.” He inched out of the way for me to pass. “I’ll lock the door behind you when you go.”

“Can’t get rid of me fast enough?”

“Picked up on that, did you?”

“Thanks, Dad.” I tapped my chest. “That warms my heart to hear my father admit he wants me gone.”

“I’m doing you a favor.” He wrapped his hand around my bicep. “You have a long night of convincing Claudia you’re not really the dumbass you’ve been the past few weeks. A head start would help you out.” He jerked his head toward the front door.

“I suppose it would,” I said as I followed my father’s slow gait to the door.

“See you soon,” I said, glancing over my shoulder one last time to make sure the living room was clear enough for him to move around if he needed to. I thought I was stealthy about it until I heard his groan behind me.

“It better not be too soon, or else I’ll send you back out. Go.”

I chuckled when he nudged my shoulder.

“Have a good night, Dad.”

“Same, son,” he said, a slow smile spreading across his cheeks as he closed the door almost in my face. I laughed as I waited for the lock to click and headed to my truck, texting Claudia before I climbed in that I was on my way.

The drive to the Russos' house was less than five minutes, but it seemed to take forever. After avoiding Claudia for so long, and all the ways my father was so kind to point out I'd fucked up with her so far, I was anxious to make it right and have her all to myself for a night.

I was in new territory—or at least new for me in the past few years. The excitement stirring in my chest wasn't something I was used to, but it sure didn't suck. I had a lot of hang-ups to get past and trepidation that I wouldn't be able to shake off in only one night, but the fact that I was here at all seemed significant enough to mean something.

“Look at you, right on time.”

I laughed at Jake's wry grin as I stepped out of my truck. He was sitting on a blanket in the grass with his daughter as bubbles floated around them. She pulled on his sleeve after he greeted me, grunting with an impatient pout aimed at her father.

“Sorry, baby girl.” He swirled the wand back in the container and slipped it out. Jake blew out a slow, round bubble as her eyes lit up, tracking it as the breeze carried it over to me and right into my face, popping when it hit the tip of my nose. Her raspy giggle made me laugh right along with her, despite the dull pang in my chest from watching Jake with his daughter.

My father and I had done everything together for as long as I could remember. Much to my mother's dismay at times, we were always playing in the yard and getting right in the dirt, trudging into the house filthy but happy. As much as she'd yelled at us, I always spotted the smile she'd try to hide.

I'd wanted to be just like my father when I had kids of my own, never thinking I'd be a displaced bachelor in my midforties and taking care of him instead.

“That's a big one!”

Claudia's voice drifted from the front door before she shut it behind her, rushing over to Keely and Jake. Keely squealed when she met Claudia's gaze as a new bubble drifted up.

“Maybe I could hold this and take it with me,” Claudia whispered, cupping her hands around it like it was a crystal ball until it popped.

“Oh no,” she gasped and pressed her hands into her cheeks and gazed back down at Keely, who collapsed in more giggles against Jake’s chest.

Keely pushed off the ground, wobbling as she tried to stand, and grabbed on to Claudia’s ankle, beaming at her with an awe that seemed all too familiar. I couldn’t blame her for wanting to clutch on since Claudia lured me to her just as much.

Tonight would be the first time I wouldn’t try so hard to fight it—or at all.

“Aunt Claudia is going out tonight for a change, sweet pea,” Claudia told her as she lifted Keely up by her underarms and planted her on her hip. “And you will be off in dreamland by the time I come back.” The hem of Claudia’s already short denim skirt lifted even higher as Keely squirmed in her arms, and while I didn’t want to give her body a shameless perusal in front of Jake, it was a relief not to feel like I had to tear my eyes away before anyone noticed.

“Seven almost on the dot.” Claudia’s smile was slow and a little devious when she met my gaze. “Sergeant Jude always follows the rules,” she told Keely in a loud whisper, our eyes still locked as she set her down in front of Jake.

“You kids have fun,” Jake teased as he stood, scooping up his daughter and the blanket. “We won’t wait up, Claud.”

“My father told me something similar before he pushed me out of the house. Ready?” I extended my hand to Claudia and had to stifle a laugh when she eyed it with suspicion. “I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry.”

“Same,” she said, her gaze darting from my hand to my face before she slid her palm against mine. The red blouse she wore hung over one sexy shoulder as she made her way to me. And just like the night she’d cooked dinner for us, I wanted to run my lips over her shoulder and across her collarbone. I

wanted to know what kinds of sounds she'd make if I dipped my tongue lower and tasted how sweet her skin would be if I kept—

“Jude, are you okay?”

Claudia's question snapped me out of my trance, confusion pinching her brow when I lifted my gaze to hers.

Christ. Just because I didn't want to fight the insane chemistry between us anymore didn't mean I could drool over her in public. When Jake cracked up behind me, I realized I needed to get a grip.

I'd been so used to locking up any feelings I had for Claudia that once I let them loose, all the dirty fantasies exploded in my head, regardless of where I was.

Thank God I'd chosen dark jeans with a little room around the crotch tonight as my dick was already exhausted from the simple anticipation of a night with Claudia.

“Good night, Russos,” she said, sifting her fingers through Keely's brown curls as I kept hold of her other hand. She shot me a grin before shifting to walk to my truck, muttering a thank-you when I held the door open for her to climb in.

“I saw you laughing with Keely,” she said while she buckled her seat belt as I climbed in next to her. “Don't worry, I won't let it get out and ruin your broody reputation.”

“How about we try something tonight?” I asked her as I started the engine.

“Try something? Like what?”

I smiled as she crinkled her nose at me.

“How about—” I picked up her hand and slowly laced our fingers together “—we reset a little tonight. Forget that I pulled you over or that I asked you to pretend to date me, and clear the way a little bit.”

“Clear the way for what?” she asked, tilting her head as she eased closer.

“We can figure that out. Tonight, I’m Jude, and you’re Claudia. That’s it. Just be honest and real tonight.”

“Okay. I’ll go first.” She shifted toward me in her seat. “I changed five times in the past hour. Both because I’m not sure if Larry told anyone that I was interested in being the new bar owner and I didn’t know what outfit would say ‘I’m fun and casual but not too casual,’ and maybe I wanted to impress you a little.”

“Impress me?” I had to laugh when she pinched the air between her fingers. “When you’re around, I don’t see or notice anything else. Which, if I’m being honest, has been a struggle.”

A bashful smile ghosted her lips as I spotted a blush staining her cheeks.

“And no matter what you chose, that would have been especially true tonight.”

Her brows popped up as she settled back into her seat, searching my face as she kept hold of my hand.

“And I changed my shirt three times.”

“To impress Larry or me?” Her red-painted lips curled into a smirk.

“You. I don’t pay Larry much mind—other than last week.”

She widened her eyes for a second before she burst out laughing.

“Peyton said you were jealous and that’s why you seemed so mad. Yes, it bothered me enough to mention it to her.”

I lifted a shoulder. “I was. Feels good to be honest, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” she said, slipping her hand from mine and skimming her fingers up my arm. I stilled as a shiver rolled down my spine from the soft scrape of her nails. “And you would look good in any shirt. Even when I thought you were about to give me a ticket, the way you filled out your uniform was pretty damn distracting.”

I dropped my chin to my chest as a chuckle fell from my lips.

“But I won’t talk about that. We’re just us, whoever that is, as I don’t even recognize myself these days. And since we aren’t doing the whole fake-dating thing anymore, I won’t hang all over you like I did the last time we were in Halman’s.”

“You can if you want. I never said or acted like I minded, did I?”

“No, but I figured that was for the show.” Her smile shrank enough to make me feel like shit for asking her to fake being with me in the first place.

“Trust me.” I tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and let my thumb graze along her jaw. “Maybe I asked you to play along and pretend to be with me, but enjoying it? That wasn’t an act.” I drifted my thumb across her chin and dropped my hand, already itching to touch her again. “Not for one damn second.”

CLAUDIA

“WHY ARE YOU LOOKING AT ME LIKE THAT?” JUDE ASKED after the hostess led us to a table at Salma’s.

“I guess it’s because I’m not sure who you are tonight,” I teased, but I was only half kidding.

Since the moment he’d extended his hand to me on Jake and Peyton’s lawn, all I’d kept wondering was who was this swoony bastard, and what the hell did he do with Jude?

First, it was the hand-holding, then the confessions, followed by the longing looks I caught from him on the drive here. I knew there had been a shift between us after I’d had them over for dinner last week—or at least my pathetic heart was hoping so—but I hadn’t expected him to be this open, and I wasn’t prepared for it.

In all our interactions so far, he’d be open for a little while and then close right back up. I was gun-shy and skeptical this Jude would stay, but I’d enjoy him while he was here.

“Not sure who I am?” His forehead creased as he handed me the long, laminated card that Salma’s used as a menu. “I can show you my badge and license if you want.”

“I’ve already seen your badge, remember? What I mean is that you’ve smiled almost four times since you picked me up, and it was a short ride. You’re almost happy-go-lucky tonight.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Jude scoffed, grinning at me over the top of the menu. “Happy-go-lucky was never me. You can

ask my father. Even when I was a kid, he'd always tell me to stop being so intense or else I'd break a blood vessel."

"I love your dad." I chuckled. "I could totally see him saying that to you."

"He's very fond of you too. It's why he rushed me out tonight. Well, that and his usual get out of the house so I can have some peace push."

I cracked up around the rim of my water glass.

"It's kind of fun watching you two bicker like an old married couple. Well, it was until I opened my big mouth at dinner and made it tense."

Jude opened his mouth to say something, when the waitress stopped by our table.

"Hi, Sergeant Davis," she chirped with a big smile. Her blond hair was piled into a bun on the top of her head, accentuating her young features. I guessed she was eighteen at the most. She reminded me of myself when I'd worked at the Palace during my summers and long breaks from school.

"Hi, Laura. This is Claudia. Claudia, Laura's father is on the KLPD. But I'm not sure when she became old enough to work." Jude's warm and easy smile liquefied my knees. Whether he was broody or whatever he was tonight, the man was always beautiful.

"I'll be a freshman in college this September," she said with a giggle. "Nice to meet you, Claudia."

"Very nice to meet you too, Laura." I returned her grin as she dug into her apron for a pad and pencil.

"What can I get you guys?"

Jude nodded to me. "Ladies first."

"Such a gentleman," I joked before turning to Laura. "Bacon cheeseburger deluxe, medium. And water is good for me."

"I'll have the same, but make mine well-done. Tell Pete to burn it."

“Okay,” Laura chuckled as she scribbled on her pad. “Someone will bring you more water, and I’ll get this started.”

“Ah, to be young again,” I mused as she darted back toward the kitchen. “I was a waitress at my father’s restaurant when I was her age.”

“I used to work for my uncle’s construction company as a kid. It was the one time we got along since I was good at lifting things and putting them down.”

I laughed. “I bet you were. That’s a lot of hard labor for a kid during the summers.”

“It was fine.” He shrugged. “I liked working up a sweat and keeping to myself.”

“And I guess some things never change, right?”

He chuckled as a busboy came by to refill our water glasses while an image of Jude as a teenager popped into my head. The perpetual frown on his gorgeous face as he made his way through town with that working-man muscle. I almost pitied the girls in this town, who I was sure had fallen at his feet on a daily basis.

“I guess not. I still like the jobs I do with Jake where I can just work and not think about anything else, but for...different reasons now. Taking orders and keeping them straight would have stressed me the hell out.”

“I never minded waiting tables, but I got into trouble a lot with my father’s serving managers for chatting up the customers too much.”

“I could see that.” The side of his mouth curled into a smirk.

“What, that I talked too much even then? I always made great tips, but Dad moved me to hostess so I could talk all I wanted without pissing off his staff. Some customers still ask for me, though. I need to make a trip down to Brooklyn to clear out my apartment and stop by the Palace. Eventually.”

“I could see how customers would be too captivated by you to remember to eat. Even though the lo mein was

delicious, I had the same problem when you invited us for dinner.”

“Seriously?” I said, searching his gaze as I took a quick sip of water. “You barely spoke to me until the last hour or so before you both left.”

“Because you get me tongue-tied like a goddamn teenager because you’re so fucking beautiful.” His eyes held mine, the heat in his stare knocking the wind out of me. “Like I said, you’re captivating.”

“Geez. Give a girl some warning before you say something like that,” I said, my breathless whisper robbing me of any of the snark I was trying to pull off. I sat back and tried to inhale back some of the air Jude had just stolen from my lungs. I crossed my shaky legs to ward off the tingle between them when Jude called me fucking beautiful with an almost feral lust in his eyes.

This dude was full of surprises tonight, and I could barely keep up.

“Did I just make you speechless?” Jude teased with a wry grin.

“Um, no. Well, yes,” I stammered, exhaling a long breath as I studied him from across the table. “Again, who *are* you?”

We shared a laugh, our eyes locking for a long moment as Laura set our plates down in front of us. She looked between us and whispered an “enjoy” before scurrying off.

I don't blame you, honey. I don't know what to do with all this stifling sexual tension at the table either.

His smile faded. “Who I should have been when you met me.”

“I was doing ninety on the highway when I met you. You were supposed to be intimidating.”

“I’m intimidating?”

“Overall, yes, a little. But especially then. You definitely nail that air of no-nonsense authority without even saying a

word. I tensed up just watching you walk toward my car in my rearview mirror.”

“How do I walk?” He narrowed his eyes at me.

I squirted some ketchup on the side of my plate and swirled a fry through it, taking a dramatic bite as I held Jude’s gaze.

“Like, with your whole body. I can’t explain it better than that. You have a strong presence even when you don’t say a word. Probably what makes you such a great cop, and why I got a rush during those rare moments I could pull a smile or a laugh out of you. I don’t think anyone really sees the playful side you seem to be so free and easy with tonight.”

“They don’t. At least, not for years. I haven’t had much to smile or laugh about.” He took a bite from his burger and set it down, my eyes darting from his strong hands around the bun to the roll of his throat as he swallowed. Only Jude could make eating a burger seem like an erotic experience.

“That’s why I liked poking for your attention. I guess I’m not used to you just giving me smiles for free.” I took a chomp out of my own burger, stifling a smile as he narrowed his eyes at me.

“You’ve always had my attention, and even when I was flustered by the *poking*, it was cute.”

“So I’m cute and I fluster you?” I crinkled my nose and glared back at Jude. “I think I liked when you called me fucking beautiful better.”

He laughed as he chewed, his blue eyes shining with a brightness I hadn’t seen from him before. I was starting to really like this new guy across the table a lot, and I hoped he’d stick around at least until we got the check.

“And what did you mean by going to see your parents eventually?” Jude asked after he swallowed another bite. Every move this guy made was with a sexy-as-hell masculine grace. Seeing him work with his hands with Jake would probably make me light-headed.

“I need to give up my apartment, so I’m not paying two rents as I can’t stay in Peyton and Jake’s basement forever. Getting a place here and giving up my old one makes it all seem...” I trailed off as the familiar coil in my stomach tightened. Every time I’d force myself to search for apartments online, I’d click through a few listings until I’d get spooked enough to slam my laptop shut.

“Official?” Jude offered, his brow arched.

“I guess. This feels both like the most exciting thing I’ve ever done and the most terrifying at the same time. Like, I’m nervous about going to Halman’s with you later. A bar I’ve been to many times, but it’s all going to hit different when I get there because it’s almost mine.”

I shook my head and rubbed at the throb in my temple.

“I’ve never owned anything outright in my life. Nothing big anyway. I rent my apartment and always lease my cars. Owning is a commitment.” I let out a slow breath as the familiar anxiety bubbled up in my stomach. “I don’t have much experience with those.”

“You’re the love-’em-and-leave-’em type, I guess.” Jude smirked before taking a sip of water, his narrowed eyes still on mine.

“No. I’m chronically single, but there isn’t a string of broken hearts because of me back in Brooklyn. At least, not intentional ones. While I loved my job at one time, I never imagined doing it for the rest of my life or rising to an executive position where I’d have to sacrifice my soul. But this place, this town...”

Jude’s gaze softened as he shot me a tiny grin.

I bunched my shoulders. “I could see myself here. If I don’t fuck things up.”

“You definitely won’t,” Jude said, his voice dipping to a husky whisper.

“I don’t know how you could be that sure, but I will soak up that validation like the needy sponge I am. You and your father seem to have a lot of faith in me and my crazy plans.”

“Well, he likes you. And I know he appreciated how you welcomed him without making him feel self-conscious. I haven’t been able to figure that out since he snaps at me whenever I try to help him.”

“I think he’s just frustrated, and you’re his safe place. He can be grouchy and snappy with you because he knows you aren’t going anywhere. It’s a nice thing when you think about it.”

“Doesn’t feel so nice when I have to remind him of his limits and he tells me to get a life. But he’s right, I’ve used him as an excuse for too long.”

I assumed he was referring to his divorce, and while I itched to find out exactly what had happened, I wouldn’t push, and I’d let him tell me when and if he was ready.

The playfulness between us came to a halt as we both went back to our plates in silence. I caught a tightness in Jude’s jaw that hadn’t been there when we’d first sat down.

“What you said before about me being the love-’em-and-leave-’em type, I wanted to clarify something.”

“Clarify?” he said, squinting at me.

“I do like poking at people and things I should leave alone. It’s not just you. When I meet someone quiet, I like pushing to see if I can get them to open up. But after a while, I lose interest if they don’t respond. That didn’t happen with you.”

Jude’s brows knitted together, but he didn’t reply.

“I knew, underneath, there was a sweet guy very worth knowing. It only happened a few times, but you probably don’t realize that when you smile—really smile—you’re fucking breathtaking.”

Jude blinked, a tiny but real smile sneaking across his lips. “Breathtaking? I think that’s the first time I’ve been called that.”

“Well, it’s true. I’ve never spent more than a few minutes worrying about what someone thought about me, but you?” I huffed out a laugh. “The thought of you not wanting to be near

me made me all kinds of miserable. It's why I may have pretended a little too hard with the fake relationship or whatever thing."

Jude swiped a napkin across his mouth and stood, his blue eyes blazing into mine as he made his way over to my side of the table. He came up behind me, his arms boxing me in on both sides before he brushed my hair off my shoulder and pressed a kiss to my cheek. I couldn't help the soft sigh falling from my lips, a mix of desire and relief at the chance to finally be this close to him and mean it. I fought the temptation to turn my head and claim his mouth right here and now.

Not for the crowd, but for me. Because I wanted to, because I wanted *him*. While I couldn't explain the crazy feelings I had for Jude, denying them was exhausting and pointless.

"If I hadn't turned into a jealous asshole later that night at the bar, I would have pretended a little too hard right back," he whispered, his words fanning hot against my skin and shooting tingles down my arm. His husky chuckle in my ear made the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

I swiveled my head around. Jude's smile was wicked as he searched my gaze, his eyes dark and full of delicious intent.

"You were really that jealous? Why?" My words were shaky from the quiver running down and all over my body. Something about this man had a visceral hold on me, and I couldn't squirm away, no matter how hard I tried.

And so far, I hadn't tried very hard, if at all.

"Because the thought of you with Larry or anyone else drives me crazy. Which makes no sense, especially after the way I've acted, but..." He searched my face, a tiny smile sneaking across his mouth. "It's the honest truth."

"I get it, trust me."

His grin widened, and there was sweet, open Jude again. Gorgeous, addictive, and as far as I was concerned, totally worth the wait.

“Good reset so far?” he whispered, resting his chin on my shoulder.

“So far.” I tilted my head from side to side when he lifted his chin. “It’s okay.”

He chuckled and made his way back to his seat. I caught the gaze of a couple at the table behind us and held in a smile when they quickly turned their heads.

So far, it was a fabulous reset.

JUDE

“STILL NERVOUS?” I ASKED CLAUDIA AS WE MADE OUR WAY down the two blocks to Halman’s.

“I don’t know if I’d call it nervous,” she said, distracting me for a second when she lifted her bare shoulder in a shrug. “Jumpy, maybe. Overwhelmed. Whatever it is, it’s stupid. If I’m going to own and run the place, I can’t get anxious when I’m just looking around.”

She stopped and dropped her head into her hands, peering up at me through the cracks in her fingers.

“This is a big step,” I said as I peeled her hands away from her beautiful face. When her eyes searched mine, I spotted the golden flecks in her brown eyes under the streetlight. The vulnerability in her features was something I’d never seen from her, and it made her even more beautiful, if that was possible.

Fighting the urge to pull her into my arms and tell her it was all going to be okay—right after I crushed my lips to hers and pulled her gorgeous body flush to mine—had *me* jumpy too.

“The only step I need to worry about is the one into my big-girl pants so I can do what I set out to do. Maybe you could distract me for a minute?”

“Distract you?” I chuckled. “How?”

“I don’t know. Tell me your story. I mean, a condensed version if you want.” She crossed her arms and leaned against the brick wall in front of the market storefront. “You know

mine, which isn't much. I don't have a juicy past, which is kind of sad."

"And you think I do?" I sputtered out a laugh.

"Well, I know your parents' story. Mostly," she said, her gaze softening when she met mine. "And you're divorced, but I don't know any details other than it was enough to make you want to pretend to date me so you didn't have to date anyone."

"Claudia," I breathed out on a long sigh. "I should never have—"

"Stop," she said, holding up her hand. "That's not why I brought it up. I wasn't mad or insulted that you asked me to do that, and I got to cuddle with you in public, so it wasn't a hardship." A gorgeous smile broke out on her face. "I'm more interested in why a man like you wanted to pretend he wasn't single so he could *stay* single."

I leaned against the wall beside her and let my gaze drift toward the street. Kelly Lakes hadn't changed much since I was a kid, and I liked that. Maggie's cousins lived in town, and she'd always commented about how she couldn't imagine living here.

I hadn't wanted to move her somewhere she wouldn't be happy, but I'd missed it when I left. Things were as they seemed here, something I'd taken for granted when I'd moved away.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't feel comfortable. The last thing I want to do is make you close off after all these weeks of trying to get you to open up."

I smiled at the curl of her lips, drawn in enough to want to tell her but unsure where to begin.

"It's not that I don't feel comfortable. It's just...not a good story. And it ends badly. Obviously, as we're divorced."

"I have time. Take all you need."

I dropped my head back and sucked in a long breath.

"Maggie and I met through one of her cousins who lived in town. She lived about an hour away, but we started dating and

it went very fast. She wanted every second of my time, and I was too into her to realize why that may not have been such a good thing.”

“Was she possessive? Sometimes that takes a minute to notice. When it’s all hot and heavy and fun, you don’t realize it until it becomes stifling. I’ve been through that a time or two.”

“She was, but she told me that she’d had a falling-out with her friends and didn’t get along with her family, so her focus was on me. No details other than that her friends had stabbed her in the back and her cousins were always mean, even though, knowing who they were, that made no sense to me at first.”

Every time I looked back, I became pissed at myself all over again for believing the best in her and the worst of everyone else without any proof.

“She was convincing enough for me to take her at her word without asking for details. People tried to warn me there was more to it, but I didn’t want to hear it. Looking back, I cringe at how fucking stupid I was.”

“You’re a good guy who believed the woman you were in love with. When you care about someone, you don’t think to ask for receipts.” Claudia shook her head.

“I didn’t think much at all,” I said, letting out a sad chuckle. “Anyway, we were married, and she begged me to move out of Kelly Lakes. She found a job in Putnam County, and I transferred over to their police department. For a while, it was nice. She found friends and wasn’t as clingy. I missed my old town, but I thought we’d made a good life there. And it was close enough to see my parents whenever I wanted to. Dad has been diabetic for years, but he was holding his own even with some complications. Then my mother got sick. Cancer. No symptoms before, but once they found it, it moved fast and nothing we did could stop it.”

“I’m so sorry, Jude.” Claudia squeezed my hand.

“So, I had to be in Kelly Lakes even more,” I continued, ignoring the stricken look in her eyes. “All my time off was here. Doctor’s appointments for them both, cancer treatments for her, then eventually hospice care. It was a lot. And I did it alone.”

“Wait, what? She never came with you?”

“Sometimes. When she didn’t, she’d just tell me that they didn’t like her anyway and probably wouldn’t want her around. That it was better to go by myself.”

“That is a lot for one person to handle.”

She pressed her hand against my chest, sympathy I didn’t want to acknowledge pulling at her features. But at the same time, the heat from where her skin touched mine, even with the cotton barrier of my shirt, soothed me.

“And really shitty of her to make you go through that all alone.”

“She wasn’t totally wrong. They were never crazy about her, but they always treated her well for my sake.”

“I believe that,” Claudia said, inching closer. “Your dad seems like a straight shooter, but I’m sure he would have tried for you.”

“He did, they both did. Anyway, after my mother passed away, my father’s health took a nose dive. He had a wound on his leg that wouldn’t go away. Since he’s diabetic, he’s slow to heal, but when the wound became infected and spread, they couldn’t cure it without removing his leg. He refused, but I told him it was either do that or leave me with no parents. I took a leave of absence to get him prepared and stayed at the house during his operation and recovery so I’d be close. Even though he told me he wanted to be alone, I didn’t let him. It’s basically how you know us now.”

Claudia’s sad smile gave me the push to keep going.

“When I came home after I’d gotten him settled into rehab, Maggie was in our bed with her best friend’s husband. And I found out later he’d been coming and going for months.”

“Please tell me you shot him. Or at least wounded him.”

“No,” I said, a surprised laugh slipping out. “I was in shock and threw him out. Maggie was sobbing, telling me she felt abandoned and that’s the only reason she did what she did. If I’d paid attention to her, this wouldn’t have happened. And some other excuses I ignored. I packed my stuff while she ranted, and I headed back to my father’s house. I haven’t seen her since the divorce was finalized.”

“I am so sorry.” She pressed her hand to my chest again. The warmth from her palm calmed my racing heart.

People assumed my divorce was bad, rightly assuming the worst of Maggie, but no one other than my father knew the whole story. The betrayal was the least of it all when I looked back. What got to me the most was the embarrassment over being an idiot from the beginning and never seeing Maggie for who she really was until it was too late.

“I was a moron and fell for her victim act—”

“You mean her *dictim* act. She was a dick playing the victim so she could keep being a dick. I hate people like that. Never apologize for having a good heart. Hate the ones who take advantage of it.”

I exhaled a gust of air that seemed to take a thousand pounds off my chest. I laughed when my gaze came back to Claudia.

“Dictim? Is that even a word?”

“Fits, no?” She arched a brow. “I’m sorry, Jude. None of that ever should have happened.”

“It’s life, I guess. And my father has had a long road and is a lot, but I’ve hidden behind him because it was easier. Going back to work a few months ago and establishing more of a routine with us has helped, but we’ve both been frustrated for a lot of different reasons. I just don’t like to talk about mine.”

“I get it,” she whispered. “And I’m sure the looks you got when you moved back to town didn’t help.”

“I didn’t mind—mostly. A lot were nosy when I came back, but it was more concern I saw rather than pity. Knowing what happened to my parents, that I was newly divorced. Then the older women in town and some of the men wanted to help fix it.”

“Where I came to your recent rescue.” She batted her eyelashes.

“I guess. I’m grateful my father reamed me out over that when you invited us for dinner.”

“He did?” Her smile faded before she cringed.

“Right after you went back inside to get dessert, he called me a fucking idiot.”

She burst out laughing. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“I’m glad he did. But that wasn’t what snapped me out of it. He asked me if I’d be okay if you dated someone else who wasn’t afraid to be with you, and if I would enjoy seeing and hearing about it all the damn time.”

“What did you say?” Her voice was soft, almost inaudible, as she held my eyes.

“I said—” I let my thumb graze along her jaw, biting back a smile when it quivered under my touch “—I’d fucking hate it.”

“Good to know,” she said, sucking in her bottom lip as she darted her eyes away.

Even though I knew the cause of my marriage imploding was Maggie, I couldn’t help the guilt over knowing she’d had a point. My parents, and now my father, had been my focal point for a long time. Yes, she should have stuck by me, but a nasty voice in my head sometimes would taunt me, saying that maybe I’d never given her a reason to because my attention really was somewhere else.

It was why I put distance between myself and any future woman I met, both to protect myself from being burned and to not disappoint anyone else. But with Claudia, I forced the

distance when I didn't want it, and pushing her away made me miserable. Taking a chance on whatever this was between us was probably a risk for both of us, but the way she made me feel already made it worth it.

“Now,” I started, sliding my hand over the nape of her neck and pressing a kiss to her forehead, “let's walk into the bar like you own the place.”

CLAUDIA

JUDE TOOK MY HAND AND LED ME DOWN THE DESERTED STREET toward the bar. Small-town midweek nightlife was quiet enough to be creepy, even in the summer. We didn't talk as we made our way down the block, the only sounds our footsteps and the thudding of my heart against my rib cage.

My heightened nerves from walking into Halman's as the potential new owner were amplified because of the man next to me. I was thirty-five years old and had never trembled under a man's touch before, and all he'd done was stroke my jaw. When he'd kissed my forehead, I could've melted into a puddle right there in front of Kelly Lakes's probably only dry cleaners.

More than the crazy chemistry between us, I liked Jude. I loved how he took care of his father without an ounce of hesitation, even though it was never easy. And, although I wished I could find her and punch her in the face, how he'd loved his horrible ex-wife enough to stand by her without question. I understood how gun-shy he was to get involved with anyone and why he wanted to use me as a barrier. He was afraid of anything deeper, and the more time I spent with him, the more I started to relate.

I had a feeling that if I ever went all the way in with Jude—if he ever truly allowed me in—I'd never get out. Moving to this small town where he'd always be in some kind of proximity made the whole thing between us one big, reckless risk.

“Here we are,” Jude said, dropping my hand to open the heavy wooden door and hold it open. “After you, boss.”

“Boss,” I scoffed, my pulse kicking up again from the twitch of his lips. Maybe this distraction was good. I could take everything in at face value once I stepped inside and focus on not tasting Jude’s lips.

I shot him a tight smile as we made our way inside, taking slow breaths in and out of my nostrils to calm the fuck down and get out of my head.

“There she is!” Larry bellowed from behind the bar as he waved me over. “Come have a drink on the house before this all belongs to you, gorgeous.”

Jude’s groan behind me came out like a possessive growl.

“It’s business, caveman. You can stand down tonight and relax.” I reached behind me to pat his hand and got his denim-covered thigh instead.

“That’s some hard muscle there, Sergeant,” I whispered. “Or are you doing a full-body clench until we leave?”

He glared at me, his eyes thinned to slits, as we trudged up to the bar and took two empty stools at the end.

“Belongs to her? What the hell are you talking about?”

I recognized the slimy edge in Artie’s voice as he charged up to Larry.

“You’re selling it to her after you told me no?” He was loud enough to turn heads in both our directions.

“She’s making me a good offer.” Larry shrugged. “Not offering me half of what the place is worth because you didn’t think anyone would want it.”

“You don’t screw over your neighbor, Larry. I’ve lived here my whole life, and I’ve spent a lot of nights in this bar. I would have held up the legacy, but I guess you don’t give a shit about that if you’re letting her have it.”

Artie’s jaw ticked as he looked my way, grasping the edge of the bar counter as if he wanted to flip it over.

When I cut Jude a look, he was scowling right back at Artie. I wasn't sure if he was going into cop mode or possessive protector, but it sent a zing between my legs all the same.

"I have nothing but good intentions for this bar when I own it, I promise," I told Artie with a big smile plastered on my face.

"You don't know anything about this town or the businesses here. I asked around about you." Artie stuffed his hands into his pockets and came up to us. "You come back and forth from Brooklyn and act like you're one of the locals, which you aren't, no matter how many cops you date."

"Watch yourself, Artie," Jude said through gritted teeth.

"You're not in uniform, so you're off the clock. Are you going to arrest me for being mean to your girl?" he sang in a whiny voice.

"His girl can take care of herself. And if you were trying to be mean, you have to do a little better than that. Another night of not being able to find the dart board make you cranky?" I jutted my bottom lip in an exaggerated pout.

Artie seethed with his nostrils flaring, but he didn't reply as he backed away.

"Anyway, I'll do a shot of tequila if it's on you, Larry. The good stuff, until I have to pay for it."

He laughed, heading over to me with a shot glass in his hand.

"I have no doubt you'll give this place the life I never had the energy for." He reached behind the bar for a bottle and filled up my glass. "You're starting already." His smile was flirty but genuine. I still needed all the support I could get, and I returned his wide grin. "Anything for you, Sergeant?"

"No, I'm good. Thank you."

Larry chuckled to himself as he looked between us and headed back to the customers at the other end of the bar.

Tingles ran up my neck when I leaned back on Jude's arm draped across the back of my seat.

"You need to chill." I squeezed Jude's knee until he turned toward me. "The jealousy is adorable but, I assure you, completely unnecessary."

He shot me a quick side glance as a reluctant smile curved his lips.

"It's not that. Or, not only that. I don't want Artie giving you any trouble."

"Oh, him." I shook my head. "Of all the things I'm worried about with taking this place over, he's not one of them." I raised my shot glass in a mock toast when I caught Artie still staring and threw it back.

"I've dealt with plenty of assholes in my time. I may be clueless about everything else, but I can handle him." I drifted my hand across Jude's back, the countless muscles flexing under my touch. So far, the shot made me more brazen than level-headed, but the momentary buzz helped me not to care. "I find him more whiny than threatening, although this nonsense cop thing you have going on right now is bringing back lovely memories of when we first met."

Jude rolled his eyes at me, but I spotted the almost-smile wanting to break out across his lips.

I really liked this guy. Every version of him.

Man, I was in a shit-ton of trouble.

"I heard you're the almost boss lady."

I swiveled my head as a woman in a Halman's T-shirt with brown curls piled on top of her head made her way over to me. She seemed a little older than me, maybe late forties or so, with a little gray sprinkled into her brown hair as she came closer, her warm smile truly relaxing me for the first time tonight.

"I'm Celia, but everyone calls me Cece. I work the bar during the week." She held out her hand. "I let the young ones

take the weekends with the actual crowd. I've been here long enough to do that. Nice to see you, Davis."

Jude nodded. "Good to see you too, Cece."

It was a little strange that no one called him Jude other than his father and me, but the rush of being different to him always thrilled me, even when I'd thought he couldn't stand me.

"Nice to meet you, Cece. I'm Claudia, and that explains why I don't recognize you. I've only come in on weekends."

"I take Fridays sometimes. I'm glad we're not closing, thanks to you."

"Well, it's not official yet. My congratulations shot was a little premature." I picked up my empty glass. "But it's really nice to meet you. If I do take over, you can show me the ropes—like exactly how a bar works since my experience has mostly been just drinking in one."

She laughed and shook her head. "Not much to know. The drink orders are usually simple. I manage the staff schedules, but when you come on and want to do that—"

"You are more than welcome to keep doing that. I don't plan on changing much around here. I just wanted to keep it open because I couldn't allow Kelly Lakes to sacrifice its only bar."

"And we thank you for that." Cece craned her neck to the other end of the counter when someone called her name. "Excuse me for a moment. We'll talk more, but it was great to meet you."

"You too," I said, watching her head over to a cluster of customers and take orders, surprised at my sudden fascination.

"This is kind of cool. And maybe not so scary." I slid my arm into the crook of Jude's elbow and leaned in. "Cece seems nice."

"She is. Her mother still lives across the street from us. I'm sure she'll help you." He leaned in to whisper in my ear. "See anything you want to change?"

I rubbed my neck to halt the goose bumps trailing down my arm from his breath fanning hot against my neck. It would be great if I could at least act my age around Jude and not like a dizzy teenager.

“Other than the walls and flooring, not really. The seating definitely, but I need to figure that out and it could come in time. I’m even starting to get excited at my dopey new bar name.”

“It’s a great name. Not dopey. I told you, you’re going to be great...”

“What?” My head whipped to Jude when he trailed off.

“If Artie keeps looking at you like that, he and I are going to have a discussion. In fact, I think that’s now. Excuse me.”

“Stop,” I said, grabbing his arm. “I told you I can handle him.”

“It’s a matter of respect. I’m not surprised he offered to buy this place so damn cheap, and he would have ended up running it into the ground if he had. Larry would have closed before he would have sold it to him. He’s at least decent like that.”

I cracked up when he flicked his eyes to Larry and back to me.

“And to think, you were the one telling *me* to calm down when we came in.”

Artie headed back to the bar, throwing a bill onto the counter and shooting me one more scowl and irritated shake of his head before turning away.

“That’s it,” Jude said, popping off the stool and heading in Artie’s direction. My heart was now in my throat for another reason.

“Jude, you can’t beat him up.” I pressed my hand against his chest. “Off duty or not.”

“I won’t. I just want a word. That’s all,” he said, his eyes still focused on where Artie had stopped to talk to someone on

his way out. “Remind him of the manners he’s supposed to have.”

My cop boyfriend, or whoever Jude was shaping up to be, couldn’t go after someone on my behalf when I hadn’t even officially bought the place yet. I loved that his first instinct was to defend my honor, but I needed to show my own authority and not have Jude throw his around when it wasn’t needed.

I grabbed his face just as he was about to charge at Artie and pressed my lips against his. He went rigid before his shoulders fell and his body relaxed. I smiled into the kiss when his lips melted against mine. I kept it PG, no tongue, even though I wanted nothing more than to slide mine past those sinful lips and taste him. I left a couple of lingering pecks before I eased back, the tiny but sexy smirk tipping Jude’s mouth tempting me back for so much more.

The distraction worked as Jude slid back onto the seat. Was that confusion or lust in his dazed expression? I couldn’t tell or tear my eyes away as I ran my tongue along my bottom lip, still tingling from the contact.

“Can I talk to you outside?” he asked, motioning toward the small crowd at the other end of the bar and all the pairs of eyes now fixed on us.

“Sure,” I said, hopping off the seat as my stomach dropped and followed him to the entrance.

Shit. I always went too far. Yes, the kiss had worked to distract Jude enough from going after Artie, but that wasn’t the only reason why I’d done it. He was being all kinds of sweet and open, but after the story he’d told me tonight about his divorce and what he’d gone through with his parents, I needed to learn to take his cues and follow his lead.

“Listen, I’m sorry if I went too far. I never learn—”

Jude slanted his mouth over mine and cut me off. I whimpered as he dragged his tongue over the seam of my lips, opening my mouth on a needy moan. He tasted even better than I imagined. Sweet and salty and delicious. He sifted his

fingers into my hair, licking into my mouth in long, hungry strokes, and backed me against the wall. I scratched my nails up his back and roped my arms around his neck, pressing my body against his as his erection grew between us. Of course, he was huge and rock hard as he grazed my core in all the right places.

“I didn’t want our first kiss to be because of you trying to distract me from some asshole, or on display in front of anyone, so that didn’t count. This...” His hand was back in my hair, weaving a fistful around his fingers as he pulled. “This is for us.”

A wide grin split his mouth as he watched me with hooded eyes. My knees were ready to give out, both from his scorching kisses and the way he said *our* first kiss.

“So, this counts?” I teased, breathless as I traced his wet lips with the tip of my finger.

Maybe it was too soon to think of any of this as anything other than the lust brewing between us reaching a boiling point, but I was all in with this mysterious and wonderful man, and I regretted nothing.

My eyes fluttered when he cupped my cheek and grazed his thumb back and forth along my jaw. I’d never fluttered or quivered for any other man before, but Jude was something special.

“It absolutely fucking counts.”

JUDE

“SO, WE SHOULD BE GOOD HERE?” I SAID, PEERING OUT AT THE new rookies who’d just joined the KLPD last week and made sure to keep their eyes on me for the entire meeting, and the cluster of young cops who were past rookie and probably irritated at the disruption to lunchtime.

“Yes. Thank you, Sergeant,” Ron said before popping out of his chair. He was probably the most annoyed, but he never missed an opportunity to kiss ass or look good in front of new personnel. “All good reminders, even if we probably won’t need many of them.” He shot me a fake smile.

“You always need them, Officer. Yes, this is a mostly safe town and the chief works to keep it that way, but he needs our cooperation. I said mostly, because nothing is totally safe. Just because the worst call of the week may be kids stealing fruit from the outdoor displays at the market, next week it could be a lot worse. We’re the eyes and ears of this town, and bad things happen when cops get cocky.”

Ron had the decency to lose the smug grin and nod before heading back into the main office. When I’d been promoted to sergeant, my boss had told me to make sure the line of authority was clear. He said not to hang out with the officers I managed unless it was a station event and to lead by example. I had never been all that social and didn’t mind having an excuse not to shit-talk at a bar after work with the cops I saw every day.

I wasn’t a dick either, and I paid attention if anything was off with anyone in the station. Even when I’d come back to

Kelly Lakes with a heavy chip on my shoulder, looking out for the guys was still a priority, along with following the rules to the letter, no matter what.

Until I'd pulled over a beautiful woman for speeding into town and let her go, and then I'd morphed into a man I hardly recognized whenever she was around.

I smiled at the thought now. Becoming a slightly less rigid version of myself wasn't so terrible when I had the right motivation. Smiling for no reason other than the image of Claudia and the taste of her lips was something I could get used to, even with the strange looks I'd been getting when I came into work.

"Still smiling, Sarge? Good for you."

Max was one of the few cops who knew me from when I'd first started in the department. We'd kept in touch when I moved away, and since he knew Maggie's cousins, he knew more about our divorce than most people in town, but he never asked any questions or brought it up.

"It's not a crime to be in a good mood. I don't always have a stick up my ass like I caught one of them say the other day." I nodded to the hallway.

"No, you can be in a good mood. No matter how unusual." He chuckled. "I don't envy you. It's a lot to keep these clowns in check sometimes. They've had it easy in this town because they haven't seen the dark side of it yet."

"Let's hope it stays that way." I tipped my chin to the hallway. "I'd rather the worst part of their days be me, than them have to shake off something awful, even if it is only a matter of time."

"Good point. Anyway, Laura told us she took care of you at Salma's the other night." He kept his gaze on me as we walked, and I had to laugh at the expectant look in his eyes.

"She did. She's really starting college in September? I couldn't believe it."

"Ugh," he groaned. "Don't remind me. But she's at least going to the state college a couple of towns over and isn't

moving into a dorm. She said you looked like you were on a date. Claudia, I think she said her name was, and that she was really nice and you looked really into her.”

I chuckled. “She got all that from taking our burger order?”

“Well, seeing as though you’re almost peppy around here lately, I’d hazard that my daughter was spot-on.”

I groaned at his sly smile.

“I’m not always an asshole, Max. I just dial it up for their sakes. They need it.”

“I know that, man. I’m your friend, remember? I know you’re a good guy and a damn good sergeant. But you’ve always been...serious. It takes a lot for you to crack a smile, so the fact that one has been plastered on your face a lot lately...” He shrugged and adjusted his gun belt. “I’m just happy for you. Asshole or not.” He slapped my shoulder and headed to his desk.

“There you are.”

I turned my head to Keith’s voice behind me just as I was about to sit down at my desk.

“Here I am, Chief. Everything okay?”

“I figured you were having your usual Wednesday afternoon meeting. You have a visitor.”

My gaze landed on Claudia behind him. The bashful smile on her lips made me lose my train of thought for a moment.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been to a real police station before. Uncle Keith gave me a tour when you were in your sergeant meeting. This is pretty cool.”

She adjusted her purse on her shoulder. She wore a snug black dress that looked like a long T-shirt, one of her short sleeves dipping low as the leather strap of her purse pulled it down, revealing a red bra strap underneath. One of the rookies approached my desk and stopped short at the sight of her, his tongue almost hanging out of his mouth.

“Is that the report I asked for, Stanton?”

“Um, yeah. I had it done before the meeting but didn’t have a chance to give it to you. Sorry, Sergeant.” He handed me the folder, his gaze still lingering on Claudia.

“Aren’t you adorable? I’m Claudia. Nice to meet you. I’m a friend of Sergeant,” she said, giving me a quick side-eye and holding out her hand.

“I’m Ken. I mean Officer Stanton. Um…” he stammered, chuckling to himself as he took Claudia’s hand. “I mean it’s nice to meet you, Claudia.”

He winced as he turned to me, offering an apologetic shrug. I had to stifle a smile at the contrite pull in his features.

“Let me know if there are any questions with that. I’ll get back to work.”

“You do that,” I said, clearing my throat when I picked up on the growl in my tone. “Thanks.”

After my identical reaction to Claudia, even now, I couldn’t blame the kid for being flustered. She was beautiful enough to make men collapse at her feet, and I doubted that would ever change. I wondered how many young guys in Kelly Lakes would decide to go to the old bar in town just to see the gorgeous new owner.

That would be something I’d have to get used to because as good a shape as I was in, I didn’t have the time or energy to threaten every man in town—despite the powerful inclination.

“I explained to Claudia that it’s mostly boring around here. Although that just now was the most amusement I’ve had in a while.”

Keith nodded toward Stanton’s departure.

“Why don’t you take a long lunch since you never take one at all? Give Claudia a tour of the deli.”

“We could do that, if you have the time.” Claudia beamed at me, her chocolate eyes dancing when they met mine as she bounced back and forth on her feet. “I have some good news that I couldn’t wait to tell you, and I came straight here.” Her

face fell as she came closer. “I should have called first. You could have been out upholding the peace with the Kelly Lakes outlaws or something.”

“No outlaws today. So what’s up that you had to come here right away?”

“I got the loan,” she blurted out, her hands clasped under her chin. “I need to transfer some funds and sign some papers, but you’re looking at a brand-new bar owner and permanent resident of the fine town you’ve sworn to protect.”

Before I knew what I was doing, I grabbed her by the waist and lifted her up, a wide grin splitting my face when she squealed.

“That is fantastic fucking news,” I whispered in her ear as she held me tighter. “Congratulations,” I said, setting her down in front of me but keeping her in my arms.

“I still don’t have a clue what the hell I’m doing,” she said, clutching on to my shoulders.

“You’ll be great,” I said, letting my hands slide down her back before I noticed three cops staring at us. Keith’s chuckle from behind me brought me back to the present and how I was doing the opposite of setting a good example by twirling a woman around while the entire station gawked at us.

“Lunch sounds good if you’re up for it.” I stepped back, wishing I didn’t have to let go, but with all the eyes piercing my back, I didn’t have a choice.

“I am very up for it.” She traced the collar of my shirt and drifted her hands down my torso, dropping them before she got to my badge. Goose bumps from her touch and proximity weren’t appropriate for work either, but there wasn’t much I could control around Claudia.

And now, she was here to stay. I almost didn’t care about the questions and looks I’d get for the rest of my shift. Let them all think that she was mine and off-limits, even if that was an unspoken conversation between us.

Besides being the most gorgeous woman I’d ever met, Claudia was genuine and kind, confident without being full of

herself, and not afraid to be vulnerable—at least with me—and that was what drew me in the most.

What you saw with Claudia was what you got—and I liked what I saw.

A lot.

Too much.

But being with her was amazing enough to forget about stupid things like self-preservation.

Would I ever be capable of loving someone so much that I wanted them to be in my life permanently? I honestly wasn't sure, but right now, here with Claudia was the only place I wanted to be—whether it meant now or in the future.

“I'll hold down the fort while you're gone,” Keith told me and pulled Claudia into a hug. “I'm proud of you, kid. Glad you'll be sticking around for good.”

“Thanks, Uncle Keith,” she said, exhaling an audible sigh when she pulled away. “That means a lot.”

“We're all happy you're here to stay. My niece, my great-niece and...” Keith shot me a wry grin over his shoulder. “And others, I'm sure.”

Subtlety was never Keith's thing.

“Come on, boss lady.” I grabbed her hand and led her away from my desk and all the prying eyes too into our business to do any work.

“Boss lady. I still don't feel like one yet, but the sound of it is pretty awesome.” Claudia waved to all the officers staring at us as we made our way out of the station.

“Do I get to ride in a police car?” Claudia asked, almost bouncing next to me as we ambled through the small parking lot.

“I'm glad police stations and cruisers excite you. Gives me the illusion of being cooler than I am.” I opened the door to my cruiser and held it open. “It's close, but we can take a ride.”

“Thank you! And I think you’re plenty cool, Sergeant.”

Her throaty whisper of *Sergeant* went right to my cock. I needed to keep myself calm as there wasn’t much room to hide in my uniform pants.

“I can go in the front?” Her eyes flicked from me to the car. “You don’t have to put me in the back seat?”

“Well, that depends. Did you do anything bad?”

“No.” She eased closer, tracing the gold chain peeking out from under my collar. “But I’m thinking about it. Does that count?” She peered up at me, her voice a soft purr that was going to distract me all damn day.

“If it does—” I bent to whisper in her ear, dipping my head low enough to spot the trail of goose bumps along her shoulder “—then I’d have to climb into the back seat with you.”

I let my lips graze her cheek as I inched back, too tempted to trail the tip of my tongue down her neck to check if she tasted as sweet as she looked.

A blush stained her cheeks as her eyes fluttered.

“Let’s put a pin in that. That sounds like a really good idea.” She pressed a quick kiss to my cheek and slid into the passenger seat. I shut the door and came around to the driver’s side, my cheeks aching from the wide smile I couldn’t hold back.

I couldn’t remember a time when I’d looked forward to anything or felt this alive.

Maybe because there wasn’t one.

“Sergeant, good to see you,” Billy, the deli owner, said when I approached the counter. “Usual order to go?” he asked before his gaze traveled over my shoulder to where Claudia was standing behind me.

“No. The chief told me to take a long lunch for once, so we’ll eat on one of the benches outside. This is Claudia.”

“Nice to meet you,” she said as she slid her arm through the crook of my elbow.

“Nice to meet you too. I’m Billy.”

“Billy opened the deli at about the same time I came back to Kelly Lakes.”

“That’s right,” Billy said with a slow nod. “I grew up here and moved to Boston for a while, but I guess we always come back, right?”

“I suppose so,” I said, pulling Claudia a little tighter into my side. Billy was a decent guy, divorced like me before he came back into town. He took care of his young son on weekends, but I wasn’t sure if he was still single or not. He could have been looking at Claudia out of pure curiosity because she was a new face, but the possessive jerk in me wanted to make it clear we were together wherever we went.

Maybe that was the reason I’d suggested the stupid fake-dating thing. I’d drawn her into my side that day at the park without even thinking and kept going because it felt so good to have her close to me. Even if I hadn’t had the balls to admit I wanted her to be mine at the time, it’d felt good to know that was what everyone would assume.

I guessed it wasn’t a bad thing to have all that established already.

“I wanted to open closer to Main Street, but the cops keep me busy. And the fire department too. I guess every location is a good one when the town is so small.”

“Claudia is the new owner of Halman’s,” I said, smiling when I caught her gaze. “She’s going to give it some life.”

“Congratulations! I heard Larry sold it or was selling it. Please give it some life—and some new seats.”

“Working on it,” she said with a chuckle and leaned against my shoulder. “So, what’s your usual, Ju—Sergeant?”

“Turkey and Swiss on a roll. Billy gets bread delivered daily from the bakery in town.”

“God, I love Kelly Lakes.” She pressed her hand to her chest. “Of course he does. That sounds amazing, so I’ll have the same.”

“You got it,” Billy said, his gaze lingering on me for a minute as a smirk curled his lips.

“The alpha possessive thing is hot. Especially when you’re in uniform,” she whispered as Billy worked on our order.

“I’m glad you think so since I can’t seem to control it. I like everyone knowing you’re with me,” I whispered into her hair. “I think it’s as simple as that.”

“Simple is good. I like simple.” She cupped my cheek. “I like everyone knowing you’re with me too.”

I grabbed our sandwiches and drinks and headed outside. It was hot, but the tables were under the shade of the trees in the back of the deli. Claudia slid in next to me instead of on the opposite side.

“I could move if you want. I figured I’d sit here so you wouldn’t have to growl at anyone else picking up a sandwich today.” She shrugged, slipping a chip out of the bag and holding my eyes as she chewed. A salty crumb stuck to her lips, and I gave in to the temptation and leaned in for a slow kiss, flicking the chip off with my tongue before I pulled away.

“Are you supposed to be that sexy when you’re on duty?”

Her words came out low and throaty, tempting me back to her lips and so much more. But yes, I was on duty.

“Probably not, but it’s lunchtime.” I reached under the table and squeezed her bare thigh.

“Sorry again for interrupting your day.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m happy for you. I told you it would come through.”

“It’s not *official* official, but I told Cece I wanted to work with her next Monday night. Just to start watching and learning. I won’t change anything until the fall and just keep it as it is for now. It’s all so weird.”

“What, being a boss?”

“I guess. Being the main boss anyway. I’ve managed other people before, but this is much different. I only have a few

days left of lounging around Peyton's basement before I'm back in the workforce."

"Have you been to the lake yet?"

"I've dropped Mike off and hung out with Peyton and Keely a couple of times. It's cute. A little crowded in the afternoons but cute. Why?"

"I'm off on Thursdays. And there's a more private part of the lake we can go to. If you want."

"A more private part of the lake." She rested her head on my shoulder and batted her eyelashes. "That sounds a little scandalous, Sergeant."

"Only if you want it to be." I nudged her knee with mine. "I think you've been going a mile a minute with this and need to relax. Dad's aide only comes in the morning on Thursdays, but I think he'll be fine for the day. If he knows I'm out with you, he'll probably find a way to dead bolt the door until nightfall."

"I'm sure," she chuckled, but she darted her eyes back and forth from the table to me. "A day with you does sound nice. And it would be good to distract myself a little from this crazy thing I'm doing."

"Stop saying it's crazy."

She coughed as she chewed.

"I hid out here after I lost my job, bought a bar in a small town I don't technically live in yet, and am living out of my best friend's basement while I still pay rent for my apartment in Brooklyn. What do you call that?"

"I call it brave."

"Brave?" She leaned back and gaped at me. "How do you not think I'm a flake?" She heaved out a sigh and took a long pull from a bottle of iced tea. "Considering how you met me, and what I've shown you so far..." She propped her elbow onto the peeling wood of the table and rubbed at her temple. "You haven't seen the best of me. Although I'm not sure what the best of me is anymore."

I tapped her chin with my knuckle to get her to look up at me.

“I see a woman with guts and fire and so much beauty it hurts to look at her sometimes. You could have gone back home, taken another job, and settled for what you’ve always known, even if it made you miserable. You didn’t. I don’t think you’re a flake. I think you’re pretty fucking amazing.”

A shy smile ghosted her lips as she shook her head.

“You haven’t known me that long.”

“I know enough. And you haven’t known me for very long either, but so far, you know me better than most people. And you can call me Jude and not Sergeant when we’re out together. My first name isn’t a big secret, and I like that you’re the only one besides family who uses it.”

She sucked in her bottom lip and searched my gaze with glossy eyes.

“Okay.” Her voice cracked as the tension melted from her shoulders. “But if we get in the back seat of the cruiser one day, can I call you Sergeant then?” She popped her brows and crunched on another chip.

I slid my arm around her waist and yanked her closer.

“The only thing you’d be able to say if we ended up in my back seat would be *please* and *more*.” I nuzzled her cheek and smiled at her shocked gasp. “You wouldn’t know my name *or* yours.”

“Jesus, who are you?”

I laughed, brushing her lips with a light kiss but lingering before I pulled away.

“Better when I’m with you.”

CLAUDIA

“SO, HOW SECLUDED IS THIS PART OF THE LAKE?”

“You’re not nervous, are you?” Jude teased as he turned into the large patch of gravel everyone used as a parking lot and then continued onto a tiny back road.

“No, not nervous. Just curious.”

I shrugged when Jude flicked his gaze to mine.

“It’s just you, me, and nature for the day.”

I laughed at his wink.

I’d been so excited for an entire day with Jude, I’d hardly slept and was almost up with the sun. Excited for nature? Not as much.

I enjoyed sinking my toes into the sand whenever I’d go to the beach, but I was more of a drinks-by-the-pool person—even better if there was a swim-up bar like at the resort Peyton and I had traveled to a few years back.

I wasn’t a big fan of walking along the grass and dirt to get to the small patch of sand near the lake, but this was what the locals did for fun around here, and I had to learn to like it—or at least get used to it until Jake folded and put up a pool in their yard.

“This is the part of the lake where you need a permit to fish. Otherwise, it’s closed off to the rest of the town. Most of the residents who have a permit are here before dawn in the summers since the swimmers are close enough to disturb the fish. How true that is science-wise, I don’t know.”

His relaxed smile was still rare enough to be a beautiful anomaly, but my gaze was hijacked by the flex in his bicep as he drove.

“The hard-core fishermen are older and cranky.”

He was pure sin in a tank top and shorts, keying up the anticipation of watching him peel his shirt off once we got to the secret part of the lake.

I snuck glances at his muscular legs as he switched from the gas pedal to the brake. I didn't know how Jude made normal and usually boring things seem so damn sexy. This day was supposed to help me unwind, but if I was this hot and bothered over watching Jude drive, I doubted relaxing would be in the cards for me today.

“Here we are,” he said, shooting me a wicked smile.

My gaze drifted out the front window to the kids jumping off the pier in the distance. Seeing it from another angle, I realized the lake seemed bigger than I thought. I wondered what else was hidden from plain view in this tiny town.

I jumped and almost slid out of the passenger's seat when Jude opened my door.

“Ready?”

He held out his hand as he slung an oversized backpack over his shoulder.

“What did you bring?” I asked, eyeing the bag as I stepped out of the cab. I'd stuffed sunscreen and a towel into my big purse but had been too distracted to remember anything else.

“A blanket, and I drove to the deli to get us sandwiches this morning. That way, there would be no rush to leave.”

He kissed my forehead and pulled me by the hand toward the lake. The sun beat down on my neck, and although I wasn't a lake swimmer, the water seemed pretty damn enticing as we got closer.

“Are you sure we can be here?” I asked and pointed to the restricted sign along the edge of the grass.

Jude spread out the blanket, anchoring the sides with his backpack and a large jug of what looked like water.

“Well, I guess you could call the cops.”

“Very fun—”

I lost my words, my breath, and my senses when Jude took off his shirt. As I’d suspected, he was nothing but muscle. His gold chain glinted in the sun as he tossed his shirt onto the blanket, the sinew of his arms and back hypnotizing me with every movement as he kicked off his shoes.

So much for a day of uninterrupted conversation. I knew what I wanted to do with my mouth, and it sure as hell wasn’t talk.

“Problem?” he asked, his head tilted as another smile bloomed on his face.

“Don’t be cute. You know what you look like. Do you need all those muscles to chase bad guys?” I threw my purse next to Jude’s backpack on the ground.

“Not all. And I don’t know about you, but I need to cool off.” He motioned to the lake, a devious glint in his eyes when he held out his hand. “Want to join me?”

This guy was all sex from head to toe and didn’t know it. Well, maybe he knew it a little if the smirk tipping up the side of his mouth was any indication. Or he spotted drool pooling on the side of my mouth. I did a quick swipe of my lips with my thumb to check and lifted the black dress I used as a cover-up over my head.

“Wow,” Jude breathed out as his gaze traveled up and down my body, more heat singeing my skin along its path.

I stifled a smile and took longer than I needed to fold the dress and drop it next to Jude’s shirt.

“I think this was the bathing suit I wore when you came into the yard that afternoon.” I strutted up to Jude. “Although maybe you didn’t notice since you hardly made eye contact with me that day until you sort of did on our drive to the market.”

“I didn’t look at you that afternoon because *all* I wanted to do was look at you.” He draped his hand over the nape of my neck, sweaty and hot for so many different reasons. “But trust me, I noticed. And now we’re alone, and all this beauty is for my eyes only. At least for today.” He ran a finger down the strap of my bikini top, his eyes nothing but lust and heat as they bored into mine. “Let’s get into the water.”

The low rasp of his voice was enough to send tingles down and in between my legs as he dragged me toward the water.

I stilled right when the water came up to the middle of my shin.

“What’s wrong?”

“You’re going all the way in?”

“Well, yeah. You don’t want to?” He dropped my hand and came closer.

“No, I do. It’s just that...there are fish in there.”

He squinted at me, searching my gaze before he laughed.

“Yes, there are. They leave you alone as long as you don’t bother them.” He cradled my cheek. “You didn’t just go city girl on me, did you?”

I narrowed my eyes. “No, I’ve gone in the water before but just, like, to here.” I pointed to my feet. “Close enough to cool off but safe from any fish bites.”

His fantastic chest rumbled with a laugh as he shook his head.

“I see. So, I think,” he began as he eased closer, pulling my body flush to his. My gaze drifted up to his mouth as I parted my lips on instinct. “Since you’re going to live here, I need to break you in on a few things.” He skimmed his hands down my arms and over my hips.

“Break me in?” I tried for snark, but the words came out too breathy to have any bite. A shiver rolled down my spine when he sank his fingertips into my thighs. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He leaned in as if he was about to devour my mouth and lifted me up by my waist. I yelped when he hoisted me onto his shoulder and jogged into the lake.

“What are you doing?” I asked, clenching my eyes shut from the splashes of water hitting me in the face as Jude ran in.

“There we go,” he said once the water reached his waist. “Stay with me,” he rasped, turning me around to face him as he waded into the lake.

The water was cold, but I had no choice other than to acclimate quickly as Jude plunged me in.

“Okay, you made your point.” I clutched on to his shoulders. “But not too far, please. I want to cool off, not get taken out with the tide,” I said with a nervous chuckle as I clasped my arms around Jude’s neck.

“I’d never let anything happen to you.” He grabbed my legs underwater and wrapped them around his waist.

His eyes burned with lust and a sweet affection that scratched at the back of my throat.

“I trust you,” I said, tracking the swipe of his tongue across his lip. I pressed myself into him, gripping his waist with my thighs as my body gravitated toward his under the water. I couldn’t get close enough, but that had been my problem on land too. Whenever I was around Jude, I couldn’t stay away—even when I’d thought he didn’t want to be near me.

Now that I knew the truth, I couldn’t get enough.

“Just so you know—” he grabbed my ass with both hands, yanking me closer to where his huge erection was probably tenting his swim trunks under the surface “—that poke you feel right now. That’s not the fish.”

I chuckled, tracing the seam of his lips with the tip of my finger. “Well, thank God for that.”

I grabbed the back of his neck and slanted my mouth over his. I sifted my wet hands through his hair as he moaned into my mouth. This kiss was just as ravenous as the ones before,

but slow, both of us taking our time to explore and taste each other without an interruption or denial to make us stop.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he mumbled into my neck as he dragged kisses across my chest, peering up at me with a crooked smile as he traced his finger along my collarbone.

“Back at you,” I said, loving the growl erupting from his throat when I grazed my teeth along his bottom lip. “I could kiss you all day.”

“Now you get the reason for the private part of the lake.”

He dipped his head and trailed the tip of his tongue across my collarbone and up my throat.

“Do you know how long I’ve wanted to kiss you right here?” Everything below my waist became one giant throb, and I forgot all about the fish, who could see us, or anything else in existence besides Jude’s mouth.

“Collarbones do it for you?” I teased as I tipped my head back. Jude kept his arm around my waist and skated his other hand over the triangles of my bikini top, slipping his finger under the top of one of the cups and dragging it back and forth.

“On you, fuck yes. That dress you wore at dinner drove me crazy. All I wanted to do was taste you right here.”

I moaned as he dragged openmouthed kisses across my chest, sucking and biting up the sides of my neck. I didn’t want to leave the lake with hickeys, but Jude could taste and touch anything he wanted. I’d wear a turtleneck in August if I had to.

“So, you didn’t hate me after all... Oh God, right there...”

I trailed off when Jude sucked on my nipple through my wet top, the warmth of his mouth even through the material almost making my brain short-circuit.

His brow furrowed when I squirmed away, concern etching his features as he studied me.

I did a quick sweep of the sand behind us. I saw no one and nothing except what we’d brought with us and a couple of

birds flying and waddling over the space. When I turned back to Jude, I pulled down one of the cups of my bikini top until I spilled out of it. His eyes went wide with the same want and anticipation sizzling in my veins.

“If we’re alone, I want it all.”

Jude’s mouth was like a magnet on my nipple, biting the rigid peak before sucking it into his mouth and slowly dragging it out. I vaguely registered something swim between my toes and didn’t even flinch. I was ready to strip naked and let him put his mouth and hands wherever he wanted.

He hooked his thumb into my other strap and pulled it down to my shoulder until I fell out of the rest of it. I was topless in a private part of a still public lake, but my head swam with too much need to care about decency.

That was one way to make an impression in my new town.

We broke apart at the sound of a motor in the distance.

We craned our necks to see a small motorboat behind us, too close for comfort but far enough away to not make out the faces of the group on board as they headed farther out and stopped.

“No one ever comes here after six a.m. in the summer,” Jude said as he dropped his head back with a groan.

“Well, you can say we’re investigating something. Going undercover?” I grinned as I adjusted the straps on my bikini. “We could dry off for a little until they leave.”

Jude’s shoulders fell as he nodded, drifting us back toward the shallow end.

“Could you carry me out?” I asked, jutting my lip out. “Please.”

“That afraid of fish?” he asked with a chuckle as he lifted my legs and brought me to his chest.

“No, my legs are a little wobbly. And I like being pressed up against you. A lot.”

His laugh vibrated against my cheek.

“You don’t have to twist my arm. I’m not complaining at all.”

He set me down on the blanket and reached for a towel.

“What?” he asked when he caught me staring.

“I’m trying to decide what’s hotter. You dripping wet or running a towel all over your body to dry off.” I leaned back, resting on my elbows. “So far, not sure.”

He dragged his gaze down my body, the feeling of his eyes roving over me like a naughty caress. My breaths were short and quick as I pressed my elbows into the lumps of sand under the blanket to stop the quivering.

“Sorry about that,” he said, nodding at the mystery boat, and plopped next to me, holding out his towel. “Did you bring a towel?”

“Yes, but I like to just air-dry. And don’t be sorry.” I scratched my nails along the bristles of stubble on his chin. “The only thing I’m sorry about is that I had to stop kissing you.”

“Same,” he said, low and husky, as he slid his hand down my damp thigh. Now that I was out of the water and already halfway dry thanks to the stifling heat of the day, I was soaked in other places.

“I think I know that boat. They’ll only be here for an hour or so, especially since it’s this hot. I doubt they could see us, and although it’s restricted, it’s not that unusual to see people over here. It’s one of those rules that people mostly follow, but we don’t crack down too much if we stumble upon anyone here.”

“I’m surprised we’re here, knowing how much of a stickler you are for rules, Sergeant Davis.” My words came out like a purr, most likely because the urge to rub my body all over his was more blinding than the scorching rays of the sun.

He grabbed my hand and kissed the tip of my finger before he sucked it into his mouth, inching it out with his eyes on mine just like he had with my nipple moments ago, and it triggered the same effect down the lower half of my body.

“I’m breaking a lot of rules for you, Ms. Ng. And I can’t seem to help myself.”

“I can’t help myself with you either. But I never could.” I lifted a shoulder. “Something about you wouldn’t let me leave you alone.”

“I’m glad that my stupidity at first didn’t ruin that.” He tilted his head, a light chuckle jerking his shoulders as his still-swollen lips curved with a sad smile.

“You weren’t stupid. And after all you’ve told me, I get it.”

I scooted over on the blanket and leaned my back against his chest.

“Plus, you proved me right.”

“Proved you right? How?” He snaked his arm around my waist and drew me closer.

I swiveled my head, scraping my nails along the scruff on his chin.

“You were worth the wait. So, so worth it.” I pressed my mouth against his. The kiss was slow and sweet at first, both of us easing into each other with lingering soft pecks with lots of wicked intent.

“Like I said, they can’t really see us.” Jude grabbed his towel and draped it over my legs. “But I guess just in case.”

He slipped his hands down my legs, drifting his fingers along the inside of my thighs.

“All dried off?” he whispered as he painted slow kisses down my neck.

“I...think so,” I stammered as my legs inched open, and Jude coasted his hands closer to exactly where I wanted them.

“Yeah? How about here?” He swiped his finger between my legs over the scrap of material keeping us from what we both wanted.

“Definitely not there.”

I felt his chuckle against my skin.

“Can I find out for sure? Can I touch you?”

The words alone had me halfway to orgasm, and he hadn't even laid a finger on me yet.

“Please,” I begged, not giving a single fuck that it came out as desperate as I felt.

He let out a tortured sound that was a mix between a whimper and a groan when he slid his hand inside my bikini bottom and dragged his finger along my very needy core.

“No, not there for sure. You're soaked, baby. Is that all for me?”

“Yes,” I croaked out as he traced tiny circles around the hard bump now holding all the blood flow in my body.

“Spread a little more for me,” he said, slipping a finger deep inside when I complied. “That's a good girl. Fuck, you feel so damn good. Dripping all over my fingers. Is this what you want, baby? You like it when I touch you?”

I let out a muffled “mmhmm” as my head dropped back against his shoulder, swaying my hips in tandem with the rhythm of his fingers.

“I love touching you too. But what I really want is to taste you. I want to crawl under this towel and lick every sweet inch until we both can't take it anymore.”

I lifted my head, about to protest when he stopped, but I forgot how to speak when he sucked his finger into his mouth, his eyes fluttering as he inched it out.

“You're even sweeter than I thought you'd be.” He speared his hand back under my bathing suit, slipping two fingers inside as he swirled my clit with his thumb. I arched my back, bucking my hips against his hand for more as every nerve ending tingled on the brink of my release.

“I wish you could ride my face while I fuck you with my tongue. I want to lick inside you and know how you taste when I make you come. Would you like that, beautiful? Or you can climb on top and ride *me* so I could watch you take me.” He slid his hand under my top and cupped my breast,

teasing my nipple between his fingers as his other hand stayed between my legs. “What I would give to be inside you right now. So goddamn good, baby.”

I dug my heels into the sand as my orgasm crested right below the surface. Sweet, sexy, and now with a filthy mouth. This man was going to be the death of me in all ways.

“I want that too,” I panted out. “I want...I want you. So much.”

The throb between my legs pulsed so hard, it was painful.

“You have me, baby.” He draped his hand under my chin to lift my head up, raising his hips off the blanket so I could feel every rock-hard inch of him. “You feel that? You have no fucking idea how much you have me. Now, give me what’s mine and come.”

I bit the inside of my cheek when a scream escaped me. Stars burst behind my eyes as I rode out waves of white-hot pleasure.

And that was from only his fingers. His cock would probably kill me, but what an amazing way to go.

I went limp in his arms, melting into his back as I tried to find my breath and will my heart back into my rib cage.

“Good girl,” he murmured as he kissed my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“Give me a minute,” I breathed out, pressing my hand to my forehead as I gasped air back into my lungs. “You are full of surprises, aren’t you?”

“I surprise myself when I’m around you too.”

He drew me closer, kissing across my cheek until he went back to my mouth. I kissed him as if I were drinking him in, licking into his mouth with long strokes, tasting myself and quenching the constant thirst that only seemed to sharpen with time.

I was right. Once I was all in, there was no getting out.

I glanced over my shoulder. The motorboat had already retreated to a little dot in the distance.

“You gave me a great idea, though,” I said with a little more of my voice. I pushed him onto the blanket and climbed underneath the towel.

I nipped at his abs, gliding my hand up to sift my fingers through the dusting of hair in the middle of his chest. As my hand went higher, my mouth went lower. I kissed the tip of his cock over his swim trunks, drawing out a moan from him when it jerked against my lips.

“I think it likes me,” I whispered, pressing more kisses up and down his length.

“It more than likes you. Don’t tease.”

“So, is that how it is, Sergeant?” I peeked out from the towel, peering up at his hooded eyes and heaving chest. “You break one rule, you break them all?”

I yanked down his shorts until his cock sprang free, and I swallowed him whole, taking him right to the back of my throat. It had been a long buildup, so many intrusive fantasies of what had become present reality that I didn’t know where to begin. I wanted to please him until he lost his mind and forgot everything. I’d make everything good for him, *be* everything good.

I’d never existed for anyone else but me, but something had shifted when Jude had come into my life. As much as it didn’t make sense or how I’d reasoned it away, he’d changed me already.

He’d said he was better with me, and he was the part of my life missing all this time that I’d never thought to look for.

He reached under the towel and wove his fingers around a fistful of my hair. His legs were stiff and rigid, as if he were bracing himself or holding back.

I let him go with a wet pop and lifted my head, locking eyes for a long minute.

“Don’t hold back, baby. Fuck my mouth and come down my throat.”

I took him back into my mouth, and a muffled cry fell from his lips as he did just as I asked. I swallowed every last drop, pressing kisses across his stomach as I lifted his shorts back up.

“You’re going to be the death of me.” He cupped my cheek. “You know that, right?”

I laughed as I climbed on top of him and dropped my head to his chest, nestling my cheek against the rapid thump of his heart.

“Funny, I was just thinking the same thing about you.”

JUDE

“LET ME KNOW IF YOU NEED A RIDE.”

Dad stopped rolling his walker to glare at me.

“I’ll be fine. It’s a few hours at a friend’s house playing cards with other old and differently abled men. Your uncle is picking me up and taking me home, and Hugo’s house has everything on one level like us, so I can get around fine. I intend to have a good evening, and you should too.”

A laugh escaped me at the snide grin tilting my father’s mouth. He’d made small but significant progress in therapy in the past few weeks, finally acclimating to his new leg enough to get around much easier, at least from what I could tell. He usually hated playing cards, but I didn’t blame him one bit for wanting a change of scenery and company—even though he’d come home complaining about my uncle and most of the guys there tonight.

Claudia and I hadn’t been truly alone since the lake a couple of weeks ago. The closest we’d come were the long goodnight kisses in my truck that stopped right before they turned obscene and rushed foreplay in Jake’s basement bathroom.

While I worried about my father, I was happy to have the house—and Claudia—all to myself tonight.

“And I’ll text when I’m coming home. Not because I’m checking in or want you to meet me at the door, but in case...” Dad trailed off and jutted his chin toward the hallway. “That should give you enough time to... get dressed or whatever.”

I burst out laughing before I could help it.

I never thought I'd see the day my father would not only encourage me to have sex but find a way to leave the house to make it easier.

“Well, thank you. That's...appreciated.”

Dad laughed as a smile broke out on his face.

“You know, we haven't argued in a couple of days, maybe more.” He shot me a smirk as he turned the doorknob. “Claudia is good for both of us.”

“That she is,” I agreed, stepping in front of him to push the door open and hold it for him to pass. “I'm not going to walk you to the car, just being polite and holding the door open. Since you like to point out all the time how you raised me with manners.”

“Oh hey, I'm glad I caught you before you left,” Claudia called out, jogging over to us with a cardboard box in her hand from where she'd parked her car in front of our house. “Are you sure you don't want to hang out with us tonight?” She gave Dad a hello hug, finding my gaze over his shoulder and flashing a tiny but sexy-as-hell smile.

“No. I'd love to hang out with you, but he's boring,” Dad said, waving a hand without looking back at me. “And all your problem tonight, sweetheart.”

“That's okay,” she said, wrapping her arms around my waist and beaming up at me when she met my gaze. I was so lost in her, there was no way to fight it. I'd already exhausted myself trying.

“Hey, handsome,” she whispered, her eyes narrowing at me with a dirty intent that kicked up my pulse.

“Hi yourself, beautiful,” I whispered back, pressing my mouth against hers as I pulled her closer.

She swiveled her head toward my father and shrugged.

“I'll take him. I'm getting used to him.”

I caught his gaze over her shoulder and spied a slow grin spreading on his face, along with something I hadn't seen in his features for months.

Pride and relief.

He turned, slowly descending the few steps in front of the porch as I fought the urge to help him. His therapist and aide both assured me that he was gaining mobility every day and I had to let him move forward unassisted whenever it was possible.

Even if I still couldn't shake all the fear, I couldn't hold either of us back anymore.

My uncle came to the passenger's side of the car to take my dad's walker and fold it into the trunk. He gave me a tiny nod of acknowledgment before climbing into the driver's seat and pulling out of our driveway.

"Getting used to me, huh?" I swatted the side of her hip and yanked her closer.

"Well, you definitely grumble less." She traced the collar of my T-shirt with the tip of her finger as she peered up at me. "You're a work in progress. A very sexy work in progress." She lifted her shoulder. "It gives me the motivation to manage."

I laughed, exhaling with an exaggerated sigh as I dug a hand into her hair. "Well, thanks for tolerating me I guess." I rested my forehead against hers. "I'm glad you're here, but I wish you would have let me pick you up."

"I'm glad I'm here too," she whispered before brushing my lips. "And don't be silly. I was at the bar with Cece learning a few things before Larry signs it all over to me next week. Then"—she tightened her hold around my waist—"you really can't get rid of me."

I pressed my knuckle under her chin to tilt her head up, the urge to take her mouth already too tempting to stop myself.

"Oh, don't worry about that. I'm not letting you go anywhere."

I ran my thumb along her bottom lip, a groan rising from my throat when she opened her mouth to bite it.

“Fuck,” I hissed, ready to back her against the door and give her a real kiss hello when I felt eyes penetrating my back.

I turned my head and found our next-door neighbors standing in their driveway, gawking at us and not hiding how they’d stopped heading to wherever they were going to stare.

“Hi, Mr. and Mrs. McCormick. Anything you need?” I asked, trying not to laugh at Claudia’s smirk in my periphery.

“Oh no. Just, um, going out for a walk,” Mrs. McCormick stammered out. “We all feel so safe with you around. You and your... friend have a good night.”

“Oh, you too,” Claudia replied, waving to them both as she cuddled into my chest. “Nice to meet you!”

They nodded, darting their eyes between us for one more minute before heading down the sidewalk.

“I think we better get inside,” I told Claudia and stepped back to let her in.

“But I didn’t get to introduce myself. Maybe next time.” She shrugged, giving my ass a quick squeeze before heading into the house. “Thanks, *friend*.” My gaze snagged on the sway of her hips as she walked, and I was mesmerized enough to forget the door was open.

“Do you grab all your friends by the ass?”

“Only the special ones. I was wondering how long you were going to eye-fuck me until you shut the door,” she said as she set the box on the table. “Not that I mind, but your neighbors seem even nosier than Peyton’s.”

My cock stirred in my shorts from the way “fuck me” fell from Claudia’s lips. We hadn’t gotten there yet, but it was a technicality at this point. I’d already memorized every inch of her body. I knew that tiny patch behind her ear that set her off like a firecracker when I traced it with my tongue, how sweet she was *everywhere*, and how beautiful she was when she came. Her gorgeous body flushed from head to toe, her brown

eyes lighting up with a pure wonder that turned me on as much as it got me right in the chest.

Everything was different whenever she was around. Life wasn't an endless merry-go-round of frustration and defeat with Claudia. It was exciting and good. Better than good. It was fucking amazing in a way I'd never thought possible, even before it all had gone to shit in the past few years.

"I was going to bake but went to the bakery instead." She motioned to the box. "And now that dinner smells so amazing, I feel like I went cheap."

"It's just London broil on the grill and some salad. You didn't go cheap. All I wanted was you, so you didn't need to bring anything else."

"You're very sweet," she said, scraping her nails over the stubble on my chin. "Thank you for cooking for me."

"You cooked for me first." I kissed the tip of her nose. "Even though you really asked my father and I was just his ride."

She shook her head and peered up at me.

"I wanted you there too. I *always* wanted you there." Her smile shrank as she searched my gaze.

"Same," I whispered, brushing my lips against her cheek. "It's all ready and sliced up. I'll give you a tour of the house after we eat. I don't think you've seen the yard yet."

"Nope, just the porch, which is pretty amazing." She craned her neck back and forth. "The inside is really nice too. Houses in the city are always tiny, I guess because they're all on top of one another. Out here, everything is out in the open. It's great," she mused, sweeping her gaze around the kitchen as I led her onto the back deck.

"Another glorious yard with no pool."

I laughed when she clicked her tongue against her teeth.

"We had one. One summer during college, I bought a collapsible pool. It was a good size and not a big deal to maintain, but we couldn't keep up with all the spontaneous

visitors looking to take a swim. It went down that September and then right into the garbage.”

“People would just invite themselves?” She cracked up as she slid into a seat at the glass patio table. “I bet if the visitors were girls, the beautiful boy with all the construction muscle is what attracted them here. I mean, I would have been here every day too just to see you shirtless and wet.” She dragged her gaze up and down my body. “Although, when you were in college, I was in high school.” She pursed her lips at me and shrugged.

“And you were born gorgeous, I’m sure,” I said as I set the plate of sliced steak on the table. “Good thing you weren’t around to tempt me back then.”

“What about now?” She rested her elbows on the table, leaning forward just enough for her perfect breasts to strain against the strapless neckline of her dress. She now knew her collarbone drove me crazy, and she wore nothing but strapless dresses and off-the-shoulder shirts every time we were together.

She was taunting me, and I fucking loved it.

“Now,” I said, bending down to nuzzle her neck from behind. “Now, I can’t get enough.” She sucked in a quick gasp when I sucked her lobe into my mouth. “I live to see you shirtless and wet too.”

I kissed down her neck, smiling against her skin as she lolled her head to the side to give me more access.

“How is a person supposed to concentrate on dinner after that?” She dropped her head back to glare at me, her eyes hooded and a blush already staining her cheeks and running down her neck.

“I bet you could try,” I said, pressing my lips against hers and slowly dragging them away. I smiled at the adorable mewl falling from her lips. I waved her off when she tried to get up.

“Sit and eat. That’s all I need you to do.”

“This is really sweet of you. Are you sure I can’t do anything?”

“Nope,” I said, filling up the wineglasses I’d found in the back of the kitchen cabinets. My mother had loved these glasses, and it had taken me a while to scrub the dust off them from years of nonuse. I felt like she’d be happy I’d broken them out tonight, for a lot of different reasons.

“Are you sure it’s okay to drink without any parents home?” she asked, a sly grin curving her lips as she swirled the Pinot Noir in her glass.

“I was given permission to do whatever I wanted—to *whomever* I wanted—tonight.” I nodded to Claudia’s plate. “Take some steak and eat. You’ll need your strength later.”

“You know,” she said, scooping some steak onto her plate, “you keep the dirty hidden well, but when it comes out...”

She widened her eyes before she cut a piece and brought her fork to her lips.

“It takes a lot to surprise me—” she pointed at me with her fork “—and that still does.”

“I still surprise you?” I gazed at her as I speared a piece of steak.

“You do,” she said, holding my eyes as she chewed. She exhaled a long breath as a smile drifted across her mouth. “All the time. This is delicious, by the way.”

“Thank you. I’m glad you like it. It’s a little more on the rare side than I normally like, but since you like hamburgers medium, I adjusted for tonight.”

“You remembered? That’s really sweet. And a relief since after getting a good look at your hamburgers whenever we go out, I was afraid you’d serve me charcoal from the bottom of the grill,” she teased, but I was too distracted by the swipe of her tongue along her bottom lip to tease back.

“How’s it going at the bar? Ready to take over?”

“I suppose so. Locked in now, right?” she said with a throaty chuckle that went straight to my dick. “I’m officially giving up my apartment in Brooklyn this weekend, so there’s

no going back after that, even if I'll be squatting at Peyton's for a while longer until I start shopping around for a place."

She took a long sip of wine before she continued. Claudia was one of the most self-assured people I'd ever met, but rambling was her tell when she was nervous. It was adorable whenever I caught her doing it.

"I'm heading back to Park Slope this weekend to pack all my stuff and have dinner with my family. My cousin Eric will load his truck after I clear out my apartment and follow me home."

"Your cousin? Why?"

"I didn't want to hire a moving company to come all the way up here, and he has a big truck like you do and owes me a favor."

"Why don't you just use my truck? I could come down with you."

Her glass stilled in her hand as she was about to take a sip.

"You'd want to do that? What about George?"

"I'm told he's okay by himself now. Even his aide is cutting down to three days per week because she said she's not needed every day. Luckily, nosy neighbors can come in handy sometimes and will keep an eye on him if I ask. Unless you don't want me to come with you."

She dropped her fork on her plate with a loud clang.

"Are you kidding? I'd love it if you came with me. You could meet my parents and have dinner at the Palace with us." She stretched her leg against mine under the table, rubbing her ankle against my shin. "And you could spend the night with me at my soon-to-be-old apartment. The headboard and frame will be gone since my cousin is giving away my furniture piece by piece, but there's still a mattress."

"Is that so?" I said, picking up her hand and bringing it to my lips.

"Are you sure, though?" Her eyes searched mine as she crinkled her nose. "I know how you worry—"

“I do, but he’ll be fine to be alone for a night. Delighted, even.” I squeezed her knee under the table. “I’m sure.”

She smiled, pushing off her chair and making her way over to my side of the table.

“Thank you,” she said, climbing onto my lap and draping her arm around my neck. “You’re kind of wonderful.”

“Don’t let it get around,” I whispered, cupping the nape of her neck to pull her into a kiss. “Did I tell you how beautiful you look tonight?” I murmured against her lips and dragged kisses down her neck and along her collarbone.

“I *love* your collarbone kink,” she said, her voice breathy and low.

“I think I have a Claudia kink.” She jumped in my arms when I skimmed my hand up her bare thigh. “Clearing out your old apartment and bringing all your stuff up here gets you this much closer to staying for good. I am all for making that happen.”

She leaned into me, burrowing her head into my neck. “It’s probably going to be weird going back. I left, thinking I was just going to take a break, not start a whole damn new life. Do you know I’ve only lived two places, and they’ve both been within blocks of each other in Brooklyn? My parents’ house and my apartment,” she scoffed, reaching for her wineglass as her gaze drifted to the woods behind our house.

“I’ve only lived four places. Here, my college dorm, my own place in town for a while after I graduated from the police academy, and then Putnam County with Mag...when I was married.”

Why had I stopped myself from saying my ex-wife’s name as if it were a curse? Maybe I just didn’t want to taint any of my good present with ghosts and guilt from the past.

“The wine is good too. I hope no one thinks that just because I own a bar, I’m an alcohol expert. I guess I need to study or something.”

“Nah, I’ve never seen anyone at Halman’s drink anything too complicated. And if anyone asks, just make it up.”

“Just make it up?” Her laugh was musical and so damn sexy. “Think that will work?”

“I’d believe anything from that gorgeous mouth.” I sifted my fingers into her hair and covered her mouth with mine, the chair creaking under us as I licked inside her mouth with long, hungry strokes.

“You taste good,” she said, giggling against my lips.

“All I can ever think about is how good *you* taste,” I growled before I covered her mouth with mine again. I shifted her on my lap until she straddled me, grabbing her ass with both hands as she squirmed, grazing over my painfully hard cock with perfect, torturous friction.

“I think,” she panted after she tore her lips away from mine, “we need to finish dinner and take all of that inside. As hot as this is, I’d rather not give your neighbors a show.”

She rubbed the back of my neck, a smile coasting over her wet lips as she slid off my lap. After keeping women at a safe enough distance for so long because I hadn’t been capable of more, *more* was all I wanted with this one and all I could think about.

We managed to finish dinner, and we brought everything inside after we heard a crack of thunder in the distance. After I loaded the dishwasher, I found Claudia meandering around the living room, staring at the framed photos on the wall.

“I didn’t realize how much you look like your dad. Especially here.” She pointed to a photo of my parents and me at my police academy graduation. “Intense even then.”

“I guess.” I gazed at the picture over her shoulder. My parents beamed at the camera, so much pride and hope radiating from them both. The years that followed were enough of a blur to forget how I’d lost one and when I’d started fighting to keep the other.

“Couldn’t even smile for a picture,” she said, patting my cheek with a chuckle. “Such a brooder.”

“I suppose. I thought you liked my intensity.” I slid my arm around her waist.

“I love it. It makes every smile I get from you feel like a prize. Although I’ll crack up if you look this mad at the world in your baby pictures.”

“There are a few in the hallway, if you still want the tour.” I grabbed her hand and led her down the hallway toward the bedrooms.

“Wow, this really was your childhood bedroom, huh?” Claudia mused, peeking through my open bedroom door.

“My parents wanted to make this a spare room but could never agree on what they wanted to do with it, so it stayed the same,” I explained, shaking my head at how the walls covered with sports posters and pennants made it look like a high school kid slept in here. The only thing that had changed was they’d upgraded my twin mattress and headboard to a full in my junior year of high school when my long limbs wouldn’t fit in my kid-sized bed. “Convenient, I guess.”

“Stop it, you played baseball?” She pointed to the trophies on the shelf above my bed. “Girls must have swarmed you in high school. How did you get anything done?”

“I wouldn’t say swarmed—”

“Oh, stop being so humble,” she said as she sprawled out on my bed, dangling her legs back and forth behind her. “Let me guess, pitcher?”

“How did you guess that?”

“Pitchers are intense. All that grit and control.” She bunched her shoulders in an exaggerated shiver. “Plus, pitchers always have really amazing asses because of all that power they need to throw fastballs.” She tilted her head as if she was looking behind me and nodded. “Makes sense.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I did that a lot lately, probably more in the past few weeks than in my entire life because she was so damn cute.

“I like your version of my teenage years much better than how they really were.” I crossed my arms and leaned against the doorjamb.

“Oh, please. And your room was ground level, easy to sneak in and out of.” Her smile was wicked as she stretched out on the bed, the hem of her dress rising enough to tease a look at her toned thighs. I ran out of words as all the blood left my brain and headed right to my cock from the sight of her in my bedroom and on my bed.

“Actually, no,” I told her, grabbing her ankles and yanking her down until her back was flat against the mattress. “My parents’ room is only next door, a little too close for comfort. So, despite the interesting picture of my past that you’re trying to paint, you are actually the first girl I’ve had in this room.”

Her eyes flared as they went wide, a mix of excitement and sex in her gaze as I climbed onto the bed, pressing my hands on either side of her before I lowered myself down.

“Is that so?” Her eyes bored into mine, the rain slapping against the window the only sound as we fell silent.

“Well, there’re no parents in the next room, and I have no curfew.” She slipped her hand under my shirt and scratched her nails down my back. “And I’m still feeling that kiss from outside.”

“Yeah?” I rasped, sinking deeper into her as her legs fell open. “Did I get you all hot and bothered?”

“Always,” she whispered, wrapping her legs around me. “Then you take me into your bedroom and seduce me with all these sports trophies.”

“Seduce you?” I snickered. “What if I told you these aren’t the only ones?” I rocked against her, drawing out a moan when I grazed against the sweet heat I wanted to taste. “It’s mostly baseball, but there are others in the closet.” I skimmed my hand up her leg and turned my head to paint kisses along the soft, sweet skin. “Track—” *kiss* “—swimming—” *kiss* “—and one year,” I said, rubbing my cheek against her thigh when she quivered against my palm, “I played football.”

“Jesus,” she hissed. “Have mercy on me, for fuck’s sake.”

I chuckled, hooking my thumb in the waistband of her panties, and dragged them down her legs.

“I don’t know if I can do that. I have a beautiful woman spread out on my bed. You’re a fantasy brought to life.”

“Am I?” she teased, scooting down on the bed to tighten her grip around me.

“Baby, you have no idea.” I slid my hand between her legs and drew slow, tiny circles around her clit. “Holy shit, Claudia.” I slumped against the mattress as my knees almost gave out. She was soaked and dripping onto my fingers. “So fucking wet. I made you like this? Tell me.”

She nodded, whimpering as I eased two fingers inside her. “Yes, always. Right there...” She arched her back, the swells of her breasts pushing against the neckline of her dress again and inching it down as she writhed on the bed. “Please, Jude.”

“Please what, Claudia? You want my mouth, my fingers, or both?”

“All of it. All of you. Please,” she squeaked out, rocking against my hand.

“Since you were a good girl and said please,” I said, my voice husky and strained with need. “Let me see you.”

I slid my fingers out of her and found the hem of her dress, lifting it until I could peel it over her head.

“Look at you.” As I drifted my hands down her body, I was the one shaking. “So. Goddamn. Beautiful.”

A shy smile ghosted her lips before I took her mouth, ravenous and rough as I slid my hands under her to unhook her bra. My greedy eyes drank in her perfect naked body. I followed the sway of her heavy breasts as she squirmed on the bed, and I ran my palm along the soft curves of her hips that drove me to all kinds of distraction.

I held her gaze as I took a rigid nipple in my mouth, biting down and inching it out of my mouth before kissing across her chest and taking the other one between my teeth.

My hands and my mouth didn’t know where to go next, and I couldn’t understand how an ornery bastard like me was

lucky enough to have something this beautiful in my arms and in my bed.

She really was my every dream come true, and even if I still didn't believe that I deserved her, she was all mine. I'd never share her or be able to think of her with anyone else. I'd drive to Brooklyn or to the other side of the world to make sure she was here to stay.

I wasn't ready for what that meant yet, but I couldn't deny it.

"It's small in here, but I think we can manage," I said, draping my hand over the front of her throat as I took her mouth again, this time slow and sensual and full of dirty promises I had every intention of keeping.

"That's so hot," she whispered, her voice gravelly and weak as she clutched my wrist.

"What is?"

"You holding me like this. Like you're claiming me."

She held my gaze, so much want and adoration in her eyes. I was doing just that, even if I couldn't say it out loud.

But I could show her what I couldn't tell her.

"Clothes. Off." She grabbed the hem of my shirt and pulled it up my torso. I ripped it off and threw it behind me, before I stood to kick my shorts and boxers off.

"You're perfection," she breathed out. "Did anyone ever tell you that?"

I shook my head, smoothing her hair off her forehead as I settled back on top of her. "You're the perfect one." I slid my arm under her waist. "Trust me?"

She nodded. "Always."

I flipped us over so that she was on top. She pressed her hands against my chest, her brows pinching together as she studied me.

"The bed may be small, but there's a headboard." I reached back and tapped the wood with my knuckle. "Hold on with

both hands.”

Her eyes went saucer-wide before she flashed me a devious smile.

“As you wish, Sergeant,” she said, breathless as she leaned forward and did what she was told.

I scooted down on the bed, grabbing her hips as I pulled her to exactly where I wanted her.

She whimpered when I dragged my tongue along her pussy, still so damn wet and sweet my eyes almost rolled back in my head.

“Now ride my face, baby. Ride me until you come in my mouth.”

I dove in like a man starved and possessed, taking her clit between my teeth and sucking hard enough to draw out a loud moan from both of us. I kissed her hard and deep, sucking and biting as she dripped on my tongue. I smiled against her skin at the tortured sounds she was making over me as she rolled her hips against my face.

“Harder, baby. Fuck my mouth.” I dug my fingers into her ass, yanking her closer. “I want to know how you taste when you come.”

The bed creaked as Claudia bounced on the mattress, coating my tongue like sugar as I snaked it inside her.

“Jude...holy shit...”

She slammed her hand against the wall as she came, groaning as I held her in place to drink every last drop.

“How was that?” I asked, flipping us over. “Still want to see the rest of the trophies?”

“No,” she said, her gaze softer as she shook her head. “I just want you. Please.”

I reached for my nightstand drawer and palmed the foil packet I was searching for. I tore it open and knelt on the edge of the bed to roll it on, my heart thundering in my ears as our eyes locked.

Once I was inside this woman, there was no going back. She had me already, and now she was about to own me.

I held her eyes as I slid inside her, easing up when I caught the grimace across her face. She raised her hips and grabbed my ass, pushing me into her and meeting me thrust for thrust. She swiped her arousal off my chin with the pad of her thumb and kissed me.

“Are you okay?” I grunted out, driving into her with a slow but punishing rhythm. She was fucking heaven, but I was holding back. I wasn’t sure if it was for her or me or my fear of this glorious and unexpected thing between us that I’d never recover from.

“I’m so much better than okay. But stop holding back. Take all of me, Jude.” She clutched my face, catching my mouth in a slow, sloppy kiss. “It’s yours.”

I let go, driving into her hard enough to slam the headboard into the wall, taking all of her and giving her so much more than I’d ever thought I could give anyone again.

“Better?” I grunted out, sweat dripping down my neck as I hooked her leg over my hip.

“The best,” Claudia whispered, holding my gaze as I dipped my head to kiss her. I swallowed her screams as she stiffened under me, clenching around my cock until my own release ripped through me. I grabbed the back of her neck with one hand and slipped the other one under her waist, holding on to her and this moment for as long as I could.

I collapsed next to her, drawing her into my side as I chased my breath.

“Wow,” Claudia whispered as her head fell against my chest. “You’re... My God, I have no words. For the first time ever.” She chuckled as she pressed a kiss to my chest, lifting her gaze to mine with a hazy smile on her swollen lips.

I already wanted them—and her—all over again.

“It’s one surprise after another with you.”

I kissed the top of her head as I flicked my eyes to the window, the rain coming down so hard that I couldn't make out anything on the other side.

“I have a late shift tomorrow. Stay with me.”

She pushed off my chest and squinted at me, her hair swirling in dark tangles around her head, almost like a matted brown halo despite all the very unholy things we'd just done.

She was gorgeous, inside and out, and I wasn't ready to let her out of my bed tonight.

Or ever.

“But your father is coming home later, and—”

“So? He won't mind, trust me. I can be quiet, and although you can't seem to, he's a pretty heavy sleeper.”

Her shoulders jerked with a chuckle.

“Still, doing the walk of shame in front of your dad in the morning...” She trailed off, cringing as she shook her head.

“It's not a walk of shame. You'll be back, at least until one of us gets an apartment with a lockable door.” I slid my hand over the damp nape of her neck. “I want to wake up with you in my arms, and I don't want you to go. Please.”

She grabbed my face, brushing her lips against mine with a soft kiss and plopping her head back onto the pillow. A dazed grin broke out on her face as she cuddled into my chest.

“Yep,” she said, letting out a sweet sigh, “still full of surprises.”

CLAUDIA

“SO, YOU NEVER SAID. HOW DID YOU MEET?”

I held back a cringe and forced a smile at my mother’s innocent question. My parents had been waiting for us by the stoop of my apartment building this morning and seemed like they’d been camped out there for a while. I wasn’t sure if that was because they’d missed me that much or wanted to meet the man I’d kept mentioning on the last few phone calls. Other than the boys I’d introduced them to while I’d lived at home during high school and college, they hadn’t seen me with anyone in an official sense in...maybe ever.

I didn’t have to tell them that Jude was special, because the simple fact that I’d brought him with me today spoke volumes. As we packed, my parents would sneak a smile toward me every time Jude turned around.

When I’d mentioned him to my parents, I said we’d been together for a few weeks, but I hadn’t elaborated on *how* we got together.

While they’d both gotten a kick out of my antics as a teen—at least now when they’d reminisce about it—speeding into town and falling for the cop who’d pulled me over wasn’t a story they’d laugh off, and I’d hear a long lecture about how they’d told me not to drive upset.

It had been a nice day, and I didn’t want to ruin it with a “What were you thinking, Claudia?” conversation during my last dinner at the Palace for a while.

“I work with Jake sometimes. Peyton’s husband.” Jude turned to me, a sneaky smile on his lips as his baby blue eyes found mine. “She was at the park with Peyton and her daughter one afternoon, and...that’s all it took.”

I wanted to laugh at “that’s all it took,” but I was too busy melting into a puddle on the vinyl cushion.

“I think Claudia mentioned that you work on restorations on your days off,” my father said, grinning as he looked between us. “I had that kind of energy at your age.”

“Please,” my mother scoffed and rolled her eyes. “We still have to force you to take a day off. I had to block the door the last time you were sick and wanted to come in.”

I laughed, thinking of my tiny mother trying to be a barricade to anything.

The bar wasn’t mine in the official sense yet, but I finally understood why my father never wanted a day off. Even though I had a lot to learn, excitement ran through me at all the possibilities. I wasn’t arrogant enough not to ask for opinions, but at the end of the day, the final decision on everything belonged to me.

I wanted the same connection with my customers as Dad had with his, much different from the clients I’d taken care of during my career.

I had a lot of things to do, but now that they were for me and my business, they didn’t seem like menial tasks just to check off.

While I’d laughed at it over the years, I finally got Dad’s unwavering motivation and why the Palace was never just a job to him.

“Can we get you anything else, Jude?” Dad asked as he eyed Jude’s empty plate. “You’ve been nonstop since you arrived.”

“Um, I’ve been pretty busy too,” I teased, squeezing Jude’s bicep. “Even if someone else did most of the heavy lifting.”

“But you’re not too shy to ask for more,” Mom said, lifting a brow at me.

“I’m fine, Mr. Ng. This is delicious, thank you.”

Jude hadn’t said much all day, but Jude didn’t say much period. He was a to-the-point kind of guy with everyone except me. I loved being the only one who saw a looser side of him, the part that liked to laugh and tease me when we were alone. That part of Jude was only mine, along with the insanely hot, dirty side and how that respectful mouth could turn lethally filthy in seconds.

“There she is! My cousin from the country.”

I laughed at my cousin Eric’s voice and slid out of the booth to greet him.

“Well, not quite the country, but close enough.”

He pulled me in for a bear hug and pushed me back, searching my gaze with a big smile. Eric was ten years older than me and almost a head taller. I wouldn’t have been able to even consider the “country” if Eric weren’t here. He lived right next door to my parents in the same home he’d grown up in, moving in with his partner after my aunt and uncle retired and bought a condo in an over-fifty community in Westchester County.

Although he’d given me a lot of shit growing up for being the pipsqueak he could never shake, my cousin was a good guy who looked out for all of us.

“Jude, I’d like you to meet Eric, my pain-in-the-ass cousin.”

“And future owner of all this,” Dad added as he waved his hand around the restaurant.

“Like that’s going to be anytime soon,” Eric said, rolling his eyes at me over his shoulder. “But nice to finally meet you, Jude. My blabbermouth cousin has been surprisingly tight-lipped about the man in her life.”

Jude snuck me a smile as he stood to take his hand.

“Nice to meet you too,” Jude said, draping an arm around my waist after he dropped Eric’s hand. My mind went to all the weeks at Peyton’s house, watching her and Jake float around in their love bubble almost on autopilot. They’d touch each other all the time, seeming like it was so natural they weren’t even thinking about it.

I’d avoided love bubbles for most of my life, but they were pretty damn awesome now that I’d become enclosed in one with the right man.

The man I was in love with but couldn’t find the words to say it yet.

“I’ve been busy. Taking over a business is a lot of little things I never thought of, and—”

“No need,” Eric said, holding up a hand. “When I first met Steven, you all didn’t hear from me for weeks. I think it was you who showed up at the house, scolding me for going dark and forgetting how to text back.” Eric squinted at me as he stroked his beard.

“Whatever,” I said, scowling back at him. “Excuse me for caring.”

Eric chuckled, shaking his head as he set his hands on my shoulders.

“I’m proud of you, pipsqueak,” he whispered, making my chest pinch with all this stupid emotion. “And so damn happy for you.”

“Stop trying to make me get all sappy,” I said, my sass falling flat as my voice cracked. I’d been so distracted packing my things all day that I’d forgotten what it all meant.

I’d be back, but I wouldn’t live here anymore—because this wasn’t my life anymore.

“Did you get the box?” Dad asked Eric from behind me.

Eric held up a finger.

“Not a box, but I can wrap it up nice and secure once we give it to her.”

“Give me what?” I asked, craning my neck back and forth between my father and cousin.

They shared a tiny smile before my cousin nodded.

“I’ll be right back.”

I watched Eric walk to the back of the restaurant where my father’s office was.

“This all has me intrigued,” I said, sliding back next to Jude. My mother’s chuckle had me even more suspicious.

“Jude, Claudia said you live with your father,” my mother said.

“I do. For now, anyway. He’s getting used to his new leg and is walking better every day. He said he’s almost at the point where he can throw me out, but we’ll see.”

“You’re a good man for taking care of him. Many of my patients when I worked at the home were diabetics, and it gets so hard when they get to that point.”

“It’s been hard, but he may have turned a corner lately. I just worry for long-term, but I guess that’s my issue since he doesn’t seem to be concerned.”

My mother chuckled and reached across the table to pat his hand.

“From what my daughter told me, your father is resilient. You’d be surprised how well people can learn to get around on one leg. I’ve seen amazing things.”

“Yeah, he’s amazing, all right. I’m hoping he can avoid dialysis, but my father and my girlfriend both get on me for thinking too far ahead. I’m trying to stay optimistic and focus on the progress.” Jude smiled as he squeezed my knee under the table.

I forgot about my cousin’s secret present the minute Jude said “girlfriend.” I loved him, and I knew he cared about me, but the word and the ease with which it fell out of his mouth made me take a pause.

“Here it is.”

I tore my gaze from Jude and swiveled my head to my cousin's voice, my hand flying to my mouth when I realized what he was holding.

“When Claudia was little, she loved that painting,” I heard my father explain to Jude. “When I first opened, I wanted to decorate the place with a little art dotted in with the family photos and give a nod to where my parents came from. I found this at this hole-in-the-wall art store in Manhattan. I kept the painting in the front, and Claudia would stare at it when she came in and tell us different stories about the man climbing up the mountain toward the tree.”

I stood, my gaze drifting from the wide grin on Eric's face to my parents now standing behind me.

“I don't know if this is the direction you want for *your* place, but I wanted you to have it.”

I had to blink a few times to clear my vision when I turned to my father, swiping the tear off my cheek as I stepped closer.

“But that's been here for years. There's probably a white spot from where you took it off the wall. I can't—”

“You can,” he said, patting my cheek. “My Claudia can climb that mountain, the tree, and anything else she wants. And like I said, you don't have to hang it up there—”

I fell into his chest. His laugh vibrated against my cheek as he wrapped his arms around me.

“Thank you,” I mumbled as I lifted my head. “I'll definitely hang it up. Right in the front. I want a nod to my parents' heritage too.”

“What's with the waterworks, cuz? Country life making you soft?” Eric said, kissing my cheek and setting the painting next to our table. “I'll get the paper to wrap this up, and you can load it into Jude's truck tomorrow since you didn't need mine.”

“Now that that's settled,” Mom said, sliding her arm against the crook of my elbow to lead me back to the table. “We wanted to give you something to show how proud we are

of you. And maybe remind you to call us since you live three hours away.”

We shared a watery laugh.

“But we’ll be up to see you soon enough,” Mom whispered. “I’m excited to see the new place and your new... life up there.” I followed her gaze when she flicked her eyes to Jude.

“I’m excited to see it too, Mom.”

I managed to get through the rest of dinner without fighting a lump at the back of my throat.

As I watched Jude box the rest of my stuff back at my soon-to-be-old apartment later, fate no longer seemed to be the bullshit notion I’d written it off as for most of my life. I was stuck on Kelly Lakes and Jude without much logical explanation, other than they were both meant for me.

Still, being in love for what felt like the first time in my life scared the shit out of me.

“Thank you,” I whispered as I wrapped my arms around Jude from behind after he stacked the last box.

“My pleasure,” he said, a soft smile on his face when he turned around and drew me closer. “Like I said, happy to do anything I can to get you in Kelly Lakes for good as soon as possible.”

“I don’t have much of a choice now. Papers are signed and all that good stuff.” I wrapped my arms around his waist. “The fact that the people closest to me are so excited about it makes me think it may not be the worst decision I’ve ever made after all, so today was nice.”

He laughed as his lips grazed my forehead.

“It’s not, you’ll see. It’s all going to be great,” he said, drifting his hand down my back. “And your family agrees with me.”

“I’m really glad they got to meet you.” I smiled as I lifted my head. “So, I’m your girlfriend, huh? I caught you slip at dinner.”

His shoulders jerked with a shrug. “Was that a surprise? I’m out of practice maybe, but did you want an *are we going steady* conversation?”

I laughed at the deep crease in his forehead.

“No, it’s just the first time I’ve heard—”

“Do you really think there would be any way in hell that I’d share you?” He grabbed the back of my head. “As long as that’s crystal fucking clear, you can call us whatever you want.”

“I’m a big fan of your possessive side.” I kissed the corner of his mouth, still flattened in a hard line. “Although, the dirty side is still my favorite.”

A smile twitched at his lips.

“I’d like to do one last thing in my apartment before I go.” I fidgeted with the neck of his T-shirt. “The bathroom has a big tub. Surprising for an apartment in the boroughs, and I wanted one more soak before I bid my city life goodbye.”

I skated my hand down his chest.

“Two people will be a tight squeeze, but if you go in first, we can sort of fit. All these muscles must be sore from lifting boxes all day.” I ran my hands up and down his arms. “From just watching them flex and staring at your ass every time you’d squat, I worked up a pretty good sweat myself.”

“The tub didn’t seem that big, but,” he sighed, clenching his eyes shut, “telling you no isn’t something I’m good at, so I’ll squeeze myself in for you.”

“Come on. It will be fun. We can’t do bathroom sexy stuff at home. At least not ye—”

I trailed off at Jude’s raised brow, remembering our quick but mind-blowing interludes in Peyton and Jake’s basement after Jude had pulled me into the tiny bathroom.

“Okay, that sort of counts, but now there’s no time limit and no reason to be quiet.” I skimmed my hands down his back and jutted my lip out into a pout.

I gasped when he pulled me flush to his body.

“Are you going to get naked, or do I have to strip you?”

“I love when you go all hot authority,” I rasped, brushing his lips. “I’ll get it started and meet you in there.” I pulled away when he went for another kiss. “Don’t waste time, Sergeant. Lose the clothes and follow me.”

My footsteps echoed in the empty bathroom. I turned the squeaky faucet to fill the tub, now seeming even bigger without a shower curtain. I’d expected to feel more emotion leaving everything in my old life behind. I’d waxed a little sentimental at dinner with my parents, but I wasn’t even a tiny bit sad at the thought of locking the door behind myself tomorrow morning and handing my keys to my landlord. In fact, I wanted to leave as early as possible to get back home—because home wasn’t here anymore. I wasn’t sure when that had changed, but when I wasn’t looking, I’d moved on and had no inclination to look back.

“I thought I said strip,” Jude whispered behind me.

“Oh, I am, just wanted to get the water started. It usually takes a while to fill—”

My words fell away as my gaze roamed up and down Jude’s body. Even though I’d seen him naked more than enough times not to be so tongue-tied, he was just that beautiful—strong legs, a sculpted chest and muscular arms, and a long, hard cock big enough for me to have to brace myself every time he slid inside me. But as gorgeous as he was on the outside, that wasn’t what had me hooked. Sure, it made me take a second and tenth take, but his heart was what grabbed me and wouldn’t let go.

“Cat got your tongue, Ms. Ng?” The corner of Jude’s mouth tipped up as he pressed his lips against mine for a quick kiss. I smiled at his groan when his gaze drifted to the tub, and I watched him climb in and hold on to the sides as he sat down.

Quiet but fierce love poured out of him, and even if I couldn’t find the words to tell him, I wanted to give him all the

love I had in return. I could leave my life in Brooklyn and the career I'd spent years cultivating with nothing more than a shrug, but picturing life without Jude was physically impossible. My brain couldn't even go there in the hypothetical.

It seemed too soon to be so certain, but if I'd learned anything this summer, moments were more important than timelines.

"See, plenty of room," I said, pulling off my shirt and leggings and tossing them in the corner. I took extra time with my bra and panties and slowly lifted one leg in front of the other as I climbed in. I caught his gaze as his eyes roamed over me. "I thought this would hold two people. I knew the bed would since—"

Jude pressed his finger against my lips and shook his head.

"I don't want to know how you know."

I rolled my eyes. "Really, caveman? You were married, so neither of us is—"

"Doesn't matter how unreasonable it is, I don't like thinking about you with anyone but me," he said, his eyes thinned to slits. "And while I don't think we fit in here, the view is pretty fucking spectacular." He leaned back and crooked his finger at me. "Having that beautiful body up close and wet will be worth all the leg cramps I'll probably get trying to get out."

"Oh please, Mr. Athlete," I scoffed, pulling off the hair tie around my wrist to wind it around the knot of hair I twisted on top of my head.

"I know you get off on my trophies, but that was a long time ago."

"But this is all current." I straddled his legs, reaching over to shut off the faucet. Holding his hooded gaze, I dipped my hands into the water and slid my palms over his chest and down his arms. "So hard everywhere," I whispered, leaning over to suck on his bottom lip and let it go with a nibble. I

grazed my hands over his torso in slow circles, grinding my hips over his growing erection under the surface.

“I loved having you with me today. Thank you for driving all the way here and in advance for driving all the way back home.”

“I love the sound of that,” Jude said, his voice low and husky as he drifted his hands down my back and kneaded the backs of my thighs.

“Which part? Thanking you or loving that you were with me?”

“That you called Kelly Lakes *home*.” He dragged his lips down my throat and across my chest. “Because that’s where I want you to stay.”

My body jerked against him, both from the glorious friction down below and the wet heat of his mouth.

I grabbed his face and crushed my mouth to his. Water sloshed around us as we rocked back and forth, both of us grabbing at each other as if we were afraid the other would disappear.

“Since I invited you in, it’s only fair that I do all the work,” I murmured against his mouth, reaching down to wrap my hand around his pulsing length and guide it inside me.

I’d gone on the pill after that first night in his bedroom, but even when I’d been on birth control in the past, I’d always made sure to use condoms too.

Jude was different. I trusted him, and I wanted absolutely nothing between us.

Sex without a condom was new for me, but sex with Jude with no barriers was mind-blowing enough to be life-altering.

“That’s it, baby...fuck,” he growled in my ear as he gripped my waist with one arm and held on to the edge of the tub with the other to give himself enough purchase to lift his hips and move with me.

The new angle brought him even deeper as we kept going, the porcelain of the tub killing my knees, but I was too far into

total fucking bliss to care.

Jude sifted his fingers through my hair and pulled out the hair tie, sending my hair down in tangled waves over my wet shoulders.

“It may get messy like this,” I said, roping my arms around his neck as locks of hair fell over my eyes.

“I love you messy.” He brushed my hair off my forehead, grinding into me as he slipped his hand underwater to trace light circles around my clit. “Messy and mine.”

I denoted like a bomb, whimpering as shocks of pleasure shot down the lower half of my body. I wasn’t sure if my avalanche of an orgasm was because of how good we were together or from hearing the words “I love you” one after the other. I bet on both as I pressed my hand against the cold tile above us, afraid of falling over, thanks to my quivering legs.

“You like that, beautiful? Coming all over my cock while you ride me?”

I nodded, still gathering the brain cells to form words.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous,” he grunted out, his legs going rigid under me as we kept moving. “How did I ever get you?” He cupped my chin and turned my face until our gazes met, holding my eyes as he squeezed my breasts and captured my nipple between his teeth. “How are you even real—”

He clutched on to me with a roar as he rode out his release, still pumping inside me until he dropped his head into the crook of my neck.

We sat chest-to-chest in the half-empty tub as my heart hammered against his.

“For the record, your dirty side is *definitely* my favorite,” I said, trailing my eyes up and down his body.

“*You’re* my favorite,” he said, taking my face in his hands as a slow grin split his mouth.

Words came easy for me, but not with this guy. I wanted to say so much, but I couldn’t because I felt too much.

Falling in love had rendered me speechless for the first time in my life.

I swallowed, searching his gaze with glossy eyes.

“Back at you.”

CLAUDIA

“I TOLD YOU. NOTHING TO IT, RIGHT?” CECE SAID, SMILING AT me as she opened a new bottle of vodka.

“Oh yeah, easy as pie.” I laughed as I swept my gaze around the bar—officially my bar as of today—noting the one cluster of older gentlemen at a table in the back.

“Between us,” she whispered after she fixed a slice of lime on the rim of a tumbler. “Larry hasn’t done or been here much over the past couple of years. It’s been me and the crew most of the time. He was always going away for the weekend or texting me that he didn’t feel like coming in and ‘we could handle it.’ He mostly came in on Saturdays, and that was it.”

“He seemed very checked-out and willing to sell once he realized that I was serious about buying, so that tracks.”

As over it as he’d seemed to be, Larry had kept amazing records, and, as I’d suspected, the bar turned a nice profit year over year. I wasn’t worried about the financial side of running things since I knew how to keep airtight books from both my old job and helping my father out for a short time when he’d had to switch accountants.

The rest were nuances that I expected to pick up over time. I’d learned the register and how to print receipts for the night, sort of remembered how to create basic mixed drinks, and had been pleasantly surprised how fast I was able to pour and serve one busy night.

Each day, it seemed less daunting and even became fun once I shook off the initial nerves. But now that my name was

officially listed as the owner of this place, it was jarring in a way I hadn't expected.

And real. Permanent and real.

The echo of those two words in my head made me untie the bow on the neckline of my blouse in desperation for air.

"Is it okay to bring outside champagne into a bar?"

Peyton held up a bottle and balloons as she stepped up to the bar.

"You're ridiculous," I said, not knowing if I wanted to laugh or cry at the elation on my best friend's face. I'd never considered myself an emotional person, but all the change thrown at me these last couple of months had done a number on my nervous system.

Ever since Jude and I had returned from Brooklyn, I'd been trapped in my feelings. It usually took a lot for me to get choked up, but verge of tears had seemed to be my baseline for the past couple of days. I'd had to walk away when Brandon, one of the younger bartenders, had hung up the painting from my parents by the front entrance. I'd rushed to my office to sniff back the tears enough to try to pretend I was the boss around here and not a crybaby.

Because now, I really was the boss. The thought again made me pull at my collar to dry the sudden sheen of sweat coating my chest.

"I don't have liquor, but I have cookies," Kristina said as she trailed in behind Peyton. "I found beer and wineglass cookie cutters, and the girls went to town."

"Come on in. We can have both." I waved them in and gave them each a big hug.

"Are you okay?" Peyton asked, eyeing me when I squeezed her a little too hard for too long.

"Oh yeah," I said, waving a hand. "It's just..." I raked a hand through my hair and lifted my gaze to the ceiling, as if that would make the lump gnawing at the back of my throat

slide down enough to get the right words to come out of my mouth.

“It’s a lot.” Kristina squeezed my shoulder. “Good stuff, though. And I’m glad you’re staying. Everything is more fun with you around.” She elbowed my side and made her way to the counter to set down the plastic containers of what looked like very brightly colored cookies.

“Yeah, I’m a barrel of fun today.” I huffed and rolled my eyes as I placed the weight on the end of the balloon strings toward the back of the counter. “Cookies and balloons shouldn’t make me cry.”

“Good things always make me cry. When Leo is extra sweet, he can still do that. Or when one of the girls does something great or acts like they want me around.” Kristina chuckled and climbed onto a stool and rested her elbows on the counter. “Those moments are nice. Enjoy them rather than worry that you’re feeling them too much.”

“I can’t have those moments in front of customers, though.” I reached under the bar and pulled out three champagne flutes.

“The guys at the table are old friends of my father’s,” Kristina said, glancing back with a shake of her head. “They don’t notice much. Be as weepy as you want on your first day of ownership, and enjoy your first night.”

“Excuse me, can I speak to the owner?”

My head whipped around to Jude’s voice. He stood behind Kristina, unfairly handsome as always in his uniform, with a crystal vase full of roses and lilies in one hand.

“What are you doing here?” I rushed out from behind the counter. “I thought you were on duty today.”

“I worked through lunch so I could leave an hour earlier and get to the flower shop before they closed.” A slow grin curled his lips before he brought me in for a quick kiss. “Congratulations, baby.”

“Jude...they’re beautiful. I don’t know what to say—”

His bottomless blue eyes searched mine, so full of love and pride that the dam finally broke. I took the flowers from his hands and pushed the vase at Peyton just in time to collapse in sobs against Jude's chest.

"Hey," Jude crooned, drifting his hand up and down my back. "What's wrong?" His effort to soothe me only made me cry harder.

"Is she okay?" he asked over my head.

"She's fine. Just a little overwhelmed," Peyton said behind me as she squeezed my shoulder. "It's a big day."

I nodded, pushing off Jude's chest. I ran my palm down the Claudia-shaped wet print on his shirt.

"I'm so sorry. I soaked your shirt with my nonsense."

"It's okay." He pressed a kiss to my forehead. "I thought maybe I'd picked the wrong flowers."

"No, they're perfect. Thank you so much. I just don't know why I'm like this..."

"Why don't you take Jude into the back and get yourself together," Kristina whispered. "The back rooms are nice for conversation and..."

I popped my head up when she trailed off.

"Other stuff," she noted, lifting a shoulder.

"I could run to my office again," I told Jude as I grabbed his hand. "That seems to be my crying room of choice lately. But that—" I pointed at Kristina. "Let's put a pin in 'other stuff' until I get back."

I led Jude to my new tiny office and shut the door behind us.

"I think I'm losing my mind," I whined and dropped my head back against Jude's chest.

"You're fine," he said, kissing the top of my head. "It's a big day. You can be a little emotional if you want," Jude said as he cupped my chin.

“That looked like a *little* emotional to you?”

He smiled down at me, kissing the tip of my nose.

“How embarrassing would it be if all of Kelly Lakes stopped coming to the only bar in town because of the new basket-case owner?”

“Not going to happen,” he said with a slow shake of his head. “You’ll have a big crowd tonight, and they’ll all love you. My father is even coming.”

I stopped wiping under my eyes to gasp. “No way.”

“He said he wouldn’t miss it, before he reminded me to get the hell out of work to make it to the florist on time.”

“I love that man so much,” I sighed, a grin stretching my damp cheeks when Jude laughed.

I loved *this* man too, so much already and more every day. Maybe someday I could say something about it, but I had to deal with one emotional crutch at a time and I had my hands full today.

“You know, maybe you could come here one day, pretend you found some business violation, and force me into my office to make me pay,” I fluttered my eyelashes as I peered up at him, loving the dark lust in Jude’s eyes at my suggestion. “I’ve been a *bad* girl, Sergeant Davis.”

“Oh, I know you have,” he rasped, swatting my ass with a loud smack. “I promise you, when the time is right, I’ll make sure you pay for all those sins.” I caught a full-body shiver when he traced his finger along my jaw and down my neck. “But today, you’re going to be the badass bar owner I know you are and relax because you’re impossible not to love.”

This man was sweet, dirty, and wonderful.

“Who sent those?” Jude motioned to the small bunch of carnations on my empty desk.

“Larry did,” I said, swiveling my head to the small vase. “To congratulate me. It was nice.”

“Yeah, really fucking nice,” Jude grumbled as his body went rigid with the most adorable rage.

The laugh escaping me finally allowed me to relax for the first time today.

“He had the florist send me a small bouquet of flowers from where he’s vacationing in the Bahamas. It was a nice, *friendly* gesture to thank me for taking the bar off his hands so he can live it up outside of Kelly Lakes. And whatever his intentions were, he’s not my type, and I am *very* spoken for.”

“What is your type, then?” Jude’s gaze was still dark and intense. I wasn’t sure if it was lust or jealousy, but it soaked my panties all the same.

I roped my arms around his neck and pushed my body against his, making sure to press my breasts flush to his chest.

“Gorgeous, broody cops with great hands, magic tongues, and...” I flicked my eyes down to the growing bulge in his pants. “Other stuff.”

He grabbed the back of my head and crushed his lips against mine, slanting his head to go deeper as he backed me against the desk, lifting me up and setting me down on the edge.

Jude’s tongue tangled with mine as he rocked against me, the desk creaking under us as I fisted his shirt and he dug his fingertips into my denim-covered ass. We both moaned as we became lost in the perfect friction, and I forgot everything else but his cock rubbing against the sweet spot between my legs.

All the glorious dry humping came to a stop when the vase behind us fell to the floor with a loud crash.

“I actually didn’t mean to do that,” Jude panted when our lips broke apart. “But...” he said with a shrug as a wry grin ripped across his mouth.

I shoved his shoulder when he laughed.

“I better get back out there.” I slid off the desk, smoothing my hair as I gave my body a once-over. “I’ll get a broom from the front to sweep up the glass in a minute. Here, you jealous

animal,” I said to Jude as I plucked a few tissues from the box I’d been using to dab at my eyes every time I felt an annoying deluge of emotion.

Jude’s brow quirked as he eyed the tissues in my hand.

“I mean, you can leave it on. Pink gloss does look like your color, Sergeant.”

He rolled his eyes and grabbed them from me when I tried to wipe his mouth.

“Feeling better?” he asked, bringing me back into his arms.

“You know what? I think so. That seemed to be just what I needed.” I flattened his lapel as I skated my hands down his shirt.

Just like you.

“Good. I’ll see you tonight. It’s all going to be great, baby. You’ll see.” He picked up my hand, lacing our fingers together before he brought it to his mouth, his eyes still holding mine.

Now I was choked up for a different reason.

“Okay,” I said on a hoarse whisper as I let him lead me out of the office and back to the counter.

“I think she’s okay now,” Jude said to Peyton and Kristina. “I’ll see you ladies tonight if you’re coming back.”

“We wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Peyton said, eyeing us both with a smirk. “My mother-in-law volunteered to watch the kids so everyone could come.”

“Tell your dad I look forward to seeing him later. Thanks for being his ride again,” I teased, cupping his cheek before I could help myself.

He laughed, turning to plant a quick kiss on my palm.

“Don’t mention it. See you later.”

“See you later.” I watched Jude make his way out the door, my gaze drifting to the perfect way his ass filled his uniform pants before I stepped back behind the bar.

“You two are so damn adorable,” Peyton gushed.

I shrugged as I popped open the champagne and poured some into each glass, my cheeks still aching from my wide smile—different from the ache below my waist.

“I agree,” Kristina said. “I grew up with that guy, and I think that is the most words I’ve ever heard him say at one time. And the way he looks at you? I absolutely never saw him look at anyone like that. Even when he was married.”

Rage bubbled in my gut whenever I thought of his ex-wife. Both for what she did to Jude in the first place and for making him feel like he didn’t have anything to offer anyone. He had so much, and I wanted it all and to give him everything I had.

“He’s...” I trailed off as I plucked the cover off one of the cookie containers and grabbed a green beer glass cookie. “He’s amazing,” I sighed as I took a bite. “He doesn’t smile or laugh much, but when he does, he’s *so* beautiful. And sweet.” My gaze drifted to the vase of gorgeous flowers. “And dirty.”

I nodded slowly when Kristina and Peyton stared at me with identical saucer-wide eyes.

“Dirty?” Kristina leaned in closer. “Davis? Elaborate.”

“As soon as you *elaborate* about you and your hottie firefighter slash nurse husband in the back rooms.”

“I can. As long as my sister-in-law doesn’t offer anything about my brother in return.” She cringed as she reached for a cookie.

“As I’ve lived with them for the past few months and seen *and* heard more than I probably should, I’d be good with that.” I pushed the container of cookies to Peyton as she glared at both of us.

“So, is this serious?” Kristina asked, taking a sip from her glass.

“Serious? We’re exclusive, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Everyone who was at Leo and Kristina’s party that night knows you’re exclusive now.” Peyton chuckled and grabbed another cookie.

“What did I miss?” Kristina asked.

“You were probably in the back room doing *stuff* at the time,” I said, arching a brow as I chewed another mouthful of cookie.

She opened her mouth to say something then closed it right up. “Probably. But by serious, I mean, for the future and things like that.”

I took a long sip from my glass, downing it all before I set it down harder than I meant to.

“For me, yes, it’s very serious. A little too serious, if I’m being honest. I’m crazy in love with him and can’t find the guts to say so.”

“Holy shit,” Peyton breathed out, her eyes wide again. “You haven’t been in love with anyone since—”

“Never,” I scoffed, refilling my glass halfway and grabbing another cookie. “His divorce and everything that happened with his parents worked him over pretty badly. I’m trying to enjoy the moments and not worry about the future too much,” I lied since when I wasn’t crying over my new bar, that was all I thought of lately.

“Davis wants you for his future. It’s obvious. He may not say much, but he shows it a hell of a lot.” Peyton reached over to squeeze my arm. “I’m so damn happy for you right now.”

I patted her hand and smiled, afraid of any more feelings slipping out of me today.

“Right now, I’m happy for me too. Maybe someday I can even move out of your basement.”

My mind drifted to the last night in my apartment, when sprawling out on a queen-sized mattress on the floor with Jude felt like the best kind of heaven. *He* was heaven, and as I’d discovered at the beginning when I’d worked so damn hard for little pieces of him and taken whatever I could get, that still held true—and most likely always would. Old me would be ashamed of country me, as I never settled for less than all of something. I’d never wanted anything as much as I wanted Jude, however I could get him.

But I had no time for that today. Today, I had to be the badass bar owner my boyfriend told me to be and the relentless ballbuster my father said I *needed* to be. Boss lady was a state of mind, and I had to find a way to get myself there.

Today, I would forget about the future because the present was all I ever knew I wanted.

JUDE

HALMAN'S WAS USUALLY PACKED ON THE WEEKENDS, BUT only the hard-core regulars came in during the week. While I hadn't frequented the place much in the past few years, that was always a constant. I guessed the huge crowd had more to do with the pretty new owner from Brooklyn, rather than the sudden urge for a drink on a Monday night.

"Wow, it's standing room only in here," my father said as he swept his gaze over the bar. I couldn't see where Claudia was through the clusters of customers around the counter, but I'd wait until I got Dad settled somewhere before I went searching for her.

"Good thing I brought my own seat," Dad said with a chuckle when we found a small table against one of the walls. I surveyed the space and spied quite a few packed tables with extra chairs.

I watched Dad turn his walker around and pull down the padded seat. He settled in with a smug smile on his face.

"She's got a nice crowd. I knew she'd do well here."

"Me too," I said, still craning my neck back and forth to see if I spotted her.

"There she is," Dad said, tapping my arm.

She was behind the bar, chatting with three customers as if she'd known them forever. They gazed at her with rapt attention, laughing at whatever she said when she leaned in.

Two were cops I recognized, and one worked at the hardware store up the street. Claudia had an infectious laugh and could make friends with anyone anywhere, the total opposite of someone like me, who usually avoided socializing and conversation at all costs. I couldn't be jealous of how they were staring at her because, how could you not?

Since she'd come into town, I couldn't stop.

"Stop gawking and go say hello to your girl. Get me a beer while you're up there."

Dad's nudge on my back almost made me stumble as I was too into what was happening behind the counter. I wasn't jealous because I trusted her. I didn't even have the urge to beat up one of the guys who looked a little too long when she turned around.

I smiled to myself, loving the chance to observe her in action unnoticed. I'd had no doubts that everyone would love her because *I* loved her. I'd never thought I could love anyone again, but I hadn't seen a lot of things coming about myself when it came to Claudia.

Maybe someday, I'd have the balls to tell her.

She caught my gaze over one of their shoulders, leaning in to whisper something before she darted away. I couldn't find her in the crowd until she ran toward me and leaped into my arms.

"I'm so happy to see you," she said in my ear as she roped her arms around my neck.

"Me too, baby," I said, setting her down to give her a quick kiss. "I told you." I nodded to the packed bar.

"It's the first night, and I'm a novelty at the moment. Let's see how much of it I can hold, babe." Her eyes lit up when she spotted Dad behind me.

"I'm so glad you came," she said, rushing over to him and bending to pull him into a hug.

"I wouldn't miss it, sweetheart. This is a good crowd here tonight."

“Well, like I just told your son, I’m the new kid everyone wants to scope out. Let’s see how good I am at holding their interest.”

“I have no doubt you will. And I’m glad you bought this old place so we get to keep you.” Dad flicked his eyes to me. I had no reply but a slow nod.

“Well, *I’m* glad to keep you both.” Claudia squeezed his hand as Dad beamed up at her. “Eventually, I’ll spruce this place up a little, but for tonight, I’ll enjoy the company.”

I couldn’t remember a time when Maggie had ever been glad to see my parents. She had been polite when we dated, but after that, she’d treated them like a huge inconvenience and resented them for the time they took me away from her.

Instead of putting her in her place as I should have, I’d put it all on me. I’d tried to take care of my parents and be a good husband at the same time until I’d realized how short I fell on both. In addition to the anger over what she’d done, I hadn’t believed I’d had it in me to try again with anyone else because I couldn’t handle disappointing anyone again. I’d kept myself in isolation because I’d blamed myself.

Then this beautiful woman had sped into my life, and I’d had no choice. She loved making me smile and laugh and didn’t ask for anything else. Being with her was so incredible, it made me wonder if anything I’d had with anyone else was real before I’d met her.

“What can I get you both?” Claudia asked, dropping Dad’s hand and coming over to me.

“I’ll get it. You’re busy enough.” I kissed her temple and slid my palm against hers.

“Sarge, hey. Nice to see you,” one of the cops I’d seen chatting with Claudia said to me as I came up to the counter.

“Oh, you know each other? Wait, of course you do.” Claudia shook her head. “I forgot about the lack of degrees of separation in this town.”

“Good to see you too,” I said, still holding Claudia’s hand. “Darren is a cop.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in here, but—” he peeked at our joined hands and smiled “—I guess that’s why you’re here now.”

I nodded, glancing toward the back table and the two people in chairs that had come to join my father. Although I couldn’t see their faces, I spied his. He was happy and more like the father I used to know than I’d seen in a while.

Claudia smiled when her gaze drifted toward Dad’s table.

“Looks like you’ve been dumped for the night,” she said, grinning up at me. “Beer for both of you?”

“Sure. Whatever is on tap. Is it okay to kiss the owner?” I whispered in her ear.

“For only you, yes.” She brushed my lips and scurried away.

“I guess this explains why you almost laughed at the meeting this week.” Darren smirked around the neck of his beer bottle as he stood. “She seems like something.”

“She is. Mine.” I slapped his back but couldn’t help the smile rushing across my mouth. “Enjoy your night.”

He chuckled and nodded. “You too, Sarge.”

“Here you go,” Claudia sang and slid two filled beer glasses toward me.

I dropped a twenty on the counter and pushed it toward her.

“Keep the change, beautiful.”

Even under the dim lights, I spotted the blush staining her cheeks.

“Hey. Put this on my regular tab.”

I was about to head back to my father when I spotted Artie grab a beer glass from a confused Cece’s hand.

“I’m sorry, no tabs,” Claudia told him. “Larry told me he settled the existing tabs, and for right now, I’m not extending tabs past one night.”

“What the fuck, no tabs? That’s not how we run things here.”

“No, that’s how *I* run things here. Sorry if paying for what you drink each night is a hassle, but—” she shrugged “—my place, my rules.”

“Your place,” he scoffed, reaching into his wallet and throwing a bill at Cece. “It would have been mine if Larry was a fair man.” My blood boiled as his eyes trailed up and down Claudia’s body. “I guess if I’d made an offer on my knees, maybe—”

I slammed the glasses down and was in his face in two strides.

“Watch your fucking mouth,” I hissed through gritted teeth.

He widened his eyes for a moment before he took a tiny step back. “What are you going to do? You can’t arrest me for speaking my mind.”

“With all the shady shit you do, I’m sure I can find something.”

“Stop,” Claudia called out as she stepped between us. “I’d hate to hurt your ego, but you’re not the first man to try to insinuate I earned something on my knees just because I have what he wanted. I’m not backing down, so this sour grapes, misogynistic little tirade won’t change my mind. Understand?”

Artie narrowed his eyes at Claudia.

“Good thing your boyfriend is always around to fight your battles.” He looked between us. “Your very own bar and police protection, who’s better than you?” He flicked his gaze to me for a second, his face twisting into a scowl before heading back to his table.

“Go back and have a nice night with your father,” Claudia said, handing me the beer glasses. “It’s fine.”

“It is definitely not fine,” I gritted out. “He’s always been a jerk, but never this bad. I don’t want him near you.”

She shrugged, craning her neck to where Artie stood with his friends. Something about the hate in his gaze as he looked at Claudia coiled in my gut.

“It’s fine, babe. Simmer down,” she said, pushing me toward where my father sat, staring at both of us with the same uneasy concern churning in the pit of my stomach.

“Simmer down?” I cleared my throat when I noticed heads snap in our direction at the loud pitch in my voice. “Baby, just promise me you won’t close up alone. At least for a while.”

“Larry installed cameras in the front and the back, and Brandon usually closes with us at night.”

“Brandon is a hundred pounds wet. Hire someone bigger.”

“Someone bigger? Like a bouncer? Do they have employment agencies, or is there somewhere I can order one?”

“Claudia, this isn’t funny. I’m just—”

“I know, babe,” she whispered, kissing my cheek. “I promise I’ll take it seriously and be careful. Your dad is waiting for his beer.” She nodded behind me. “I’ll come see you both in a bit.”

I nodded, holding in a frustrated groan as I made my way back to Dad’s table.

“Sorry I took so long,” I said as I set the beer glass in front of him. “Where did your friends go?” I asked as I took the now-vacant seat next to him.

“They left. A couple of dirty old men wanting to see the beautiful new management. I set them straight that she was spoken for, not that they had a chance in hell.”

“Good,” I grunted as I took a long sip from my glass. The alcohol sliding down my throat did nothing to calm me down, but for right now, I had to find a way or I’d drive myself nuts.

“What did that asshole say to Claudia?” Dad asked, his jaw clenched as he watched Artie march out the door. That at least brought me a little relief—for the moment.

“He’s pissed that Larry wouldn’t sell to him and made a crack that he’d sold it to Claudia instead because she—” I grabbed my beer and chugged half the glass because I couldn’t find it in myself to repeat something so fucking vile.

“He was always bad news. I knew it even before his wife ran out of town with their kids after they divorced. You had already moved away at the time.”

“Ran out of town?”

He nodded. “His ex-wife was the niece of a friend of mine. After it was final, he said she wanted to get as far away from Artie as possible. That’s all he told me, but I always thought there was more to it. That she was running from him more than just not wanting to live in the same town anymore.”

“Like he was hurting her?”

“Maybe. My friend never went into it, and I didn’t press. But to me, he’s the type. He never had much respect for anyone in general, but to go after a woman like that in public? Maybe I’m old-school, but it’s telling in a very bad way. And while I couldn’t hear what he said, I didn’t like the look on his face.”

“Agreed,” I said, raking my hand through my hair. “It’s not the first time he’s gone after her like that in front of a crowd. I think it’s because he wanted the bar, but she also put him in his place in front of his friends one night. Larry selling the bar to her and not him just made it worse.”

Dad nodded, the same concern creasing his forehead that was going to cost me some sleep.

“Well, keep an eye on her.”

I nodded as my gaze traveled back to the bar. Claudia blew me a quick kiss when her gaze met mine. I tried to smile back as I wondered how I could convince Keith to send a rotation of cops in here every night around closing time.

He’d tell me the same thing—just keep an eye on it. But until I got rid of this bad feeling I couldn’t shake, there would be no way to think about anything else.

CLAUDIA

AFTER BEING A BAR OWNER FOR A MONTH, IT ALREADY FELT like a routine. The weeknight crowd had dissipated quickly. The extra customers who'd packed in during those first weeks to get a good look at the new owner lost interest when their curiosity was satisfied, I supposed. Once they cleared out around early October, I enjoyed getting to know the regulars who were here for more than fodder for gossip.

"I don't think we've ever had a staff meeting before," Cece quipped as she settled onto a stool.

"That doesn't surprise me. Larry probably just assumed you all knew how to pour and make change and left it at that," I said, waving at Brandon as he held the door open for Abby.

Abby had been here a long time too, although not as long as Cece. She was a cute little thing, kept mostly to herself and went to college when she wasn't on shift. We had extra help on the weekends from a couple of part-time bartenders, but if I wanted to plan anything here, these three were the core staff.

I'd have to look at the books over the next few weeks to see if I could add anyone. Jude had gotten into my head about hiring muscle in case Artie or anyone else got out of hand. Larry was a big man and had probably taken on that job himself when he'd been here and had been able to manage with a small staff.

My cousins had forced enough martial arts on me growing up to be able to defend myself, but an extra body big enough

to make anyone looking for trouble think twice wasn't the worst idea.

"Now that we're all here, I promise I won't take long, and I won't have meetings all the time. Long, boring meetings aren't something I want to jump back into, but I was wondering what you guys thought of theme nights?"

"Theme nights?" Cece asked. "Like, what we'd serve?"

"No. Well, maybe. I was thinking more like maybe a trivia night or game night. Maybe we could have a costume party here for Halloween or a Christmastime afternoon party." I studied their faces. Abby was unreadable as usual, but Cece and Brandon looked pleasantly surprised.

"We have the word of mouth, even when I changed the bar name since we're the only bar within town limits, but maybe weeknights don't have to be so quiet. Make this place somewhere people *want* to come to rather than their only option, which is why I used to come here when I'd visit."

Brandon chuckled. "I'd be up for that. Maybe we could even participate in the winter festival this year."

"Larry would write a check, but he never wanted to work at a booth," Cece explained. "He said people would come back here anyway, and we'd have drink specials that night, but he was never interested in participating in the actual festival."

"Well, I can see his point since I was here for that and the place was pretty packed. But doesn't hurt to socialize a little, right? I bet we could look up a good holiday cocktail to sell at a booth. I'd have to check on outdoor alcohol laws, but I have an in with the local police department."

I winked and managed a smile from Abby when I met her gaze.

"I don't have anything specific planned yet, but I'd love your ideas since I'm still the new kid in town."

"I'm in for any of that," Cece said, pushing off the stool to head to the back of the counter next to where I stood. "Larry was a good guy, but he mainly focused on making sure people drank and paid."

I laughed as she tied her apron.

“Well, that’s important too, but there are other things we can do. Would you guys hate it if I made shirts once my designer friend finishes the new logo?”

“No, why would we hate it?” Brandon asked as he headed up to the front door to switch the closed sign to open.

“I didn’t want to go all new management on you guys just yet. I told you I wouldn’t change anything big, but I think a few adjustments could make the place a little nicer and more fun.”

“I agree,” Cece said, smiling at Abby and Brandon. “I knew you’d be the shot in the arm this place needed.

“Me too,” Abby said, sending me a little smile before she headed to the back.

Aside from my office and the break room, the bar also had two empty rooms that looked like the original owner might have had parties or private events in. So far, I’d only known about the *really* private parties some patrons tried to sneak back for, but unlike Larry, I kept the doors locked.

“Too early for a drink?”

I laughed when I recognized a newly familiar face come up to the counter.

“They say it’s five o’clock somewhere, but I’m a firm believer in any time after twelve, unless it’s brunch,” I said. “Rough week?”

Angel was a city import like me. He’d just moved to Kelly Lakes from the Bronx a few months ago and worked at the local district attorney’s office. I’d met him and his wife on opening night, and we’d all bonded, so happy to meet someone else in town who wasn’t a lifer.

“Old me would laugh at what I call a rough week now,” he chuckled as I filled a beer glass from the tap and handed it to him. “You would not believe the squabbles we deal with on the regular. Over the dumbest things. I think that’s what happens when you live in the same town with the same people

and they all start to get on your nerves.” He smiled around the glass as he took a long sip.

“Are you drinking on the job? You’re going to get me into trouble with my boyfriend for aiding and abetting you.”

“No, I’m off today. I drove Liz to a spa appointment a couple of towns over and thought I’d do some self-care of my own.” He raised his glass.

“Why didn’t you go with her?” I cracked up at the cringe twisting his face.

“Not my thing. Liz had a rough couple of weeks teaching at the high school so I gave her a day at the spa to relax after I convinced her to take today and tomorrow off. She does it her way, and I do it mine,” he said, raising his glass.

I waved to a couple of older gentlemen whom I’d come to know as regulars as they sat at their usual table.

“Excuse me a second,” I said to Angel. “Let me know when you’re ready for more self-care.”

I grabbed the TV remote and headed over.

“Hey, Claudia. Gorgeous as usual today.”

“Thanks, Benny,” I said to one of the men at the table. “You’re good for my ego. I have a surprise for you guys,” I sang, waving the TV remote before I changed the channel.

The eyes of all four men lit up behind their glasses when they saw a panoramic view of Yankee Stadium on the screen.

“Larry never put on anything but that TZZ gossip show and the news without the sound,” Bill noted next to him. They all dressed the same, button-down shirts over crisp khaki pants with various amounts of white hair on their heads. They were adorable, and I delighted at making them this happy with a free cable trial.

“Larry was all right but a little on the cheap side,” Diego noted in his thick Spanish accent.

“*I* may be too cheap after the free trial is over, so enjoy it while it lasts.”

“When you get sick of Davis, you let us know,” Benny said, taking my hand and pressing a kiss to my wrist.

“You’ll be the first one I tell,” I said, laughing, until my gaze homed in on the muffled voices at the door.

Artie stumbled in with Larry’s brother Lou behind him. And by stumbled, he could barely walk a straight line to the seat at the end of the counter. It was barely two in the afternoon, and he was already drunk. I met Cece’s gaze and spotted the same wary look in her eyes. We couldn’t serve him, and telling him wasn’t going to go over very well.

“Cece, could we have a Coke, please?” Lou pleaded as he tried to settle Artie onto the stool.

“Fuck a coke. Scotch. No ice,” Artie slurred.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t serve you alcohol.” I approached Artie, his bleary eyes looking me over with the same disdain as usual.

“I forgot, the city bitch has rules.”

“Art, stop it,” Lou said, peering up at me with an apologetic wince. “He’s had a rough day.”

“Day?” Artie scoffed. “I haven’t seen my kids in months, and now that bitch won’t even let me speak to them.”

Through the grapevine that seemed to run right through here, I’d heard Artie’s ex-wife had left Kelly Lakes with their two young children and never looked back. In the limited contact I’d had with Artie, I could see why a woman would want to keep her kids away from him. I’d blown it off to Jude, but I suspected there was more to him than just a jerk with an ever-present chip on his shoulder who didn’t like being bested by a woman.

He’d come in with Lou a couple of times after I’d refused to keep a tab for him. He hadn’t approached me since, but I was creeped out by the way I’d catch him watching me. Not in a sleazy way, but in a fuckload of resentment way. I hoped that since he hadn’t come at me, it would wane into a simple dislike over time and he wouldn’t make any trouble.

But now, I had no choice but to make it worse.

“We will serve you whatever nonalcoholic drink you want until you sober up.”

“I don’t want a Coke. I want scotch.”

His words were sloppy enough for his spit to ricochet off my face. He’d had plenty of scotch already, judging from the whiff I caught of his breath.

“Then you need to leave.”

Lou nodded, shaking his head with a loud exhale. “He came in here before I could stop him. Come on.”

Artie swatted Lou’s arm when he tried to help him off the stool.

“Fuck you, this bar, and your stick-up-his-ass cop boyfriend,” Artie spat at me as Lou led him out.

“I’ll tell him you said hi,” I said, smiling despite the twist in my gut. I tried to pull off a relaxed smile when Brandon and Cece looked at me with identical creases in their foreheads.

I resolved to look into those bouncer employment agencies when I had the chance today. I didn’t mind being the one who had to throw people out, but I—at the very least—needed adequate backup.

I’d been too wrapped up in my business plan and Jude to really think about what I’d do to protect myself from more than just financial failure. I’d romanticized Kelly Lakes and this bar, forgetting that small towns were still a part of the real world and not everyone would be a nice neighbor.

I chatted it up with the Thursday crowd for the rest of the day, while keeping an eye on the door. Artie was probably sleeping it off and would be a worry for another time, but I couldn’t put it off any longer.

Jude: *Who is closing with you tonight?*

I smiled, shaking my head at my phone screen. Jude sent this text every day right before we closed when he was

working. I would have to tell him what happened today, and I didn't doubt that once I did, I'd have a police escort home every closing time.

"Claudia, would you mind if I cut out a little early?" Brandon asked me before I could text back. "My roommate just texted me that a pipe burst in the kitchen, and the whole damn place is flooded. He's not good under pressure," Brandon said, chuckling as he stuffed his phone into his pocket. "I'll stay if you want."

"No, go. I'll close up now since it's empty anyway. Go save your friend and your apartment."

"Thank you," he said, letting out a relieved exhale. "See you tomorrow."

I followed Brandon to the door and locked it behind him. I'd opened and closed the bar for the past week, but I'd only opened alone. It was barely nine but still dark. I closed out the register for the day, putting the cash and the receipt in the safe. I'd log it all in the morning light when the hairs on the back of my neck weren't sticking up.

Blowing out a frustrated, uneasy breath, I set the alarm and pulled down the front gate after I locked the door. I'd walked the streets of Brooklyn from the subway station to my apartment at all hours of the night without any worry, so I wasn't sure why I felt eyes on me on this quiet street. My car was parked right in front of the bar. Any closer, and I could have slid into the driver's seat from the counter.

Closing alone was something I'd most likely have to do sometimes, and I hoped maybe the more I did it, the less I'd be creeped out by it. I glanced at my empty back seat, a habit I'd had for years, but I'd never really looked for anyone there after I'd come up here. I rolled my eyes at myself and clicked the key fob to open my door.

"Fucking bitch."

I fell against my driver's side door when something slammed into me from behind.

Artie still reeked of liquor but was now more sober and steady. His eyes were clear as they glared at me, thinned to angry slits.

“Look, you were drunk. I couldn’t serve you. In fact, I think it’s against the law to sell more alcohol to someone so drunk they can’t stand without assistance.”

“Like you have to follow any laws.” His humorless laugh made my skin crawl. I just wanted to get away from him long enough to get into my car and speed away. But where? Jake and Peyton had taken the kids to the Finger Lakes for the week, and I didn’t want him to follow me home to an empty house.

My phone was lost in the bottomless pit of my purse. Jude was on duty, and if I could only grab it and call him, he’d bolt here in his cruiser. But that wasn’t an option until I escaped into my car and drove off. I wrapped a hand around my quivering wrist to stop my keys from jingling.

I did a quick sweep of the street behind him. I saw no one. Just me and this very angry man who had about fifty pounds on me and looked ready to charge.

“You fuck one of the cops. Maybe more, who knows? Got it made in this town, don’t you? What a cute little fortune cookie you are.” I swiped his hand away when he tried to touch my face. His mouth hardened for a minute and then curled into a smirk.

I wrapped my hand around the handle of my car door and clutched my keys with the other as he came toward me. I drove my elbow into his face when he tried to grab me, just like Eric had taught me before I’d started first grade and had made me repeat with him all through high school, feeling and hearing the crack of bone as Artie stumbled back.

I climbed into my car, but I couldn’t shut the door. My gaze dropped to where Artie had lodged his foot inside before I could close it and drive away. I tried to kick his foot away before he grabbed a fistful of my hair and yanked me out.

I lost my footing and ended up face down on the concrete, my ears ringing from the impact. Rolling up to sit, I couldn't get the balance to stand. My legs and feet were still okay, but the adrenaline was pumping through my system too fast. The only thing I was able to do was slip my foot in between his and shift enough to catch him by surprise and make him trip and fall.

He joined me on the ground, pulling me by the back of my shirt when I tried to crawl away and feel for where I'd dropped my keys. If I could press the panic button, the piercing sound through the quiet night could get someone's attention, but my keys were too far out of my reach.

"Stop!" I shouted, but the echo of my scream came back to me on the desolate street. "Get off me," I grunted, pulling up my knees as much as I could to kick him off me.

"Not so brave without an audience, are you?" I tried to squirm away from the blood pouring out of his nose and dripping on me.

He pinned my arm to the ground, but I launched my other elbow against him, this time getting him across the mouth. He muttered a "Fuck" and slapped me across the face with the back of his hand.

My ears rang even more, like a clanging inside my head that grew so loud, it reminded me of sirens. I put my hands over my face, curling into a ball as I rolled over.

I swung at him with my eyes closed, but I only punched air. He'd either fallen off me or stood. Through my hazy vision and something else dripping into my eyes, I couldn't see what was going on.

"Claudia, it's me. Baby, can you hear me?"

I blinked, only able to hold one eye open as I tried to turn to Jude's whisper.

"Babe, I... Where..." I stammered, my voice barely a whisper as I reached for Jude.

"Shh, it's okay." He lifted me off the ground and settled me into his lap. "I've got you."

“I think...I think I’m bleeding,” I told him, swiping the back of my hand over my soaked forehead.

“Yes, you are. Don’t touch it. I’m getting you to the hospital.”

I tried to make out the muffled sounds in the distance, the static of a radio and another deep voice giving codes and asking for a medic to the hospital.

“Who’s that, Jude? Is he calling a doctor?” The pain was settling into my jaw and head, making the words hurt as they came out.

“He’s calling an ambulance,” he whispered into my hair. “That’s Max. I asked him to take a ride here with me when you didn’t text me back. I had a bad feeling and...” He shook his head and drew me closer to his chest. “Fuck, I should have been here sooner.”

“What about me? She broke my nose.”

I almost wanted to laugh at Artie’s garbled whining.

“I got this, Davis. Take care of your girl, and I’ll get him booked at the station.”

“I think I can stand,” I said into Jude’s neck. “You can’t carry me around all night,” I tried to joke with my raspy voice.

“I’d carry you forever, baby.” His voice cracked as he pressed a gentle kiss to my temple.

Artie muttered more curses behind us as Jude slowly helped me up to stand.

“Where does it hurt?”

“My head. My side a little. I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you. I didn’t think—”

“Shh, I didn’t either. At least not this bad. But he is never going to hurt you again,” he said, cupping my chin to ease my head up. “I promise.”

His eyes were glassy when they met mine, so much fear and anger in his gaze, I barely recognized him. His touch was still sweet and the only thing grounding me at the moment.

“It may be a long night, but I’ll be right there with you. Okay?”

I nodded, clutching his arms when the street started to spin around me again. I was fairly certain the sirens behind me this time weren’t only in my head. I needed to be patched up and go to sleep—and then figure out where the hell my perfect country life went wrong.

JUDE

BEING A COP HAD COME EASY TO ME FROM THE BEGINNING. I was a firm believer in following rules and doing everything by the book, never having to think twice about it on any shift. Even on the worst days, I saw things in black-and-white, not allowing much gray because it became a slippery slope. Keith always loved to say how when cops get sloppy, criminals get away, so you needed to keep your emotions in check.

Then I saw the woman I loved bleeding on the ground, and I didn't give a shit about process or rules or anything else but tearing the son of a bitch responsible to fucking shreds.

A blinding rage shook me as I rode in the ambulance to Kelly Lakes Hospital with Claudia. Even after what had happened, she was almost herself, joking with the paramedics on the way.

Her injuries were minor from what I could see, but I could tell she was shaken up, even if it hadn't fully hit her yet.

All I could think about was the slab of concrete Artie had been about to pummel her with before I'd thrown him off her and what would have happened if we had gotten there five seconds later.

I balled my hands into fists at my sides as I followed her stretcher into the ER, the thought filling me with even more fury. They settled her behind one of the curtains and assured us a doctor would be in shortly to treat her.

“What are you doing all the way over there?” she asked in a scratchy voice and crooked her finger at me.

“I’m here, baby.” I came up to the side rail of her bed and picked up her hand, holding it between both of mine as I brought it to my lips. “I actually think you did break his nose.”

“Sounded like it,” she said, lifting her shoulder in a slow shrug. “Eric taught me that move as a kid. Strike fast and hard, and if you land it right, elbows can be lethal.”

“My beautiful badass.”

My stomach sank when her smile faded.

“I’m proud of you.” I swiped the hair away from the dried blood caking across her forehead.

“I went down swinging, at least.”

“Shit, Claudia.” Leo winced as he closed the curtain behind him.

“I heard about an attack by the bar and just texted Kristina to see if she’d heard from you.”

He set down the chart and came up to the side of the bed.

“The doctor will be right in, but let me have a look.” He took her face in his hands, examining the cut across her forehead and the growing bruise along her cheekbone. “I’ll get you some ice for that. I don’t think you’ll need stitches, but I’m sure they’ll order some X-rays. It’s slow tonight, so we should be able to get you in and out quickly. Any blurry vision?”

“Not now, but a little before. I’m mostly just ugly.” She uttered a sad chuckle.

Leo smiled and shook his head. “No way. How’s the pain on a scale of one to ten?”

“Five? Maybe?” She darted her eyes to me, a smile trying to pull across her mouth even now. I was too keyed up to do anything but nod back.

“After you see the doctor, I’ll get you something.”

She smiled back at him when he squeezed her shoulder.

“Leo,” one of the nurses called as she peeked inside the curtain. “I need your help. We’re trying to treat this guy with a broken nose, and he keeps thrashing around. We need your firefighter muscles.”

“Thrashing around? Why?”

“It seems like he’s pissed because he’s handcuffed.”

I ripped the curtain open and headed toward the commotion, my body and feet moving on autopilot as I found Artie. Claudia had gotten him pretty good. His face was more swollen than hers, with angry bruises across the bridge of his dented nose and blood still dripping from his jaw.

“That bitch hit me.”

As I watched him thrash around the bed without an ounce of remorse, knowing how the difference of a matter of seconds could have made this the worst night of my life, something snapped inside me, and I lunged for the bed.

“You fucking son of a b—”

I caught the wide-eyed gazes of a few nurses in my periphery, but all I saw was red as I went right for Artie’s throat.

“Nope. Step back, Davis.”

Keith’s voice sounded far away even though he was right in front of me, pushing against my chest as I tried to fight him off.

“I said, step back! Stay with Claudia and let Max deal with it.”

I stopped charging forward and pushed his hands away. Keith was the same chief he always was, the calmest one in the place as he took control of everything.

“If Max is here, why are you?” I spat out when I met his gaze.

Keith didn’t flinch and regarded me as if I had just lost my mind. Maybe I had since all I could still think about was beating that asshole until I broke more than just his nose.

“Artie made a fuss on the way to the station that he needed medical attention, and Max radioed in that he was bringing him here. I came to protect you from doing something stupid.”

“Stupid? How would you feel if it were Maya? Bleeding and lying in the street, and you saw the asshole attacking her, holding a piece of concrete over her head?” A growing lump in my throat cut off my air, and all I could manage was an angry whisper. “If he’d hit her in the right spot—”

“But he didn’t.” Keith’s voice was soft as he put a tentative hand on my shoulder. “She’s here, and she needs you. That piece of garbage is never going to hurt anyone else in my town again, but you need to play ball and do things my way. And to answer your question, if it were my wife or niece or any woman I loved on that street, I’d want to pummel the piece of shit responsible until there was nothing left. But I don’t have the luxury of rage in this job. None of us do. Becoming the bad guy doesn’t stop them, and you know that.”

I took in a steady breath through my nostrils and let it out, attempting to slow my heartbeat enough to stop it from pounding in my ears.

“I remember Larry telling me he installed a camera right in front of the bar. Hopefully, it’s at a good enough angle to see the rock he was holding over her, and we can get him for attempted manslaughter. You’ll come in as a witness and hold your shit together in front of the judge, and this asshole will get what he deserves. My way, got it?”

“Got it, Chief,” I said, pinching the back of my neck as my still-raging pulse began to slow.

“All right. Now let’s go see Claudia, who’s probably worried about you after you most likely ran off like a madman.”

I nodded, heading back to her with Keith stepping behind me.

Leo was holding an ice pack over Claudia’s beautiful, bruised face, adjusting her hand over it when they both turned to us.

“Security came and said they didn’t need my firefighter muscles anymore, so I stayed with Claudia,” Leo said.

“You didn’t kill him, did you?” Claudia asked from behind the ice pack.

“No, I managed to stop the Hulk before he smashed,” Keith quipped and came up to the side of her bed. “How are you doing, kiddo?”

“I’ve had better days, Uncle Keith.”

“I’ll go.” Leo squeezed Claudia’s shoulder. “Yell if you need me.”

“Thanks, Leo. Glad you were a nurse today.” I couldn’t tell if it was a smile or a wince on her face. Watching her in obvious pain almost made me lose it all over again.

“Me too.” Leo’s grin faded as he came up to me. “For what it’s worth,” he whispered, “if he’d hurt Kristina or one of my girls, I would have wanted to chop him into fucking pieces. I wish Keith hadn’t stopped you.”

I managed a weak laugh. “Thanks, Leo.”

He nodded after he closed the curtain behind him and left us alone.

“I’m proud of you.” Keith smiled as he leaned over her bed. “That jerk is a bloody mess.”

She clenched her eyes shut. “Don’t be proud. I got too cocky and brought this on myself.”

“Hey,” Keith said, giving her arm a gentle nudge until she opened her eyes. “This is *not* your fault.”

“It kind of is. Tell him, Jude.”

“Baby, I don’t think any of this is your fault. Keith is right.” I squeezed her knee over the white hospital blanket.

“But you tried to warn me. To get someone to close with me, hire protection. Like I said, I was cocky and thought I could handle it, and I should have taken it more seriously when he cursed me out in public.”

“But you couldn’t have seen this coming, not like this,” Keith said. “And you are not the first woman he’s been violent with, although he wasn’t brazen enough to do it out in the open before this.”

“I’m not?” She cringed when her head popped up.

“No. It was nothing we could ever make stick and can’t use now, but tell me what happened today.” Keith pulled up a chair next to her bed.

“Artie came in drunk. I told him I couldn’t serve him alcohol, and when he wouldn’t order anything else, I told him he had to leave. He called me a bitch and said fuck me and my cop boyfriend, and then Lou dragged him out.”

I tried to loosen the clench of my jaw when Claudia’s eyes met mine.

“Brandon had an emergency, so I had to close alone. Artie was waiting somewhere for me and pushed me against my car door from behind when I tried to get in, and we fought back and forth until Jude got there. I’d tried to just push him off enough to get into my car and get away from him, but he pulled me out once I managed to get in.”

“I’m so sorry, baby.” I grabbed her hand and brought it to my mouth.

Her shrug when she lifted her head made me feel even worse. “I wouldn’t be surprised if he says I assaulted *him*.” She huffed. “Since when he tried to grab me, I was the one who struck first. But I was just trying to leave.”

“No one will buy it if he does. I’ll thank Larry if he ever comes back from the Bahamas for the cameras, but I am sure you have lots of witnesses all those times he was nasty with you at the bar. Do you know how to pull the camera footage?”

“I do. Cece definitely does if I have any trouble.”

“If you’re feeling up to it, Davis will take you down to the station to start a restraining order tomorrow. Either way, he has the next couple of days off.” He arched a brow at me. “Peyton is coming back in the morning.”

“They have a few days left of vacation.” Claudia groaned. “She doesn’t have to do that.”

“Jake had to talk her out of driving home tonight when I called her. Let us all fuss over you for a bit, all right?”

“Sure, Uncle Keith,” she said, a normal smile pulling at her lips this time. “Cece opens tomorrow anyway. I’ll stay home until these fade enough to be able to cover them up.” She pointed at her face. “Not that everyone doesn’t know what happened already.”

“Kelly Lakes shows up for our own. And that’s you now, sweetheart. So don’t worry about what people think. Artie should, but you shouldn’t.”

He kissed the top of her head and cut me a look.

“Get some rest, and I’ll talk to you in the morning, Davis.”

I nodded at his retreat and took the vacant chair next to Claudia.

“He’s right. People are going to be very pissed, and Artie is going to be even less welcome around here than he is now.”

“Yes, I’m sure Benny and all his friends will line up to defend my honor.” She laughed, rubbing at her eyes.

“Benny used to be a boxer. I bet he’d still kick some ass for you.”

“That’s right. I forgot about that,” she laughed as she rolled up to sit. “He probably would now that I got him his Yankees games. I just want to go home,” she said, clenching her eyes shut as she leaned back onto the pillow. “Not that I have a home here.”

“Yes, you do. Maybe not an apartment just yet, but you belong here. You’re staying with me tonight.”

She nodded, darting her eyes everywhere but to mine. I couldn’t tell if it was defeat or resignation in her gaze, but I didn’t like whatever it was or know what to do about it.

CLAUDIA

EVERY PART OF MY BODY ACHED AFTER JUDE HELPED ME INTO his truck and drove me back to his house. I wasn't sure if the pain behind my eyes was from the bruises across my cheek or the rise and fall of adrenaline. Even before Artie had come after me tonight, I'd been on edge. It was almost as if I'd had a sixth sense about what was about to happen.

Why didn't I just text Jude that Brandon had to leave and lock the doors until he could take me back to Peyton's house?

Because I didn't want to ask for help or admit that I'd left myself vulnerable. Because I didn't listen and thought moving to the country would be this Hallmark-esque cakewalk, never thinking there could be bad guys in a small town.

Tonight, I'd made a huge oversight that could have been catastrophic if Jude hadn't acted on his bad feeling. Even while I admitted that buying a bar was the craziest thing I'd ever done, I'd thought that I could do it. Artie had come out of nowhere because I wasn't smart enough to see what I was really getting myself into, and I didn't know if I could truly handle it.

My outsides were banged up, but my insides had taken the biggest beating. Hours ago, I hadn't been able to hold in my excitement. I had even been looking forward to printing the damn T-shirts once I finalized the new logo, and now the urge to run back to Brooklyn and nurse all my wounds at my parents' house overpowered anything else.

“It’s late. I don’t want to wake up your father,” I told Jude when we pulled into his driveway.

“He’s *been* up. I called him when they took you back for X-rays.” He pointed to the light glowing through the living room window. “There was no way he was heading to bed without seeing you and making sure you were okay.” He gently grabbed my arm when I turned to climb out. “Stay there. I’ll help you step out.”

I nodded, not fighting him as I had still been woozy when they’d discharged me. It could have been the fall and the blows to the head or the fact that I hadn’t eaten anything since Artie had stumbled out of the bar. Either way, the doctor had told Jude to watch me during the night even if I didn’t have an official concussion.

“Can you walk?”

“Yes,” I said as all the anger and frustration I’d managed not to feel until now bubbled up. Yes, Artie was more than just a rude asshole and I shouldn’t have underestimated him, but I was mad at myself more than anything else.

Jude held my hand as he led me to the porch and unlocked the door, holding it open for me to step through.

“Let me see.”

We found George waiting by the door, scrutinizing us as he came closer. If I hadn’t had one of the shittiest nights ever, I would have commended him for how fast he was able to maneuver to the door, but I was out of fake jokes for tonight. My tank was empty in every way.

George cupped my cheek and searched my gaze, grunting out a curse as he looked over my face.

“That son of a bitch. I heard you broke his nose. Good girl.”

“I did,” I replied with a slow nod. “Didn’t stop him much, though.”

He dropped his hand and glared at Jude.

“Keith should have let you kill him. Police chiefs cover up all kinds of shit everywhere else, and ours has to be a goddamn Boy Scout.”

“It’s fine. I should have known better and not shot my mouth off,” I said with a slow shrug, wincing as it even hurt to do that.

“Known better?” George’s brows shot up. “He had no right coming after you. At all. Putting him in his place wasn’t an excuse for him to do this. Stop that.”

“Yes, but—” My words halted as a sob slipped out, followed by another, until big tears deluged down my cheeks. I hadn’t cried all night, even when the fight was at its worst, and now I couldn’t hold back.

“Shh,” George crooned as he pulled me into his arms. “It’s okay. Let it out, sweetheart.” I cried against his shoulder, wishing my father were here to say all the right things like when I was a kid and skinned my knee after running too fast. I guessed this was the adult version of what happened when I became too impetuous.

George was a good substitute as he rocked me back and forth and let me pour it all out onto the sleeve of his T-shirt.

“I’m sorry,” I croaked out, pushing off George’s chest. “I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay, baby,” Jude whispered and kissed the back of my head. “We’re both here for whatever you need.”

“That’s right.” George cupped my chin. “Go lie down and try to get some sleep. I’m good enough with the walker to make us some breakfast. Try to rest tonight, okay?”

I gave him a weak nod and let Jude guide me into the hallway.

“I need to wash my face,” I said before we got to his bedroom.

“Okay, come on,” Jude said, opening the door when we stopped by the bathroom.

I winced when he flicked on the light, irritating the strain in my eyes. I hadn't taken a good look at myself in a few hours, and my hideous reflection startled me. My cheekbone was a million shades of purple, and a round bump stuck out of my forehead. My fading eye makeup added to the horror, pooling in dark circles under my eyes and streaking down one cheek, thanks to my crying jag a few minutes ago.

"Wait," Jude said, pushing the door closed behind him and reaching over me to dig into one of the cabinets. He turned on the faucet and ran a stream of water back and forth over a blue washcloth in his hands.

"Come here," he whispered and wiped my face in gentle strokes. "I'll get some ice for your forehead, but your cheek doesn't look too bad."

"I guess purple is my color." Trying to sound like myself fell flat as my words came out with no affect whatsoever.

"I'll wash you up, and you can get into my bed. Do you need something for the pain?"

"I need to go home," I said, sniffing as Jude dropped the washcloth.

"I can't take you back to Peyton's. The doctor said you need someone to watch you—"

"I mean New York City home. This was a mistake."

He reared back as if I'd just slapped him.

"What do you mean by New York City home?"

"Who the fuck just buys a bar?" The tears strangled my words, but I kept going. "I packed up my life because I wanted to live in the *country*. Be my own boss. I'm an idiot who didn't think it all through, and I left myself open. I'm not cut out for this, and I don't belong here." I dropped my head into my hands. The bump was where all the pain was, but my sore cheek throbbed as I hiccupped more tears.

"You belong with *me*. Because I love you."

My head shot up. The tears stalled for a second as I tried to process what I'd just heard.

“W-what?” was all I could push out, my weakened voice nothing but a sandpaper-like rasp.

“I love you. So fucking much.”

He grabbed my face with a gentle hold, but I still felt the quiver of his palms against my cheeks.

“I...” I hiccupped again. Jesus, could I get words out without tears anymore? It was like I’d opened up the floodgates of all my emotions and couldn’t hold anything back.

“I love you. I love every fucking thing about you.” His throat worked before he went on. “I love how you wouldn’t give up on me, even when I gave you every reason to. I love how good you are with my father. I love how beautiful you are, even if it still knocks me on my ass sometimes. I love never knowing what’s going to come out of your mouth next. And I love that big, brave heart that got you here in the first place, and now you’re where you belong.”

“Jude, I—”

“I was scared to tell you because I never expected this. You sped into town and made me love you so much, it’s like I never loved anyone else at all before you, because this—” he waved his finger back and forth between us “—is nothing like anything else. It’s fucking everything. So, you can’t leave, Claudia. Not when I finally got you.”

I stopped crying, but my jaw went slack. My feet were stuck to the bathroom tiles, so overwhelmed by his beautiful words and how much I knew it took for my quiet boyfriend to say them all.

He really did love me.

“Jude, I—”

“I mean it. I’ll handcuff you to the bed if I have to.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time, Sergeant.” A watery laugh bubbled out of me before I dropped my head into his chest. “I love you too. I’m *so* crazy in love with you.” I sniffled and lifted my head. “My first time being in love with

anyone, believe it or not. So, I had no clue how to say it either. I think that makes you the love of my life, right?”

“Yeah,” he rasped. “I already knew you were mine. You’re supposed to be here, and nothing was a mistake. I know it’s been an awful night, but don’t let this make you doubt that.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck.

“It’s a pretty damn good night right now.”

He smiled and pressed his lips to mine with light, lingering kisses that said so much more than all the passionate ones we fell into so easily. Before buying the bar had even crossed my mind, something had been keeping me here.

Maybe fate hadn’t gotten it so wrong after all.

“Let’s get you into bed. We can talk about how we’re a couple of chickenshits in the morning—or later *this* morning—okay?”

“Sure,” I said as Jude picked up the washcloth and finished cleaning my face. We headed to his bedroom, and he helped me out of my clothes. I faked a little extra weakness so he would undress me. I was still me in spirit, even if it was a little battered tonight.

“You can wear this.” He rummaged through his drawer and tossed a Kelly Lakes PD softball jersey onto the bed. “Thought it would give you a thrill.”

“It does,” I said as I slipped it on. “What are you looking for?” I asked when he dug deep into the bottom of his closet.

“My sleeping bag.” He stood, holding up a large black backpack. “I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“You don’t tell a woman you love her and then sleep on the floor next to her right after. What’s wrong with you? Haven’t you ever watched a rom-com or picked up a romance novel?”

He dropped his chin to his chest with a loud exhale. “My bed is tight—”

“And we always make do. So?”

“So, you’re injured, and I don’t want to hurt you. You have enough bumps and bruises.”

“You’ll hurt me if you make me sleep alone. Strip and get into bed, Davis.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time either,” he joked, stepping out of his uniform and pulling on a pair of boxers.

I tucked my hands under my head, carefully avoiding brushing against the bruises, as I shamelessly ogled the man I loved. Even if I wasn’t up to physically appreciating every inch of his perfection—and most likely wouldn’t be for a little while as I healed—a thrill ran through me because he was all mine.

And mine to keep, because I was here to stay. My stupid idea to run back home to Brooklyn was forgotten once the man I loved had reminded me that home wasn’t there anymore. Home was here—with him and the life we could build together.

“Easy,” he whispered as he climbed in next to me and wrapped his arm around my waist. “Are you okay?”

“Not quite yet. But I will be.” I rested my chin on his chest to peer up at him, soaking up all the love in his blue eyes. “The one thing I do regret is that game of darts. I thought he was just one of those jerks who didn’t think women could do anything and”—I darted my eyes away from his—“I wanted to impress you. I didn’t realize I’d enrage him that much by showing off.”

“Don’t regret that. I loved it.” He smoothed a stray lock of hair away from my forehead. “You were so damn sexy. Every time you hit the target, I got a chill.”

I chuckled against his chest.

“But then I asked you for a fake-couple game of darts, and you wouldn’t even look at me.”

“You know why I didn’t. I was a jealous idiot throwing a tantrum but still very, *very* turned on.”

He ran his hand up and down my back with a wicked glint in his eye.

“I wouldn’t have given me another shot after that if I were you. I’m a lucky man right now for a lot of reasons.” Jude wrapped his other arm around my waist and gingerly pulled me closer.

“Another thing.”

“What?” Jude snapped his head to mine.

“I love you.”

He chuckled, lifting my chin with the tip of his finger to press his mouth to mine.

“I love you too. Gets easier every time you say it, right?”

I nodded against his chest as he turned off the light.

Saying it might’ve been hard, but loving Jude was the easiest thing I’d ever done.

CLAUDIA

THE WEEKS AFTER THE ATTACK WENT BY IN A BLUR OF POLICE statements, legal depositions, and recounting the story so many times, I almost stopped cringing at all the worst parts. My bruises turned yellow enough to cover with some quality makeup foundation, and I'd gone back to work after a few days.

When Artie made bail, even though I had a restraining order on him, Jude was glued so tightly to my side, he was almost my shadow. The only place I managed to go alone was the bathroom, and even then, he was always hovering close by.

Angel was assigned to prosecute the case after the arraignment. Normally, he would have recused himself from the case since we knew each other personally, but the district attorney's office—like everything else in Kelly Lakes—was small, and Angel had the most experience with felony convictions involving assault. He'd later told Jude that he wouldn't have let anyone take the case from him anyway because he wanted to ensure that the "creep" who'd hurt me received all the justice he deserved as quickly as possible.

Since Angel had been at the bar two of the times Artie had come at me, he didn't need any help gathering a quick list of witnesses who were all too happy to give and sign statements.

And God bless Larry, the front door camera caught everything—Artie pushing me from behind, pulling me out of my car when I tried to drive away, and the rock he'd held over my head when my eyes were closed.

I couldn't sleep for a couple of nights after Angel had told me that, and while I was angry at Jude at first for keeping it from me, I understood why he didn't tell me.

Angel went after Artie for attempted murder, but his lawyer argued that he'd grabbed the rock without thinking in a moment of rage. All Angel had to do was play the video footage from two hours before the attack, which showed that Artie had parked up the block and finally stepped out of his car a half hour before, lingering by the bar behind a parked truck across the street until the door opened and he stalked toward me.

While Angel couldn't completely prove that the rock was part of Artie's premeditation, his actions showed an obvious plan to ambush and hurt me.

It was enough to shut down his defense and led Artie to plead guilty to attempted voluntary manslaughter, at least saving us all from a strenuous trial. I gave my victim's statement to the probation officer to read at the sentencing in a couple of weeks. Jude said it was up to me if I wanted to go for closure and he'd go with me if I did, but I just wanted to move on.

Uncle Keith said he knew the judge assigned to his sentencing, and he was confident that Artie would get at least ten years, but might be up for parole after five. Uncle Keith also told us that he'd mentioned to Artie while he was in lockup that should he ever make parole, it would be wise not to come back to Kelly Lakes as even a police chief couldn't control the court of public opinion.

In the short time Artie was out on bail, the people of Kelly Lakes made it clear that he wasn't welcome anywhere. Salma's wouldn't let him order takeout, and Mary threatened to call the police when he attempted to have a cup of coffee in her shop.

A total shutout like that wouldn't have happened in my old neighborhood. I'd had some amazing neighbors and friends in Brooklyn, but the city was too packed to know every single person like you could in a small town. The bad seeds could

stay anonymous there, but small towns held no secrets or tolerance.

Kelly Lakes really did show up for their own, and to be accepted and protected by them was an unexpected silver lining in a truly awful experience.

My goal was to take what had happened to me as a lesson and go back to work. Brandon still apologized to me at the end of almost every shift, and as much as I told him it was okay because I was okay, I had a feeling it would be a while until I got through.

I still had an unusual number of cops stopping by on the regular, ordering soft drinks and lingering long enough right before closing time for me to know who'd sent them.

Even though Artie was gone, I was permanently more aware of my surroundings. I always held my car keys with my thumb on the panic button at night, but I didn't feel the urge to keep looking over my shoulder. Country life felt safe for me again.

But my boyfriend was still spooked enough to treat me like I was made of glass, and while I tried to be understanding, it was getting on my damn nerves.

"Who's closing with you tonight?" Jude asked, looking up at me as he slid his feet into his uniform shoes.

"Jackson is closing with me tonight. One of the new college kids I told you I hired. The wrestler. As I've told you a million times, no one closes alone anymore, and yet you ask every day."

I spent more nights at Jude's than Peyton's these days, which made it annoying to have to figure out which clothes were where. I'd contacted a local real estate agent, but nothing she had shown me caught my eye. My prolonged displacement had taken me from squatter to nomad.

I'd meet Jude at home at the end of most of our workdays, and we'd make slow, careful love even though my bruises were long gone.

"I just asked. No need for the huff."

“I didn’t huff. I sighed.” I groaned as I pulled on my jacket and slung my purse over my shoulder. “That was more like a huff.”

I strode out of his room, already feeling guilty for snapping at him when he was worried. But he couldn’t be worried all the time. It was taxing on both of us.

“Have a good day at work, kids.” George raised his coffee mug up at us from his recliner.

“Will do,” I said, smiling as I tapped his arm on the way to the front door.

“Call you later,” Jude told his father behind me as I made my way to my car.

“Listen. For whatever I did, I’m sorry,” Jude said, stuffing his hands into his pockets as he came up to my car door.

“You didn’t do anything. But you need to relax, babe.” I draped my hand over the back of his neck and squeezed. “Stop sending random cops to the bar to keep an eye on me, and stop worrying so much. It’s all over.”

“To you, maybe it is,” he said, his jaw tight. “I can’t help it if I love you and I worry about you. I don’t know what you want me to do.”

“I just want to be Claudia to you again.” I ran my hand down the front of his jacket. “Don’t let what happened to me stay in your head. The rock never hit me. I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’re *always* Claudia to me,” he said, his brows knit together. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I want the Jude who isn’t afraid to slam me against the headboard because he knows I can take it.” I leaned against my door as our eyes stayed locked. “And who doesn’t hold back because he knows all of him is all I’ll ever want.”

I kissed him before he could answer. Closemouthed, but hard enough to make my point. “I love you. Be safe, and I’ll see you later.”

I drove to Peyton's, in need of a shower and time alone. I hadn't meant to snap at Jude and I knew he meant well, but I wanted a boyfriend not a bodyguard.

"Hey, I wasn't expecting you this morning," Peyton said as I ambled into the kitchen. I felt her eyes on me as I headed toward the coffeepot and filled up one of her oversized mugs.

"Jude went to work, and the outfit I wanted for today is still in your basement. Plus, I wanted to shower alone. Or at least without someone lingering by the door."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Peyton eyed me as she dropped Cheerios onto Keely's high chair tray.

Peyton hovered too, but she had a touch more finesse about it than Jude.

I exhaled a long breath as I nodded.

"I think I just need a little breather. I love him like crazy, but he's driving me nuts."

"Because he loves *you* like crazy. We all do." She darted her eyes from mine as she sipped from her coffee mug.

"I owe my parents a call, and then I'll get in the shower." I kissed the back of Peyton's head and blew a raspberry on Keely's cheek before I made my way downstairs.

Only my father knew about the attack. I didn't like lying to my mother, but Dad was right. She already worried about me running a bar and closing at night, and telling her after the fact didn't make sense when it would upset her so much.

She didn't notice the uptick in video calls, requested by my father. He said seeing my face more often would make him feel better, if only until everything wasn't so fresh in his mind. While I was determined to put what had happened to me in the past, it was fresh enough in my own mind to be soothed by my parents' dotting faces on-screen a few times per week.

"Good morning, ladybug," my father said, giving me a good view of his chin as he tried to position his phone on what looked like their kitchen table. "Mei, Claudia is on the phone!"

I smiled at the scuffle from my mother's slippers as she pulled up a chair next to Dad.

"Hi, sweetie. You look so pretty today," she said with her hand on her chest.

I had a ratty ponytail on top of my head and not a stitch of makeup on, but my mother's dark eyes—eyes that matched my own—were so full of love and happiness each time we talked, I felt a horrid rush of both guilt and relief that she didn't know what had happened to me or what had *almost* happened.

Dad had been sick when I was attacked and couldn't make the trip up, but Eric had driven up the day after Jude had called my father. Getting a glimpse of Eric's anger and worry was enough, although he'd had a good amount of pride in his eyes when he'd learned I still knew how to use my elbow.

Seeing my father's heartbreak when I was still recovering would have done me in, and although I had wanted nothing more than to collapse into his arms at the time, I was grateful that neither of them saw me until my face was healed.

"Ah, it's all that love, Mei. How's Jude?"

"Good," I said a little too quickly, guilt washing over me when I thought of the hurt in his gaze when I'd driven away from his house.

"He's a good man," Mom said. "I'm so happy you found him."

"Me too," I said, a smile sneaking across my lips. The shrill ring of their landline pierced the sudden silence.

"Sorry, sweetie. I think this is your aunt, so I'll take it in the bedroom." She blew me a kiss. "I'll try to be quick."

I'd commuted to college, but I'd bet if I had gone away, these were the affection-filled calls I would have received in my dorm room. You had to love how cute my parents were.

"How is Jude? He's holding up okay?" Dad asked, his brow furrowing as he gazed at the screen.

"Fine. Why?"

Dad lifted a shoulder. “The last time he called, he sounded tired.”

“Wait,” I said, setting down my mug on the end table next to the futon to scoot closer to the screen. “Jude calls you?”

“Since... Yes. Once per week, tells me how you’re doing since we all know you leave things out.” He arched a brow.

“Leave things out? I told you, I’m fine. I want to move on. A little smarter this time, but move on.”

“You know, I was held up at the Palace once.”

My eyes grew wide.

“You were? I didn’t know that.”

“Oh yes. Gun pointed at my head and everything. It was a night I closed alone too. So you weren’t the only one with a lesson to learn.”

I uttered a sad chuckle.

“Oh, Dad. Of all the things to have in common. I’m so sorry that happened to you.”

“I had just opened, like you. And I was so excited, I forgot the little things. You at least had an alarm and cameras. But I was able to keep it together, hand over the money, and stay calm until the guy left. I made sure I did all I could to make it back to your mother. And you did too. In the end, that’s all you can do. The best business owners miss things, and just because they do, that doesn’t mean you write it all off as a failure.”

I nodded, hating the image of my father with a gun to his head, trying to make it out of his restaurant alive.

“Jude was so devastated when he called me that morning. My heart broke for the poor guy.”

“Devastated? What do you mean?”

“Claudia,” he said on a heavy sigh. “He’s a known police sergeant in a small town. One would think your connection to him alone would give you some protection, but from what I gathered, it only egged this guy on. Jude’s job is to keep the town safe, but he couldn’t keep *you* safe. Not in that moment.

He told me he'd had a bad feeling and didn't go to you as fast as he should have, and he couldn't forgive himself for it. I know about the rock too." He flattened his mouth as he nodded.

I swallowed the bile rising in the back of my throat, sickened because I was the worst person on the planet. I wouldn't watch the video of the attack, as living through it once was enough, but Jude had. And although he never said it, he probably obsessed over what would have happened if they hadn't gotten to me when they did.

I might've been ready to move on, but Jude and I weren't on the same timeline. My heart broke for him too.

"I better get ready to head into the bar. I love you."

"I love you too, ladybug. And so does that big guy. So give him a break."

"I will." I gave my father a watery smile as I ended the call and fell back on the futon.

There were worse things in life than having a man love you so much that he drove you both nuts.

In fact, there was nothing better.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE SO SOON?" CECE ASKED AS I stepped through the bar doors an hour early.

"Trying to keep my mind busy, and I thought I'd treat you guys to lunch."

"Lunch sounds good to me, but Abby already went to the coffee shop with Ken."

My jaw dropped. "Officer Ken? That is the sweetest thing. All that spying Jude made him do here all this time pushed them together."

"I wouldn't say pushed them together as she's still a little reluctant, but they're young. At least, younger than me." She

shrugged as she stacked the glasses under the counter.

“Oh, come on. Where’s your sense of small-town romance?” I clasped my hands under my chin.

“Small-town romance?” She pursed her lips at me.

“It’s Peyton’s fault. I sleep next to a bookcase of her romance novels when I’m there. But it’s a thing. I have personal experience now.” I winked and dug into my purse for my wallet.

“I read romance too, but I’d call love in this town more forced proximity.”

I cracked up at her disgusted cringe.

“Ah, those are good too. Especially when there’s only one bed.” I hopped onto one of the stools. “I’m feeling Italian today. This chilly November air has me craving soup from Dino’s.” My phone buzzed when I set it on the counter.

Julie: *Check your email.*

I opened my mail app and let out a loud gasp.

“What is it?” Cece rushed over.

“I think we may have a final logo. Let me run to the office a minute.” I fished my credit card out of my wallet and handed it to Cece. “Please order me a large minestrone soup and get whatever you want. I want to see how it looks on the laptop before I tell her it’s final.” I jogged to my office, the heels on my booties making loud clicks on the floor all the way down the hall.

I’d met Julie back when she was a creative director at an advertising agency we’d hired at my former company to do branding. Even though I hadn’t even been in the marketing department, I’d become the one reviewing and approving all the concepts since the higher-ups were too busy and tried to bullshit me that I had a “better eye” for it. Julie and I had spoken so much that we’d become friends after the work ended and kept in touch when she’d stepped back from agency life to freelancing from home.

“Hey, girl,” Julie said when her face filled the screen. “I’m glad you called so I can see your honest reaction.”

“I didn’t open the image yet. Sorry I’ve been such a pain in the ass. I’ve never had to logo myself before.”

“It’s fine. And among all the clients I have right now, you don’t even rank in the top fifty for pain in the ass.”

I smiled at Julie’s Bronx accent.

“Okay, I have the rainbow ball of death, but it’s loading and... Oh shit, it’s perfect.”

My hand flew to my chest. “The Pour House” was in a flowing script with wine and beer glasses underneath. “Kelly Lakes” was rounded across the top. It looked swanky, yet like a neighborhood bar.

“It’s kind of sexy, but definitely has a small-town vibe. It’s you, only country.”

“It is. Holy shit,” I said, falling back in my chair. “Wow, I own a bar.”

“Yes, you do. And Landon and I can’t wait to visit and see the fall foliage and all those little shops you always talk about. I already scoped out a B&B not too far from Kelly Lakes, so you tell us when you have a free weekend.”

“I’d love for you guys to come up. Now that all the leaves have changed over, it’s gorgeous up here. How about you resize the file to the specs for the neon sign, and you can come here when I unveil it. The vendor told me about ten business days from when I hand off the file.”

Her brown eyes grew wide on-screen. “So, it’s approved?”

“Approved and final.”

And permanent.

“Thanks for your patience, girl. I appreciate it.”

“It was my pleasure. And you look amazing. Small-town life looks good on you.”

“Thanks. Feels good too.”

I tilted my head back in my chair and stretched my arms over my head. Small-town life was so good because of a small-town cop. Guilt wormed its way into my gut again as I picked up my phone to text Jude.

Me: *I love you, and I'm sorry.*

I closed my laptop and made my way out of my office, still mooning over the logo on my phone screen and not watching where I was going after I opened my door.

“Oops, I’m so sorry,” I said, popping my head up to see who I’d run into, finding out I’d hit a wall of said small-town cop.

“What’s wrong? What are you doing here? Is George okay?”

I clutched his shoulders, but he didn’t move as he hooked his thumbs into his belt and glared down at me.

“Listen, about this morning. Babe, I’m so—”

“I’m here about the violations on this place. If you don’t bring it up to code, we need to shut it down.”

“What?” My heart dropped into my stomach. “But I went over everything with you. I have all the licenses I need, right? At least, I think. Shit,” I muttered, pressing my palm into my forehead.

“Is there somewhere we could talk about this, Ms. Ng?”

I jerked my head up at the husky dip in Jude’s voice. My breath caught from the carnal lust in his eyes as he trailed them up and down my body. This wasn’t Jude—this was Sergeant Davis coming to punish me for being a bad girl, just like he’d promised he would.

It was all I could do to hold in a squeal like I was a kid on Christmas morning after someone handed me the best present in history.

“I’m sure we can come to an agreement, Sergeant, is it?” I peeked at his badge just like I had on the side of the road what

now seemed like a million years ago. “Please step into my office.”

I turned, swaying my hips as I strutted back in the door and held it open for him to walk through. I shut it behind us and clicked the lock.

“So, what can I do so you don’t close me down?” I asked, my voice a throaty whisper as I traced my finger down his shirt, batting my lashes when I dragged my thumb over his belt buckle and down the front of his pants. He was already hard and huge as I palmed his cock through the fabric, squeezing every time it pulsed against my hand.

He unhooked his gun belt and laid it down on the chair next to the wall.

“Can we work something out? You seem a little stressed.” I sank to my knees. “I’d love to help you relax, Sergeant.”

“Oh yeah?” He dug his hand into my hair, slowly weaving his fingers through the strands before he grabbed a fistful and pulled my head back. “I’d love that pretty mouth around my cock.”

I made quick work of his belt buckle and zipper, dragging his pants and boxers down. I peered up at him as I took him slowly into my mouth, taking my time to work my tongue up and down, tracing along the vein down the side and pulling him to the back of my throat.

He muttered a “Fuck” as I sucked him harder, digging my nails into his ass to take him even deeper. My eyes started to tear as I kept going, loving this fantasy so much more than I’d expected as I moaned around his cock and dragged my nails down his thighs.

“Up,” he said, spearing his hand into my hair and pulling my head back until he fell out of my mouth. “Both hands on the desk and spread your legs.”

I stood and unbuckled my jeans, cursing myself for picking the ones so tight on my full hips when he hauled them down my legs along with my panties. I guessed Jude was on a

break and we didn't have much time, but he was making every second count.

“So wet. I bet you taste so fucking sweet.” My knees buckled as he swirled his finger around my very hard, very wet clit. I bit the inside of my cheek to muffle the needy whimpers falling from my lips.

He slipped two fingers inside me as he draped his other hand over my throat and turned my head, kissing me hard and deep.

“Is this what you want?” He teased the tip of his cock up and down my soaked core. “You want me to fuck you right here?”

“God, yes,” I pleaded, reaching back to push him into me.

Jude cupped his hand over my mouth as he thrust inside me hard and quick.

“Don't scream. Make a mess all over my cock, but don't scream.”

He took his hand away from my mouth and yanked the hem of my sweater up to my neck. He pulled at the fabric of my bra so hard I thought it would rip in half until I spilled out of the cups. I arched my back when he cupped my breasts and teased both nipples between his fingers, still plunging inside me so hard my eyes kept rolling to the back of my head. It was too much sensation all at once, and I had no idea how not to scream when I finally came all over him.

“You're my Claudia. *Always* my Claudia,” he grunted in my ear as he started moving faster and deeper, so deep I had to hold on to my desk to stay upright. “I love you so much.”

“Stay in character, babe,” I said, turning my head to catch his mouth in a sloppy kiss. He brought his hand back to my clit, and with three circles, I lost it, a blinding throb taking over the lower half of my body as wave after wave of my climax washed over me.

Jude flipped me around, lifting me onto my desk and driving back into me just as hard. Our eyes locked as he

grabbed the back of my neck and pushed my head down, pointing my gaze to where he was sliding in and out of me.

“Watch. Watch how good we are.”

He shuddered against me, clenching his arm around my waist until his head fell into the crook of my neck and a garbled, guttural moan dropped from his lips.

“Holy shit,” I said, the entire lower half of my body shaking as I tried to stand up. “Could we make this a thing for the next fifty years? Because—” I fell onto Jude when he stepped back “—like, fucking wow.”

“Yeah, my heart is about to break through my rib cage,” Jude panted as he held on to the edge of the desk.

I burst out laughing and lifted my head.

“I just texted you too. I love you and I’m sorry. So, so sorry.”

He pressed his lips to my forehead.

“No need for sorry. You’re right. I’m a cop, and I know that things happen and you can’t let them ruin you, but...” He wove a hand into my hair. “It was things happening to the woman I love that threw me. I’ll be better.”

“Any better than just now, you may kill me.”

He laughed, and it was still the best sound in the world.

“I better get back before my break is over.”

“I didn’t make you miss lunch, did I?” I readjusted my bra and sweater as he fastened his gun belt.

“No,” he said, drawing me close. He dragged kisses across my cheek and lingered when he got to my mouth. “This was the best lunch of my whole life.”

JUDE

“THIS IS AMBITIOUS, NO?”

Dad laughed as I unpacked all the groceries for dinner tomorrow. The last time I'd cooked Thanksgiving dinner had been when I was still married to Maggie. It had been a small chicken instead of a turkey, with Stove Top stuffing on the side. She'd insisted on not seeing any of our families, and after a week of fighting, I'd given in like always.

Her parents hadn't made too much of a fuss, but I could still hear my mother's disappointed “okay” in my head when I'd told her we wouldn't be stopping by.

I couldn't blame Maggie because I'd chosen not to fight her on it. I shouldn't have been so relieved after our divorce, but striving to make my wife happy every single day when she hadn't offered me that same consideration had exhausted me in more ways than I'd realized.

This Thanksgiving was different in all the best ways and, ambitious or not, I wanted to celebrate the hell out of it.

“The turkey isn't that big. I can prepare it when Claudia is working tonight, and all we have to do tomorrow is lounge around while it cooks. Potatoes and vegetables are easy, and Claudia said she made us a pie, but I'm not sure if she's going to end up buying one instead.” I chuckled as I pulled out my mother's old roasting pan from the cabinet. “I'll give this a good scrub since it's been a while.”

“I'm glad she's closing the bar and staying with us tomorrow. She brings a lot of life to this old house.” Claudia's

father worked on Thanksgiving Day, like always. We planned on making the trip to Brooklyn to see them next weekend when her family usually celebrated, but I liked being with just my immediate family for this holiday.

“She’s a lot of life, in general,” I said, a wide grin splitting my mouth as I reached for the Brillo pad.

“She certainly brought you back to life. Watching the two of you does an old man’s heart good.” He slapped me on the back. “And makes what I have to tell you a little easier.”

I snapped my head to him.

“What?” I put down the pot and shut off the water. “Jesus, Dad. Spit it out.”

“Calm down. It’s not bad news. You may take it that way, but—”

“Anybody home?” Claudia sang from the doorway. “What kind of cop keeps his front door unlocked?”

I kept my gaze on my father as the screen door squeaked open.

“Here’s the pie for tomorrow. I baked this today, but I wanted to bring it straight here since there’s no room in the refrigerator at the bar. I should put a bigger refrigerator on the wish list for next year.” She breezed past Dad and slid the pie into the refrigerator.

“I bet you thought I’d buy one. So little faith.” She came up to me and kissed the corner of my mouth, her smile fading quickly when she took in my rigid stance.

“What’s going on? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, and it’s good that you’re here so I can tell you together.” Dad pointed to the kitchen table. “Come sit with us, sweetheart.”

I eyed Dad as he made his way to his usual seat at the head of the table. Claudia slid into the chair next to him before she lifted her gaze to me.

“I’ll stand. Before you came in, Dad said he had some news that I’m probably going to think is bad.”

“For Christ’s sake, sit down, Jude.”

I exhaled and took a seat next to Claudia.

“I’ve been doing well. Finally. Seemed to take forever, but other than not being able to drive anymore, I’m getting around fine, or as fine as I’ll get. Jolene is down to three mornings a week, and I really don’t even think that’s necessary. Nice girl, but she’s more needed elsewhere.”

“Do you want to let her go?” I asked. “I’d honestly rather someone be able to take you to the doctor or food shop when I’m working, but if you feel that strongly—”

“No, I agree with that. And I don’t want you to have to take off for that kind of thing,” Dad said. “I asked Dr. Mullens last month if moving into my own place would be possible, and he said yes. I put my name on the waiting list for the assisted-living complex, and an apartment became available this week. It’s furnished and ready. All I need to do is pack.”

“All you need to do is pack?” I fell back in my chair and shook my head. “The last time I spoke to Dr. Mullens, he was still monitoring your kidneys. Dialysis may still be a reality down the road.”

“Then I’ll worry about it down the road. And if that happens, the dialysis center is right there. You wouldn’t have to sort out transportation. For now, I could maybe get out and go for a walk without having to plan it so far in advance. I have a few friends who live there, and they all love it.”

“I heard it’s amazing,” Claudia said, flashing me a hopeful smile. “I know Leo’s aunt and uncle stayed there for a while. Kristina said the apartments are pretty sweet.”

“They are,” Dad said. “There’s a nice common area and theme nights, just like at the bar.”

“Does that mean you won’t come to my trivia night again?” Claudia pressed her hand against her chest. “Dumped me already?”

“No,” Dad said with a chuckle and patted her hand. “I always have time for you—”

“This isn’t a joke,” I snapped. “And you put yourself on the waiting list without telling me?”

“Yes, and the way you’re reacting is proving my point why I didn’t. You have a nice life now.” He jerked his head toward Claudia. “What’s the big deal about me having one too?”

“Well, he worries about you.” Claudia turned to me, running her hand up and down my forearm. The sympathy in her smile only made me tense up more. “But with assisted living, if, God forbid, something happens, you have someone to call, right?”

“Exactly. I’m by myself but not alone.”

“And when your blood pressure drops and you get dizzy and fall, you’ll just wait for someone to find you?”

“That happened once and months ago. You finally have better things to do than babysit me. Why are you fighting this so damn hard?”

“Okay,” Claudia sighed, stretching out her arms as if she was holding the both of us back. “Before we start bickering, let’s talk about this like—”

“*We*? You didn’t see him at his worst and don’t realize all that could still happen. This isn’t your problem, so you don’t get it.”

Claudia flinched as if I’d just slapped her.

“Jude, enough!” Dad bellowed, narrowing his eyes. “You’re acting like a—”

“It’s fine. I should get to work,” she said, throwing me a glare over her shoulder as she stood. “It’s the night before Thanksgiving, so we may have a bigger crowd with the college kids home.” She kissed Dad’s cheek. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Remorse hit me hard when she started for the door.

“Claudia—”

“Maybe I don’t know everything about his health,” she said after she swiveled her head to me. “And maybe I didn’t see how bad it was. But I believe in your father, and I want him to be happy. And if he ever went down that road again, it’s not only *your* problem. I’m not Maggie, and I wouldn’t let you deal with it alone, despite what a stubborn moron you are.”

My feet were glued to the carpet as I watched her leave. Things had been so great lately, I’d forgotten what it was like before. All the late hospital nights and endless calls with insurance companies. Sure, things were fine and fun now, but that could all change on a dime.

Claudia wasn’t Maggie, and I never doubted that she loved me, but I’d never shake the fear I’d end up disappointing her.

“I really thought you were past being an idiot,” Dad said, groaning as he shook his head at me. “Old habits die hard, I suppose.”

“Look, Dad—”

“I know you think I give you a hard time and don’t appreciate all you’ve done.”

I sighed, rubbing my eyes as I leaned forward. “I don’t—”

“Listen first, talk later, okay?” He held up a hand. “Your heart is the best thing about you—and your biggest crutch. I’m not sure if you realize that. You think if you keep an eye on me, you can somehow prevent anything bad from happening to me. That’s not how it works for me or Claudia or anyone. Bad things happen when they happen.”

I raised my head and noticed the gloss in my father’s eyes.

“My impossible boy.” He chuckled. “You were our miracle, and you still are. You’re in love. Enjoy it without worrying about your father all the damn time.”

He craned his neck toward the living room. “This is a great house. Your mother and I had big plans when we moved in. The best day was when we could finally make the spare room into a kid’s room. Not that we thought you’d end up sleeping in your teenage bed in your forties.”

A laugh slipped out as I nodded.

“It’s not so bad.”

“You need to apologize to Claudia. Groveling a little may help.”

“I know. She’s always been more than I deserve.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “I’m lucky.”

“That you are. I think I know a way you can make it up to her.”

“Oh yeah?” I said, shooting him a wry grin. “How?”

“Ask her to move in.”

My eyes grew wide.

“This is a big house for just you. And it’s paid for, so you don’t have to worry about a mortgage or rent, so it’s dumb for you to give it up. Plus, Claudia is here most nights anyway now. She loves your grumpy, stubborn ass.” He exhaled a long breath and chuckled to himself. “Against all odds.”

“I love her too. So much it makes me a little nuts, but...it’s only been a few months. I may spook her if I ask her that now.”

“She’s seen you at your worst and still wanted to stick around. Then you babysat her and spied on her for all that time, and she didn’t run away. If she hasn’t been spooked by now, I think you’re good. If your mother and I taught you anything about life, it’s that time is limited.”

I nodded, dropping my gaze to the carpet before I lifted my head.

He shifted in his seat toward me. “Your mother would be so proud of how you stepped up for me without a second of hesitation, but she would want you and Claudia to start a great life, and she’d want me to be happy for the rest of mine.”

I’d never expected Claudia, but I couldn’t live without her. It was a big reason why Artie’s attack had shaken me so much. Because what if I’d lost her? She’d never wanted anything else

from me except me, as I was. Dad was right. I couldn't fix everything, but I could do something about this.

“You can think of a good grovel as you scrub the grit off that pan.” He smirked at me as he stood and headed to the living room.

I'd beg for her forgiveness for being the broody jerk she seemed to love anyway and bring her home.

BY THE TIME I ARRIVED AT THE BAR, IT WAS HARD TO FIND Claudia through the thick evening crowd. Snowflake-shaped lights were mixed with the glowing leaf ones draped along the counter and along the back of the bar.

Customers now referred to the bar as “The House” instead of Halman's after the neon sign on the window was replaced. It still looked mostly the same after Jake and I'd refurnished the floors and some of the walls, other than the new barstools and couches in the back. Claudia was already so ingrained in every corner of this place, I felt her the second I stepped inside.

I wanted to step into my house and feel her everywhere too. I wanted her to own everything I had, like she'd owned me from almost the beginning.

I weaved through the crowd and found a seat at the counter as I searched for Claudia. I found her on the far end, laughing at something until she caught my gaze. Her wide grin shrank as she whispered something to Cece and headed in my direction.

“Good evening, Sergeant,” Claudia said, frowning as she dropped a napkin in front of me. “What can I get you?”

“I'd like to tell the owner that I'm the world's biggest asshole and beg for her forgiveness. Is she around?”

She crossed her arms, glaring at me despite the twitch I spied in the corner of her mouth.

“The owner will meet you at the empty table next to the couch,” she said, pointing over my shoulder. “Give her a minute.”

I grabbed her finger and pulled her hand to my mouth, kissing across her knuckles as I held her gaze.

“Tell the owner I’ll wait all night. I’m told a good grovel takes time.”

“And energy,” she noted, pursing her lips at me. “Hope you have both.”

She pulled her hand away, stuffing something into her pocket as she headed back toward the end of the bar. I allowed myself a minute to watch her go, so damn beautiful from every angle, she still stole the air from my lungs.

I headed to the table and took the chair against the wall, finding Claudia already sitting across from me.

“That was fast.”

“Well, you said something about a grovel? I’m always up for one of those.” She leaned back in her chair, hurt still evident in her eyes, even with the smirk tilting her lips.

“I’m sorry. I had no right to snap at you like that.” I reached across the table to grab her hand. “I know you’re not Maggie and you’d be there for both of us. But that fear of disappointing you if things ever take a bad turn again is probably never going to go away.”

“Disappoint me? My God, Jude.” She covered my hand with both of hers. “If I had one wish, it would be to meet your ex-wife so I could punch her in the face. You are a wonderful man who exhausts himself trying to take care of everyone but himself. There is no way you could ever disappoint me.” She lifted a shoulder. “Did I get a little pissed at you? Sure. But I’m mostly frustrated that you still think it’s all on you and you aren’t supposed to expect anyone to help you. You’d never go through any of that alone again if it came down to it, because I’d never let you. Okay?”

“Okay.” I leaned across the table to grab the back of her head and bring her in for a kiss. I’d planned on a peck, but the

relief from both of us kept our lips locked as she stood and planted herself on my lap.

“If it weren’t so busy, I’d drag you to my office,” Claudia panted against my lips when we broke apart. “You can’t close out a grovel without epic make-up sex.”

“Of course not,” I whispered as I ran my lips down her neck. “That’s why I want you to come home with me tonight.”

“I planned on it, even though I was mad at you,” she breathed out, giggling when I sucked her earlobe into my mouth. “So now we can have make-up sex instead of angry sex.”

“Can’t go wrong with either, but about that...” I swept her hair off her shoulder, holding her eyes. “I don’t like sleeping without you.”

“I don’t either,” she said, pursing her lips. “Even if your bed gives me neck cramps the next day.”

I laughed, draping my hand across her nape and rubbing the back of her neck.

“I think I have a solution. Bigger bed, bigger room.”

“There’s another bedroom in your house? Is it, like, behind a wall or something,” she said, squinting at me.

“The main bedroom is pretty big. Once Dad moves into the assisted-living facility, I can move in there. He doesn’t want me to give up the house when it’s already paid for, but it’s a big house for one guy, you know?”

“Jude,” she said, her voice a shaky whisper as her hand flew to her mouth. “Are you asking me what I think—”

“Move in with me. Call the real estate agent and tell her you already have a place.” I framed her face. “I want you with me every single day, not random nights stuffed into my childhood bedroom, or in Jake and Peyton’s bathroom. We deserve so much more than that, don’t you think?”

She sank her teeth into her bottom lip and nodded.

“And I want you to make our house as beautiful as you made this place.” I swiped the tears streaming down her cheeks with my thumbs. “Please, baby. Come home with me for the rest of my life.”

“I can’t”—my stomach dropped when she hiccupped a sob —“I can’t believe you’re asking me this here. I’m a fucking mess, and I’m supposed to be management and shit.” She wiped her face with the back of her hand.

“So, it’s a yes?” I chuckled as I dipped my head to meet her gaze.

“Of course it’s a yes,” she cried out, pressing her salty lips to mine. “I love you so much, you big jerk.”

“I love you too. More than I could ever say and more than you could ever imagine.” I drifted my thumb over her wet cheeks.

“The hell with the crowd.” She reached up and grabbed my wrists. “I own the place, right?”

“You sure do, baby,” I said and kissed the corner of her mouth. “Just like you own me.”

A huge smile spread across her face before she pressed her lips to mine, smiling into the kiss as she backed away.

“Then take me home.”

EPILOGUE

CLAUDIA

“WHOSE STUPID IDEA WAS IT TO HAVE HOLIDAY PARTIES?” I quipped as I swept the New Year’s streamers from behind the bar. “Oh, right. Mine.”

Abby chuckled as she tied another garbage bag closed. “And there’s confetti everywhere. Even the bathroom. People really got into it, so that’s good, right?”

“Right.” I tried to agree, hoping I’d be able to clean up the celebration remnants before Easter.

I was pretty sure the entire town had been packed into the bar last night, but the older crowd had cleared out before midnight. After decorating all day and being on my feet for most of the night, I’d been jealous of their departures and had wished I could join them. Jude had snuck in right under the wire to give me my New Year’s kiss, but at that time, we were both too exhausted to do anything other than pass out once we got home.

By Christmas, George had been all moved in. His apartment was small, but he seemed so happy and relieved to be there. He’d loved the tiny tree I’d bought him but ushered us out when we’d “lingered too long.”

It had almost felt like taking a kid to school for his first day, hoping and wishing all would be fine when we dropped him off. I missed seeing George in his regular chair when I walked into the living room or reading the newspaper at the kitchen table, but he was thriving in his new home with his old friends and a new lady friend we heard a lot about lately.

Jude was still getting used to his father living mostly alone, but he had no hang-ups about sex on the couch, against the kitchen counter, or basically anywhere we wanted now since we had the place to ourselves.

George encouraged us to fix up the house however we wanted, but as long as we had a nice big new bed and I could climb into it next to Jude every night, everything else could wait.

Moving in with Jude had been a big deal, but once I was there, it seemed too natural to be a milestone. Just like when I'd ended up here and asked Larry to buy his bar, I was simply where I was supposed to be.

"This is our last garbage bag, too," Brandon told me with a grimace.

"Seriously? And the market is closed for New Year's Day. I think Walmart is open at least until the afternoon." I stared at the brightly colored crumples of paper in the dustpan I was holding and groaned.

"I'll go. Hopefully everyone is sleeping off a hangover and the roads will be nice and empty."

"Oh, you're going now?" Cece asked, almost startled. "Up the highway?"

"Yeah, unless you know another way to get to the mall?" I narrowed my eyes. "I'll get my jacket and head over. Text me if you think of anything else we need."

When I came out of my office, ambling to the front as I zipped my jacket, I spotted all three of my staff in a secret conference.

"The least you can do is wait until your boss leaves before you talk about her," I joked, scrutinizing them even more when they jumped apart. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," Cece said, giving me an almost watery smile as she came up to me. "Have a nice drive."

"Guys, I'm going to Walmart, not off to war. What gives?"

"Nothing," Abby offered a little too quickly.

“Yeah, thanks for going for us. We should probably keep cleaning.” Brandon cleared his throat and headed into the back.

“You do that,” I said, eyeing them all as I made my way to the door.

I shook my head as I got into my car and started the engine. A call from Peyton came through as I pulled out of my spot and headed out of town.

“Hey, girl. That was an awesome party last night,” she told me on a yawn.

“It must have been if it’s ten in the morning and you’re still yawning like that.”

“Since Mom had Keely, Jake and I came home and—”

“Had your own party? I hope Mike was out or at least has invested in good noise-canceling headphones.”

“He spent the night at his friend’s house. How was the rest of *your* New Year’s since you came home to an empty house too?”

“Jude worked overtime because of the holiday, and we were both exhausted. I told him the blow job I gave him this morning counts as New Year’s sex until we both get home from work tonight.”

“And this is why I don’t put you on speaker. Are you in the car? I heard a turn signal.”

“I am. On my way to Walmart to get garbage bags since New Year’s threw up in my bar last night and we ran out.”

“You are?” Peyton asked as if she’d been jolted awake.

“You too? Cece, Abby, and Brandon were all acting like weirdos when I said I was going on the highway. I like Walmart well enough, but what is so damn special about my going there?” I asked just as I noticed flashing lights in my rearview mirror.

“Shit, Peyton. Let me call you back.”

I pressed the button on my steering wheel to end the call, hoping the cruiser behind me was just passing through. When I heard the familiar *woop-woop* from the siren, panic ripped through me as I pulled over.

Jude was going to be so mad at me. The last time I'd peeked at the dashboard, I was only doing seventy. It was a sixty-five zone, so it wasn't that much over the limit. Maybe Kelly Lakes cops had no jurisdiction a town over, but I had been outside town limits when Jude had gotten me for speeding, so this had to be one who worked with Jude. I bobbed my knee as I waited for the cop to get out of the car and approach me.

I had some cash on me. Maybe I could just pay the ticket now and this cop could file it fast and Jude wouldn't know. What a way to start a new year.

"License and registration, please."

My head whipped around to a familiar voice. I freaked out for a moment that Jude had pulled me over again for speeding until I spotted the quirk at the side of his mouth.

"There are better ways to say hi, babe. You almost gave me a heart attack." I pressed my hand to my chest and could feel the thump of my heart through my down jacket.

"Step out of the car, please." He backed away from the door, his eyes zeroed in on me exactly like they'd been that night.

"You're using the cruiser for role-play?" I whispered as I shut off my engine and opened my door. "I mean, it's fine with me, but sex on taxpayer time seems kind of—"

Jude was on one knee by the time I shut the door behind me.

"What...how?" I stammered as my nose burned.

"I may have asked Cece and Peyton to let me know the next time you went on the highway. I could have pulled you over in town, but it wouldn't have been the same. And you haven't left town in weeks."

“Weeks?” I screeched out. “That’s how long you had this planned?”

“Yes, and you didn’t make it easy.” He sighed and grabbed my hand. “I had no idea that the woman I pulled over that night was about to change my life. Or give me a life since I didn’t have one of my own before that. I know we already live together and we’re basically married already, but I want it on paper that you’re mine.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a velvet box. “Everything about you is amazing, and I want to be yours for the rest of my life. Ms. Ng, will you marry me?”

I let out a soggy laugh at “Ms. Ng.” I remembered feeling like the unluckiest woman alive the night fate had smiled on me, despite the fact that I’d never believed in it before.

“Yes,” I squawked out as Jude’s blue eyes lit up. “Absolutely fucking yes.”

He let out a relieved gust of air as he slid the ring on my finger and popped off the ground, pulling me into his arms for a long, deep kiss that I felt down to my toes.

“Does my father know?” I asked when we broke apart.

“Seriously? I asked him a while ago. I told him I was waiting for the right time to make it perfect, but he didn’t understand why that was taking so long.”

“You’re a sneak,” I murmured against his lips.

“And you need to slow down. I clocked you at seventy-five—”

“Shut up and kiss me, Sergeant.”

When I’d planned a quick escape from a bad day, I’d never imagined I would be coming home.

Want a glimpse of Jude and Claudia in the future, and the surprise they never expected?

[Click here!](#)

****If you are having any trouble tapping on the extra scene
please type twsspub.com/bonus/srrtb into your phone or
computer browser.****

WHAT TO READ NEXT?

If you loved *Raising The Bar*, for more steamy small town romance check out [An Unexpected Turn](#), an age gap/single dad romance, and [Starting Back](#), a single mom/firefighter romance, the first two standalone stories in the town of Kelly Lakes.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I would love to tell you that I'm an author who meticulously plots out series or books set in the same world. Truth be told, I let my characters tell me if they need a story, and usually I can tell early on who I may give a book to, but Claudia was unexpected. I didn't see her potential until the scene at Halman's in *Starting Back*. She got such a kick out of "life in the country", I knew she had to end up there and that she'd be the perfect sunshine to Jude's broody ways. Peeling back their layers as I watched both grow was a joy to write (and hopefully to read, too).

Kelly Lakes is a completely fictional town. Its inspiration comes from my summers in Lake George, New York, as a kid. I loved going into that small town at night and having a big cone from the ice cream parlor, playing skee ball at the tiny arcade, or just hanging by the lake during the day (like Claudia, I never wanted to wade too far in and have a run-in with a fish, but preteen me didn't have a Jude to carry me in). Coming from the Bronx, it seemed so serene and idyllic, and totally not what I was used to. The quiet hum of cicadas at night instead of sirens and city bustle made it difficult to sleep.

But as much as I love Hallmark romance, each standalone story wasn't a flawless fantasy. There are bullies and fights at the high school, residents dealing with past traumas and emotionally damaging marriages, and as Claudia put it, sometimes there are "bad guys in a small town."

But, to me, the strife brought out what was truly wonderful about Kelly Lakes. How even the nosy neighbors protect their

own and while life may not be perfect, its never too late to make it amazing.

I may come back to Kelly Lakes one day, but for now Claudia and Jude are the last of my plans for this small town. I hope you loved them and the entire crew as much as I did.

All the love,

Steph

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I will try to keep this short (and probably fail).

Thank you to my husband and son, for always being my biggest fans even if this writing gig makes me a little crazy sometimes.

To my betas: Jodi, Rachel, Lauren and Michelle. Thank you for pushing me to be my best with every single book.

Kathy, thank you for taking the time to make sure I showed Claudia's Asian heritage with accuracy and respect. Your love for this story means a lot to me.

To Lisa: For teaching me something new every time you edit and making me smile in the comments. I'm so happy I found you and that you kept me.

To Najla: For being your usual creative genius and giving me another gorgeous cover.

To Jodi: for all you do for me every day and for being my found family.

To Rachel: I don't deserve you, but you're stuck with me anyway.

To Lauren: It's great to have a good friend and beta within walking distance. Thanks for being my sounding board in plotting and in life.

To Michelle: You're a wonderful friend, word fluffer, and fist shaker. Thank you for all you do for me.

To Lona: My best decision of the year. Thank you for all your beautiful reels of my books that I'd never be able to make.

To Cece: Thanks for the truly perfect bar name.

To Lucy, Tim, Rick, Dan, and all my TWSS family: I'll never be able to thank you enough for all that you've done for

me. Thank you for all your support and what you've made possible.

To my hype friends, LJ and Kathryn: Our daily chat is fun, life-affirming, and sometimes my emergency hotline. I wouldn't know how to do author life without you guys.

To Karen for the advice and podcasts that make my days, to my Canadian sister wife and author idol Melanie, and all my author friends who guide me through this wonderful and sometimes very difficult journey. Real friends who get you through the lows and celebrate the highs are life's biggest blessings.

To my beloved Rose Garden: Thank you for always supporting me and being my safe and happy place.

To all the bloggers and bookstagrammers who took a chance on a girl from the Bronx who wanted to write, thank you for all you do for me and all of us. I appreciate anyone who picks up one of my books out of the millions that are out there.

I always say that when I first published in 2015, my goal was to have ten people who weren't related to me buy my book. Looking back from where I am now, almost nine years later, there is no way to express how grateful I am.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephanie Rose is a badass New Yorker, a wife, a mother, a former blogger and lover of all things chocolate. Most days you'll find her trying to avoid standing on discarded LEGO or deciding which book to read next. Her debut novel, *Always You*, released in 2015 and since then she's written several more—some of which will never see completion—and has ideas for hundreds to come.

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The Boy I Shouldn't Want

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The Marriage Solution