

# RULE



**NICOLE**  
*NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR*  
**EDWARDS**



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RULE

BY NICOLE EDWARDS  
**THE COYOTE RIDGE UNIVERSE**

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Ethan  
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Brendon

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RULE

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RULE

NICOLE EDWARDS



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## RULE

Standalone

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Sometimes it's only in the darkness that we can see the light.

# PROLOGUE

## Rule

### EIGHTEEN YEARS AGO...

“What the fuck’s keepin’ you here?” I muttered to myself, staring at the parking lot across the street.

The question was philosophical. One I’d been pondering since I turned eighteen just fifty-seven days ago. Each time I asked myself that, I came up with only two reasons, both weighing heavily in the pro column, for why I should pack up my shit and move on from this dusty little town.

First, I had no family.

Not since the bio-parents dropped me off at the local police department lobby and high-tailed it outta Dodge when I was two.

Second, I had no friends.

Not since Creed left, getting the hell out of Oklahoma the first chance he got.

If I were smart, I would get the hell out, too. I had options. I could head south to the little college town Creed now called home. Last I heard, he was settling in nicely. Learning how to fight, of all things. Professionally, I mean. The asshole knew how to fight because I’d taught him. I’d learned my lesson on more than one occasion not to fuck with him.

The thought made me smile.

Creed had been a scrawny little fucker with his nose stuck in a book when I came around. The kids picked on him like he was the only nerd in the bunch. Didn’t matter that he’d shot up a foot in a year. They’d treated him like he was four feet tall, not over six feet before his junior year.

Then again, size didn't matter when you cowered and let them beat on you, which was precisely what that fool did until I taught him how to throw a punch and explained that throwing the first one was the only way to win respect.

It was just one of my many rules. Hence the name. I had a few dozen that I was known for in this tiny little shit-hole town, and one of them was to never back down from a dare. So when some jackass at school dared me to legally change my name, I did. I mean, it wasn't like the one I'd been given was sentimental or anything. When the cops picked my diaper-clad ass up off the floor of their lobby, they hadn't known what to call me. After two weeks of trying to find out where I came from and coming up empty, they'd been just as clueless, so some social worker who felt sorry for me gave me a name. And the day I turned eighteen, I gave it back and chose my own, ignoring the sideways sneer of the woman who processed the application. No, I didn't have a last name because I didn't fucking want one, thank you very much.

Too bad finding a job and a place to live wasn't as easy as changing your identity. At eighteen, I had neither. Not since I'd been kicked out of Purgatory, the group home I'd been sent to when I was twelve. Although I wouldn't go back there if someone paid me, I wouldn't deny it had been easier when I was there.

Yeah, we referred to it as the place sinners went to repent for their sins, but it wasn't nearly as bad as we all made it out to be. There were three squares a day, a room with a television, and beds to sleep in. Granted, when you'd been shit on by the world, you tended to think of everything as your own personal hellhole. At least at Purgatory, there'd been someone to entertain me—generally, the stupid assholes who ran the place.

There'd also been structure. Out here in the real world, I was ambling around aimlessly. Even with two jobs, I had too damn much time on my hands. Then again, night stocking at Walmart and part-time stocking at Dollar Tree weren't exactly mentally stimulating. I made just enough to keep the rent-by-the-week room at the local no-tell motel while scarfing down three meals a day via the dollar menu at McDonald's.

It would've been easy to hitch a ride south and find Creed. I could probably find tons of shit to keep me busy in the college town he landed in. But no, here I was, trying to do something good.

"Come on, man. Don't be a dick. Just let him be," I muttered, shaking my head when the redheaded asshole stood tall and pointed at the kid coming out of the convenience store.

I wasn't sure why I even bothered to play guardian angel to the kid, but for some stupid reason, I couldn't help myself. Clearly, I wasn't doing it for thanks because the kid I'd been keeping an eye on would just as soon put a bullet in my head for trying to interfere with his life. Or it was possible he wanted to hug me. Truth is, I didn't know the first thing about what was going on in his head. And since he didn't talk, no one else knew, either. But that was Jinx for you. Rumor was he could talk. He merely chose not to. Again, no one really knew for sure.

Not that I was interfering so much as keeping tabs. And it was a damn good thing I was. That fucking kid found trouble everywhere he looked. And just like Creed had, this one never fought back. I'd tried to teach him how to throw a punch, even incited him enough to make him want to hit me a time or two, but he never took the bait.

He wasn't taking it now, either.

I pulled the squished red and white box from my back pocket and popped a cigarette out of the pack. I stared at the scene across the street, wondering if it would escalate quickly or continue like this—with two assholes talking shit while the kid stood there and took it—for another half hour. Something had to give soon, or I was going to go over there and punch the kid myself.

I put the cigarette between my lips, wishing I could hear what those fuck-ups were saying. Not that it mattered. The kid wasn't going to respond. He never did. I'd never heard him speak a single word in the two years I'd known him. According to the counselors at Purgatory, he was mute. As for whether it was a medical condition or a personal preference, I

didn't know. I didn't give a shit, either. For the life of me, I didn't know what the fuck I was doing here now.

I dug my lighter out of my pocket and lit the cigarette, taking a long, deep pull and letting the nicotine ease the chaos in my head. It worked, although I knew it was merely another lie I told myself to find some comfort in this world. The nicotine did nothing for the racing thoughts or the constant mental calculations, but for a few brief moments, I could focus on something else. With every puff, I'd trained myself to ignore everything but the cigarette. Bad habit, sure, but it was a vice I couldn't kick. It was the only reprieve I had because my brain worked overtime to process everything I saw and heard, keeping track of it even when I would've preferred to forget forever.

Some cocksucking asshole who called himself a school counselor said it was an eidetic memory and that I had a gift. Ass kissing bastard. That same motherfucker had spent the better part of three years with my dick in his fucking mouth. He'd wanted to pick my brain and learn what made me tick—under the guise of offering me guidance and helping to prepare me for college—and I'd wanted my dick sucked, so it had worked out well. Provided you didn't figure in the fact that I'd been fourteen the first time he put his fucking face in my crotch. At the time, I hadn't given a shit that he was nearly thirty or a fucking pervert with a penchant for boys. I'd used that fucker's mouth for all he was worth. For three solid years. Right up until he was hauled away in handcuffs when the principal walked in and caught us.

As for his diagnosis, no, the photographic memory wasn't a goddamn gift. It was a fucking curse. My intelligence level had made it impossible to blend in with the other pathetic losers who'd ended up in Purgatory with me. Instead, I had that fucker keeping tabs, exploiting me every chance he got.

For the year after he was arrested, I found a bit of peace. It was during that downtime that I met the kid. He'd been the newest guest at Purgatory—number eight at the time—and from the first day he arrived, I knew he would have to fight to survive. The staff called him Chester—which didn't help the



ridicule—but I called him Jinx. I still remember the day I'd given him the nickname.

*“Did you get your homework finished?” Tony asked, hand on his hip as he stared at us.*

*I glanced at the kid sitting beside me on the couch, wondering if this would be the time he finally spoke.*

*He didn't. Neither did I.*

*“You better get it done,” Tony said, attempting to sound stern. He sucked at it. It was his fault. He tried so fucking hard to be everyone's friend it was impossible to take him seriously as some sort of authority figure.*

*Tony glanced between the two of us, then sighed before stomping off.*

*I glanced over at the kid. “Jinx. Owe me a coke.”*

*His light blue eyes swung to my face. His forehead scrunched in confusion.*

*“It's a game,” I explained. “You know. Two people say the same thing at the same time...”*

*It was clear he had no idea what I was talking about.*

*“We didn't say anything,” I drawled. “At the same time.”*

*He continued to stare as though I'd lost my mind.*

*I chuckled and turned my attention back to the television. “No worries, Jinx. It's all good.”*

From that day onward, I called him Jinx. If he didn't like it, he could tell me. Otherwise...

As for the kid having to fight to survive, I wasn't wrong. Proven by the shit he was enduring at the moment.

I took a final drag on the cigarette and flicked it across the street before pulling out another one. As soon as I lit it, the verbal exchange in the parking lot got heated. I guess, technically, there was no *exchange* unless you considered the mouth vomit spewing from both bullies since Jinx was ... well, he was being Jinx. All quiet and shit.

One of the assholes stepped up to Jinx, chest-bumping him. From where I was, I couldn't hear what the asshole was saying, but his mouth was moving, and an endless spew of bullshit was coming out.

Of course, Jinx didn't do anything. He never did.

"Come on, kid," I muttered. "Make a fist and punch that asshole in the face."

Jinx's arms remained at his side, his eyes on the bully.

I sighed. If only he would stand up for himself, people wouldn't fuck with him. He was no longer the scrawny kid who'd landed on Purgatory's doorstep two years ago. He'd come into his own, sprouting up to nearly six feet not too long ago. He was taller than the bully, but you wouldn't know it by the way he backed away slowly.

I stared, waiting for the moment when Jinx would finally turn and leave. It usually happened right about ...

As though on cue, Jinx turned away and started walking.

I grinned, proud the kid hadn't instigated a fight. He couldn't throw a punch for shit, so it usually resulted in—

My attention was on Jinx, so I didn't notice the kid coming up behind him until he nailed Jinx in the back of the head with what looked to be a metal pipe. Before Jinx's limp body hit the ground, I flicked the cigarette away and started running toward them.

"You're such a pussy, your momma didn't even want you," the fucker shouted, whacking Jinx in the back while his friend delivered a boot to Jinx's ribs.

The cocksuckers were going to pay for that.

My feet ate up the asphalt even as my lungs tightened from exertion. Stupid fucking cigarettes.

The kid who'd hit him was laughing, banging Jinx's shoulder with the pipe. "Get up, motherfucker. Be a man, not a fucking pussy."

Jinx's limp body shook from the impact of their blows. He didn't even move to block them, his head completely unprotected from the next whack with the pipe.

"Son of a bitch," I growled, anger surging in my bloodstream.

Jinx's eyes were closed, and blood was pooling under his head.

As soon as I saw it, a red haze clouded my vision. I didn't stop running. Not until I plowed right into the fucker with the pipe, taking him to the ground. The impact knocked him back. We skidded when I landed on him. The pipe fell to the concrete with a clang, rolling out of reach. I was aware of the air being knocked from the fucker's lungs, but I didn't give him a chance to breathe before I started wailing on him. He never saw it coming, but the same couldn't be said for his friend. That fucker grabbed the pipe and swung it like a Louisville slugger, hitting me square in the jaw and knocking me for a loop before I realized what had happened.

As soon as my brain registered another threat, I went after him.

Time became inconsequential as I pounded the shit out of the two motherfuckers, taking punches but delivering three times as many. By the time someone came to pull me off, the fucker who'd hit Jinx with the pipe was unrecognizable, and the other was stumbling like he was drunk.

The cop who pulled me off earned a punch for surprising me, which tacked on a little more time to the multiple assault charges I earned—including assaulting a minor because those stupid fuckers were sixteen.

The good news was Jinx would live.

The bad news was I would spend the next six years in prison.

That was the day I learned the universe sometimes answered philosophical questions for you.

As they say, no good deed goes unpunished.

\* \* \*

# Jinx

## TWELVE YEARS AGO...

I parked my car outside the gates of the Oklahoma State Penitentiary and got out. The sun beat down overhead, the slight breeze doing little to diminish the heat that rose from the asphalt. I swiped a hand over my head and leaned against the car, ready to settle in for the long haul.

Aside from *sometime today*, I had no idea when Rule would walk out of that place, but I intended to be there when he did, if for no other reason than to give him a ride wherever he wanted to go. It was the least I could do, really. I mean, the man had saved my life. Probably.

Of course, no one knew what those assholes would've done that day if he hadn't intervened. Maybe they beat me to death. Maybe they left me to bleed out. Maybe they grew a conscience and called 911. Considering I spent several days in the intensive care unit after having my head bashed open with a steel pipe, I figured instead of forking over the money for the hospital stay, the state would've applied it to the pine box they tucked me in and buried me in the dirt.

No one knew for sure how it would've turned out because those dickheads hadn't been given an opportunity to make a life-or-death decision. Rule had done that for them.

Because Rule had been there, here I was, ready to return the favor in some way.

I only hoped no one came out to ask me what I was doing. I hadn't spoken a single word since I was eight years old, and I wasn't even sure I was capable at this point. Of course, that probably hadn't helped Rule's cause much since I hadn't opened my mouth to relay what happened that day. I tried. Honestly. I'd spent days trying to muster the courage to get a syllable out of my mouth, but in the end, I failed epically. Another reason I owed Rule. For all I knew, he might've avoided jail time altogether if I could've told them he had

saved my life. Instead, those dickheads told the cops that Rule was the one responsible for my beating, too, and they'd walked away without so much as a slap on the wrist.

They only *thought* they'd gotten away with it, but they forgot I knew the truth.

Six months after I got out of the hospital, I returned the favor when I hacked their parents' bank accounts and drained every penny, moving it to an account I created in their names. I purposely made it somewhat easy to discover, and two months later, the FBI tracked it back to those two dickheads.

Oh, did I mention I concocted a nefarious, if not fictional, plan—complete with traceable email correspondence—where they hired a hitman to eliminate their parents? Yeah. That was me. No, the charges didn't stick, but watching them squirm as the media compared them to the Menéndez brothers, claiming they nearly got away with killing their parents in order to inherit their millions was rather satisfying.

Minutes ticked by as I stared at the enormous white stone building and briefly wondered what went on inside those walls. I didn't really want to find out, but like so many other things, I was curious. Perhaps one day, Rule would tell me.

As though I'd summoned him from my thoughts, the large chainlink gates began to open, and a single guard escorted Rule away from the building, delivering him to freedom.

As soon as he passed the gate, it began to close.

Wow.

That wasn't the same guy I remembered. Somewhere along the way, my memories had been jumbled because I didn't recall him being quite so fucking ... big. And I wasn't talking about him being over six feet tall. It was the breadth of his damn shoulders that tripped me up now. He'd put on some serious muscle during his time in there.

I stared at him, wondering if he would even remember me. Six years was a long time, after all, and I wasn't a scrawny fifteen-year-old anymore.

While he'd spent his time locked in a cell, I'd focused my efforts on graduating from high school and making money. Since college wasn't an option, I started out with part-time jobs. Due to my inability to speak, finding something suitable hadn't been easy, but I'd found work in a garage, tinkering under the hoods of cars and handling the maintenance jobs for the shop. It paid enough to keep my head above water and gave me something to do while I waited for this day.

But it was what I'd done with my spare time that had made the difference. I'd bought a laptop with my first paycheck and used it to make real money. I'd learned from my hitman setup that I had a real knack for computers. More specifically, for gaining access to places I shouldn't. People paid hefty for that skill, and that was the money I invested. A few good gambles and I was now set for life.

When Rule looked my way, I tilted my chin in acknowledgment, noticing the way his dark eyebrows pinched.

“Who're you?” he asked, angling toward me.

I lifted my eyebrows in response.

“Jinx?”

I hadn't heard that name in six years. To everyone else, I was Chester Mahoney, the poor kid who'd been taken away from his drug-addicted parents because they preferred to snort a line rather than feed their kid.

I nodded.

That was all it took because a smile pulled at Rule's mouth, and his dark brown eyes glittered with recognition.

“I'll be damned. You grew up.” His eyes raked downward, then slowly back up. “And shaved off all your hair.”

I jerked my chin in agreement, then gestured toward the car.

“You're offerin' me a ride?”

I nodded, then pulled a cell phone out of my pocket and passed it to him.

Rule frowned but took the phone. “What’s this for?”

I pulled out my phone and texted the number I’d entered in my address book.

The phone buzzed in Rule’s hand, and he stared at the screen.

“Thanks?” Rule said, then looked at me.

I nodded.

“Thanks for what?”

I typed a response.

“For savin’ your life.” Rule laughed, and I felt that strange buzz in my chest that I’d felt all those years ago when I first heard it.

So maybe I had a slight crush on the man. So what? Not like I was going to make shit weird for him or anything.

“Dude, seriously?”

I nodded, gesturing to the car once more.

The expression on his face said he was contemplating the idea of getting in. It was obvious to both of us that he didn’t have any other options, but he wouldn’t be Rule if he didn’t pretend otherwise. Which was why his next question didn’t surprise me.

“What’s in it for me?” he prompted, moving closer to the car.

I was about to text a response, but he stopped me with another laugh.

“I’m kidding, Jinx.”

I wouldn’t pretend my insides didn’t warm simply from hearing that name. While Rule didn’t know what his actions had done for me, I did. And as far as I was concerned, he was the only person in the world who’d ever stood up for me. For that, I owed him.

“If you really want to thank me for savin’ your life, I’ll take the car.”

When the punchline didn't come, I figured I had two options. I could get in the car and leave him, or I could pass over the keys.

In all fairness, there really was only one option.

I held up the keyring.

Rule's eyes widened, but then that heart-stopping smile appeared. "You always were too fucking soft."

Oh, if he only knew. There wasn't anything soft about me. At the moment, I meant that literally.

"You're not what I expected, Jinx." He shook his head and reached for the passenger door handle. "Come on. Let's get the fuck outta here."

Two hours later, we were bellied up to the bar with beers in front of us. Rule was carrying on a conversation with the bartender, an old guy who seemed rather impressed that Rule had spent the past six years in prison.

"I bet you're hard-up for some pussy, huh?"

Or maybe stupefied was a better adjective. The guy was fixated on the fact Rule hadn't gotten laid by a woman in all that time.

Rule cast a glance my way and smirked.

Admittedly, I was curious as to the answer, but not for the same reason as the dude with the wire-brush eyebrows.

Before Rule could respond, a skinny blonde shuffled up beside him, sliding her fingers over his shoulder as though she knew him intimately.

"Did I hear correctly? You're looking for a date, sugar?"

Rule snorted. "*Honey*, I don't date."

I wasn't sure whether Rule understood the meaning of date in this regard. The too-skinny woman certainly wasn't looking for a night out on the town or dinner by candlelight.



“Well then, how about some relief?” she offered, lowering her voice in an attempt at seduction.

“Naw,” he said, shrugging her hand off his shoulder.

His rejection didn’t faze her. “What about you, sugar?”

I met her hazy gaze and shook my head.

“Well, that’s too bad. The three of us coulda had a good time.”

The three of us?

Rule snorted. “Darlin’, I assure you, you can’t handle us both at the same time.”

I took a long pull on my beer and watched the exchange as the blonde did her best to convince Rule he didn’t know what he was talking about. Their verbal volley was just getting good when the cell phone I’d given Rule rang.

He glanced at the screen, then over to me, and grinned.

“Yo, Creed. Good to know you’re still alive,” Rule said when he answered.

I couldn’t hear what was being said on the other end, but I caught Rule’s side of the conversation. It sounded like he was catching up with an old friend.

“California? No shit?” Rule’s dark brown gaze shot to me. “I might be able to make it out that way, sure.”

I nodded because it seemed Rule was expecting a response, and to be fair, nothing was keeping me here. The only reason I was still in Oklahoma was because of this man.

“A job?” Rule chuckled and glanced down at his beer. “Naw, man. I don’t need a job. I’ve got somethin’ in the works, and Cali’s just the place to implement it.”

His comment piqued my curiosity, and I waited for him to finish the call, waving off the bartender when he asked if I wanted another beer.

“I wouldn’t say no to a loan though,” Rule said. “I’ll pay you back with interest.”

For the next few minutes, Rule's voice lowered, and he was nodding his head as he spoke. By the time he hung up, his grin had returned.

"You up for a road trip?"

I nodded.

"You sure?"

I cocked my head and fought the urge to roll my eyes.

"How long will it take you to pack your shit up?"

I shrugged.

"Will it fit in the car?"

I nodded.

"Will that POS get us to California?"

I nodded.

Rule's grin was slow and sly, and there was a twinkle in his eyes when he downed what was left of his beer and got to his feet.

"What do you say we get on with the rest of our lives?"

He didn't have to tell me twice.

\* \* \*

## Laikyn Quinn

SIX YEARS AGO...

*"I'm on my way, Monica. I'm leaving the house right now."*

*"You were supposed to be here an hour ago," my mother insisted, her tone shrill.*

*That was Monica Quinn, the queen of melodrama.*

*"No. I'm supposed to be there an hour from now. But you got your way, like always. I'm on my way."*

*"Don't talk back to me, young lady. Hurry up."*

*“Be there in twenty minutes.”*

That was the last thing I remembered as I came to, lying on the hard, cold ground. I grabbed for my dress to drag it over my legs but fumbled around and felt nothing.

Nothing but bone-penetrating cold.

Nothing but icy concrete.

Nothing but skin.

In a panic, still curled up on the floor, my hands shifted over every inch of my body from my neck to my toes. A sob tore free from my constricted chest when I realized I was naked.

*What happened? Where the hell am I?*

A loud noise drew my head up fast, my eyes searching the near pitch blackness for the source. I pressed one hand to the frigid stone floor and pushed myself up to a sitting position, but I didn't get further than that. My arms felt like they were weighed down. My head throbbed. Nausea blazed a righteous path through me when I peered around, trying desperately to penetrate the darkness for something to ground me.

“Wakey, wakey, princess!” The voice echoed in the space.

The only light came from a sliver underneath a doorway at the top of the stairs. The golden glow didn't reach far enough to show anything except a sea of blackness beneath.

The sound came again—like a steel pipe being banged against metal—serenaded by whistling. The reverberation was as deafening as the initial strike, growing louder by the second.

“About fucking time. Thought you was dead.”

I could barely make out the silhouette of a man standing a few feet away. The only thing separating us was a door constructed of thin vertical bars. A crescendo of metal on metal split the air, then the door opened with a squeak.

“Cover yourself up,” he snarled, tossing something at me.

A dark, coarse blanket hit me in the face, causing him to laugh. It smelled like cigarettes and body odor, but I clutched it like a lifeline, dragging it around my body and fisting it tightly. It did little to ward off the chill, but at least it concealed my nakedness.

“Otherwise, I’ll treat you like a whore.” His words brought with them the stench of cigarettes and rot. Or maybe that was what bone-penetrating fear smelled like.

Something smacked the floor directly in front of me. It looked like a plate, but it was too dark to see what was on it. A water bottle landed next, bouncing when it hit the concrete before rolling away from me.

“Who are you?” I choked out, but even I knew the garbled words made no sense. My throat was on fire, my brain fuzzy, and I sounded like I’d just come from the dentist after having the numbing drug injected into my gums.

I swallowed past the pain in my throat and repeated my question.

“Name’s Diggy. I’m your babysitter for the foreseeable future, princess.”

Based on his tone, he was proud of his job title.

“What do you want from me?”

“Your virginity would be a good start.” He laughed like a hyena choking on a coconut. “Unless you want that to happen, that’s your last fucking question.”

I didn’t bother telling him I’d lost my virginity when I was fifteen. In the boy’s locker room, the night the Beverly Bulls won the homecoming game. I’d bet Rory Bingham, the star quarterback—also my boyfriend—that they wouldn’t win. I’d paid my marker with my body and hadn’t regretted a single second. Didn’t matter at the moment, obviously. Plus, if believing I was a virgin kept this creepy asshole’s hands off me, all the better.

The metal door slammed closed, the bang echoing over the concrete walls and floor.

“Maybe this’ll keep you company,” he chuckled.

A light flashed on, washing the room in a blue-white glow. I got my first glimpse of my accommodations, which included a toilet in the far corner and a drain in the floor. It took a second for me to realize the glow wasn’t coming from a light but rather an LED clock mounted on the wall over the door. It read 14:00:00.

Was that military time? Two o’clock? *How long was I out?*

The man laughed. “Sit tight, shut up, and you might make it back to your mommy and daddy in one piece.”

I stared at the dark outline of his body as he loomed in the doorway. Whoever this guy was, he didn’t know me. At least not the way he thought he did. If he had a clue who I was, he would’ve realized I didn’t have a dad—my mother claimed she had no idea who he was. Worse than that, I doubted Monica Quinn could be bothered enough to pay the ransom, much less put too much effort into looking for me. To say she was a narcissistic, self-centered bitch would be an understatement. And since the disappearance of her seventeen-year-old daughter would bring the press out in droves, I was sure Monica would have exactly what she wanted: attention. If I had to guess, she would drag this out as long as possible.

“Aww, do you miss your mommy and daddy?” he taunted. “So sad for you.”

Whatever hope might’ve flickered in my chest was snuffed out quickly because this guy ... he was clearly the hired help. A henchman, a lackey. He was nobody, and he probably had nothing to lose.

He was also the only person I would see for the next thirteen days, twenty-two hours, and forty-two minutes. I knew because that clock wasn’t a clock after all. It was a timer depicting days, hours, and minutes. It started counting down from fourteen days, the amount of time I had left to live if my mother didn’t pay the fifty million dollar ransom.

My pervy jailer never realized that the fifty million dollar demand only ensured I wasn’t abused during my captivity. My

kidnapper's greed worked in my favor. Acted as a safety net that ensured Diggy didn't touch me and that I was given enough food and water to keep me alive.

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***12 days, 18 hours, 57 minutes remaining***

"Tell me, princess. What's it like to be the daughter of a Hollywood queen?" Diggy asked when he brought me breakfast the following day.

Breakfast, as it turned out, was a piece of stale bread and a bottle of water.

"It's fine," I told him, knowing I had to give him some form of an answer or risk him coming in here.

He let loose with a broken cough as he pulled a cigarette from behind his ear. "Fine? That's all you've got to say? I've seen the magazines."

I was surprised he could read.

"She's always out with some Casanova-lookin' motherfucker." He put the cigarette between his lips and talked around it. "Bet your dad don't like that shit."

"No," I agreed. Since I didn't have a clue who my father was and since he wasn't around, I could pretend that was the truth.

Diggy took a moment to produce a cheap plastic lighter. It took him three times to get the flame to appear. The end of the cigarette burned red when he took a deep drag in.

"I wouldn't either. I'd beat her ass if she did that shit to me." He blew out a long stream of smoke. "You look like her."

That wasn't true, but I nodded as though agreeing. Monica Quinn was what the press called camera-worthy. Five foot ten with long dark hair, alabaster skin, and giant boobs that hadn't required a scalpel, my mother was front page news on plenty of tabloids, not to mention primetime entertainment news. I'd gotten her height and her dark hair, but that was where our similarities ended. Everything about me was average. My boobs weren't big, but they weren't small. My hips weren't

curvy, but they weren't narrow. My butt wasn't rounded, but it wasn't flat. My complexion was more on the tan side, something I assumed I'd gotten from my father, whoever he was. Where Monica Quinn was long and lithe, I was tall and plain.

“Does she really fuck all those guys?” Diggy asked.

“Yes,” I said because it was true.

The paparazzi loved Monica Quinn because she was always giving them a story, stringing them along on one of her sexcapades, of which she had many. During interviews, she said she was blessed with a body for sin and saw no reason not to let others enjoy it. She said she adored sex scenes in a movie and insisted on going Method. I hadn't realized what that meant until recently when I learned she'd had affairs with most of her co-stars—regardless of their marital status.

Needless to say, her adoring fans were not usually the people she worked with.

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### ***11 days, 4 hours, 35 minutes remaining***

“I've been reading up on you, princess,” Diggy said, initiating conversation as he had been doing every day since I'd been there.

I waited patiently for him to toss me the bread and water, but it didn't come.

“You're smart, huh?”

“Yes,” I admitted, willing to say whatever was necessary to get food.

As it was, my stomach felt like a giant black hole. The only thing I'd had for the past two days was two pieces of bread and two bottles of water. I wasn't sure if he was rationing it or merely fucking with me. With Diggy, I couldn't tell. I was trying to get a read on him to decide whether he might listen to reason and let me go if I could offer him something of value, but so far, the only thing I'd learned was

that he was nosy as hell, enjoyed reading trashy gossip magazines, and smelled like he hadn't showered in a decade.

"How come you're not hot like your mom?" he asked as though it truly was a disappointment.

I was long past being offended that people didn't think I was as beautiful as my mother. I'd seen pictures of her at seventeen, and Monica Quinn had been a beauty even then.

"There's lots of pictures of you," he mused, flipping the page of a magazine. "You should wear makeup."

I didn't contribute to the conversation. I didn't figure it was necessary. Plus, I had no desire to take fashion advice from an idiot.

"You're always by yourself." Diggy looked up. "You ain't got no friends?"

Because he was expecting an answer, I shook my head.

"I can tell." He glanced down at the magazine. "Too bad. They might be looking for you if you had any."

Yeah, that *was* too bad. But the truth was, I didn't really have friends. The people I hung around with were more like acquaintances. The reason being none of their parents trusted my mother.

I couldn't blame them. My best friend from middle school had learned the hard way what it meant to be close to me. My mother had seduced her mother—Monica didn't discriminate against gender when it came to playing her games. That brief affair resulted in a divorce and, ultimately, the loss of my best friend.

My social status dwindled even more when Monica seduced the principal at the beginning of this year. He left his wife for her only to learn Monica was over him. To top it off, he got fired when my mother accused him of making inappropriate advances on her daughter.

It never happened, but you wouldn't know it to hear Monica tell the lie. She was good at making shit up.



“I’ll be your friend, princess. All you gotta do is drop that blanket and show me your rack.”

*Not happening, Diggy. Not in this lifetime.*

---

***9 days, 17 hours, 3 minutes remaining***

“Come on, princess. Just show me your tits, and I’ll let you take a shower.”

*I would rather sit in my own stench, thank you very much.*

And that was what I did.

---

***7 days, 8 hours, 52 minutes remaining***

“Hey, princess! Good news!”

The clanging sound that announced Diggy’s arrival was louder than usual. As was his whistling.

I wasn’t sure if I was dying or just dehydrated, but I’d started shivering early this morning, and no matter how much I burrowed into the stiff, scratchy blanket, it wasn’t doing any good.

“The whore you call Mom said she’d pay the money. Shouldn’t be too much longer.”

I peered around the blanket to see him leering at me. He couldn’t see anything beneath the blanket, but based on his expression, he saw everything.

“You sure you don’t want that shower?”

It was tempting, if for no other reason than I needed to get warm. But the mere thought of him watching me while I was naked ... I let the tremors rack my body and shook my head.

“Your loss, princess.”

---

***5 days, 3 hours, 13 minutes remaining***

“Dude, she’s sick or something,” Diggy said, his phone to his ear.

I remained curled on the floor, the bread and water he'd brought me for the past two days untouched nearby.

"She ain't eating."

*Pause.*

"I've tried."

*Pause.*

"I can go in there if you want. I'll be happy to check her for a fever. You do that by sticking a finger up her ass, right?"

The chipper sound of his voice had me stirring, attempting to sit up. I would pretend I wasn't tormented by fever if it would keep his nasty hands off me.

"She's moving now. I think she's better."

He disconnected the call and tucked his phone in his pocket. If only I could get that phone, then maybe I could call for help. But I'd tried persuading Diggy already, so I knew he wouldn't cave easily. And I damn sure wasn't going to sell my body for a five-minute phone call. I would rather die here than do that.

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### ***3 days, 15 hours, 6 minutes remaining***

"There's a bunch of shit about your mom on the internet," Diggy mused. "So much shit."

He was sitting on the other side of the bars with a laptop in front of him.

"Did you know she was at a party last night?" He snorted. "I guess she don't care too much about you, huh?"

I tried to mentally calculate what day it was, but time had ceased to exist. The only thing I had to go on was the countdown clock. Assuming I hadn't been here long when he first turned it on, my best guess was that it was Tuesday, March 20<sup>th</sup>. Eleven days since my arrival. Which meant my mother hadn't been at a party but a fundraiser, one of many she participated in. Not because she wanted to raise money for a worthy cause. No, Monica Quinn was far too narcissistic for

that. She went so she could be caught on camera doing something that made her look like she cared. If I had to guess, she took some poor, unsuspecting sap back to the house and pretended she was in love with him.

She did that a lot, both taking people to her bed and claiming she was in love. It never lasted more than seventy-two hours at most, and I'd long ago stopped thinking she would fall in love. I didn't think she was capable of it—another trait I had acquired from her. Although I told Rory Bingham that I loved him, I was lying. I'd wanted to lose my virginity to him, and those three words had gotten me what I wanted. Since then, I'd told him the same thing at least a hundred times. I even smiled when he returned the sentiment, but deep down, I felt nothing.

“You sure you don't want that shower now?” he asked, once again leering as he closed the laptop. “I could help you out. Wash your back.”

His cackling made my head pound, but I shook my head and feigned a sweetness I no longer felt. I'd done my best not to lash out because I didn't doubt for a second that Diggy would hurt me. He wanted to. I could see the gleam of menace in his eyes. Why he was keeping his distance, I didn't know, but I was grateful.

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***0 days, 1 hour, 18 minutes remaining***

“Time's almost up, princess,” Diggy announced as he strolled in, clanging his metal pole along the bars of my cell. “Good news is I get to do whatever I want to you when that clock hits all zeroes. I'm thinking I'll start by shoving this pole up your twat. Get rid of that pesky virginity.”

He cackled, but a disgusting hacking sound followed it.

“I'd use my dick, but I'm gonna stick that in your ass. I'm gonna fuck you so hard, you'll cry for your—”

A sound from above caused Diggy to stop suddenly. He spun on his heel and stared at the doorway before stomping off.

“Javier, is that you?”

Javier? I wondered if he was the guy behind this. Maybe he would listen to reason.

I sat up, praying someone had finally found me and I wasn't about to be traded to an asshole who would do worse than threaten to do bad things to me.

“Hey!” Diggy shouted as he slammed through the door at the top of the stairs. “Who the fuck—”

There was a muffled pop followed by a heavy thud on the floor above. I held my breath and stared at the open doorway at the top of the stairs. What if no one came down here? What if I was left in this cell to rot? What if—?

A man appeared, this one far more menacing than Diggy. I clutched the blanket tighter and inched back toward the wall, praying this wasn't the end while at the same time hoping perhaps it would be because I was tired. Tired of being here. Tired of my life in general. I wanted to go home.

I moved back a little more when the man produced a key ring. The click of the lock was so loud and so welcome that tears sprang to my eyes.

The man didn't enter, but he held out his hand to me. “You want to go home?”

I nodded.

“Can you walk?”

I shrugged.

“I'm gonna carry you.” He took off the button-down shirt he wore over a T-shirt. “If you're opposed to that, tell me now.”

I hesitated for a moment, weighing my options. I honestly didn't think I had enough strength to get to my feet, much less walk up all those stairs.

“You don't have to fear me,” he said, his voice smooth like fine Swiss chocolate. “Here. Put this on.”

He held out the shirt, and I took it with trembling fingers. As soon as I clutched it, he turned away from me. Clearly giving me privacy.

The shirt was soft and smelled good, so I hurried to shove my arms in the sleeves, then fumbled with the buttons to conceal my nakedness.

“You decent?”

“Yes,” I rasped, my throat so dry it hurt.

He slowly turned around to face me. “You have a problem with me carrying you?”

Deciding it was my only option, I shook my head.

He approached slowly, as though hoping to wrangle a feral cat but not eager for it to claw his face off.

When he crouched down, I tossed the blanket aside and fought the tears that threatened when he gently slid his arms beneath my knees and behind my back.

“I’ve got you, girl,” my savior whispered as he lifted me into his arms. “You’re going home.”

The good news was my mother *did* pay someone to look for me.

What I didn’t realize was that she would go so far as to hire a brutal, ruthless man to do the search and rescue. Diggy died mid-rant when a bullet hit him right between the eyes. A bullet from the gun of my savior, the same man I would eventually sell my soul to—intentionally or due to circumstance, I wouldn’t know until much, much later.

Too bad my mother didn’t realize it would’ve been cheaper to pay the fifty million, although I never understood why anyone would’ve thought I was worth that much to her.

# 1

*Five years and six months later,*

*Present day...*

## Rule

A LOT OF PEOPLE BELIEVED I LIVED a glamorous life. As though being a sin eater for the rich and famous somehow made me royalty. It didn't.

Yes, it paid ridiculously well. Why wouldn't it? I did illegal shit to cover up stupid shit. I was taking all the risk, so yeah, I insisted on being paid well for it. Could you blame me?

However, there was no glamor that came along with doing this job. It afforded me a nice place to live and work, but that was all window dressing. Underneath was where it got interesting.

Parking my car at the curb, I got out and fed the meter. I could've driven down the alley behind the building and parked in the lot we shared with a few other businesses, but this was easier. Waiting for the gate to retract was a test of my patience, and everyone knew I had very little on a good day. It was still too early to tell whether today qualified as good.

The tree-lined side street was fairly empty, but the same couldn't be said for Sunset Blvd, which was packed with commuters at this time of morning. This small section of West Hollywood was where residential met commercial, and the building I owned just happened to be an eclectic mix of both.

It had once been someone's house but was converted into commercial space long ago. The first floor still resembled someone's living room that opened to an eat-in kitchen. There was a bathroom and a bedroom on that floor for the nights Rhyan decided she was too tired to go home. The second floor had been gutted and redesigned for our needs. It provided a

central place for my employees to congregate as well as an address that put my clients at ease. As for me, I didn't care one way or another. I came in each morning because people expected that of me, but spent most of my day in my car.

"Give me an update," I said as I reached the top of the stairs and started across the rustic hardwood floor toward my office.

As was the case each morning, my employees sauntered out of their workspaces, following behind me to give me the daily news. It was a routine I started several years ago when I realized there was far more going on than I was aware of, and keeping a finger on the pulse of this company was as important as fixing things for my very rich, very famous clients.

"Clark Huxley and Wayne Parson have officially settled on their private island, set up to live out their lives in seclusion."

I glanced at Wallace Hoffstadler, more adequately known as Red Wally, thanks to the fire-red hair that matched his equally fiery temperament.

"Anyone looking for them?" I asked, pulling my chair out from my desk.

"No." He tucked his hands in the pockets of his worn and faded jeans. "And based on our research, no one's going to. They weren't exactly liked by many people."

No, they definitely weren't. Both men had caused tremendous emotional and physical trauma to those they tormented—specifically, my best friend Creed Granger and the people he loved. Wayne's and Clark's deaths had been far too kind, in my opinion. Not to mention, too abrupt to set up in advance. There'd been no way to set up a crime scene without running the risk of dragging innocent people into the resulting investigation. So we'd gone with the cleaner option of burying the bodies in the desert and creating a trail to a private island so that, in the event someone did go looking for them, it looked like the men had gone off together.

To be honest, I didn't expect anyone would even miss them. Perhaps some pain-in-the-ass detective hoping to make a name for himself, but other than that... The world was a better place without them.

"In all fairness, you did warn Wayne."

I glanced up at Red Wally's identical twin brother, William, a.k.a. Willy.

I didn't bother telling Willy I wasn't losing sleep over either man's death. Nor would I. I'd dealt with the fact I had put a bullet between Clark's eyes. It was in the past with all of my other transgressions, buried as deep as those bodies had been.

"Moving on," Rhyan Ambrose said as she strolled into the room with her coffee cup that read: LET'S KEEP THE DUMBFUCKERY TO A MINIMUM TODAY.

Rhyan liked to refer to herself as my Girl Friday. She wasn't wrong. I relied on her for everything, and she was damn good at what she did. No, she wasn't quite the wiz with a computer as Jinx was, but she kept this place running smoothly and provided a second set of hands when I needed them, always willing and available. The thrill for her was the risk of getting caught. So the riskier the job, the better she was at it.

As always, Rhyan looked like she'd just rolled out of bed. Her short, inky black hair was chopped at a million different angles and somehow managed to look sexy. In a grungy, disheveled way. Plus, her preference for thick black eyeliner went perfectly with her monochrome wardrobe and the chunky boots she favored, which somehow made her look menacing despite being barely five feet tall and thin as a rail.

"Hold this," she told Red Wally as she passed him her coffee cup. "Don't drink it."

He grinned, then winked as he took a sip when she turned her attention to the iPad in her hand.

"You're gonna pay for that," Rhyan told him. "I promise."



She tapped the tablet screen, her nose scrunched as she focused. When she lifted her head, she turned the iPad so that the screen was facing me.

“These are the most recent pics of Laikyn,” she said, skimming her fingertip across the screen to flip through the images.

“Who’s the guy she’s with?” Red Wally asked, tilting his head forward to look.

“Wes Carver,” Rhyan explained, stealing her coffee mug back.

While she rattled off the details of Laikyn Quinn’s most recent suitor, I listened with half an ear. I knew everything there was to know about Wes Carver. Just like I knew everything about Sean Strall and Aaron Middleton, the previous two men she was rumored to have dated in the past six months. We weren’t the only ones who’d gotten a candid glimpse at her everyday activities. Every gossip magazine and blog was splashing photos of Monica Quinn’s daughter and her newest *himbo*, as Rhyan liked to refer to them.

“Is it serious?” Willy asked.

Rhyan rolled her eyes. “Doubtful. He’s Monica’s most recent attempt at marrying off her daughter now that she’s twenty-two and eligible for her inheritance.”

I cleared my throat to stop Rhyan. When she looked my way, I shook my head. I didn’t want that information to be passed around freely. The only reason Rhyan knew about it was that Jinx had been otherwise preoccupied and unable to keep an eye on Laikyn when I needed him to. I’d relayed as few details of the job as possible, but Rhyan was a nosy one. She didn’t like taking assignments without having all the information.

“Sorry, boss.” She set the iPad on the desk. “Anyway. She’s going to a party tonight with him at the home of his ... uh ... *ex-girlfriend*. Would you like me to check it out?”

“No. She’ll be fine for a night.”

“Got it.” Rhyan turned to Jinx and took his phone when he held it up. She glanced at the screen and began to read Jinx’s update. “The priest is in the clear. Victor Ingram took the fall for the assault. He’s looking at a year max.” She looked up at Willy. “Did you talk to him?”

“I did.” Willy ran a hand through his shaggy red hair and turned his attention to me. “He’s cool. Wants you to confirm you’re even.”

“We are. Once he serves out his sentence. But I’ll ensure he hears it from me.”

Jinx finished typing something else and passed the phone back to Rhyan.

“Father Andrew understands you’ll call on him for a favor in the future as payment,” she read aloud. “He wasn’t happy about it.”

Red Wally snorted. “The priest damn near beats a guy to death, asks you to cover it up, and he’s worried about paying the fixer? Figures.”

Rhyan continued as though he didn’t say anything. “And last but not least, with Jinx’s help, I was able to get detailed communications between Marcus Figueroa and Liam Dewhurst, proving their relationship is, in fact, real. His agent wants it kept under wraps, no matter the cost.”

Considering Marcus Figueroa was currently playing the role of a teenager on one of those kids’ shows and Liam Dewhurst was a forty-year-old sex addict who was arrested for beating his ex-wife several years ago, it made sense that his agent wanted to keep it on the DL. If word got out that Marcus was willingly hooking up with the man, the fallout would be grave.

“You three focus on that one,” I told Rhyan, nodding toward Red Wally and Willy. “Just give me updates when necessary.”

She nodded. “Cool.”

“You tell him about the new client yet?” Red Wally asked.

Rhyan's eyes narrowed on him.

I leaned back in my chair and looked between the four of them. "What new client?"

When I met Jinx's gaze, he shook his head. I didn't know whether that meant he didn't have any information or he simply didn't want to share it with me. With him, it could go either way. We'd been in this business for so long that there were certain cases no one cared to talk about. When it came to the rich and famous and the shit they wanted to be buried, sometimes it was best not to admit to knowing a goddamn thing.

"Sally Elizabeth Warren," Rhyan said, as though the name was supposed to mean something to me.

I shrugged. "What about her?"

"She's having an affair with her stepdaughter."

"So." Aside from it being creepy as fuck, I wasn't sure why I would give a shit.

"Her stepdaughter's husband found out. He's blackmailing her. Said he'd go to the media if she didn't pay him a million dollars."

"Considering she's got a few dozen to spare, why doesn't she just pay him?" Willy asked, frowning.

"A million a year for the foreseeable future," Rhyan clarified.

I looked at Willy. "Who the fuck is she?"

"Remember that super hot chick from that one rock video?" Red Wally said.

Rhyan sighed. "She's the girl who tied the cherry stem with her teeth and became every straight boy's wet dream about a decade ago. A few years later, she was caught on camera with three girls and a guy in a scandalous orgy. They dubbed it the *V-Squad*."

I didn't recall any of it.

"Anyway, now she plays the mom on that popular sitcom."

“From porn star to mainstream mommy,” Red Wally mused. “Can’t see that getting far.”

“It’s up for a primetime Emmy award,” Rhyan explained.

Red Wally grinned wide. “Color me corrected.”

Rhyan continued. “If she’s outed for screwing her stepdaughter...”

Well, that made more sense. It wouldn’t go over well to learn that the sweet, wholesome mom was putting her grubby hands on her kid. Didn’t matter that they weren’t related by blood.

“Anyone ever wonder why most of the cases we get involve famous people doing taboo shit?” Red Wally mused.

Personally, I never wondered about any of it. Their ill deeds paid the bills and then some. Plus, it wasn’t my place to decide who was wrong or right. As long as I wasn’t put in a position to hurt someone else to cover it up, I didn’t ask questions.

“You want that one?” I asked Jinx.

He shook his head emphatically.

I looked at Rhyan and lifted my eyebrows.

She chewed on her lip before saying, “You know this one’s gonna creep me out, right?”

“I’ll take the lead on it,” Red Wally offered as he smirked at Rhyan. “But you’re gonna owe me.”

“And the blowjob I gave you this morning wasn’t enough?”

I rolled my eyes and sat up in my chair. “Trust me when I say no one wants to hear about your sex life. Get out.”

Rhyan laughed as she sauntered out of the room, Red Wally and Willy following dutifully behind her.

Jinx didn’t stick around, either.

When I was alone, I grabbed Rhyan’s iPad and tapped the screen, pulling up the images of Laikyn Quinn. I knew I’d

only have a few minutes before Rhyan came back to get it. In the meantime, it gave me a chance to look at the beautiful and enigmatic Laikyn Quinn without anyone around to give me shit about it.

## Laikyn

“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU DRAGGED ME TO a sex party,” I whispered, feeling my cheeks flush but not from embarrassment.

If I were anyone else, I would’ve been appalled that the guy I’d been dating for nearly two months would be so presumptuous as to bring me to something as depraved as this.

I wasn’t for two reasons.

One, my mother was the one who had introduced me to Wes Carver, the son of one of her unsuspecting acquaintances—or future victims, as I liked to call them. He was the third guy she’d attempted to set me up with since I turned twenty-two nine months ago. I hadn’t yet figured out what she was up to—it wasn’t like Monica to play matchmaker for anyone, least of all me—but I was sure I would find out sooner or later. In the meantime, I was playing along.

And two ... well, let’s just say *depraved* was right up my alley. I’d spent the better part of the past seven weeks attempting to get Wes Carver between the sheets, to no avail. He was holding out, which was the only reason I was still dating him—although I used the term loosely. It was more like hanging out while biding my time. If and when I fucked him, I would move on. It was what I did.

“It’s a *party*,” Wes argued with a smile.

“A *sex party*,” I corrected because, *come on*. No way could you look around this place and not think *Sex!!!* Seriously, it was everywhere. In some cases, quite literally. I mean, shit, the girl on the couch, riding that guy’s dick ... Even though they were both fully dressed, there was no pretending it was anything but fucking. The sad part was I actually envied her.

Too bad Wes wasn't as accommodating as the frat boy currently gripping her hips and moving her on his dick.

"You said you wanted to get out of your comfort zone."

True, I had said that. "I was thinking more along the lines of zip-lining."

Wes laughed, flashing his perfectly straight pearly whites down at me.

Although I was only in this masquerade of a relationship for sex, I found I enjoyed being in his company. Wes was charming and funny, even if he wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed. Handsome in the traditional sense with his dark blond hair, light brown eyes, and clean-shaven jaw. He dressed like a Tommy Hilfiger ad—casual prep, I called it. With his button-down shirt and his khaki shorts, the white sneakers, and no-show socks, he looked as though he was ready for vacation or class, neither of which he was going to.

Most of all, I liked Wes because he was normal, and my only objective in life was to obtain a sense of normalcy that would drown out my very *abnormal* existence. There wasn't anything mysterious or daring about him, and I found that ... nice. Probably had something to do with the fact that I was lacking nice in my life. Mainly had to do with my mother, who acted more like a rebellious teenager at forty than I ever had. Considering I'd just turned twenty-two, I probably should've been the one acting out, embracing my youth. Instead, she was the one who partied all night, drank too much, snorted even more, and lived like royalty.

Granted, Monica Quinn was royalty. Hollywood royalty. I blamed her millions of adoring fans for her inability to grow up. Everyone thought Monica Quinn didn't give a shit about anything because she ensured that was the face she showed the world, but I knew better. Behind closed doors, she was insecure and needy, and she would do anything to ensure she was the center of everyone's universe. Everyone but me, that was. If only they knew the woman I knew, they wouldn't fawn all over her like she was some sort of princess.

*Tell me, princess. What's it like to be the daughter of a Hollywood queen?*

I shivered as Diggy's voice sounded in my head. I fought the urge to turn around to look for him. He wasn't there. He was merely a figment of my overactive and quite traumatized imagination. Ever since I'd been rescued from that hell hole, I'd heard his voice often. Five years, five months, twenty-three days, and counting, and I was still looking over my shoulder for ghosts that didn't exist. And the word *princess* was a surefire way of triggering my paranoia.

"Where'd your thoughts go?" Wes's adoration had morphed into concern, evidenced by the little wrinkle across his forehead.

I shook off thoughts of Diggy and the hole I could still see vividly in the middle of his forehead.

"Laikyn? You okay?"

I nodded, then came up with a lie. "Sorry. Just thinking about my mother."

And just like that, it wasn't a lie. I *was* thinking about my mother.

"She okay? Your mom?"

*No.* "Always."

Although Monica was the one who introduced us, I had yet to bring Wes around her, figuring he was better off staying far, far away. I had learned my lesson the hard way when I opted to introduce my last boyfriend—Rory of the hot sex in the locker room—to my mother over dinner.

That particular encounter was shortly after I'd been delivered back home by the white knight who'd put another hole in Diggy's face. Despite being hounded by reporters and kids at my school, I was determined to go back to normal. Granted, normal was relative, and since I'd never been, I wasn't putting too much thought into what I was doing. Case in point: introducing my boyfriend to my mom. I learned the error of my ways after she jerked off my seventeen-year-old boyfriend at the dinner table. *Her* dinner table. In her house.



It didn't matter that Rory had actually liked it—*ick*—because Rory-of-the-hot-sex-in-the-locker-room had been a minor. Needless to say, he'd received a ridiculous payout to keep his mouth shut and a promise that he would never come around again.

Too bad because Rory really had been a good fuck.

Until this year, when my mother started setting me up, I hadn't dated anyone since him. Not by the traditional definition, anyway. I'd had sex with plenty, exploring my youth and using sex as a coping mechanism for all my issues. Whether that was true or not, I didn't know, but it seemed to appease my therapist. She didn't force me to dig deeper once I'd admitted it. Yes, I preferred to keep my interactions with men casual. One-and-done worked well for me since I seemed to have a short attention span and a diva mother who had no business around men my age.

Not to mention, I had an aversion to relationships. I had no desire for anyone to get close enough to figure out I was fucked up in the head. I preferred being the only one who knew about the nightmares or the ridiculous amount of time it took me to scope out an area—including my own driveway—before I could simply get in my car.

“Perhaps I could come by tomorrow. We could take your mom to lunch,” Wes suggested.

*Perhaps not.* “Mmm. Maybe.”

I accepted a shot glass from a passing waitress who was wearing baby doll lingerie and high heels, her nipples visible to all with eyes.

And Wes said this wasn't a sex party. Uh-huh. Right. Then again, every party I'd ever been invited to had been a sex party. Like my mother, Beverly Hills wasn't known for its discretion or calibrated moral compass.

“So, how'd you wrangle an invite to this place?” I asked as we stood together and looked around at the kinky chaos taking place.

“Chastity,” he said quickly, his eyes not meeting mine for the first time tonight.

I turned to face him, concerned. “Your ex-girlfriend?”

“It’s not like that, Laikyn. We’re friends.”

Yeah, friends. So *why* couldn’t he look at me?

As though he heard my inner question, his gaze skimmed my face before scanning the room again. “I told her you wanted to get out and try new things, so she invited us.”

And by *us*, he really meant *him*, but Wes was far too nice to admit it.

“You talk to her about me?”

“Of course. She’s my best friend.”

I knew Wes and Chastity were “best friends” because he had a picture of them as his screensaver on his phone. When I’d asked him about the girl whom I had purposely called his sister, Wes snorted and admitted they’d become close since their breakup nearly six months ago. He then patted my hand and told me I had nothing to worry about as long as I didn’t have a problem with him being friends with a girl.

I was fairly certain Wes was delusional because, based on my understanding of the situation, Chastity was the girl stringing him along, and he’d resorted to calling her his best friend because she was no longer spreading her legs for him. Or so he said.

If I had a jealous bone in my body, perhaps I would’ve been worried about her. Chastity was one of those little blonde tarts. Petite, bouncy, with big tits and a tiny ass. We had absolutely nothing in common. I was tall to her short. Dark to her light. And though I wasn’t overweight—although I had been prior to my time with Diggy—I would never have the ideal female form by Hollywood’s standards. According to my mother, my forced diet had been a good thing (yes, she *actually* said that), but now she insisted I needed breast and butt implants—neither of which I would be getting—and I could use a nose job when I was ready to go under the knife.

I happened to like my nose, and I didn't have a problem with my tits or my ass—or my narrow hips, for that matter—but I wasn't sure Wes was on board. I was having no problem keeping the weight off, especially in the two months since I started seeing him because all the dates we went on consisted of some sort of cardiovascular activity.

Everything except for sex, that was.

We had yet to consummate our relationship, and for the life of me, I didn't know why. He said he wanted to take things slow and get to know me before we moved things to the next level. I respected that. Mostly. I hadn't been raised to see sex as something sacred shared between two people who would spend the rest of their lives together. From my experience, it had nothing to do with emotion and everything to do with a physiological response to stimuli. I wasn't sure why Wes was making a big deal out of it, but I was hanging around to see if I could unravel him.

My abstinence was made a little more difficult when so many things sparked that dry kindling deep inside me. How long I could hold out was yet to be determined. For the time being, my vibrator was getting a good workout.

“And how did Chastity learn about this party?” I asked, dragging my thoughts back before they face-planted in the gutter.

Wes frowned. “This is her dad's house.”

Well, that was definitely news to me. “Her dad? The doctor?”

“Yes.”

Based on Wes's stories, Chastity's dad wanted her to follow in his footsteps. Evidently, she fainted at the sight of blood, so she opted for the next best thing: pharmaceutical sales. According to Wes, that was the be-all, end-all of careers. A far cry from my desire to pursue my passion for art in place of a dollar. According to Wes, I didn't understand what it meant to have to work for a living since I came from Hollywood royalty.

Did I mention his father was a high-profile defense attorney, his mother one of the most sought-after plastic surgeons in the country? Yeah. Like he knew what it meant to work for a fucking dollar.

“Did she warn you it was a fucking orgy?” I asked, unable to stop staring at the partially naked bodies moving through the room.

“Language, Laikyn,” he mumbled.

Right. Wes didn’t like foul language. Or meat. He lived on vodka and fruit—he was a self-proclaimed fruitarian who liked salmon on occasion and refused to believe me when I told him the vodka he preferred was made from potatoes. While he would never win any awards for dedication to one diet, he was pretty consistent, and I wasn’t dating him for his common sense.

I didn’t bother apologizing for the F-word because I wasn’t sorry. Not even a little. I’d spent my entire life being judged by others. From the first pictures of me, people felt it was their due to share their opinions of my clothes or my haircuts, what toys I was photographed playing with, the people I chose to talk to. I’d long ago stopped giving a shit what people thought I should be doing and decided to live my life how I wanted.

Truth be told, I didn’t care to be at this party, yet here I was, mixing it up with the Gen Z-ers looking to progress themselves socially by recording their daring acts of debauchery for their TikTok followers to rave about. Everyone here was donning a designer label, whether in T-shirts and jeans or short skirts and skimpy tops. There was no theme, but they likely claimed that *was* the theme.

Wes nudged my shoulder to get my attention. I followed his gaze to a guy finger-banging some girl in the corner.

“She said it would be eye-opening,” Wes said with a chuckle.

If he considered that “eye-opening,” perhaps someone needed to sit him down and have a conversation about birds and bees. That someone was *not* going to be me.

He grabbed my hand and tugged. “Come on. Let’s go talk to her.”

Sometimes, I wondered if he was helping himself to whatever drugs Chastity was hawking because his idea of a good time was having me and her hang out together.

“Chastity? You found her?”

I didn’t hear his response because he was moving at a fast clip, weaving between bodies. I did my best not to dig my heels in and refuse. I didn’t want to see the girl who was stringing Wes along to the point he’d become abstinent. I’d already had the displeasure of being in her company more than I ever cared to be.

And no, I wasn’t obtuse. I knew Wes wasn’t embracing abstinence to build a stronger relationship with me. He was saving himself for the woman who had stomped all over his heart while at the same time giving her the illusion that he was moving on. I would almost say that was sweet if I weren’t the one suffering from his no-sex rule.

“Well, hello, handsome,” Chastity greeted Wes when she spotted him.

Wes dragged me to his side before releasing my hand and accepting Chastity’s hug. I watched, wondering if this was the moment the green-eyed monster was supposed to make an appearance. After all, the man I was dating just had his chin nipped and his dick rubbed by the flouncy blonde whose tits were about to fall out of her barely-there tank top.

Oddly, I felt nothing.

“It’s when you dress like this that I wonder why I ever let you go. Smokin’.”

*Oh, yeah. Smokin’. If someone sprinkled him with ether and lit a match, maybe.*

Wes set her back from him, then motioned toward me. “Laikyn’s here.”

Why did that sound like a warning more than an acknowledgment?

“Of course she is, silly. She’s your boo.”

Uh, no. No boo.

When Chastity met my eyes, I saw her smile falter but knew she had hidden it from Wes. That was what she did, but when I mentioned it to Wes, he shrugged it off. Said Chastity was one of those girls who got along much better with men than women. It was the reason they’d become such good friends after their break-up.

*Or...* Chastity didn’t want Wes, but she didn’t want anyone else to have him.

Yeah, that was the more likely explanation. However, since I didn’t care enough to look deeper, I simply rolled my eyes at Chastity and cast a sweet smile at Wes.

Chastity put her hand on his arm. “I hate to do this to you, Lauren—”

“Laikyn,” Wes corrected.

“Yes. Sorry.” She batted her tarantula eyelashes. “I need to drag your boyfriend away for a minute. There’s someone I want him to meet.”

My guess was that was code for *I’m going to blow him in a dark corner and remind him where his loyalties lie.*

“Chas, that’s not—”

“Hush it, Mr. Gonna-be-a-screenwriter-one-day. This is important. For your career.” Chastity batted her lashes my way. “You understand, don’t you?”

I considered causing a scene simply because it would liven up this party. Then I thought better of it because the last thing I wanted was for Wes to develop the same one-sided affection for me that he obviously had for Chastity. Unlike her, I had no desire to lead him on or let him believe this was anything more than a potential hookup somewhere along the way. If and when his virtue could ever step aside so he could have a little fun.

Unfortunately, I’d long ago lost my passion for causing a scene. I’d dealt with too many of my mother’s meltdowns to

run headlong into another on purpose. Instead, I tended to stick to the fringes of the room, trying to disappear into the shadows.

“Go on,” I urged. “I’ve got to use the restroom anyway.”

It was a lie, of course. One of many I used to placate Wes because he was just so sweet. I hated to rock the boat with him, so I tended to hold my tongue when what I wanted to do was cut my losses and move on.

However, this was the version of me that was making an effort to fit in. The girl tailor-made for a guy like Wes. Accommodating and patient. Neither of which I had an ounce of on a good day.

“I’ll be back in a sec,” he said, smiling before Chastity dragged him off to make all his dreams come true.

If he were lucky, maybe he *would* get his dick sucked simply because she thought it would piss me off. At least one of us should be getting some satisfaction.

Did I mention I hated women like that?

While Chastity dragged him off, I took advantage of having free rein to look at what the party had to offer. It reminded me a lot of the time my friends and I had snuck into a strip club when we were sophomores in high school. Fake IDs proved invaluable when you lived in a town where kids were spoiled by parents who would rather be in the limelight than actually doing the job of instilling morals and urging their children to make good choices. Unlike that club, there were no naked men or women dancing on poles, nor was anyone throwing money at them, but based on the industrial music thumping through the space, it was only a matter of time.

Granted, every now and then, someone would drop trou, and someone else would end up on their knees. Guy, girl, genderfluid, it didn’t matter.

Or ... as was the case over there, a happy mix.

“Laikyn? Laikyn Quinn? Is that you?”

Hearing my name, I turned to scan the faces, then did a one-eighty when a hand curled around my wrist.

“Oh, my God, girl! I can’t believe you’re here!”

It took a moment for her face to register, but then I smiled. It was forced, of course.

Jennifer Ashstrom was a girl I’d gone to high school with. After graduation, I had severed ties with all my acquaintances, mainly because they went off to college while I’d opted to hide out in my mother’s twenty-thousand-square-foot mansion, reducing the risk of getting snatched again while telling my mother I was focusing on my art. Since Monica didn’t care about anyone but herself, I didn’t have to come up with a convoluted story to make it believable. She did her thing; I did mine.

I accepted Jen’s hug and returned it. She pulled back, stared at me with a wide grin.

“I cannot tell you how glad I am that you’re here.” She sighed dramatically. “I don’t know a soul, and it looks like my boyfriend’s abandoned me.”

More like she was looking for some gossip, and I was the bullseye. Didn’t matter how hard I tried to stay out of the public eye, that was where I often found myself, thanks to my mother. She used me as a platform to boost her popularity. Everyone loved a doting, adoring mother, and thanks to my very public kidnapping, she’d effectively created the lie for the world.

“In the same boat,” I told Jen. “Where’s Mandy and Mindy?” I asked, referring to the girls who used to be attached to Jen’s hip back in the day.

She sighed again. “They couldn’t come. They’re in Greece for a month. Family vacation. They are *so* bored! Said they’d much rather be here, but no.”

Oh, yes, those poor, *poor* spoiled, rich bitches off in Greece, likely “suffering” on a yacht the size of a small country.

“Heather and Addy are around here somewhere.”



*So much for not knowing a soul, Jen, but nice try.*

Jen's upper lip curled, and her voice lowered. "They're trying to get Kash Miller to fuck them both at the same time."

I nearly said, "Hashtag relationship goals," but caught myself just in time. At least they *had* goals.

Jen's smile amped up a few megawatts. "So, I say the single girls should enjoy."

She linked her arm to mine, grabbed us two more shots, and proceeded to tell me what she'd been up to for the past four years while not-so-discreetly tossing in questions about my time in captivity. Didn't matter how many years passed, people still wanted to know the details since I had refused to talk about it. I hadn't even told my mother. Not that she'd really asked. Monica Quinn wasn't known for her empathy toward others. In this case, I think she was too scared to know what might've been done to her sweet, innocent daughter. In her eyes, I'd been away at fat camp for a couple of weeks. Nothing bad could *possibly* happen at fat camp.

For the record, I was neither sweet nor innocent, and I had absolutely no desire to rehash the worst two weeks of my life, so even I was starting to pretend it had been fat camp.

The rest of the night was mildly boring. As was the case at most of these parties. Wes stayed gone, so Jen and I spent our time being voyeurs while she went off on a tangent about recent kidnappings, another attempt to get me to spill.

"I'm not talking about it," I reminded her, trying to keep my tone civil.

"About any of them?" she asked, a hint of a plea in her tone.

"No."

"You know you could write a book. Call it *The Most Kidnapped Girl in the World*." Her eyebrows popped like it was a brilliant idea. "You'd make a lot of money."

Yeah, that wasn't happening. The last thing I wanted to do was share with the world how I'd been used as a pawn for my

mother's dotting fanbase.

The sad thing was Jen wasn't exaggerating. I'd actually been kidnapped four times in my life, none of which had resulted in any harm done to me. I probably should've been more traumatized than I was, but it wasn't really an option since my mother insisted I was never in danger. Monica claimed her fans would go to any lengths to get her attention—which had been the case the first three times. And like I said, we didn't talk about the last one.

I didn't think Monica was actually clueless; she merely chose to turn a blind eye, which was what she'd done when the nurse had taken me from the hospital when I was two days old. And again, when my nanny took off with me when I was four. I didn't remember either of those, but I did recall the time when I was eight. Some crazy fan had been seeking a way to get close to my mother, so she managed to get me alone on the playground while my nanny was deep in conversation with her other nanny friends. It took the stranger no time to convince me my mother was hurt and she needed to take me to her.

I know what you're thinking—don't take candy or pet puppies because those people are bad. I got it. But I did take the bait. That woman had known all the right words to say, and I'd gone willingly, only to learn that the woman was bartering an autograph for my safe return.

Some people.

The fourth one had been real, though. A sincere ransom for money. No one had ever found the person responsible, and without me telling them anything that would lead them to whoever was behind it, they never would.

I chose not to tell Jen any of that because I fought hard to keep my private life private. That wasn't the case for my mother. She wanted people to talk about her, so she did whatever was necessary to keep the attention on her. Including dragging out the kidnapping long after I was home, claiming to have suffered PTSD from the event.

Evidently, that was over because she was currently entertaining the idea of a reality show. I had no doubt people

would tune in to watch Monica Quinn unravel on a daily basis.  
It happened. I'd seen it more times than I cared to admit.

## Laikyn

BY THE TIME WES RETURNED WITH A very intoxicated Chastity in tow, I was tired of sidestepping all the questions. I told Jen I would catch up with her later, then offered to share an Uber with Wes and Chastity so she could get home safely.

When Wes said he would just take her back to his place, a sigh escaped. I wasn't sure if it was relief or disappointment, nor did I care to overanalyze it. It had been fun while it lasted, but I expected this to happen. Wes was still in love with Chastity even though she treated him like garbage. I didn't have the dedication or interest to help him get over the heartbreak, which meant he would be stuck in limbo as long as I was in the picture.

Pretending to be the understanding girlfriend, I agreed, telling myself Wes would call me eventually. When he did, I would do my best to bolster his self-confidence and act hurt, but deep down, Wes didn't matter.

Now, as I sat in the backseat of my own Uber ride, my brain had moved on to more important things. Like getting from the main gate to the house without getting snatched out of my front yard. Deep down, I knew it wasn't going to happen. Security measures had been put in place on the grounds to ensure no one got past the main gate, but knowing that and accepting that were two very different things when your brain continued to dredge up ghostly images of Diggy and the hole in his head.

The driver kept looking back at me through the rearview mirror. I could tell he was trying to figure out if I was someone famous. When he realized he'd been caught, he nodded and smiled.

If he recognized me, he didn't mention it, but I was sure he was trying to determine if he'd seen me on television or in movies. Then again, I probably wasn't the first famous person he'd driven around. Not that I was famous for any reason other than being Monica Quinn's daughter. If it weren't for the fact that I lived in Los Angeles, people wouldn't recognize me on the street.

It wasn't until he stopped in front of the house that I decided to ease his curiosity. "My mother's Monica Quinn," I said with a smile as I opened the door. "Can you wait until I'm through the gate?"

"Of course. Yes. Thank you very much."

Rather than risk unauthorized vehicles getting in, I punched in my code for the single-door gate next to the main one, then hurried through, closing it behind me and standing completely still until I heard it lock. Once inside, I felt better. I wasn't worried an intruder was lurking in the bushes because they couldn't get this far. The gate was electrified, and without a code to open it, a few hundred volts were going to knock whoever tried to get past it on their ass.

As I strolled up the brightly lit front drive toward the house, my pepper spray held at the ready (you know, since there was no such thing as an absolute), I realized I was disappointed for a number of reasons.

One, Chastity was going to have drunk sex with Wes tonight, and she wouldn't even remember it in the morning.

Two, I was going to break up with Wes without fucking him because he was going to have drunk sex tonight and pretend it was them making up when in reality, Chastity would kick him to the curb in the morning.

Three, I wasn't the one having drunk sex.

And last but not least, my mother was home. I knew because there was a shiny gold Lexus in the front, parked haphazardly in the driveway, one tire in the grass, the bumper pressed up against the brick, dangerously close to the elaborate flowerbed she'd had installed two months ago.

I ignored all my disappointments except one. Right now, the only thing I had control over was the fact that my mother was home. It was never a good sign when she came home before dawn after a night out. It usually meant she'd brought the party to the house. And by party, I meant whatever person she was entertaining for the evening.

As I walked up the rounded porch steps that descended from the house like a cascading concrete waterfall, I felt the same sense of foreboding I got every time I came home. Not only did I fear what lewd act I might stumble upon once I went inside, but I also hated this place. I hated what it stood for. I hated that my mother thought it was her castle and she could rule the world from it. But most importantly, I hated that I still lived here, more so that I didn't have the means to get a place of my own. If my mother had one lick of sense in her head, I probably would've had a trust fund to fall back on, but she wasn't good at managing money. Unfortunately, when you put a lot of it in her hands, she found a way to make it disappear without much effort.

So, no, I wasn't rich. I had a few thousand sitting in my account—what little I'd saved back when my mother showed her love by showering me with cash. Enough that I could get a place of my own and live there as long as I got a job. It wasn't that I was opposed to gainful employment. I'd just never given it much thought. Or actually, *any* thought, really. I wasn't sure I even had any skills someone would pay me for. Maybe that explained why I was still living here. Not only because my mother begged me to but also because I wasn't motivated to actually work for a living.

Did that make me pathetic?

I stood on the porch, staring at the front door, and pondered that momentarily. Finally, I shook off the thought. I would let that keep me up another night, but not tonight.

I started to put the key in the lock, but I realized the door was open. Definitely odd.

The house was lit up like Monica had been entertaining guests, and based on the sickening scent of cigarettes and pot,

not to mention the strange car in the driveway, I figured she was.

Once inside, I tucked my pepper spray in my cross-shoulder bag and locked the front door behind me.

“Monica?”

Yeah, I referred to my mother by her first name. Not because she said it made her feel creepy, although that was true. It was merely my passive-aggressive way of letting her know she sucked at being a mom. She only thought I was doing it because she requested it.

“Are you home?” My voice echoed back at me.

My mother’s house was ridiculously fancy, not to mention extreme overkill for two people. Eight bedrooms—five of which had never had a guest—and twelve bathrooms were far more than we would ever need. There was a parlor, three living areas, two dining areas—the formal and the one reserved for only really special guests—and even an indoor greenhouse, although my mother couldn’t keep a cactus alive. We didn’t use even a quarter of the house, but my mother was a diva and insisted status was only reflected by the material items one owned. Although I didn’t share the same ideology, I figured she was doing something right since she was still highly admired and sought after.

Too bad it had nothing to do with taking care of herself or nurturing the relationships that might see her into old age.

I scanned the interior, trying to determine what was different since I left for the party nearly six hours ago. It looked the same. Mostly. The circular staircases ascended to the second floor, a large marble table positioned in the center of the space with a lavish floral arrangement sitting on top. The gray-veined marble floors sparkled as though they’d been shined with a cloth, and under the cigarette stench, I could smell a hint of lemon oil.

The only thing different was the single Dior slingback pump that looked like it had taken a tumble down the stairs. I recognized it as my mother’s.

Monica had been gone before I left the house. When I was leaving, the housekeeper was rushing through, tidying up, emptying my mother's dirty ashtrays and glasses of whatever liquor she'd received as a gift from people looking to get her attention.

That poor housekeeper. I didn't know her name because she was the third one we'd had in the past month. They rarely lasted more than a week, two tops. My mother would find some reason to belittle them and then fire them. Another would come along, and I'd feel sorry for them because they were going to work ten times harder than they were getting paid for.

That was why Monica didn't have house staff, although she claimed she valued her privacy. Probably the biggest lie she'd ever told. My mother preferred people waiting on her hand and foot. When I was little, there was more staff in this house than they employed at the STAPLES Center, or whatever they were calling it now, before a Lakers game. But over the years, the services she looked to for hiring had refused to keep sending people, claiming she was verbally abusive. Which she was. She was also a spoiled, surly, rebellious brat.

Again, I hated that I still lived here.

Looked like the housekeeper's efforts had been in vain. A glance in the front parlor told me my mother had brought the party in there when she got home. The small throw pillows were on the floor, the coffee table was crooked, and the rug beneath shifted. There were two empty wine bottles, one lying on its side on the floor alongside a half-empty bottle of gin. There were stray pieces of clothing—a leopard print bra, a pair of men's pants, and two and a half pairs of shoes—beige Valentino rockstud heels, brown Ferragamo loafers, and the other Dior pump.

That put the headcount at three upstairs.

Believe it or not, that wasn't the record number of people my mother could fit in her bed at one time.



She liked to brag even though I tried to convince her that it made my ears bleed.

Beyond the stray clothing and reclining liquor bottles, there was an ashtray with half a dozen cigarette butts and a roach, along with some scattered papers and a bowl of marijuana. Not all the dried leaves, stems, and seeds were in the bowl. There was plenty of it dusting the tabletop.

Frustrated with my mother's disregard, I decided to ignore it as I always did. Come morning, the housekeeper would scamper through, tidying up once more, erasing everything as though it hadn't happened.

If only life were that easy.

With a sigh, I marched toward the stairs leading to the second-floor wings, sidestepping a red thong and a matching bra carelessly left behind.

Monica had one wing, I had the other, and neither of us used more than one room. My mother claimed that not only did she need it for social status, but the space was necessary so she didn't feel claustrophobic. Telling her five thousand square feet would give her plenty of clout and more than enough breathing room was pointless. She was practically married to this monstrosity of a house.

I turned right at the top of the stairs, then came to a grinding halt when I heard a high-pitched cry coming from my mother's bedroom.

Based on history, the sound could mean one of two things: either my mother was coming down from her last high, and she was sick, or she had some stranger in her bed. Those were the only two options, both of which I had experienced more times than I could count since I was ten years old and found her passed out on the bathroom floor shortly after some casting producer spent three days attempting to make her fall in love with him.

For the record, she got the part, but only because she blackmailed him with pictures of all the dirty things she'd insisted he do to her. That movie had reignited her career after

several years of mediocre parts. Monica got what she wanted as usual, but I think it hurt her that she hadn't gotten it because of her talent. She put on a brave front for the world, but her alcohol and drug abuse was directly related to her feelings of self-worth, of which she had very little. One might think she would've treated me better, considering I was the one person who truly loved her.

Based on the large number of shoes downstairs, not to mention the sounds following the first cry, I knew my mother would survive whatever was taking place behind her closed door. Her guests were obviously taking care of her.

I hurried down the hall to my bedroom, praying that Monica and her guests would not come out until morning. The last thing I wanted was to endure one of her drug-induced tirades or listen to her go on about the orgasms her nameless guests had given her.

I closed my bedroom door silently, flipping the lock for good measure, then went into the adjoining bathroom.

After going into the closet, stripping out of my jeans, T-shirt, and bra, then pulling on a pair of shorts and a tank top, I headed back to the bedroom. I considered washing my makeup off my face but decided I was too tired to bother. I could deal with it in the morning.

Right now, I just wanted to sleep.

A shrill sound jolted me out of a good dream, launching me right back into reality just as someone pounded on my bedroom door.

Sitting up, I tried to clear the cobwebs from my brain to decipher what was happening. A chill skated down my spine as I waited for the obnoxious clang of metal on metal to follow, reminding me I was in a cold, dark concrete box.

My gaze slid to the alarm clock on the nightstand, my brain attempting to determine whether it was really 3:57 A.M. or if it was counting down to zero.

“Laikyn! Oh, God, Laikyn! Wake up!”

Monica.

Not a box.

Not a countdown timer.

She pounded on the door. So hard this time, the mirror on the wall rattled.

I bolted out of bed, unlocked the door, and pulled it open, nearly getting a fist in the face when my mother reached to knock again.

“What’s wrong?”

“She ... he ... dead!”

“Dead? Who’s dead?” Jesus. What the hell did she take last night? The last time she’d had drug-induced delusions had been three years ago. That one night of chaos had been enough for a lifetime.

She pointed toward her bedroom. “There. Her. H—” Her chin trembled. “They’re ... they’re...I need your help.”

“No. No, no. That’s not happening, Monica. I’m not ... *entertaining* your guests. That’s gross. Really—”

Her bony fingers snapped around my wrist, and then my mother dragged me down the hall to her room.

“Hey!” I tried to pull away. “Ouch.”

“You have to ... oh, Laiky, you have to help me.”

I knew when I was being manipulated because she used the nickname I detested.

Monica stopped inside the doorway and released me in order to jab her finger in the direction of the bed. I rubbed the spot where her claws had dug in but didn’t move.

“I’m not going in there,” I insisted.

“You have to.” She shoved me forward. “You have to help me.”

I stumbled into the room, my gaze snagged by the woman in the bed.

“Oh, my God.” My hand went to my mouth, and I backed up a step as though that might help.

It wouldn't.

“Is she...?”

“Dead,” my mother bit out. “Yes.”

I glanced at Monica, taking in her disheveled appearance, the black smudges under her eyes, the rest of her makeup smeared. She was wearing a red silk robe, which hung loosely on her too-thin frame. Her eyes were crazed, her skin far too pale.

“What happened?” I demanded when I took in her swollen lip, puffy eye, and the jagged scratch mark on her cheek.

“I ... I ... I had to.”

Had to? Had to what? Kill the woman?

Maybe Monica was wrong, and the woman was just ... I don't know. Out of it.

Figuring there was only one way to find out, I took a step toward the bed, then another until I stood at the edge, close enough to see the woman's blank stare. Her chest wasn't moving, and her lips were tinged blue. Still, I attempted to find a pulse at her neck.

Nothing. The woman—whoever she was—was naked in my mother's bed, and not for as long as I live would I ever get that image out of my head.

“I didn't do this, Laiky,” my mother said. “You *have* to believe me. I didn't do it.”

“No?” I laughed, and it rang with hysteria. “Then who did?”

I moved back to the door, not wanting to be close to the dead woman.

“*He* did,” she said, her gaze swinging to the far side of the bed.

He, who? Was she seeing people now?

“There’s no one else here,” I said, keeping my voice as calm as I could.

My mother shoved me again, this time toward the windowed wall. I peeked around the end of the footboard and looked down at the floor between the bed and the wall.

“Ah, Jesus. Monica, what did you do?”

There on the floor was another body, this one a man who was also naked with a glassy-eyed stare. Unlike the woman, who looked as though she was asleep with her eyes open, the man had a knife in the center of his chest, the handle pointed toward the sky.

“I had to,” my mother pleaded. “I had to, Laiky. He was going to kill me. When we realized she was dead, he went berserk.”

When they *realized*? Good God, I did *not* want to know how that realization came about.

“Who is *he*?” More importantly, why did she have a knife in her bedroom?

“The place ... the party!” she cried out.

“Who. Is. He. Monica?”

“Lawrence Pierce,” she said, her eyes wide.

“Oh, my God!” I stepped back. “You killed a world-famous director?”

Yes, that was my voice screeching, but I couldn’t help it. Lawrence Pierce was the man responsible for directing some of the biggest box office hits of the decade.

“I only met him tonight.”

“That doesn’t make him any *less* famous,” I said snidely.

“He wanted me for a role.”

“And what? A simple no wouldn’t suffice?”

She squared her shoulders. “It was an accident.”

“What? You were holding the knife, and he just *ran* right into it?”

She was something else.

“I had to,” she said softly.

“And her?” I asked, unable to point at the dead woman.

“His wife.”

Oh, fucking hell. The husband *and* wife were dead? In my mother’s bedroom, of all places.

This was bad. So very, very bad.

“Those—” Monica’s arm snapped up, finger pointed toward the dresser. More panic escaped as her breaths raced in and out. “Those are their drugs. Not mine. They are *not* mine, Laiky.”

I glanced at the dresser and noticed the plate of cheese, crackers, and grapes—probably the explanation for the knife. Beside it, white powder and a rolled-up C-note. I wish I could’ve been surprised to find drugs in the house. I wasn’t. Unfortunately, with glamor came drugs of all sorts, and my mother had a penchant for them. Probably the reason I steered clear of them at all costs.

“Did you kill them, Monica?”

Her dramatic panic instantly disappeared. Like a curtain pulled down on her emotions, blocking them.

“That’s a ridiculous question, Laikyn.”

Was it?

While she was no longer panicked, I still was, and I wanted to be anywhere but there. I backed out of the room, my heart racing. “We have to call the police.”

“No!”

“Yes.”

She lunged for me, but I jerked out of the way. “I have to.”

“No. They’ll take me to jail. I can’t go to jail.”

Yes, she probably would end up behind bars, but at the moment, there were two dead people in the house. As much as I enjoyed all those television shows where people managed to

hide dead bodies, those were fiction. I was not living in some dream world. When people died—especially famous ones whose chests were sliced open with a kitchen utensil—the cops had to be called.

Ignoring my mother's frantic yelling, I dashed to my bedroom, grabbed my cell phone. Before I could dial, my mother came racing in, slapping the phone out of my hand.

"Call him!" she insisted, thrusting her phone toward me.

"Call who?"

"Rule. He'll fix this."

"What the hell is a *Rule*? Monica, I think—"

"He's the one who came for you. He'll help me again. Call him."

I stared at my mother, my mind returning to that day when the man had come for me, saving me from whatever would've happened when that clock had stopped at zero.

No one had ever told me his name, and I'd never seen him again despite thinking I saw him everywhere. I blamed the hallucinations on my previous trauma. The man had saved me, so I had some misplaced hero worship, that was all. My mother wouldn't even talk about him, but for the longest time, I'd been dreaming about him.

"Please, Laikyn. Call him. He'll fix this. That's what he does."

# 4

## Rule

“OH, GOD! OH, GOD! OH, GOD! UH! Uh! Uh!  
Yeeeeeeeeee!”

As the woman beneath me succumbed to orgasm, I drove in deep one last time and let myself go.

“That was...” She smiled up at me, her hair slicked back from perspiration, her eyes glassy from pleasure. “Wow.”

Now she was at a loss for words.

Figured.

I forced a smile as I pulled out of her and rolled off the bed. I left her panting and smiling while I went to the bathroom to dispose of the condom, flushing it down the toilet. I splashed water on my face and ignored my reflection. I knew what I would see, and self-loathing did not look good on me.

Yeah, I hated myself. Sometimes more than others. Like now. When an orgasm was merely a bodily function and provided absolutely no relief whatsoever.

You’d think I would learn.

Because I wasn’t a complete ass, I returned to the bed, intending to give her a few minutes to come down from her high before I slipped out into the night.

She purred as she moved up beside me, her hand sliding over my chest.

“That really was amazing,” she said softly. “I always did have a thing for dark and dangerous.”

If she only knew.

“And *this* thing...” She wrapped her fingers around my cock. “It should have its own zip code.”



If she thought she was flattering me, she was wrong. I didn't need my ego stroked after sex.

She pressed her lips to my shoulder. "Want to do that again?"

I didn't. It hadn't been great the first time, what with all the porn-worthy squeals, but I wasn't about to tell her that. Instead, I put my arm around her and urged her head on my chest. I would give her a few minutes to fall asleep and then slip out.

I didn't expect to be the one drifting off as she purred softly beside me.

I came fully awake and alert a short time later when my cell phone rang.

I grabbed it from the nightstand, answering on the first ring. "Yeah?"

"Is this *Rule*?"

She said my name as though she doubted the accuracy of it.

"Yeah. What do you want?"

"My mother said to call you." There was a hint of panic in the sultry tone of her voice.

I glanced at my watch to see how long I'd been asleep. Half an hour.

Shit.

"Who is this?" I grunted as I shifted my bed partner off of me.

"Laikyn Quinn."

I sat up, dropped my feet to the floor, and rubbed my eyes. "Where are you?"

"My house."

"I'll be there in half an hour."

“Don’t you want—”

“Half an hour,” I stated firmly, not wanting her to say anything that might incriminate herself or her mother.

“Uh...” she stammered. “Okay.”

I disconnected the call before her panic had her spewing shit that could get us both in trouble. I set my phone on the nightstand and grabbed my boxer briefs, which I’d discarded only an hour ago. Right before I fucked the dark-haired woman currently staring back at me from the other side of the bed.

“Leaving so soon?”

I didn’t bother answering her. We had agreed going in that this was a one-night thing. I was holding her to that.

My lack of answer didn’t deter her. “Do I get to see you again?”

I pulled on my jeans and cocked an eyebrow. “That’s not what this is.”

“It could be.”

No, it couldn’t. I didn’t do relationships. I fucked to sate a biological urge. I didn’t fuck the same woman twice to ensure they didn’t get attached. Even those I interacted with occasionally, those who wouldn’t want more than some horizontal fun, I didn’t indulge more than once because women said one thing but felt something else entirely. I wasn’t out to hurt anyone, so I kept it to one-and-done.

There was only one person in the world I trusted enough to fuck on the regular. He happened to be the closest thing I had to a real friend. Not the kind you saw on occasion, and they told people you were friends. The ones who were around even when you didn’t expect them to be. But Jinx was as emotionally damaged as I was, so I didn’t worry about him doing something as stupid as falling in love with me.

I sat on the edge of the bed and pulled on my boots, rolling my eyes when the woman—I didn’t even know her fucking name—lightly scraped her nails over my back. Before she

could move closer, I stood, grabbing my shirt off the floor. I pulled it on, then grabbed my cell phone.

“Thanks,” I told her before heading out of the room.

“Thanks?” she shouted. “Seriously?”

Once in my car, I called Rhyan using the most recent burner she’d given me.

“What’s up, boss?” she asked, her voice thick with sleep.

“I got a call from Laikyn Quinn.”

“Yeah? She get snatched again?”

“Didn’t sound like it.”

“You want me to meet you somewhere?”

“Yes. I’m on my way to her mother’s house.”

“You need the Reds to come, too?”

*The Reds* was how she referred to Red Wally and Willy, who, if I had to guess, were currently asleep in her bed.

“No. Not yet.”

“Gotcha. See you in a few.”

I liked Rhyan Ambrose for the simple fact she did what I needed her to do, and she didn’t expect me to make small talk. Yeah, she was nosy as fuck, and she asked questions she knew I wouldn’t answer, but I figured she’d earned that right since I’d been working with her for the better part of eight years now. However, she knew to put the job first, and I appreciated that.

Especially now because I didn’t want to admit it, but this job was going to get messy. And I wasn’t talking about the actual cleanup of whatever Monica Quinn fucked up. It had been five and a half years since I’d rescued Laikyn Quinn from that dingy basement in Tijuana, and I’d thought about her damn near every day since. Each year, on her birthday, while ringing in the new year, I would mentally calculate whether she was at an age that would be appropriate for me to instigate

a chance meeting. And each year, even after she turned eighteen, I decided I was out of my fucking mind.

Instead, I kept track of her through other means. I wouldn't call it stalking, *per se*. I merely wanted to know what her mother was up to because Monica Quinn was what people in my line of work called repeat business. She was prone to making bad decisions. The kind that resulted in people getting hurt. Innocent people. Rescuing her daughter wasn't the first time I'd met her, and I doubted this would be the last time our paths crossed, either. Some rich people—those with more money than sense—tended to find themselves in predicaments they needed help getting out of. I was notoriously good at making that happen, hence the reason I was on so many speed dials.

I was curious what Monica had gotten herself into this time. My fees weren't cheap, and the menu of things I was willing to do was long, provided you were willing to pay upfront—in cash. If you were hiring me, you were someone important, and you'd done something you didn't want anyone to find out about. And if you were calling on my services *again*, you were going to pay the frequent flyer tax.

“Hey, Siri. Send a text to Jinx.”

“Sure. What would you like to say?” the automated voice replied.

“On a job. Might need you.”

“Would you like to send it now?”

“Yes.”

A few minutes later, his response came through.

— **Whatever you need.**

That was Jinx, straight to the point without asking questions he knew I wouldn't answer anyway.

Half an hour later, I was pulling up to the gates at the Quinn estate. I rolled down the window to press the button. A camera was aimed directly at my face, and a moment later, the

gates began to open. Once I was through, I stopped and waited for them to close behind me. No sense letting someone slip through. I wouldn't put it past the paparazzi to be lingering nearby even minutes before dawn.

I pulled down the short drive until the house came into view. It was a ridiculously opulent residence that matched the owner's over-the-top personality to a T. I'd hated it the first time I saw it, and my feelings hadn't changed. The only thing it had going for it was that it was set back from the road and not visible unless someone was flying a drone overhead. Considering the time of night and my presence in the neighborhood, there was a good chance one of those sneaky reporters would launch one over here soon enough.

Since I didn't know what I was walking into, I retrieved my gun from the lockbox in the trunk, tucking it into the holster at my back and using my shirt to cover it. I looked around, scanning my surroundings as I made my way to the door. It was a little after five in the morning, and the house's exterior was lit up like someone wanted it to be seen from space. I wasn't sure whether that was a security precaution or simply because Monica Quinn wanted her house to be seen at all times. From all planets. The latter certainly wouldn't surprise me.

I knocked on the door and stepped back.

When it opened, the air in my lungs locked up for a moment as I took in my first face-to-face—after five and a half years—with the woman I'd rescued all those years ago.

Unlike then, when she'd been a grimy mess after spending two weeks in a cage, she looked healthy. Her hair, which was dark chestnut at the roots, hung to her shoulders and gleamed with an array of cinnamon and red-gold highlights. Her eye makeup was smeared, but the fact she wasn't worried about it made her that much hotter.

Every cell in my body came to life.

It was the same reaction I'd had when I first met her all those years ago. She'd still been a child at the time—barely seventeen—but she certainly wasn't now. Which I figured was

why I was looking at her through lenses hazed with lust rather than mere observation. Standing there in a pair of ass-hugging shorts and a tank top that cradled her chest like it was in love, looking like she'd just walked out of my best fucking dream, I was struck as mute as Jinx.

While Monica Quinn was elegantly beautiful, her daughter had a sharper edge that made her stunning in a way her mother never would be. Laikyn Quinn had a steely determination—not to mention a body made for sin—and the combination made my dick hard.

“Where’s your mother?” I asked, forgoing pleasantries and trying not to ogle the expanse of olive-gold skin that wasn’t covered by her barely there pajamas.

“Are you Rule?”

“Yes.” I raised my eyebrows. “You gonna let me in?”

“Sorry,” she said in a hushed voice, as though she was trying not to wake someone.

When Laikyn stepped out of the way, I walked in, closing the door and leaving it unlocked so Rhyan could come in when she arrived.

“Where’s your mother?” I asked again, doing my best not to stare at Laikyn’s long, *long* legs. But sliding my gaze upward wasn’t much better because the tank top that hugged her breasts and trim waist didn’t quite meet the shorts, leaving a sliver of skin where the fabric didn’t touch, and my tongue itched to lick her there.

“In the parlor.”

She gestured in that direction, but I wasn’t interested in talking to Monica. Not yet.

“Show me what happened.”

Laikyn frowned.

I waited patiently for her to get with the program. When she finally started walking, heading for the stairs, I fell into step. I kept my eyes on her bare feet as we ascended to the second floor, wondering if I’d ever seen feet as sexy as hers.

Her toenails were painted a glittery purple, and while I wasn't fond of the color, it worked for her.

Laikyn's pace slowed as we reached a doorway halfway down the hall on the right.

"They're in there," she said, her voice wobbling slightly.

"They?"

She swallowed and nodded. "The dead people."

Well, that answered what the situation was.

"Stay here," I told her before walking into the room.

"It's gruesome," she muttered.

I didn't bother telling her it was likely nothing I hadn't seen before. No sense in traumatizing her more.

I flipped on the lights so I could get a good look at the scene. I could smell the blood before I even walked in, so I knew it wasn't going to be pretty.

It wasn't.

On the bed was a young—probably early thirties—Asian woman. She was naked and very dead.

Since Laikyn had explicitly stated *they*—meaning more than one—I glanced around for another person. I slipped into the en suite bathroom but came up empty. I was walking back toward the door, intending to get more information from Laikyn, when I noticed the way the bedspread was pulled down, like someone had grabbed onto it as they slid off the mattress. I walked over and peered at the floor.

*And this one makes two.*

A middle-aged male with a knife protruding from his chest stared up through sightless eyes.

Not the worst I'd ever seen, that was for sure.

I pulled out my phone and dialed Rhyan as I returned to the hall to find Laikyn leaning against the far wall. She had one foot propped on the wall, her toes curled under. She was attempting to mask her expression, but I could tell she was

freaked out. I didn't blame her. She shouldn't even be here right now.

Rhyan answered on the first ring. "Yeah, boss? I'm five minutes out."

"Use the garage."

"Got it."

I disconnected and tucked my phone in my pocket, turning my full attention to Laikyn. "Did you touch them?"

"What?"

"The bodies? Did you touch them?"

"I ... uh..." She paused, deep in thought. "Yes. I checked for a pulse on the woman's neck. Not the old guy, though."

I made a mental note to have Rhyan take care of that pesky detail. Last thing I wanted was for this to come back on Laikyn.

"You know who that is, right?" Laikyn prompted when I looked at her.

"Lawrence Pierce and his wife," I answered.

"You know them?"

"I've done business with him before." Sad because his jobs usually paid well.

Laikyn stood tall. "We need to call the police."

"No, I need you to open the garage for Rhyan and buzz her through the gate when she gets here."

"But, I—"

I met her stare. "Open the garage, Laikyn."

She swallowed hard, then nodded before rushing off to do my bidding.

While she did, I returned to the bedroom and took it all in again, coming up with a plan for Rhyan. I couldn't simply dump the bodies in the desert because famous people would be



missed. Which meant coming up with a plausible scene that would support the evidence.

First and foremost, it didn't look like they'd been dead for long. That would help with the timeline, provided we could adjust the temperature of the bodies. I didn't see any wounds on the woman, but that didn't mean there weren't. The lack of blood nearby and the drugs strewn out on the dresser confirmed my initial theory that she'd overdosed. Based on the white powder around her nostrils, she'd taken the party a little too far. And since the husband had a knife in the chest, the only logical conclusion was that Monica had stabbed him. What prompted it was anyone's guess, but I would ensure Rhyan kept the knife. It was always best to hold onto incriminating evidence in the event someone suffered from a crisis of conscience.

When I heard footsteps, I returned to the hall. Laikyn was walking toward me, her gaze moving over me slowly.

I started for the stairs.

"You can't just leave them there," she hissed, her voice still low.

I kept walking, not looking back. "I'm not."

"It's not—wait. What?"

"I'm not gonna leave them there."

"What are you going to do?"

"That's not a question you should be asking."

"Then what *should* I be asking?" she shouted. "There are two dead bodies in my mother's room, and she's downstairs self-medicating. I've got a stranger in my house and another in the garage ... and..."

I turned to face her, noticing her eyes were glassy with unshed tears. I was impressed by how well she was holding herself together. It wasn't the first time. Laikyn Quinn had been stoically composed the day I pulled her out of that basement in Tijuana. She hadn't even flinched when I carried her past her captor's dead body. By the time I returned her to

her mother's doorstep, I had to question whether I'd actually rescued her. She certainly hadn't acted like she'd spent fourteen days in a hellhole with some douchebag threatening to do vile things to her. I'd been there long enough to hear it for myself, and I could honestly say he was lucky the bullet between the eyes was the only thing I gave him.

"I'm gonna take care of it," I told her, trying to keep my tone even. I sucked at it.

"Take care of it how?"

"No more questions."

"Yo, boss?" Rhyan's voice echoed off the tiled foyer. "You in here?"

Laikyn's green eyes went dinner plate wide.

"You can trust her the same way you can trust me," I told her softly, touching her arm before I could think better of it.

She moved one step toward me, her voice raspy and soft. "What's happening?"

"Upstairs!" I called to Rhyan.

"Rule, please," Laikyn pleaded. "Tell me what's happening."

Rather than explain, I took her hand and pulled her along with me so I could go downstairs and talk to Monica.

Rhyan, being too fucking perceptive, noticed that I was holding Laikyn's hand before she even looked at my face. I swore I saw the hint of a smirk, but she covered it quickly.

"What do we have, boss?"

"Two bodies."

"Do we know who they are?"

"Unfortunately. And so do a lot of other people. You'll recognize 'em."

"Great," Rhyan muttered.

"Get it cleaned up and erase any evidence they were ever here. Including the security videos."

“Where do you want me to take the bodies?”

“Get Red Wally to check out their place. See what he can do about the staff. Our best option is to take them there.”

“Got it.”

I continued down the stairs, still holding Laikyn’s hand.

“You’re dumping the bodies?”

“Unless you’d prefer I set them up in the living room.”

She tried to pull her hand from mine, clearly not appreciating my sarcasm. I held firm, not wanting her to run for a phone to call the cops.

“This is stupid,” Laikyn insisted. “Just call the police. My mom can tell them what happened.”

I stopped and turned toward her. “And what *did* happen, Laikyn?”

“I don’t know.”

“I very seriously doubt that man stabbed himself.”

Her dark eyebrows arched, her expression one of confusion and fear. “It was an accident. She said so.”

I didn’t comment, turning and continuing down the stairs. It pissed me off that she was in the middle of this.

“Take me to her,” I instructed when we reached the bottom of the stairs.

“In there,” she said, motioning toward the large open archway on the right.

I didn’t bother hiding my eye roll when I found Monica sitting on the settee, her feet curled up under her, a cigarette in one hand and a highball glass in the other. She looked as though she’d just come from the beauty salon. Her hair was styled, her makeup perfect. I had to assume she’d had a wardrobe change since the incident. She was wearing a black silk gown and robe and glittering heels on her feet. Her robe was draped perfectly over her legs like she was posing for a photoshoot.

“Where were you tonight?” I asked, foregoing pleasantries.

“Oh, Rule. You’re here,” she said dramatically. “It was all such a blur. One minute—”

“Where. Were. You?” I repeated.

I didn’t give a shit what happened. That was none of my fucking business.

Her eyes twitched at the corners, proof she didn’t appreciate my tone. “At a party.”

“Did you know them before tonight?”

“Not really, no.”

“Are you working with either of them?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“I’ve auditioned for them before.”

Since she used the term *auditioned*, I assumed she hadn’t gotten the part. Which to some could look like she had motive to kill them. Especially if they hadn’t been interested in offering her a part in the future.

“You told me you just met them tonight,” Laikyn accused her mother.

“I forgot.”

I could tell Laikyn wasn’t surprised by the lie.

“Did anyone see you leave with them?” I asked, wanting to maintain control of the situation.

This time, she hesitated, presumably to think back. “I…” She stammered over her words before finally saying, “Probably.”

Realizing I was still holding onto Laikyn, I released her hand. “When Rhyan’s done here, she’ll drive the car back to their place. You’ll go with her. From there, you’ll call for a ride. Not before, but as soon as you get there. And call from your phone, Monica. If anyone asks, you went home with them, then after you had your fun, you came home.”

“I’ll call my driver,” she said.

“Fine. Whatever,” I said firmly. “I want you smiling and laughing when he gets there. You had a good time. When you left, they were still ... doing whatever the fuck y’all do.”

I could feel Laikyn’s eyes boring into me.

I spared her a glance.

“Why can’t we just call the police? This isn’t her fault.”

“No? And you have proof of that?”

“Well, no, but she said—”

“No police,” Monica stated firmly.

I nodded my chin toward Monica. “This is your third time. My fee tripled.”

Her eyes widened. “I ... I don’t have it right now.”

“Rhyan!” I shouted, directing my voice toward the foyer. “Stop doing what you’re doing.”

“No!” Monica yelled, stabbing her cigarette out in the ashtray as she hopped up from the couch. “No. Please.”

“I don’t work for free, and I don’t work on consignment.”

“It’ll take me a little while to get it.”

“What’s a little while?” I prompted.

Her gaze snapped to Laikyn like her daughter could help her out of this.

Rhyan appeared, wearing black latex gloves that glistened with fluid—most likely blood—her eyes skimming everyone in the room. “What’s up, boss?”

“Leave it like it is,” I told her, waiting for Monica to come up with an answer.

“I’ll need some time,” Monica said quickly. “But I can get it. I swear it.”

One of my biggest regrets was that I’d trusted Monica Quinn at one point. Not with money, but with her word. She’d gone back on it, but by the time I realized it, it was too late.

So, no, I wasn't helping for Monica's benefit. I was doing this for Laikyn. I owed her that much.

As for Monica Quinn, she appeared wealthy from the outside, but I'd learned the woman had been in dire financial straits for a while now. She claimed she didn't trust anyone else with her money, but no one had ever taught her how to manage it properly. That and Monica Quinn had a gambling problem that had caused her to make some terrible decisions in recent years. Some far worse than others.

"How much is your fee?" Laikyn asked, her soft voice strained.

"One mil. Incremented by the same each time I help."

Her eyes widened. "You want *three million* dollars?"

"Yes." I looked at her mother. "You know the drill, Mon. Three million cash. Now. Or we walk."

That didn't shave any of the shock from her face, but Laikyn turned her attention to her mother.

"Three million dollars to..." Laikyn waved a shaky hand toward the ceiling in the direction of the dead bodies.

"It's cheaper than the high-price legal team she'll need," Rhyan pitched in.

I waved a hand low, urging Rhyan to shut the fuck up.

I pinned Monica with a stare. "What's it gonna be?"

## Laikyn

I COULD NOT BELIEVE I WAS STANDING in the living room at almost five o'clock in the morning, having a conversation about paying someone to dispose of bodies.

This could not be my life. It couldn't.

Of course, being slightly warped and twisted, my thoughts had shifted elsewhere momentarily. Namely on the devastatingly handsome man who had saved me from captivity and was now the one planning the route those dead bodies would take.

But Jesus Christ, this man was so fucking hot, it was difficult to remember he was a criminal. I wasn't merely talking about the dark hair and eyes, the beard covering his jaw. Not about his stature—at least a few inches over six feet, deliciously muscled—or his domineering air. No, it was the combination of it all. Rule was so darkly handsome that the legality of it was highly suspect. Seriously. Someone should check into that because no one was that physically perfect. I would know. I'd been around some of the most perfect people in the world, all enhanced by skilled hands. Not even the best plastic surgeons in Hollywood could make a face as spectacular as this man's.

Yes, fine. That was me waxing poetic about a man who got rid of dead bodies for a living. Whatever. He'd saved me at one point, so there had to be some good in him. Maybe. Okay, probably not. More than likely, he was earning his one-million-a-pop fee, and pulling me out of a hole in the ground was all in a day's work.

And we certainly weren't going to delve too deeply into why I was regarding him in such a manner when there were dead bodies in the house. That was for therapy.

I forced myself to look at my mother while I waited for her to tell him how she was going to come up with the money. It was evident from her expression that she didn't have three million lying around. But who did?

"What if we go to the bank first thing," I suggested when they continued to stare at each other.

My mother's eyes snapped to my face. It was then I realized she'd covered the marks on her face, fixed her mascara, and styled her hair into some purposely disheveled knot on her head. And at some point, she'd put on a clean nightgown, a matching robe, and a fucking pearl necklace.

Yeah, therapy was going to be a requirement after all this.

"It's not that simple," Monica said softly.

"Sure it is."

She shook her head slowly, and tears formed on her lashes. I prepared myself for some sort of sob story. She was really good at that. There was a reason she was an A-list actress.

"I don't have it, Laiky. I don't. I wish I did."

I cringed at the nickname. She might as well announce that she was gearing up to manipulate me because that was how it always began.

"Meaning what?" I prompted. "You don't have three million tucked in a sock drawer? Or you don't have the money at all?"

More tears formed, but they hadn't spilled over yet. She was holding them back, timing them perfectly.

"We're done here, Rhyan," Rule told the woman wearing blood-covered latex gloves.

"Gotcha, boss." She turned and strolled out as though being woken up in the middle of the night for a *never mind* wasn't a big deal.

And just like that, the Monica Quinn Waterworks began, tears streaming down her face as she stared at me helplessly. Soon, the sobs came, and my mother crumpled onto the settee,



curling into a ball as she always did when things got too difficult for her to deal with.

I refused to console her. I refused to even feel sorry for her. This was a mess she'd gotten herself into all on her own. If she would only go to the police, she could get herself out of it with a simple explanation.

Oh, hell, who was I kidding? I knew the justice system didn't work like that. It would be national news if Monica Quinn were accused of a double murder, and some glory-driven detective would latch onto this as a highlight of their career. I could hear the reports now, "Monica Quinn kills two in a jealous rage. More at six." Unlike OJ, who got away with murder, Monica would probably go down for something she didn't do.

*If she didn't do it.*

While I loved my mother, I didn't know exactly what she was capable of, and I wouldn't deny that the scene upstairs looked a little too *clean* for me. Too simple, even. In my mind, the woman on the bed overdosed, and the husband flew into a crazed rage when he realized she was dead before going on the attack. Monica grabbed the nearest object to protect herself with. Just happened to be a five-inch Wusthof cheese knife with a curved blade and forked tip—translated to: the perfect murder weapon.

Maybe it really was that simple, but there was no doubt in my mind someone could pick it apart and find a dozen other scenarios that would suit the gruesome scene.

I glanced at Rule and noticed he was watching me. It wasn't the first time. His gaze had lingered on me more than once since he arrived. Like those other times, I couldn't make out what he was thinking, but that warped and twisted part of me hoped it consisted of the two of us getting naked and dirty together.

"I suggest you call the cops soon," he said, nodding before he turned on his heel and headed for the door.

“No. Wait!” I rushed to catch him before he slipped out into the night, and I never saw him again.

He stopped and peered at me, his hand on the doorknob. Yes, it was wrong of me to be thinking that he had really, really nice hands. The kind that could probably play a woman’s body like a finely tuned instrument.

“Take me,” I blurted before I could think better of it.

He released the doorknob and turned to face me fully. “Excuse me.”

“Take me. Make it look like a kidnapping.” I glanced back at the parlor where my mother was weeping. “She has kidnap and ransom insurance on me. They’ll pay three million easy.”

Rule’s dark eyebrows narrowed. “You know that’s not how it works.”

“Yes, it is. She told me.”

Rule peered past me at the room my mother was in. “They don’t *pay* the ransom. They pay it *back*.”

No, he was wrong. My mother specifically told me the insurance company had been putting together the ransom when she found Rule, who said he could get me back faster and for less than what the kidnappers were asking for. Since she was desperate to get me home, Monica chose him.

“Tell me you know this, Laikyn,” Rule said softly, his dark eyes hard.

I figured now wasn’t the time to argue because he was practically out the door, and I did not look forward to spending the rest of the night explaining to the police that I had nothing to do with the horror show upstairs. Not that they would believe me. That glory-seeking detective would likely toss me into his fictional story, claiming mother and daughter dreamed up the perfect murder only for it to go awry.

Rule glanced toward the stairs. I followed his gaze and saw the woman he referred to as Rhyan standing at the top, staring down at him. She had a leather bag in her hand and a questioning expression.

“I’ll remind you I’ve got two redheads waiting in my bed,” she told Rule. “Shall I go home? Or do you want me to finish up?”

I met his stare once more, trying to read his thoughts. The man was too guarded, too mysterious. He could’ve been thinking about petting puppies or cutting eyeballs out of doll heads. It was impossible to tell.

“Tell one of those redheads to scope their house, then finish up,” he finally said, his eyes never leaving me.

“Calling now,” Rhyan shouted back before disappearing again.

“So you’ll do it?” I asked, lowering my voice so my mother didn’t hear. “Fake my kidnapping?”

Rule took a step closer, then another, until I swore I could feel the heat of his body. I fought the urge to move back because I was the one who’d instigated this with my request. It really was simple. He could stash me away somewhere and have someone demand a fake ransom. Once the insurance company paid the money, he could have it, and I could go back to living in a world where my mother called fixers when her sexcapades went awry.

That was something I would tuck away in the mental box marked CRAZY SHIT so I could pull it out and deal with later.

I gasped when Rule put a finger under my chin and tilted my head back. I held his stare, noticing for the first time a glitter of gold in his dark eyes. Like stardust sprinkled in coffee. His lips ... those perfectly shaped lips were close enough it would only take one misstep for them to be on mine, for him to rock my world with a kiss.

He remained motionless for a moment, holding my stare. He was so close I could smell the faintest hint of ... I don’t know. It was familiar. While I waited for him to say something—or yes, kiss me—I focused on the smell until I placed it. It only took a few seconds before I realized it was Yves Saint Laurent Libre perfume. He wasn’t wearing it, but it was *on* him.

Was that where he came from? Some woman in his bed?

Was he married? He wasn't wearing a ring, but that didn't mean anything.

Was I over here fantasizing about a married man?

"K and R insurance doesn't work like that," he said smoothly. *Too* smoothly. "Your mother knows this because it backfired on her once already."

I frowned, trying to decipher his meaning and get the scent of his girlfriend's perfume out of my nostrils.

His eyes bounced over my face as though he was waiting for something to click for me. It didn't. That didn't make sense.

"Just ask her what happened when the guys she hired to kidnap you the last time learned they weren't getting paid because she didn't get the money she thought she would."

I backed up a step but had nowhere to go. I was trapped between his big body and the wall.

No.

No, no, no.

He was wrong. There was no way my mother would've done that.

"She wouldn't," I whispered, even as I realized that was exactly something Monica Quinn would do.

"She did."

There was nothing in his expression to say he was lying. Why would he? Why would he tell me something like that when I was trying to solve his problem? He wanted his fee, and my mother needed it to make this go away. Fake kidnapping plus fake ransom equals three million dollars. Easy peasy.

Or maybe not because the glint in his eyes said he knew what he was talking about.

The thought that Monica had hired someone to hold me captive in a dark, dank basement, refusing me everything but the bare basics to survive for two weeks, made my stomach turn. She was capable of plenty, but turning on her own daughter? That was a new low. Had she told Diggy to torment me? Was she the reason a cold chill ran down my spine when I heard a loud noise?

My stomach lurched, but I choked down the bile rising in my throat.

“Take me anyway,” I said, my jaw hardening. “Do whatever you want with me. I can work it off.”

His eyes glittered with amusement, but his expression didn’t change. “Work off three million?”

“Yes.”

“What is it you do that’ll earn you three mil?”

I shrugged. I was an artist, and while my paintings were good, I wasn’t Salvador Dali or Claude Monet, and I never would be. I’d sold every piece I had ever created and even had a few commissioned by a local gallery. Of course, if you asked my mother, she would tell you it wasn’t because I had talent—which I did, thank you very much—but because I was her daughter. People wanted a piece of her, and my art was by proxy. But I wasn’t going to devalue myself entirely. I was capable of earning money. I could do what Rhyan was doing upstairs if I had to.

*Yeah, sure you can. If you’re so brazen, why does the thought of cleaning up a crime scene send your stomach into an alligator death roll?*

I ignored the stupid voice and focused on Rule’s question.

“Whatever you want me to do,” I whispered, refusing to back down. If I did, I would probably fall apart, and while my mother was a good actress, I wasn’t. It was going to get messy, but I was tired of being the fucking pawn on the chessboard, used and discarded for someone else’s gain.

“You’re willing to sell yourself to clear your mother’s debt?”

“Yes.”

I held his stare, refusing to acknowledge the butterflies that had erupted in my belly. I wasn't scared of this man. He wasn't going to hurt me. He had no reason to.

The question was: would he help?

I saw the moment something clicked for him. “Under one condition.”

“Anything.”

“We have to get married.”

Well, the good news was he wasn't married. That or he didn't realize bigamy was a crime.

The bad news was he was batshit crazy.

I stared, waiting for the punchline because surely I didn't hear him correctly. Why in the world would he want me to marry him? I didn't understand what that would possibly gain either of us.

“Why?”

“That way, you can't back out.”

Why he thought I might, I didn't know. Plus, marriage didn't mean *forever and ever, amen*. Not in the world I grew up in. Didn't he know divorces were all the rage in California? For every marriage, weren't there like five divorces? It seemed like a reasonable guesstimate, at the very least.

“This was my idea,” I countered. “I won't back out.”

“I know. Because you'll be my wife.”

“I don't even know you.” I wondered if he heard the rhythmic thump of my heart. It was so loud, banging against my ear drums with every breath, and it had nothing to do with fear. This man was basically manipulating me the way everyone in my life had, but for some stupid reason, I was okay with it. Something told me I shouldn't be, but being left behind to deal with a woman who paid someone to kidnap her own daughter was the worst kind of hell I could imagine at the moment.

Kinda sad since ... you know, dead bodies and all.

“You’ll get to know me,” Rule said. “We have time. Do we have a deal?”

I pretended I was giving this serious consideration, but there was no way I could. People didn’t do this. They didn’t barter and trade themselves to pay debts or as an excuse to escape a shitty situation. Or maybe they did, and I was as sheltered and clueless as the media portrayed me to be.

“Couldn’t we maybe start slow? As friends?” I asked, still not sure what the marriage angle did for either of us because his excuse was flimsy at best. Divorce was always an option.

“No,” he said firmly, standing tall.

His dark eyes were determined, as was the set of his jaw. I knew this wasn’t a negotiation, and if I didn’t give him the answer he wanted in the next five seconds, he was going to walk out that door and leave me to clean up my mother’s mess and risk beating my mother to a pulp for what she’d done to me. An image of both of us in orange jumpsuits came to mind.

“Fine,” I said because I didn’t look good in orange. And because I could tell he was expecting me to refuse.

I swear his eyes softened, and the hint of a smile pulled at his mouth. “Good girl.”

That alligator death roll my belly had been doing stopped suddenly and reversed, sending my heart rate into hyperdrive. Though manipulative and misplaced, his praise filled my chest with helium and momentarily lifted my feet off the ground. Sad, I know. But I couldn’t remember a time anyone had praised me for anything. Unless you considered my mother telling me she was proud I’d watched my calorie intake while imprisoned in some lunatics basement. Not exactly the same thing.

Before I could ask him what I was supposed to do to prepare for the upcoming nuptials, Rule took my wrist firmly in his hand and led me back to the living room, where my mother was still weeping while she peeked through slitted eyes

to see if anyone was watching. Sure enough, as soon as we walked in, the sobs became more intense.

“The fee’s been taken care of,” Rule told her.

My mother sat up, her expression instantly smoothed. “What? How?”

“Your daughter took care of it for you.”

Monica’s eyes widened. “You have money?”

I shook my head. “Not three mil, no. But it’s fine.”

My mother launched to her feet, the skin on her face tightening. “What did you do?”

I thought the question was for me, but her glare was pinned on Rule.

He didn’t answer, something I realized he was ridiculously good at.

“Go upstairs and pack a bag,” he instructed me. “You’re leaving with me.”

“I need more than a bag,” I countered. I had canvases and paints that needed to be packed up. I would rather take those than clothes.

“I’ll send someone for the rest when it’s daylight.”

“What did you do?” my mother shouted more insistently this time.

“Go,” Rule snapped, urging me toward the door.

I stumbled a few steps, but this time, I did as he said. I hurried upstairs to grab clothes, pretending I didn’t hear the raised voices that followed.

It was easier to tell myself that my mother was heartbroken that I was leaving, but I knew Monica Quinn. She didn’t do heartbreak. She didn’t have it in her.

\* \* \*

## Rule



“YOU DON’T GET TO DO THIS,” MONICA hissed, glaring at me when Laikyn left the room.

“It’s not up to you.”

Monica’s blue eyes burned like a gas flame as she moved toward me, daring to get in my face. “You will get nothing.”

“Actually, I’ll get what I’m due. And remember, before you get high and mighty, you’re the one who called me. This is *me* solving *your* problem.”

“No, this is you trying to get your hands on money that doesn’t belong to you,” she seethed.

“And that’s different from what you’ve done, how?”

Monica gasped, her eyes narrowed.

“Don’t think about it,” I growled softly when she pulled her hand back as though to strike me. “It won’t end well for you.”

“It won’t end well for you!” she snapped.

“Don’t forget, I know your secrets, Mon. There’s only one thing that matters, as far as I’m concerned. Me. I protect my own ass first. Always.” I took one step closer. “And if you even think about telling her, I’ll take what I have directly to the FBI. What will your creditors think then? I know. They’ll think you’re spilling your guts to save your ass. And they, too, are into self-preservation.”

That got through to her because Monica took a step back.

I could tell she was trying to devise a way out of this, but there wasn’t one. I was much better at playing this game than she was. It was the reason I’d been biding my time, looking the other way when I’d wanted to drop that little bomb on Laikyn for a long time. Ever since I learned of Monica’s scam to rip off the insurance company, I’d wanted nothing more than to fuck up Monica’s life. Not because I gave two shits about the money.

No, this was about betrayal. Monica Quinn had betrayed her daughter in the worst possible way. She had used Laikyn as a fucking pawn to get what she wanted. It wasn’t my fault

she hadn't read the fine print before she took out the policy on her daughter. The insurance only covered the ransom *after* it was paid, ensuring the policyholder wasn't out the money. Monica hadn't known that when she purposely put her daughter in danger to save herself. It had backfired in a big way.

And though I was a man who didn't feel much of anything—not hate or like—I wouldn't deny I fucking hated Monica Quinn for what she'd done to her daughter.

“She'll hate you when she finds out what you're after,” Monica said when I turned toward the door.

“Maybe. But it sure as shit beats her hating you for the same thing.”

A very unladylike snort sounded behind me, making me smile.

I reached the front door at the same time Laikyn was coming down the stairs. She had changed into jeans and a chest-hugging T-shirt and pulled her long hair back into a ponytail. She had a large duffel bag on one shoulder and an even larger portfolio case dangling from her other hand.

I reached for the case to relieve her of the weight, then took the duffel bag. “Say goodbye to your mother. I'll be in the car.”

I walked out to put the bags in the trunk, wondering what Monica intended to tell Laikyn. I doubted it would be the truth because then she would have to cop to a lot of other things. Things her daughter likely wouldn't forgive her for. And everyone knew Monica Quinn didn't do well when people didn't like her.

Twenty minutes later, with Laikyn sitting in the passenger seat of my Challenger, I was driving west on Sunset Blvd toward my house. It was just under six miles from one house to the other, and due to the early hour, the traffic was light.

“Nice car,” she said, skimming the interior. “Is it new?”

I cocked an eyebrow, amused that she was trying to make small talk.

“Smells new. Better than the perfume you’re wearing.”

“I’m not wearing perfume.”

“Tell that to your neck.”

Fuck. That chick had been heavy-handed with the scent, but I’d thought nothing of it.

“This afternoon, we’ll get it done,” I told her when we were a few minutes from my front door.

“*It?*” She looked at me. “I assume you mean the wedding?”

“Yes.”

“Has anyone ever told you how romantic you are?”

I fought the urge to grin because there wasn’t any fear in this woman’s voice. She was giving me shit while coming to terms with her circumstances. I admired that about her. Hell, I admired a lot of things about this woman, things I would never lay claim to.

She didn’t look at me when she asked, “Do you know a judge or something?”

“Or something.”

“What about the marriage license?”

“He’ll take care of that, too.”

I flipped the blinker to turn into my neighborhood while Laikyn looked out the window. I could tell she was curious about where I lived, but she didn’t ask questions. Not when I pulled into the short driveway and up to my house. Not when the garage door opened so I could pull the car inside. She looked around, silently observing.

“Is that a Harley Softail?”

“It is.”

“Nice.”

Two minutes later, the garage door was closing behind us. I turned off the engine and got out, grabbing her things from the trunk.

“Where do I sleep?”

“Pick a room.”

“What if I want to sleep in your room?”

That nearly tripped me up, but I countered smoothly.  
“Then I’ll pick a room.”

“Do you live here by yourself?”

“No.”

Before I reached the door, she grabbed my arm.  
“Seriously? Please don’t tell me you have a girlfriend in there?”

I grinned. “No girlfriend, I assure you.”

“So your powers of persuasion didn’t work on Perfume Girl?”

“What?”

Laikyn waved a hand at my chest. “I just call it like I smell it.”

I didn’t bother explaining because it didn’t matter. After the ceremony this afternoon, she would never have to worry about that again. At least not while I was married to her. It was the least I could do, considering what I was after.

I opened the door to the house and stepped back so she could go in first.

“To the left,” I instructed, then followed her down the short hall to the open living room and deposited her things on one of the couches.

A sharp bark sounded from down the hall, and a second later, it was followed by nails clicking on the hardwood floors.

“Sit,” I commanded gruffly.

A sad whimper sounded at the same time Waldo’s butt met the floor.

“Oh, my God.” Laikyn’s eyes lit up like a kid’s on Christmas morning. “You have a dog?”

I didn’t answer because it seemed obvious to me.

“Boy or girl?” she asked, not taking her eyes off the chocolate lab currently thumping the floor with his tail.

“Boy.”

“Name?”

“Waldo.”

“Is he friendly?”

“He’s a marshmallow,” I said, then signaled Waldo to get up.

As soon as I did, he launched himself at Laikyn, practically taking her to the floor as he tried to lick the skin off her face.

Laikyn giggled and dropped to a crouch so she could let Waldo bowl her over and attempt to cuddle like he’d been left here alone for a year. Within seconds, she had Waldo draped over her legs, his head against her belly as he curled into her warmth.

“You are the cutest thing I’ve ever seen,” she said, smoothing her hand over his dark brown fur. “Thank goodness you don’t smell like perfume.”

I sat on the arm of the sofa and watched, waiting until she was finished showering Waldo with attention and making more digs at me. I wouldn’t acknowledge the envy I felt at that moment. I wanted to be that damn dog. It was stupid and juvenile.

When she finally looked up, it was to peer around at the open space. “Wow. This is ... well, the house is nice, but did you have to take decorating tips from *That ’70s Show*?”

I should’ve expected that.

“It’s home,” I told her, not at all offended that she didn’t care for the decor. I couldn’t blame her. I didn’t care for it either, but I didn’t have the time or the inclination to change it.

“Who’s your decorator? They suck.”

I scanned the room, taking it in from her viewpoint. To be fair, it wasn’t so much ugly as it was an over-the-top attempt at mid-century modern. The house’s architecture made it livable, even if the furniture wasn’t everyone’s cup of tea.

“Ask the previous owners,” I told her. “I bought it like this.”

She eased herself from under Waldo, then brushed dog hair off her jeans when she stood up. “So the furniture isn’t yours?”

“Came with the house.”

“You just move in?”

“Three years ago,” I admitted.

“That makes the furniture yours.” She laughed, then shook her head. “And Waldo?”

“He didn’t come with the house.”

She pointed and grinned as though to say, *I see what you did there.*

“How long have you had him?” She skimmed the living room, the dining area, and the kitchen as she moved toward the back of the house.

“Two years.”

Laikyn peered down at Waldo, who was propped with his front paws in front of him as he watched her. “How old is he?”

“Three, maybe four. Don’t know for sure.”

“No doubt the longest relationship you’ve ever had,” she said with a grin.

“Not quite, but close,” I admitted.

Her eyes met mine, and I could tell she was trying to read into the meaning. When I didn’t give her anything more, she continued to survey the space.

“What was the appeal?” she asked, placing her hand on the retracting wall of windows that opened to the outdoor living space. “All the concrete, the pool, or the view?”

“All. None.”

Laikyn smiled, and it changed her from attractive to dick-hardeningly beautiful.

“What’s out there?” She was pointing at what the real estate agent had referred to as a recreation room at the far back of the property. The previous owners had used it as a gym.

“Nothing at the moment.”

“Seriously?”

I nodded. “You should get some sleep.”

“Oh, right.” She clutched her hands to her chest. “Big day today. A girl only gets married three times, but I’m sure the first is supposed to be special.”

I choked on a laugh. Honestly, I wasn’t expecting her to be quite so lighthearted about the whole thing.

“So we get married this afternoon.” Laikyn’s eyebrows rose. “Then what? I hope you don’t expect me to sit in this depressing place all day.”

I could tell she was being facetious. The house wasn’t the least bit depressing, even if it was bland. Considering I was rarely here, I didn’t see the point in doing anything with it.

“I’ve got an office,” I informed her.

“In the house?”

“No.”

“Ah. You’re one of those, huh?”

“One of those what?”

Laikyn shrugged. “I don’t know. It was the first thing that came to mind.”

Oh yeah. She was going to give me a run for my money.

“You should get some sleep.” I picked up her bags. “Pick a room.”

She stopped me as I turned toward the hall leading to the guest rooms, her expression serious. “Is my mother going to

be all right? I mean, with the ... *stuff*.”

“Yes.”

“You sound certain.”

“That’s my job.”

“And you’re good at your job?”

“The best.”

Her eyes moved over my face as though hoping to ferret out the truth.

“I won’t lie to you, Laikyn. I have no reason to.”

Her pretty green eyes searched my face for a moment before she finally said, “Okay.”

I nodded, then raised my arm in the direction of the bedrooms. “Okay.”

“What are my options?” She spun on her heel to lead the way down the hallway that extended off the living room. Waldo trotted along at her side, clearly expecting to spend more time with her.

I didn’t respond. The house was four thousand square feet, but the majority was the entertainment areas. There were only three bedrooms—only two downstairs—so it wouldn’t be difficult for her to figure it out in less than a minute.

She stopped at the first door she came to. “Is this one yours?”

“No.”

“Is someone else using it?”

“No.”

“Then I’ll take it.”

I carried her bags into the room and left them on the bed. I had just stepped into the hall when Laikyn called my name.

“Yeah?”

“What you said earlier about my mom paying someone to kidnap me...”



I waited.

“Was it true?”

“Yes.”

“I want you to tell me about it. Not now, though.”

“Sure.”

“Good night.”

“It’s morning,” I reminded her.

She smiled. “Good morning, then.”

“Come on, Waldo. Let’s give the girl some space.”

If a dog could pout, Waldo did, but he followed me out of the room so I could close the door behind me.

Instead of going straight upstairs to my bedroom, I went to the other bedroom and rapped my knuckles on the door, signaling Jinx that I was coming in.

I opened the door and found him propped up on the bed, a book in his hand. His light blue eyes skimmed over me briefly.

“I’ll introduce you after she catches a nap,” I informed him as Waldo hopped up on his bed and curled against his legs.

Jinx nodded. He pointed a finger at me, then to himself, before arching his eyebrows. It was his way of asking if I needed anything from him.

“No, I’m good,” I answered.

His eyebrows arched higher.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

Jinx jerked his chin, then turned his attention back to his book.

I pulled his door closed, then headed upstairs to my bedroom. I didn’t stop until I was in the bathroom. I flipped on the water, stripped off my clothes, and got under the spray. I let the cool water beat down on my body, willing it to take the edge off this lust that had consumed me since Laikyn first

opened the door a short while ago. I couldn't explain what it was about her, but I ached for her.

I'd never had a reaction to a woman like this. It wasn't merely physical attraction. It was more than that.

When it came to women, the only thing I'd ever been curious about was how loud I could make her scream when she was in the throes of orgasm. With Laikyn ... I got the feeling her screams would be as vibrant and heated as she was. I wanted to hear them, but I also wanted to hear her say my name when she came. I wanted to watch her face when her eyes rolled back as she succumbed to ecstasy. None of it made sense.

I fisted my cock roughly as I imagined tunneling into her tight, wet cunt. I imagined her fingernails slicing down my back while I pounded inside her, taking us both to the edge and beyond. I envisioned her long legs wrapped around my hips while I impaled her over and over again.

It wasn't going to happen, but the mental imagery had formed, and for a brief moment, with my eyes closed and my hand stroking my dick, I let myself think it could.

I grunted when my cock kicked in my hand, spurting cum on the shower wall.

While the idea was fantasy worthy, I had no intention of fucking Laikyn Quinn. I would make her my wife and then do what needed to be done. Once everything was as it should be, I would release her from the contract with an annulment—after all, I was doing this under false pretenses—so she could go on to marry someone who deserved her.

For now, it had to be this way. I couldn't tell her my reasons, but it had nothing to do with love or lust or happily ever after. I didn't give a shit about any of those things, and I damn sure didn't want her to mistakenly think I did.

## Laikyn

AFTER A FITFUL NAP, I WOKE UP a few hours later in an unfamiliar room, but it didn't cause me to panic. I didn't recognize the space, but I wasn't overwhelmed by a sense of foreboding, either. I probably should have, considering the events of the night, but it all clicked into place, making sense in the most awkward way.

Dead bodies.

Crazy mother.

Dead body fixer.

Rule's house.

Rule's guest room.

Yep, that was the gist of my night and part of my morning, but based on the sun glinting through the thick drapes covering the short windows, the day was well underway. A glance at my cell phone told me it was a little after nine.

“My wedding day.” I snorted a laugh as I crawled out of bed and headed for the bathroom.

Me. Twenty-two-years-old. Getting married.

I was waiting for someone to jump out and shout, “Gotcha!”

*It is what it is.*

I went pee, then opted for a shower to wash off the stench of last night. I'd grabbed some travel-size items my mother kept on hand before I left her house, so I had what I needed without having to find Rule. When I was finished, I felt better. I took the time to dry my hair but didn't bother with makeup. I'd only brought the bare minimum with me, and until I knew

exactly what the plan was for today, I saw no reason to waste it. I pulled on loose-fitting capris and my vintage Queen T-shirt, tucking the front into the waistband before opening the door.

The sound of emptiness greeted me, but it was quickly filled with the rumble of my stomach. I definitely needed breakfast.

Part of me had expected Waldo to greet me the same way he had last night, but either he hadn't heard me yet, or he wasn't there. I didn't really get the take-my-dog-for-a-ride-in-the-car vibe from Rule—his car was much too clean—but stranger things had happened.

I didn't announce my presence as I went in search of sustenance. I made it as far as the kitchen without hearing a sound, but the second I stepped past the wall that separated the kitchen from the rest of the space, I realized I wasn't alone.

“Oh, shit,” I said, coming to a stop. “I didn't realize...”

*What* I didn't realize was anyone's guess because my words died on my tongue as I stared at the bald man standing at the kitchen island.

I should clarify that. The bald, muscular *god* standing at the kitchen island.

Lord, help me.

He was shirtless, although, at first glance, it appeared he was covered. But it wasn't clothing that concealed his skin. It was ink. He was tattooed from his neck to his fingers on both arms, over the solid expanse of his chest, and down his sides. The tattoos had been artfully designed as though they were showcasing his finely chiseled abdomen, and boy, what a stomach. Can you say washboard? All rippled muscle and...

Okay, I was ogling. I had to stop.

I forced my attention back to his face, back to those sinful eyes. I wasn't sure it was appropriate to say the man was beautiful, but it was the only word that came to mind. Beautiful in a very sexy, bad-boy way. He was bald as a cue ball, but if he'd had hair, it would've been blond since his

perfectly arched eyebrows and the short stubble on his jaw, chin, and upper lip were the lightest shade of brown. His face was oval, and an artist could've sculpted his nose. But again, his eyes were what captivated me most. The lightest of blue irises stood out like beacons in his tanned face.

"I ... um..." I took a hesitant step forward. "I'm Laikyn. Rule's ... uh ... friend?"

I didn't mean for it to come out as a question, but I wasn't sure how to explain my relationship with a man I'd only met a few hours ago when he came to clean up dead bodies for my mother and insisted I marry him or deal with the cops.

The bald man nodded.

"And you are?"

His eyes lingered on me for a moment before cutting to the counter. He picked up his phone, typed something, then turned it so I could see. I moved closer, taking the phone from him to read it.

"Jinx? That's your name?"

He lifted his arm, his hand formed into a fist.

I grinned when I realized what he wanted. I fist-bumped him back, then set his phone down.

"Did your parents know Rule's? I mean, were they playing a game when they came up with your names?"

He shook his head and grinned.

I gestured toward the phone. "And the phone thing...? Is it a new trend millennials are trying for?"

His smile ... heaven help me, his smile was hot enough to smoke meat.

He shook his head.

"Do you speak?"

He shook his head again.

"Do you know sign language?" Not that it would matter if he did since I didn't know it.

He shook his head.

“So you respond using text?”

He gave me a thumbs-up.

“Good to know.”

He held up the egg carton, and his eyebrows rose as he nodded toward me.

“Do I want eggs?” I said, smiling. “I would love a couple. Thank you.”

Jinx flashed a smile, and I was pretty sure my ovaries started breakdancing.

He pointed toward the opposite counter, so I followed the motion. I saw a coffee pot.

“Do I want coffee? No. Not a fan. Any chance there’s juice?”

He pointed at the refrigerator. I took that to mean I was to make myself at home.

I ignored my ovaries’ demand to ogle his impressive stomach some more and went to the refrigerator to scope the contents. Like the rest of the house, there wasn’t much in it, but I was grateful to find a carton of orange juice. I grabbed it while Jinx produced a glass and set it on the counter.

“Is Waldo around?” I knew he wouldn’t answer, but I was one of those people who liked to fill the awkward silence with intruding questions.

Jinx pointed toward the back of the house.

I glanced outside, and it took a second to find the dog splashing in the swimming pool.

“Tell me that thing’s heated,” I said, although I didn’t look back to see if Jinx answered. “Is he...?” I laughed and moved closer, clutching the orange juice carton as I watched Waldo and Rule playing in the swimming pool. Rule had a ball, and he tossed it to the shallow end, following behind Waldo as he raced to get it.

Not in all my life had I ever seen anything as endearing as Rule playing ball with his dog.

Waldo reached the ball first, but before he could turn, Rule whistled, then gestured toward the steps. Waldo paddled over and climbed out, giving a full-body shake as he stood at the side.

It was a good thing I was watching the dog, or there was a good chance I would've imploded as Rule came out of the swimming pool. It was difficult enough to tear my eyes away when he grabbed a towel and began running it over the bare expanse of his chest, which had the muscles in his shoulders and arms flexing deliciously. Like Jinx, he had tattoos, though they didn't cover as much real estate. And like Jinx, he had a set of drool-worthy six-pack abs.

Before I actually *did* drool, I spun around and marched back to the island to pour juice into the glass. I found Jinx watching me, those arctic blue eyes moving as I did.

"Do you ... do you, um, live here?" I asked, forcing my attention to the glass before remembering he wouldn't be answering with words.

When I looked up, he nodded.

"Are you the only one?"

He quirked an eyebrow and pointed to Rule.

"Besides him?" I huffed a laugh. "And the dog?" I tacked on before he could point.

Jinx winked and smiled, so I took that as a yes.

Two smoking hot guys and their adorable dog. What more could a lonely girl ask for?

Of course, his answer spurred a few dozen questions I managed to choke down. I figured it wasn't appropriate to inquire about what they were to one another. Brothers, friends, lovers ... the options were endless. They didn't look like they were related, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. I figured there was a good chance they were friends since they lived together, but that didn't mean they weren't also lovers.

These days, assuming something was the best way to find yourself looking like an asshole.

“Hey.”

The greeting came from behind me. I turned to see Rule standing inside, the towel draped over his very impressive shoulders, his hair slicked back, his beard glistening with water droplets. At his feet, Waldo sat, his tail thumping on the floor with eager anticipation.

“Hi,” I said, aiming the greeting at the dog but sparing Rule a quick glance while refusing to admire his very, very nice physique.

I crouched down, and when I did, Waldo looked up at Rule. He gave a hand command, which released the dog from his sitting position, and the next thing I knew, I was on my butt with sixty pounds of wet dog squirming all over me. I was pretty sure I hadn't laughed that hard in my entire life. I'd never had a dog of my own, nor did any of the few friends I had growing up. This opportunity was the equivalent of opening the only gift you'd ever wanted on Christmas morning.

It took effort to get Waldo to chill enough that I could sit without being knocked down, but he seemed content as long as I was petting him.

“Let me guess, he flunked out of obedience school?” I said, peering up at Rule.

Rule canted his head slightly. “He's mastered sit and stay. The rest is a crapshoot.”

Waldo licked the side of my face in agreement.

“You're so cute,” I told Waldo, hugging him when he put his head on my shoulder. “Don't take offense, but I think I'm in love with you.”

Waldo licked my face again.

A knock sounded, and I looked up to see Jinx getting Rule's attention. He held up the egg carton.



“Nah. I’m good. Thanks.” Rule looked down at me. “You two meet?”

“We did.” I scrubbed a hand over Waldo’s back. “His name’s Jinx. He doesn’t speak, but he texts. And he cooks.”

Rule’s smile was barely there, but I swore I saw it. “I’m gonna shower. We’re getting married at one.”

Ah, so that was still on the agenda. Good to know.

He moved past me, and I took a moment to admire his muscular legs and the dark hair that covered them.

“Should I wear anything specific?” I asked.

“What you’ve got on is fine,” he said without looking back.

“I’ll do it,” I warned. “Don’t tempt me.”

This time, he chuckled, and my ovaries started doing the cha-cha.

\* \* \*

## **Jinx**

NOT A SINGLE WORD HAD PASSED MY lips since I was eight years old.

At thirty-four, I wasn’t sure my vocal cords even worked anymore. I didn’t have the urge to speak, and in those instances when it was necessary—dealing with the police, for example—my anxiety made it impossible.

Hence, the reason I hadn’t spoken in twenty-six years.

Yet, the moment I laid eyes on Laikyn Quinn in the flesh, I swore sounds were going to creep their way up and out of my mouth.

Only they didn’t.

And yet, it didn’t seem to faze her one bit. In fact, that girl acted like it was every day she met a grown man who didn’t communicate outside of his cell phone.

In all fairness, I'd known there was something special about her since I first typed her name in a search engine. Back when Monica Quinn approached Rule about her daughter, I'd been keeping track of Laikyn, learning every nuance about her existence that I could. I'd seen pictures taken by media outlets hellbent on getting the front page story, as well as those Rhyan and the twins captured when they were sent to keep an eye on her. Still, I hadn't been prepared to meet the woman face to face.

And now, as I watched her eat the eggs I'd prepared with my own two hands, there was this strange sensation fizzing in my chest. I'd never put a name to that sensation, but it was very similar to the one I got when I was around Rule or Waldo. I wasn't sure I'd go so far as to say it was love, but if I were to lay claim to an equivalent emotion, that would be it. It was the sort of feeling that assured you things were going well, that you were safe, and there weren't any demons lurking in the shadows.

Not that I would ever tell Rule that I loved him. He would think I was fucking psycho. Maybe I was because no one in their right mind would love a man as hard and guarded as Rule.

I finished off the last of my eggs and turned to rinse my plate in the sink before tucking it into the dishwasher. When I turned back around, I found Laikyn staring at me. She'd been doing that a lot since she walked into the kitchen a short time ago. I certainly didn't mind the approval I saw in her eyes. It wasn't new. I got approving glances from women all the time. Sometimes, I indulged. Most of the time, I didn't. I wasn't like Rule in the sense I tried to fuck myself into oblivion. Although he didn't drink or do drugs—not since he gave up smoking when he went to prison—the man certainly had a vice: sex. He used it to numb himself. I knew because I was one of his numbing agents.

Not that I minded. The relationship we had was a give-and-take. He fucked me, I fucked him. Whatever he needed at the time. I didn't overanalyze what it was or look for something that wasn't there. I owed that man my life, and as

far as I was concerned, I would be here for him until he turned me away. And if that day ever came, I would walk away without a single regret.

“Could you ... um ... turn around again?” Laikyn asked as she got down from the counter stool she’d been sitting on.

I didn’t have to ask why. I knew she was looking at the tattoo on my back. People found it fascinating, and when someone saw it for the first time, they often had the same reaction.

“It looks so *real*,” she said. “Can I touch you?”

I nodded, then steeled myself for her touch. It didn’t help. The instant her cool fingertips grazed over my skin, my cock kicked like someone had held an electric current to the damn thing.

“That is crazy cool,” she whispered, her fingers sweeping over me. “The chiaroscuro technique is incredible. The shadows have depth, enhancing the light source on the... Sorry, I’m an art nerd.” She giggled. “I keep expecting to feel the mechanical components like they’re really there. The hatching is insane.”

The tattoo was designed to look as though my skin was pulled away to reveal the mechanical skeleton beneath.

“The shadows make it come to life,” she mused, caressing along my sides, where the artist had filled in with black ink to imitate the dark cavities that would surround the skeleton.

Her hand fell away, leaving a chill in its wake.

“How long did that take?”

I turned to face her, using the island to conceal the hard-on tenting my shorts. I held up two fingers.

“Two years? Wow.” She returned to her seat at the counter. “I’ve never seen anything like it. The artist is very talented.”

I didn’t tell her that I was the one who’d designed it. I had the original drawing in my bedroom, the one I’d given to the tattoo artist so she could convert it into a design that worked best with my musculature.

I pointed at my arm and then at her.

“Do I have tattoos?” she said, guessing my intention correctly. “I do, actually. A few.” She gestured to her left side. “I’ve got butterflies starting at my hip, and they go around to my back. There’s a paintbrush that touches the tip of one of the butterflies since I designed them myself.”

I hoped one day I would have a chance to see her masterpiece simply because I was sure it was as beautiful as she was.

“So, I have a question.”

I met her stare.

“Actually, I have a thousand, but I’ll start simple.” Her smile was infectious. “If I want more than one-word responses, how do I go about getting them?”

Yeah, I really liked this girl.

I picked up my phone, then held it up before pointing to her.

“My phone?”

I nodded.

She grinned, then reached for her back pocket. “You’d be really good at charades, you know that?”

Funny, I was thinking the same thing about her.

I tapped my phone and pulled up the note I’d created long ago that had my phone number on it. I showed her.

Laikyn typed it into her phone. A few seconds later, a text message came through.

**— You might regret doing that. I like to ask questions.**

I typed my response.

**— I’m an open book.**

Her smile was sinful when she peered up at me. “Fair warning, I like to read.”

Fuck. My dick thickened more than I thought possible.

It was then that I knew Laikyn Quinn was going to change my life in ways I never imagined. As for whether she realized it, too, only time would tell. But I had a feeling Rule was in the know based on the way he stared at me from the doorway. I didn't know how long he'd been standing there, but the heat in his eyes said it had probably been about the time Laikyn had touched me.

And something told me he didn't care for the fact that she had.

Or perhaps he did, and that was what confused him.

## Laikyn

AT ONE O’CLOCK ON THE DOT, RULE summoned me to the outdoor living area. It wasn’t a formal space, but it was probably the most appealing part of the house. At least what I’d seen so far.

The back wall of the house was made of retractable glass. Just beyond that were three long, deep steps that started the downward cascade of the backyard. The rectangular patio space was covered partially by solid roofing and partially by wide trellises that allowed some light to filter down. On the right was a wall with a wide-screen television mounted on it, to the left, a small outdoor kitchen sectioned off by a bar with three wooden stools. In the center were two extra-deep lounging sofas facing each other atop a large bamboo rug with a hideous neon-colored geometric pattern. Thankfully, it was mostly hidden beneath the furniture. Last but not least, two potted Areca palms stood on either side of the opening that led to the swimming pool.

Like a lot of real estate in California, the lot was long and narrow. Enormous hedge trees—at least twelve feet tall and crammed together to create a wall—ran down both sides of the property to add privacy from the neighbors. It was the only green in the space except for two rectangular patches of grass, about four feet wide and twenty feet long, on each side of the pool. Waldo’s spot was on the left, I figured, since there was nothing on the grass. On the right side were two covered lounge chairs/bed contraptions that would give a king-size bed a run for its money.

The pool itself was lovely. Also rectangular, it jutted out from the house. It had a sun shelf on the end closest to the house and a hot tub, complete with a gentle flowing waterfall on the other.

Not exactly where a girl envisioned saying her wedding vows, but I figured it could've been worse.

The ceremony took all of twelve minutes from start to finish before we were pronounced husband and wife. The nuptials weren't sealed with a kiss but rather a dismissive head nod from Rule before he turned his attention to the officiant to finish the paperwork.

"What? No birdseed for luck?" I muttered, strolling into the house and leaving Rule behind to deal with the officiant.

Twelve minutes and I was now ... Mrs. Rule?

He apparently didn't have a last name. At all. And I don't mean like Prince or Pink or Madonna. I meant legally, he had only one name. It was the weirdest shit I'd ever heard, but based on what the officiant said, it wasn't as uncommon as people believed. I wanted to ask if that was the case with Jinx, but I figured it was a question better left for later. Probably not wise to be inquiring about another man on your wedding day.

So, did that make me Laikyn now? Just Laikyn? Or, I guess, technically, I could make Rule take *my* last name. Then he would have one of his own. Jinx could have it, too, if he wanted.

The thought made me snort a laugh.

No, neither seemed like a Mr. Quinn to me. Then again, I wasn't sure Quinn suited me all that much, either. Since it wasn't a family name, I didn't really have any ties to it. My mother was born Renee Noblespreyer, but she had it legally changed when she moved to California to become an actress. And because she claimed she didn't know who my father was, she'd passed her fake name on to me. I guess I should thank her since Laikyn Audrey Marilyn Noblespreyer would've been a mouthful. Seriously. I didn't have one middle name; I had two. My mother said she couldn't choose between naming me after Audrey Hepburn or Marilyn Monroe, so she opted for both.

I went to the kitchen and poured a glass of water, staring out the back windows at the two men deep in conversation

while the officiant finished something up at the patio table. I'd been briefly introduced to Red Wally, one of Rule's employees, moments before the nuptials. Like Jinx, Red Wally was a witness, and based on his expression, this was par for the course for his boss. He sure as shit hadn't seemed surprised to learn Rule was marrying a woman he didn't know.

As for me ... well, my prior behavior never would've alluded to me having a quick and dirty wedding in someone's backyard with the Hollywood sign looming in the distance. I mean, shit, Wes Carver had been boyfriend number two, and that was seriously rare for a twenty-two-year-old living in Beverly Hills.

So, to sum it up, last night, I went on a date with Boyfriend #2, and today I was hitched to Husband #1.

No one ever said my life was boring.

I still couldn't believe I went through with it. Not a single second thought or butterfly in sight, either. After sharing breakfast with Jinx, I excused myself to my bedroom, where I spent a couple of hours unpacking my things and setting up my canvases. Right before the ceremony, I took a minute to clean up, not bothering to change out of the capris and T-shirt I'd put on this morning. I'd applied only minimal makeup, but other than that, I hadn't given much effort to my appearance.

Thankfully (and perhaps a bit regretfully), there were no pictures. However, I did intend to sneak a selfie with Rule at some point today. I mean, sure, this was all some sort of convoluted debt reduction plan, but in the eyes of the law, we were officially wed. Might as well capture the moment for eternity. You had to have something to reflect on when you were old and gray and reminiscing on the highs and lows of your existence. Oddly, I would consider this one of the highs.

The weirdest part—and I didn't use that term loosely because ... well, obvious reasons—was that I hadn't realized how old Rule was until right before we were wed. His driver's license had been out on the table, noting him to be thirty-six years old as of April 7th. I considered myself fairly good at guessing ages, so I'd been leaning somewhere in the mid-



thirties range. Turned out I was right. However, with people like Rule, whose eyes told a story of pain and sorrow, it wasn't easy to tell for sure.

As for Jinx, he looked younger. Not by much. I pegged him around thirty, but again, it was all a guessing game.

“Did we miss it?” a deep voice asked.

“Probably,” a woman said.

“That sucks balls.”

“No, you suck balls.”

“The fuck I do. Mine are always eager, in case you're offering now.”

“Fuck off.”

“No, you fuck off.”

The voices came from the front of the house, and I peeked out of the kitchen in time to see Rhyan—the woman from last night—and a ... I glanced out the window to ensure I wasn't seeing things because now there were two Red Wallys.

“Whoa,” the Red Wally Doppelgänger said. “You the wife?”

I stared at the redheaded man with the glittering brown eyes and well-maintained goatee—it was the only thing different between him and Red Wally. Like his identical twin, he was a definite ginger. The fiery orange hair on his head was the giveaway, but the multitude of freckles on his face, nose, and arms solidified the point.

“Ignore him. He's an idiot. I didn't officially introduce myself last night,” Rhyan said as she approached, depositing several bags on the counter before holding out her hand to me. “Rhyan Ambrose.”

I shook it because it felt rude not to.

“This here is William Hoffstadtler,” she said, nodding toward Red Wally's mirror image.

“My friends call me Willy.”

Willy and Wally ... that was ... I wondered if there was any relation to Waldo, the chocolate lab. I couldn't contain my grin.

"The man who doesn't suck balls," I said. "Nice to meet you."

He barked a laugh, then jerked his chin toward the back of the house. "Speaking of ... the ball and chain hooked up already?"

"Yep," I said, feeling like any minute the rabbit was going to make an appearance, and I was going to veer off down a dark hole into another dimension. I held out my hand to let him admire the non-existent wedding ring on my finger. "You like?"

Willy played along, gently clasping my fingers and turning my hand this way and that as though admiring the sparkle of the imaginary diamond. "Impressive. I didn't know he had it in him." He winked. "Welcome to the family."

"You one of his other wives?" I deadpanned.

His expression went from amused to downright jovial as he huffed a laugh. "I like you, girl. I really like you."

Rhyan, who was grinning from ear to ear, began pulling paper cartons out of the bags and setting them on the island. "I brought food."

"And *I* brought an appetite," Willy said before nodding toward the back windows. "I'll go see if he needs anything."

"Do they call him Red Willy?" I asked Rhyan when he stepped outside.

"That's only reserved for Wally."

I was nosy, so I kept going. "How come?"

Rhyan stopped what she was doing to look out the back window, her dark eyebrows arched in confusion. "Honestly, I think because it's easier to say."

"Versus?"

"Willy and Wally? Try saying it several times fast."

Mentally, I did exactly that because that was what you did when someone said to.

Rhyan laughed. “Try it in the throes of orgasm. It’s even harder.”

My eyebrows arched to my hairline as I stared at her, processing what that meant.

“Oh, girl,” she said with a husky chuckle. “You were born and raised in LA. Don’t tell me you haven’t encountered a throuple before.”

“I’m sure I have,” I said because telling her no seemed like the wrong answer. “So that’s what the three of you are? A throuple?”

She set one of the containers on the counter and peered at me. It looked as though she was trying to determine how to answer.

Rhyan chewed on her lip for a moment, then nodded and shifted into motion once again. “They fuck me, I fuck them. I think that’s a suitable description.”

Very interesting. And, of course, my curious brain conjured at least three dozen questions related to that announcement, but I forced them back, opting for something more appropriate to a first encounter.

“Do you all work for Rule?”

“Yep.” She produced plates and chopsticks.

“Do you all ... do what you did last night?”

Rhyan smiled, and the woman had a really lovely smile.

With her short black hair, which was cut and styled like Robert Smith’s from The Cure back in the 90s—only without the height or the tangles—she had an edge to her that I admired for some reason. When I looked at her, I immediately thought *badass*. Although I couldn’t say why that was. Maybe it was the fact she was dressed all in black, from her T-shirt to her short skirt to the Doc Martens on her feet.

Despite her taste in careers, she seemed normal.

Well, besides the fact she was getting railed by hot, redheaded twins.

“We do what needs to be done,” she said simply.

I decided I wasn't going to pry because I wasn't sure I was ready to hear their war stories. I certainly didn't want to hear the details of what it took to clean up a crime scene or to stage it elsewhere. Plausible deniability and all that.

“I suggest you eat if you're hungry. Once Jinx gets in here, he'll clean out whatever's left.”

Instinct had me turning to look for Jinx. He was squatting down by the pool, petting Waldo while Rule scribbled something on a paper the officiant passed him.

“I take it you've met Jinx,” Rhyan noted.

“I have, yes.”

“He say anything to you?”

“Oh, we had a nice long chat. His vocabulary ... I've never met a man who was so articulate.”

There was a brief moment of silence before a huffed, “Seriously?”

I glanced at her over my shoulder. “No. But it was the best silent conversation I've ever had.”

She laughed.

I turned to face her. “Is his mutism by choice or medical condition?”

Rhyan canted her head as though considering. “Damn good question.”

I found it oddly interesting that they seemed to be close, yet no one knew much about the other.

“How many more of you are there? That work for Rule, I mean.”

“That's it. Just the four of us.”

I looked back when I heard footsteps and noticed Rule standing just inside the house. His gaze was on me, but I

couldn't decipher what he was thinking. I did, however, like the way he looked at me.

Probably not the sanest thing to acknowledge when I was standing in a house full of people who likely owned stock in cleaning supply companies whose products removed blood stains. Yet, I couldn't deny there was a spark of something between us. I first noticed it when I opened the door and saw him standing on my mother's front porch. He was exactly as I remembered him from all those years ago. Dark and mysterious and insanely sexy.

"You good?" he asked me as he moved closer.

"Yes. I was just learning the names of your employees."

"You ready to eat, boss?"

Rule looked over as Red Wally walked in. "You tell Jinx there was food?"

Red Wally nodded. "He said he'd be here in a minute."

"*Said* it?" I asked—because *why not?*

Red Wally stopped just inside the door and huffed a laugh. "I like this girl."

Was it wrong that I liked that it was the consensus?

I spent the next two hours watching Willy and Red Wally roughhouse in the pool—which Rule had confirmed *was* heated—while Jinx finished off the leftovers and Rhyan sat in a chair on the back patio and stared at her cell phone.

It was true. Jinx didn't speak. At all. He communicated via text messaging with the others, or so it appeared since every time he used his phone, one of theirs would chime. His lack of vocal conversation didn't seem to bother any of them at all. They talked openly and even relayed what Jinx said without preamble, keeping him front and center in the conversation. It was apparent the five of them were a cohesive unit, and I found myself wanting to be included, although I didn't understand why.

“You good?” Rule asked as he stepped up behind my chair.

I was sitting at the outdoor bar with my feet propped up on one of the other stools, my gaze on the two redheaded men acting like children.

I tilted my head back and looked at him, smiling because it felt oddly right to do so. I couldn't remember a time when I felt like I fit in anywhere. Not at home with my mother, certainly not at her famous-people parties, and not with what few friends I'd had growing up. But here ... I was an outcast in a sea of outcasts, and it felt strangely comfortable.

“I am. You?”

“Yeah.”

When he didn't look at me, I brought my head back to level and stared out into the bright afternoon sunlight. My scalp tingled from Rule's nearness. Or at least I thought that was the case until I realized his fingers had brushed through my hair, and the hairs were pulling at my scalp, causing sensations to erupt unexpectedly.

He moved away a moment later, and I smiled to myself, wondering if he'd felt it, too. I doubted it, but it was nice to think perhaps he was attracted to me in some way. I mean, I was his wife. As strange as that was to think, it did give us the perfect opportunity to explore on a physical level. I certainly wouldn't mind. The guy was insanely hot, and I had never had this sort of instant attraction to anyone. Well, unless you counted Jinx, but I was keeping that tidbit to myself because, you know, *married*.

Then again, if Rule wasn't interested, perhaps he would be willing to let Jinx step into his role. Or perhaps maybe I could try on that whole ménage à trois thing. It seemed to be working well for Rhyan. I wasn't sure whether her relationship with Red Wally and Willy was long-term or merely a dalliance, but they seemed happy. They certainly gave each other shit like people who liked each other, anyway.

My gaze shifted to Jinx, and I briefly imagined what it would be like to be crushed between him and Rule. As my

brain conjured the image, I swore I could feel the heat of their bodies, the warm press of their hands over my skin... A shiver danced down my spine, and I couldn't hide it. Since Jinx chose that moment to look at me, he noticed, and I was pretty sure his eyes had darkened.

I tore my gaze from him and looked at Rule, only to see he was also watching me.

This wasn't going to be easy; that much I knew for sure.

Since I hadn't spoken to Rule about the terms of this marriage—whether we would be consummating the ritual—it probably wasn't wise to fantasize too much. I mean, I didn't see the harm in exploring what was right in front of me. This time, I was referring to Rule—the man I'd married—not Jinx. Although, the more I thought about it, the more I liked that idea, too.

There was a good chance my overactive libido was going to get me in some serious trouble.

I wasn't looking for a fairy tale romance, but I had no problem consummating this transaction with some kinky sex. Rule seemed like the perfect partner because it was obvious he didn't form attachments. Everything about him was cold. Even the way he interacted with the people he was closest to. I didn't think he'd said more than two-word sentences at any point since they'd arrived. And if he had some weird hangup about virtue and shit, maybe he wouldn't mind if Jinx acted as a stand-in husband for the time being. I got the feeling he was fucking wild in the bedroom.

A buzzing sound came from behind me, and I recognized it as Rule's cell phone. It had been going off throughout the day. Every time it did, he glanced at it. Occasionally, he would type a response; otherwise, he would tuck it back in his pocket.

"Your things are here," he said. "You want them put anywhere specific?"

"Um. My room's fine, I guess."

He nodded, then disappeared to the front of the house.

I got up to follow him because it seemed the right thing to do. I found him talking to what appeared to be a delivery driver. He passed him a wad of cash, then said something as he pointed toward the front door.

The guy's eyes were enormous as he glanced at the cash and then at Rule. Finally, he got with the program and barked a command at his partner, who was beginning to load boxes onto one of those rolling things—a hand truck, I think they called it.

“Show them where to go,” Rule instructed me.

Because it looked like they had the difficult part taken care of, I led the way.

\* \* \*

## Rule

AFTER LAIKYN'S THINGS WERE DELIVERED AND AFTER everyone left for the evening, I found myself alone in the house.

Laikyn had disappeared into her bedroom a couple of hours ago, and Jinx had remained out by the pool, where he spent a good amount of time on any given day. Although tempted, I resisted the urge to talk to him about what I'd witnessed earlier. My eyes hadn't been playing tricks on me when I saw him watching Laikyn. First in the kitchen over breakfast, then after the brief ceremony this afternoon. I rarely saw Jinx interested in anyone, so I immediately picked up on it.

I couldn't really blame him, though, could I? There was something uniquely enchanting about Laikyn Quinn. It was more than skin deep. Her zest for life, despite the obstacles in her path, was impossible to ignore. There hadn't been a moment of awkwardness all day, as though she'd been here for a year, not a few hours. She fit right in, giving as good as she got, and I wouldn't pretend I wasn't even more fascinated by her. In fact, I'd felt like a piece was missing ever since she'd excused herself to her bedroom. I wasn't sure what she was doing, nor did I want to interrupt. I was trying to be respectful



of her privacy, but I had things to do. The only reason I wasn't out taking care of business was because she told me last night that she wanted the details of her kidnapping. I figured it was a conversation that needed to occur sooner rather than later, so I was waiting around.

Unfortunately, I didn't do well with idle time, so at a quarter to eight, I decided to go to her.

I knocked on her bedroom door, prepared to wait.

"Come in."

Not one to hesitate, I opened the door, and as soon as I saw her, it was as though I was doing it for the first time. The same thing had happened that morning. Looking at Laikyn was like seeing the sunrise for the very first time or feeling the static electricity from lightning. It was a magnificent jolt to the senses because it felt ethereal and brief.

From the first photo I saw of her, I'd been fascinated by her. She reminded me of a butterfly, the way she had morphed into this sassy, sexy young woman. Marrying her was likely the dumbest thing I'd ever done, but I couldn't bring myself to regret it. I was doing this for her, even if she would never understand my reasons.

Laikyn was standing at an easel with a pencil in her hand. Her long dark hair, sprinkled with a multi-hue of colors, hung between her shoulder blades, forming a sharply cut V that seemed to point directly at her delectable ass encased in a pair of black cotton shorts. Her black tank top had risen on the right side, giving a glimpse of the curve of her waist. When she turned to face me, my eyes shifted to her breasts before I forced them to her face.

This was the stupidest thing I'd ever done in my life. No sane man would bring a temptation as sweet as this one into his life. Not willingly. Yet here she was.

"What do you think?" she prompted as she stepped aside.

I realized she was referring to the drawing she'd been working on.

She smiled as I moved closer. “I figured we needed to capture the moment somehow.”

I kept moving until I was beside her, although I didn’t recall giving my legs direction to do so. She’d drawn a picture of the two of us on a large white canvas. Shoulders and above, looking at one another. Her attention to detail was extraordinary, from the curve of her jaw to the deep set of my eyes. I wasn’t sure how she managed to do it. Somehow, she’d captured every emotion I’d pretended I hadn’t felt during that brief civil ceremony when our lives had become irrevocably intertwined.

“It’s...”

Laikyn chuckled. “You don’t have to be nice. My mother tells me all the time—”

“It’s incredible,” I interrupted, unable to look away. I couldn’t explain what the draw was about it, but I was lost for a moment, recalling the words we’d exchanged. There had been nothing heartfelt about that brief moment in time, yet there was a foreign connection in there somewhere, and she’d somehow captured it in the drawing.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her attention shifting to the canvas. “I call it two souls brought together by chance.”

“Chance had nothing to do with it,” I muttered, then cleared my throat because I damn sure hadn’t meant for the words to come out.

When I looked at Laikyn, she was staring at me, her pretty pink lips parted, her green eyes round with wonder. I didn’t like looking at her because she was so beautiful, I felt an ache in my chest when I did. It made no sense at all and had no bearing on what we were doing here, but it couldn’t be helped.

“Did you need something?” she finally said, laying the pencil on an open black case on the nightstand.

“You can use the rec room,” I told her, nodding toward the canvas. “If you want more room to spread out. It’s air-conditioned.”

She smiled. “Thanks.”

I slid my hand through my hair and stepped back toward the door. “You said you wanted to know the details about the kidnapping.”

“Yeah. I ... uh...” She glanced down, wringing her hands. “I don’t know if I can handle that right now. I mean, it is my wedding day. Why ruin it?”

I waited for her to look at me. When she did, I felt the full effect of her beauty somewhere in my chest.

“Understood. When you’re ready.”

I turned to leave but stopped when she called my name.

“Would you mind if I got in the pool?”

“No,” I said curtly, then walked away, not wanting to dwell on the idea of Laikyn changing into her swimsuit.

I went to the highboy in the dining room, retrieved a highball glass, and added two ice cubes. I opened a can of Sprite. I filled the glass halfway, then took it outside. The drink wouldn’t dull my senses or make me forget about the woman who was now the center of my universe, but it was the best I could do. I didn’t drink, and I didn’t do drugs, both conscientious choices. Sex with nameless, faceless strangers was the only vice I served these days.

As I stepped outside, my phone chimed. I knew who it was, so I pulled it out to look at the screen.

### — **Where’s Laikyn?**

“Putting on her swimsuit,” I told Jinx, glancing to where he sat on the outdoor sofa.

His left eyebrow arched.

“Yeah,” I said. “Hell on earth, my friend.”

He smiled.

And though I didn’t succumb to things that clouded my senses, apparently, I was a glutton for punishment because while I didn’t want to think about Laikyn changing, I damn sure didn’t want to miss the opportunity of seeing her in her swimsuit. I fell into one of the chairs at the side of the pool

and stared up at the hill behind the house, wondering whether she wore a one-piece or a bikini.

Bikini, I learned a few minutes later when she came out, carrying a towel and a glass of wine. Jinx was the source of the wine. This afternoon, he'd ordered groceries, informing me that my new wife deserved to have things she liked on hand. Evidently, she liked wine. I wondered whether he knew that as fact or he merely guessed. Then I wondered why the fuck I even cared.

I pretended to be interested in the water, but my gaze was firmly on her, skimming all the smooth, curvy lines of her body as she took the steps down one at a time. I'd never seen a more perfect woman before. Or maybe I had, but none of them compared to Laikyn. There was something about her that called to something deep inside me. She woke whatever it was and brought light to a very dark place.

It was premature and juvenile, this lust I'd formed for her, but it was there all the same. I refused to give it freedom, though, keeping it caged where it belonged. As much as I wanted to fuck this woman, it wouldn't benefit either of us. Certainly not her because this would all come crashing down when she learned the truth, and while I had her best interest in mind, I doubted she would believe it.

"So how does this marriage work?" she asked, her sultry tone carrying across the water as she dipped her shoulders under.

"I don't know what that means."

"Well ... I guess ... will you and I be fucking?"

I shouldn't have been surprised by her candor, but I was. Most women prettied up the terms, choosing to refer to it as sleeping together or some such idiocy. Not Laikyn.

"No."

"That's really too bad," she said with a sigh. "I'm still trying to figure out what the benefit of this arrangement is. Sex qualifies as a benefit, in case you were wondering."

“I wasn’t,” I muttered, then took a drink, wishing for the first time it was vodka, not Sprite.

“Then will you be fucking other women?”

“No,” I said quickly. Too quickly.

“Really?”

My phone chimed. Another text from Jinx.

— **Will you be fucking me?**

I didn’t answer either of them.

“Am I permitted to fuck other men?”

I swallowed the *no* that lingered on the tip of my tongue. “If that’s what you need.”

My phone chimed again.

— **Is she permitted to fuck me?**

I didn’t respond.

“Is Jinx included in my list of options?” Laikyn inquired.

I met her gaze across the glittering water. “Do you want to fuck Jinx?”

“I damn sure wouldn’t turn him down,” she said with a laugh as she casually moved farther away. “I was just wondering.”

I got the feeling she was tormenting me on purpose. I didn’t know this woman. Not really. Only from the reports Jinx had provided over the years and what I’d seen on social media and the society pages. As I said, I’d kept tabs on her, feeding this insane addiction. Unfortunately, at least for me, I liked what I’d learned. But nothing had prepared me for meeting the woman face to face. She was sassy and sexy, and her zest for life was palpable. I even liked that she asked ridiculous questions about personal things. There wasn’t another woman like her, of that I was certain.

Laikyn Quinn was the opposite of her mother. She didn’t seek the spotlight; she clung to the shadows. What little I’d seen, she blended into the background as though preferring to

remain on the fringes. I understood that need because I felt it, too. People knew my name. Some even talked about me as though I was this mythical creature who could make miracles happen. I was nothing more than a man who lacked a conscience and carried a broken moral compass. I wouldn't apologize for who I was because the world I lived in had made me this way.

“Have you and Jinx ever fucked a woman at the same time?”

The question caught me off-guard, but again, it shouldn't have. I suspected Laikyn was going to keep me on my toes. She didn't hide her curiosity. She should've been a journalist because she had this fierce ability to get to the heart of the matter.

“Once or twice,” I admitted, ignoring my phone when it chimed.

“Mmm.” She dipped her head under the water and came up with her hair slicked back. “That could be fun, too.”

Yeah, my dick was definitely in agreement. The fucker.

“Have you and Jinx ever fucked each other?”

This time, I censored my response, choosing instead to issue a warning. “Laikyn...”

She smiled. “I thought so.”

I glanced over to see Jinx grinning down at his phone. He wasn't helping the situation one fucking bit.

“It's a good thing I brought my vibrator,” Laikyn mused, moving toward us.

I groaned.

She chuckled. “You know, we could use this as an opportunity to ease the sexual frustration.”

“No,” I said fiercely.

She didn't appear fazed by my tone. “Why? You worried you'll get attached? Yeah, that would suck for you, Rule. I've got nothing to give.”

It wasn't only the words she said but the way she said them that captured my attention. As though she genuinely believed she had nothing to offer. I didn't detect any deceit in her tone. In fact, she sounded a lot like I did when I explained to the women I fucked that I wouldn't be spending the night or coming back for more.

“Are you worried you're too old for me?” she asked, grinning as she turned to go back in the other direction. “Too close to your golden years, Rule?”

I didn't bother responding. My dick was hard enough to pound steel spikes, and thanks to the lights above, I doubted she could miss it.

“That goes for you, too,” she challenged Jinx. “How old *are* you, anyway?”

“He's thirty-three.”

She shrugged one shoulder. “Not *as* old, I guess.”

Her gaze swung to my face. “So, do you, like, have gray hair down there? That's okay if you do. I'll keep my eyes closed when your dick is in my mouth.”

I groaned. She was killing me.

My phone chimed. The screen lit up where it rested on my leg.

— **Jesus fuck. I'm in love with her.**

As though she'd read Jinx's message, she chuckled, and the melodic sound made my balls ache.

“Don't worry, I won't throw myself at you, Rule. Just know ... it's something we can discuss when you're ready.”

I grunted as I got to my feet. “We'll be out most of the night,” I informed her as I walked toward the house. “Good night, Laikyn.”

“Good night, Rule.”

Jinx got to his feet a moment later.

“Good night, Jinx.”

Before we reached the door to the house, she tacked on, “I’ll fantasize about both of you when I’m playing with myself later.”

“Don’t say a fucking word,” I growled to Jinx before stomping through the house.

Half an hour later, I strolled into my office to find Rhyan and Red Wally standing in front of the television. It was late for most people, but our line of work didn’t conform to the nine-to-five rules.

“It happened,” Rhyan announced.

I turned to the big screen in time to see the scene shift from a reporter in the newsroom to one standing in front of a mansion, spotlighted and surrounded by camera crews all standing around to get the top story of the night.

“Thanks, John,” the man on the screen said. “I’m standing outside the home of award-winning director Lawrence Pierce and his wife, Melati. Their bodies were found earlier this evening when one of Mr. Pierce’s assistants stopped by to check on them. According to police, it appears to be a murder-suicide. They believe Mrs. Pierce overdosed shortly after she stabbed her husband in the chest. It’s unclear whether the couple was having issues, but the police have assured us the investigation is active.”

“Any mention of Monica?” I asked Rhyan.

“No, but they’ll backtrace the steps, and when they do...”

“She’s an actress,” I told Rhyan. “She knows how to play her part.”

The only issue we might encounter would be the timeline. Once the police determined the time of death, there was a chance Monica would still look suspicious since it had taken a couple of hours to get everything in order.

“You trust her?” Rhyan asked.

“Not as far as I can throw her,” I admitted. “But she’ll do what needs to be done to protect her own ass.”



She always did.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out and read the text message from Jinx, foolishly thinking his question was about work.

**— Will you be taking any time off for your honeymoon?**

“Fuck off,” I told him in response.

His smile earned him a middle finger.

“We have a job, boss?” Rhyan asked, clearly amused by my response to Jinx.

“No.”

“You just come in for the view?”

“Something like that.”

“How’s the little wife?”

“You can fuck off, too,” I told her, then closed my office door, shutting them both out, along with my wandering thoughts of Laikyn Quinn.

## Laikyn

I WOKE UP THE FOLLOWING DAY TO an empty house and a phone full of messages—both texts and voicemails. All the voicemails were from my mother, as were most of the texts, although there were quite a few from Wes sprinkled in there.

Now, as Waldo and I sat on the back patio, him snoozing, me drinking orange juice and staring out into the obscenely beautiful morning, I listened to my mother's ramblings.

"Laikyn, I'm just calling to check on you. Make sure you're all right. I talked to Wes earlier. He said he hasn't heard from you. He misses you. When you get a chance, call me."

I snorted. The fact that my mother talked to Wes directly was off-putting. I'd always wondered if she had an ulterior motive for setting us up. It felt manipulative at first, but I shrugged it off when I realized Wes wasn't prime husband material. I always figured my mother would try to set me up with a man who could progress her career, not one who hadn't yet figured out what he wanted to be when he grew up.

I pressed the button to play the second message.

"It's me again, sweetheart. Call me as soon as you get this."

My mother had never referred to me as sweetheart before, and her use of it felt calculating and shrewd.

Her tone was civil until about the fourth voicemail.

"Laikyn, it's urgent you call me. I'm worried. Have you seen the news? Something terrible happened last night. I need someone to talk to. Call me as soon as you get this."

That was Monica, making everything about her. I assumed the *something terrible* she was referring to was the tragic news

about Lawrence Pierce and his wife, who were found dead in their Hollywood Hills home. As though it wasn't bad enough the media was currently picking apart Melati's life, trying to figure out what would drive her to murder her husband and take her own life—neither of which actually happened. Now my mother was going to insert herself into their fictitious tragedy and make everything about her.

Ironic since she was the actual cause of their *real* tragedy.

I took a sip of my juice and flipped to the messenger app to see the nonsense she was spewing there.

**— It's terrible, Laikyn. Their lives were cut short, and for what reason? Why would she do something like that?**

Oh, brother. I didn't bother reading the rest of her messages because I knew they would be the same. That was how it always started. Monica would look at a situation as though she was on the outside. Lie or not, she would build it up into this grand tragedy and somehow spin it around to be detrimental to her. In this case, the story she was concocting was written on a ribbon of lies that weaved through the very foundation of her existence. By the time she was done, it would be about another person entirely, but affecting her all the same.

My thoughts drifted to that night and the truth Rule had revealed.

*Take me. Make it look like a kidnapping. She has kidnap and ransom insurance on me. They'll pay three million easy.*

*You know that's not how it works.*

*Yes, it is. She told me.*

*They don't pay the ransom. They pay it back. Tell me you know this, Laikyn.*

Although Rule was willing to elaborate, I wasn't sure I was ready for the whole truth. It was easy enough to figure out what it all meant, and the notion that my mother had hired someone to kidnap me to make a dollar . . . it was terrifying. She was the only family I had, the only person I thought I

could depend on. It didn't matter that she was self-centered and spoiled, I believed I could trust her. But like everything else, it had been a lie.

I flipped over to the message thread from Wes, not wanting to dwell on my mother for another second. Unfortunately, his messages weren't any better.

**— Hey, L. I wanted to check in. See if you want to grab lunch today. Or dinner if that works better for you.**

His next message came only a few minutes after that.

**— So I talked to your mom. She sounds upset. What did you tell her? Did you tell her I took Chastity home last night? Why would you do that?**

His next message came less than an hour later.

**— I hope you're not upset that I took care of Chastity last night. She was in a bad place. She's my friend, and she needed me. I was just doing what a good friend would do.**

I wasn't sure whether he was trying to convince me or himself. I guess he felt guilty because his next message was only fifteen minutes later.

**— Since you're not responding, I'll take that to mean you're pissed. That's selfish, L. I would do the same for you that I did for her.**

Yeah, somehow, I doubted that.

Although I couldn't write my mother off indefinitely, I could bring this thing with Wes to a close, so I typed up my response.

**— No worries. Not mad. She needs you, and you need her. You should**

**dedicate time to working on  
what the two of you have.**

If only Wes could've left it at that.

**— Are you breaking up with me? Seriously.  
Over text?**

And if only I could have.

**— I think you took care of  
that last night when you  
took your drunk ex-  
girlfriend back to your  
place. It's all good, Wes.  
Really.**

And, of course, Wes needed to get in the last word.

**— That's rather presumptuous of you, L.  
What makes you think we had sex?**

I laughed, the sound booming off the concrete surrounding me and causing Waldo to pop up.

"The fact you jumped to that conclusion, Wes," I said aloud.

I wasn't the one who mentioned sex. He was.

"Sorry, Waldo," I said with a smile, gesturing toward my phone. "Stupid people, you know?"

His head went back down, and he let out a cute doggy sigh.

I could've ended it easily by telling Wes I was married, but I decided it would be easier to let him have the last word. I solved both of our problems by blocking his number.

If only I could do the same with my mother. An hour later, I received another text from her.

**— I talked to Wes. He said you broke up  
with him. Is that true? Why? I thought the  
two of you were happy. Did Rule have  
something to do with this?**

“I think the bigger question is, why do you even care?” I muttered, tossing my phone aside.

I refused to play this game with my mother.

Not today, at least.

Today, I was going to bask in my post-wedding glow.

I mean, hey. Why the fuck not?

\* \* \*

## Jinx

THE CRASH THAT SOUNDED FROM RULE’S OFFICE could only mean one thing.

The man was frustrated.

It happened from time to time. When things didn’t go the way he anticipated or an obstacle he couldn’t predict landed in his path—in this case, Laikyn—he let it get the best of him. These were the easy things to deal with. The difficulties arose when Rule did something that went against every fiber of his being. Such as killing a man who’d been torturing his childhood best friend. After Rule killed that crazy bastard who had literally whipped Creed Granger to shreds, he’d gone down a dark, dark path. It had taken me nearly a month to get him back to the light.

Luckily for both of us, in this case, I knew just what to do to stop the tirade before it got out of control.

“Tell me you’re going to do something,” Red Wally grumbled, leaning back in his chair at the conference table and angling to see into my office.

I silently wished for his chair to fall over.

It didn’t, but the mental image of him falling on his ass made me smile even as I prepared to deal with Rule’s tantrum.

If the man ever heard me refer to it as a tantrum, there was a good chance I would wake up without my dick attached to my body.

As I passed Rhyan's office, she looked up, her expression one I'd seen many times. She was expecting me to deal with the situation. I nodded, then continued on my way to Rule's office. The door was open, so I walked in and closed it behind me. There was no lock, but even if there were, it wasn't needed. No one else would approach Rule when he was in one of his moods.

Rule was sitting in his chair, his head tipped back, eyes closed. Even with the beard, I could see the hard set of his jaw, knew he was grinding his molars together. If I could've talked, I would've reassured him everything would be fine because it would. Eventually. That was the way of the world. Issues worked themselves out, one way or another. Repercussions were inevitable, and there would always be a price to pay, but in the end, there would be another path available to take.

For now, I was going to take Rule down a familiar path.

I moved closer, waiting for him to open his eyes. By the time I was standing at his side, he was looking up at me. There was a plea in his stare. One I'd seen so many times before. A need so deep, so dark, most men never acknowledged it. And those who did sought something to ease the pain that consumed them, whether it was alcohol or drugs, or in Rule's case, aggressive, mind-numbing sex.

But if he thought I was going to let him take it out on me, he was sorely mistaken.

I held his stare briefly before grabbing him by the hair and jerking him forward. The chair shot out from under him, crashing into the wall. His knees thudded on the hardwood, his eyes rolling back in his head. For this brief moment, I would take his control away and make it mine. I was the only person in the world capable of doing that for him, and it humbled me to know that I could.

It wasn't always like that. At one point, I'd surrendered myself to Rule because I owed him. He tolerated that for only so long before he pushed me to my breaking point. It had been on purpose, of course. Rule was good at that. Since then, our relationship has been different. Better, even.

I wasn't gentle, yanking him by the hair to get him where I wanted while I ripped at the button on my jeans. Rule was there to help, unzipping my fly and tugging the denim down my legs even as he fisted my cock. I was hard as steel, but that was what happened when I thought of Rule. Even after all these years, after all the ways I'd fucked him and he'd fucked me, my cock longed for his attention.

Since I couldn't speak, I showed him what I wanted, and my methods weren't gentle. I pinched his chin between my finger and thumb, tugging his hair with my other hand to force his mouth open. He knew what to do, opening wide and taking my cock deep. His eyes met mine. Gratification was instantaneous as he submitted to his hunger, to those desires that fueled his very life force. Rule didn't make excuses for who he was or what he did, and I admired that about him. I hungered for him because of it.

Although this was a pleasure only Rule could deliver, for him, it was punishment, a way to atone for his sins. A penance he expected for whatever reason. I understood it on some level because I'd been on his side more times than I could count. On my knees, his cock owning my mouth, fucking with unrestrained fury. But it was my turn, and I didn't hold back, fucking his face like I owned him. Which I did. Deep down, he knew it as well as I did. There would always be others because that was how it worked when you were too damaged to accept that happiness belonged to you, but there would always be this between us.

Rule's hands curled around my legs, his fingers digging into my thighs as he took every grueling thrust. When he choked, I rammed deeper. When he grunted, I tightened my hand on his hair. And when I was seconds from coming, I slammed in as far as his throat would allow and let go.

Usually, the moments that followed were uneventful. I would get dressed. He would go back to whatever he'd been doing.

Not this time.



I managed to tuck my spent cock back in my underwear, but before I could button my jeans, Rule was in my face. He gripped the back of my neck even as he shoved me against the wall. His mouth crushed down on mine with a kiss as brutal as it was telling.

“Do you want her?” he growled against my mouth, his fingers massaging my neck, although I wasn’t sure he was aware he was doing it.

I waited until he pulled back to look at me. When he did, I nodded. There was no sense denying it. I’d been fascinated by Laikyn from the first time I saw her picture. More when I met her face to face. But after her candid questioning last night, I wanted her with a hunger I’d only ever known with Rule.

“She’s supposed to be temporary,” he hissed.

I nodded because he was right. She was. Whether that would remain the case was entirely up to him and her. I had a job to do, and I knew the boundaries. It wasn’t in my nature to overstep, and I wasn’t about to start now.

“You think she can handle it?”

By *it*, I figured he was referring to fucking. I didn’t know if he was referring to him and her, me and her, or the three of us, but it didn’t matter. I nodded again because I believed Laikyn could handle anything. That didn’t necessarily mean she would be up for it. There was a damn good chance she merely enjoyed taunting us. I appreciated that she could because it meant she felt safe with us. A woman didn’t provoke a man she feared might take advantage. I would never, but I was certainly open to exploring this if they were.

Rule kissed me again, this time not as rough as before. “I don’t want to do that to her.”

I kissed him, licking at his tongue as I cupped the back of his neck. With Rule, kissing was a luxury he didn’t usually indulge in. When he did, I knew it was his way of choking back the emotions he pretended he didn’t feel.

“I don’t want to hurt her, Jinx.”

I knew that because I knew who Rule was deep down. He came across as this hard-as-steel man with no conscience, but he wasn't. He cared. Especially about those closest to him. If he didn't, I probably would be dead at this point. Instead, he'd stepped in and saved my life when he had nothing to justify doing so. Nothing except friendship.

When he pulled back, he released me and took a deep breath.

"I can't," he said as he turned away. "I can't do that to her. There's an endgame for her, and I'm manipulating her enough as it is."

And people claimed Rule wasn't capable of feeling anything at all. He was. In fact, he cared too fucking much. To the point he allowed it to eat him up inside.

He wasn't a savior to the rich and stupid because he'd dreamed about it as a little boy. This was how he punished himself because he truly believed he wasn't worthy of anyone. The system that should've protected him never did, and he'd been lost in the shuffle, never finding a place where he fit. He believed doing the things others didn't want to do was his way of giving back to those who'd wronged him. The law had never been there for him, so he saw no reason to abide by it. On some levels, I understood his way of thinking.

We all had ghosts that haunted us, and no one made it through this life without some scars. Some were just deeper than others.

## Laikyn

LIVING WITH A MAN I DIDN'T KNOW was crazy.

Living with two men was weird.

That one of them was legally my husband ... well, that made it bizarre.

Then again, that was the word I used to describe pretty much every aspect of the past two weeks. Sixteen full days of being married, and nearly every one I'd spent alone, only my thoughts and a sweet dog to keep me company.

I wish I could complain, but to be fair, I liked being alone. It didn't happen often. I hadn't felt quite this free in ... well, probably not ever. It helped that I'd been avoiding my mother as well. I'd spent my days in the house while Rule and Jinx went out and did whatever the hell it was that they did. Some days, they were gone before I woke up and home after I'd called it a night. Others, they would linger a little longer in the mornings.

I wouldn't go so far as to say we'd engaged in much conversation. Since it usually entailed me provoking one or both of them and finding a way to shift to the topic of sex, they were letting me dig my own hole. Problem was, when I wasn't taunting Rule about sex, I wasn't sure what to say to him. I hadn't seen his other friends/employees since our wedding day. I hadn't met anyone else either.

When I got bored, I watched television. When I got *really* bored, I did internet searches.

Imagine my surprise when I learned that Rule wasn't as much of a ghost on the internet as he seemed to be in real life. In fact, he was famous. Or maybe *infamous* was a better word. On social media, he was portrayed as a unicorn—some sort of

mythical creature with incredible abilities. People actually wanted to *be* him.

Granted, the Feds weren't quite as enamored by him as the public. The FBI seemed to believe he was responsible for a lot, but they didn't have solid proof of any particular crime. Everything was circumstantial. But they had enough interest to take note. Especially when the media—who referred to him as the Hollywood Fixer—caught wind of his association with various people. I had to wonder whether Rule was aware that he likely had a shadow or two when he was out and about.

Since he didn't seem to be worried, I just absorbed what I found and moved on.

When I was seeking conversation, I spent it texting people. Most of the time, Jinx was my target because he would respond. Unless I talked about sex, then he ignored me. I figured he was respecting Rule and the fact that I was his wife. In my defense, I wasn't necessarily coming on to Jinx. I mean, I was, but I was doing it to get a rise out of Rule.

Mostly.

I'd seen the way Rule looked at me, and he could pretend all day long that he didn't want to fuck me, but it would be a lie. As for why he refused ... well, I'd come up with a million possible scenarios: he was a eunuch; he had a disease; he couldn't get it up; he preferred his hand. Sure, they were ludicrous, but when you gave a girl an unlimited amount of time, what else was she supposed to do but come up with crazy reasons a man didn't want to fuck her? I mean, it would've been too easy to say he simply wasn't attracted to me in that way.

And maybe he wasn't. It was possible I'd imagined those heated stares. Possible but doubtful.

However, I didn't spend all my time tormenting Jinx. I had blocked Wes's number, but he got creative and sent a text from someone else's phone. He started the thread by pleading for my forgiveness and ended with him spilling his guts through a litany of words and emojis. According to him, he'd been hesitant to date me at first, convinced we had nothing in

common. Then we went out a few times, and he liked hanging out, doing things together. At the beginning of the rant, he said it wasn't about Chastity, but by the end, he admitted he still loved her and probably always would, but that didn't mean he wasn't willing to try. He didn't outright say I would always be second, but that was the gist of it.

I played along for almost half a day, replying with mundane emojis to make it look like I gave a shit. I didn't, but it was a way to pass the time.

But the moment he told me he loved me, I had to put an end to it. I assumed it was Chastity's number, so I point-blank told him I wouldn't play second fiddle to a woman who used men for her own gain. Then I blocked that number, too. If she saw it, I would never know.

I was sure someone would consider my actions inappropriate, but I didn't give a shit. No, Wes wasn't someone I would've spent much time with after we had sex the first time (unless he was a god in bed, though I didn't have high hopes), but he had still fucked up. Taking his drunk ex-girlfriend back to his place while I left in an Uber was the equivalent of a bitch slap, and admittedly, it stung a little.

The only other person I talked to was my mother, and that was via text message also. She wasn't as good at manipulating me that way, so I opted for that means of communication versus a phone call. She told me she was worried about me and reminded me that a fundraiser was coming up soon, and I'd promised I would be there. I assured her I was okay and informed her I would need to think about the fundraiser. I was no longer certain my calendar was free. Yes, a blatant lie, but who cared? It seemed only fair.

I didn't want to feel sorry for her, although I probably would, even though I was angry and hurt. I had put off my conversation with Rule for the time being because I didn't need him to spell it out for me, and as long as he didn't, I could pretend he was wrong.

As for my mother, she was acting as though nothing had happened—no sexcapades gone wrong, no daughter moving

out, nothing—giddily going on about an upcoming project she'd been approached about. Evidently, her agent had called to tell her about the perfect part, and, as usual, nothing else mattered. For the record, every part was perfect for her until she read the script. At that point, she would either feign disinterest to see what she could get out of the role or whine that she was too strong an actress to play such a mediocre part.

My mother was right about one thing. She was a strong actress. She was brilliant when it came to pretending she was someone else, both professionally and in her everyday life. And she only improved over time.

As for my relationship with Rule ... well, there wasn't one. Unless you counted my increased attempts to seduce him. I guess it probably wasn't really seduction, but I was going out of my way to ensure he felt some discomfort. It seemed only fair since I did every time I was in the same room with him. He pretended he wasn't affected by me, but he was. The man had mastered the art of masking his expressions, but he was screwed by biology. His jeans constantly showed an impressive bulge after little time in my presence. That didn't make *my* comfort level any better because the thought of what he could do with his cock... I was starting to fantasize.

The sound of the front door had me reining in my thoughts before they could take a taboo turn. I glanced over my shoulder as Rule and Jinx were coming into the kitchen.

“Hey,” I said cheerfully, waving from my spot on the outdoor sofa. “Do you have any double A batteries? The ones in my vibrator died this morning.”

It wasn't true, but I was on a mission, and I took every opportunity to get one in.

Jinx spun on his heel and made himself scarce.

Rule grunted. “You hungry?”

“Starving.”

“You dressed?”

Feeling giddy for the chance he might want to leave the house with me, I twisted around to look at him fully. “I can

be.”

His eyebrows rose slowly.

“I’m dressed, you perv, but not for leaving the house.”

There was a hint of a smile under that beard. I wanted to know how soft it was to the touch. I wanted to know if it would feel the same between my legs as it would against my fingertips.

I shook off the thought and met his gaze just as he said, “Get dressed. We’ll grab something.”

“Thank you!” I squealed as I shot up from my seat and hurried down the hall to the room I’d taken over.

I traded my shorts for my favorite jeans—the ones with pockets on the legs and a low waist. They were a bit baggy by design, but now they were loose enough to require a belt. I thought for sure I would’ve gained back some of the weight I’d been keeping off thanks to my excursion dates with Wes, but that didn’t seem to be the case. Since the extent of my exercise involved petting Waldo, every time I ate a bite, I imagined it forming itself to my waistline. Then again, I was spending a lot of time in the pool. It wasn’t made for laps, but I was getting in a brief workout every day.

I paired my jeans with a form-fitting black halter. It was simple and not something I usually wore out in public. I rolled the pants up several times and pulled on a pair of black and pink sneakers. Once dressed, I hurried to the bathroom to put on mascara and lip gloss. I didn’t wear more than that most days, if I even bothered with it at all. It took a minute to pull my hair up in a ponytail and fix a ball cap on my head.

Last but not least came my clunky rectangle frame glasses. They weren’t prescription. They were cute, but I didn’t wear them as a fashion trend. I wore them as a disguise. I’d learned they drew less attention than wearing sunglasses at night, and since I was merely the offspring of a celebrity, regular people weren’t usually expecting to see me. As for the paparazzi ... I couldn’t do anything about them.

Because I couldn't resist, I pulled on some jewelry—my rose gold Ferragamo mini watch, my diamond halo stud earrings, and my rose gold nose hoop. I reached for the Bvlgari bangle bracelet I always wore but stopped myself. I didn't actually like the bracelet, and I only wore it because it had a tracking device implanted in it. One my mother gave me after the last time I was kidnapped, insisting I wear it in case something ever happened to me.

I stared at the damn thing and rolled my eyes. Had she felt any remorse whatsoever for what she did? Had there been an ounce of guilt when she pretended a bracelet might keep me safe from everyone but her?

I shrugged off the thought and palmed the bracelet before glancing once more at myself in the mirror.

“Good enough,” I said, content with it.

I found Rule in the kitchen, leaning against the waterfall island, his head tilted down. He appeared lost in thought, so I cleared my throat.

When he looked up, I instantly saw the familiar heat in his gaze.

I held out the bracelet for him.

“What's this?”

“It has a tracking device so my mother knows where I am. I didn't know if you wanted to get rid of it. Otherwise, she'll know where you live.” If she didn't already. Knowing Monica, she'd already looked to see where I was.

He set it on the counter. “I'm not worried about your mother.”

“Good.” I smiled. “Me, either. Now, where are you taking me?”

“Thought I'd leave it up to you.” He motioned toward the front door. “I parked out front.”

“Hmm.” I followed him into the early fall evening.



The sky was a perfect blue, with hints of pink, yellow, and purple beginning to form on the horizon as the sun got lower.

“Is there anything you won’t eat?” I asked when I joined him in the car.

“Preferably not salad.”

“No to Panera, then.”

I swore I saw a smile as he started the car. The throaty purr of the engine made my girly parts tingle.

“You know what sounds really good?” I prompted as he backed out of the driveway.

“What’s that?”

I waited until he was driving down the street to say, “Chipotle.”

He glanced over at me. “Seriously?”

“What? You have something against Mexican food.”

“Not at all.”

“Then why are you surprised.”

“I didn’t take you for the fast food sort.”

“Ah.” I nodded and stared out the window as he pulled onto Sunset Blvd. “You figured I preferred escargot and caviar for dinner?”

“Something like that.”

“Apparently, taste in food isn’t passed down from mother to daughter.”

“I guess not.”

“I didn’t get a lot of traits from my mother, actually,” I continued simply because I had someone to talk to. “What about you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Meaning you’ve never paid attention or...?”

“I don’t have parents.” His eyes remained locked on the road in front of us.

Since everyone technically had parents—at least from a biological perspective—I approached the subject with sensitivity.

“Were you adopted?”

“I guess that was the plan when they left me in the front lobby of a police station when I was two.”

He said it as though he was stating a fact, not reflecting on a traumatic event in his life. Not that I expected more from Rule. He wasn’t exactly the emotional sort.

“Oh.” I wasn’t sure what to say to that, but I didn’t want him to stop talking. “Were you *later* adopted?”

“No. Foster care, mostly. Group home when I was a teenager.”

“What’s it like?” I asked, staring out the window. “Not knowing where you came from?”

He didn’t respond, but I hadn’t expected him to.

“I have some idea how it feels since I don’t know who my father is. Sometimes, I imagine he’s an actor with a family of his own, and he and my mother had something temporary while on set. Other times, I think maybe he’s a world-renowned chef in Paris and met my mother by chance. In both cases, she ran out on him, and he never learned of my existence because if he had, he would’ve been there.”

“She never told you?”

“She doesn’t know.”

At least, that was what she said. When I tried to get her to narrow it down to a manageable list so I could have some idea, she said it was during a time she didn’t remember. My mother didn’t have a monogamous bone in her body, so I didn’t expect anything less.

“I just don’t understand why she kept me.” I had never admitted that to anyone. “Her life would’ve been so much

easier without me, I'm sure. As it was, she hardly raised me. My nannies did. Even those weren't consistent because she has a hair-trigger temper and takes it out on people who work for her."

I glanced at Rule. His fingers were curled around the steering wheel so tight his knuckles were white.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to bring up a touchy subject." I added as much cheer to my tone as I could. "We can always talk about what else we're going to do on our belated honeymoon."

He barked a laugh, and the tension in his fingers eased. "Is that what this is?"

At that point, I made it my mission to make Rule laugh. The real kind of laughter that comes from the belly. I wanted to hear it at least once.

\* \* \*

## Rule

WHEN I SAW LAIKYN IN THE OUTFIT she had on now, my first thought was—*she's so fucking young. What the fuck am I even doing with her?*

She was young. Quite a bit younger than me. Fourteen years, to be exact.

Considering our vastly different upbringings, we shouldn't have anything in common. And yet, if I didn't know the details from when I had rescued her, I probably wouldn't have guessed she was in her early twenties. There was a maturity about her that lingered beneath the sassy personality. One I suspected came from taking care of other people rather than enjoying life.

She certainly didn't act like a woman only a few years out of high school with the rest of her life ahead of her. Or the spoiled brat people expected her to be. I knew more about her life than most people, though. More about her mother, specifically. Not because I was fascinated by Monica Quinn. It

was part of the job. What I did for a living wasn't something most people would do. And because I often committed crimes to protect the lives of others, I had no choice but to have the necessary evidence to protect my own ass. God knows the rich assholes I'd worked for weren't going to return the favor. If anything, they would claim they'd never met me before.

If I were a good man, I wouldn't drag Laikyn into this life. Not even for the amount of time required to get her situation sorted out. It wasn't that I gave a fuck about Monica, but her problems would essentially become Laikyn's problems, and because I knew the depths her mother would go for a dollar, I refused to let Laikyn suffer.

I could've easily given Monica time to get the money together. She would somehow. This wasn't the first time the woman had been down on her luck and used her wiles to get her way. Unfortunately, the creditors she'd used in the past weren't quite as besotted by her as the public, which was why I'd put my foot down. The last thing that woman needed was to seek another loan to make another problem disappear. She would merely be creating an entirely new one in the process. And if, like the last time, Monica put her daughter in danger to achieve her objective, I couldn't promise I wouldn't end her.

So here we were.

"Can I ask you something ... business related?" Laikyn prompted while we sat at one of the restaurant's outdoor tables.

I glanced to my left and then to my right, curious who might overhear because if I'd learned anything about Laikyn, it was that she did not have a filter.

"Don't worry," she said, grinning. "I'm the queen of discretion. At least when in public."

"Okay, then." I poked at the bowl of food.

"What you did for my mom ... is that par for the course?"

"No."

"So, what exactly do you do?"

“I fix things.”

“Like?”

I cocked an eyebrow. I certainly wasn't going to go into details in a public place. Hell, I didn't intend to go into detail at all. What I did for my clients was kept on a need-to-know basis. Rarely did anyone need to know aside from one of my employees if I could keep it to that.

“Hollywood problems,” she said. “Like cheaters who don't want to get caught or executives who did something wrong in the past and need it to be covered up.”

I took a bite, choosing not to respond.

“You also save kidnap victims from creepy assholes who call them princess and threaten to steal their non-existent virginity.”

She played it off as though she wasn't traumatized by the event, but I noticed the way her eyes scanned our surroundings. She was hyperaware of everyone and everything. I got the feeling that was the norm for her after what happened.

I met her gaze. “Don't make me out to be the hero in the story, baby. I'm not.”

“You save people.”

“From themselves,” I clarify.

“My mother could've gone a different route. It would've worked out.”

I figured she was referring to the police. “She could've, yes. She didn't.”

“Why?” Laikyn pointed at me with her fork. “That's what I don't understand. What else is she hiding that she felt the need to ... call you?”

Her mother had a lot of skeletons in her closet. I wouldn't even know where to begin if I was open to sharing them. I wasn't. I didn't want to see Laikyn hurt any more than she had been already. I simply wanted to get her through this in one

piece. Once she came out the other side, she could move on with her life. There were bigger and better things waiting for her. Things she wasn't even aware of yet.

Laikyn laughed. "You know you're the worst first date in the history of first dates."

"I thought this was our honeymoon."

Her smile was sweet and shy, and I forced myself to look away. This woman ... I wanted her in a way I knew I shouldn't. I was not a nice guy. I did not do nice things. She deserved a man who would walk through fire on the right side of the line to protect her. I would protect her, but I would do it through any means necessary. It wouldn't matter if I traumatized her in the process.

"Do you remember any of your first dates?" she asked, casually moving on.

"All of them," I admitted.

Laikyn sat up and leaned back. "All of them? Seriously?"

I didn't bother telling her every single one of my dates had been the first and the last. "Yes."

"Who was your very first *first date* with?"

"Margot Freeman," I answered. "She was a sophomore in high school. I was a junior. I drove her dad's car. We went to the movie theater. She wanted to see *Mean Girls*. I talked her into *Hellboy*. We made out when I took her home. Third base."

Her eyes were wide. "You remember all of that? About your first date?"

"I remember everything about everything."

Her expression sobered, and I could feel her studying me. "Eidetic memory?"

"Hyperthymesia," I corrected.

"Not the same thing?"

I shook my head. "I remember more than images."

“So similar in theory? But you also recall *what?* Sounds and smells?”

I nodded.

“How far back?”

I glanced at her, then to the table, and back to her again. “I remember being left in that police station. The officer who picked me up and frowned like she didn’t know what she was looking at?”

“Oh, God.”

I’d never told anyone that before.

“So it’s not this great phenomenon that people make it out to be?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if you can recall things with vivid clarity, it wouldn’t only be the good things.”

No one who knew about my enhanced memory had ever made that acknowledgment. Most people were in awe, wishing they had the same ability. What they didn’t realize was exactly what Laikyn said—bad memories were as ingrained as good. Although I could recite a book verbatim after reading it once or twice, those weren’t the only things lodged in my brain. Life experiences were stored there as well, and most of them with vivid clarity.

“It’s not, no.”

“What’s it like?”

I decided to give her an example. “Not only can I remember things, I capture details without meaning to.”

“Like what? Give me an example.”

“I know there are seven people sitting on this patio with us.”

I gave her a moment to look around, tallying them up.

“Three are male, four female.”

She nodded.

“Four are white, two black, one Asian.”

Again, she nodded.

“Two brunettes, two blondes, three with black hair.”

Her gaze skimmed each one.

“Five sets of brown eyes, two blue. The blue-eyed blond guy is missing the third button from the bottom on his jean jacket.”

All seven of those people were behind me. I hadn’t seen them since I walked out, and she knew that. The entire time, I’d focused on my food or her.

“Very impressive,” she said with a smile. “I’m good at something, too.”

“Yeah?”

Laikyn licked her lips. “It’s a topic not meant for young ears.”

I was grateful there were teenagers lingering nearby because I didn’t think I could listen to her reveal some sexual secret. I was hanging on by a thread as it was. For the past two weeks, Laikyn had been pushing my buttons. Whether directly or baiting me with her ongoing conversations with Jinx. I knew they shared a mutual attraction. It was obvious. I also knew Jinx would never do anything without me prompting him first. Since I intended to keep my relationship with Laikyn platonic, I had no intention of doing so.

However, I wasn’t a saint, and her mention of batteries and her vibrator when I got home had nearly undone me. I prided myself on control, but this woman was unraveling the thread slowly. And deliberately.

“You’re young, Laikyn.”

“In years, sure. But this town ... you grow up fast.”

I got the feeling she was right about that.

She reached for her cup and brought the straw to her lips. “Did you grow up here?”



I shook my head and pushed my plate away. “Oklahoma.”

“I thought I detected a drawl in there.” She set down her cup, then wadded up her napkin and placed it on her half-eaten bowl. “When did you move here?”

“Twelve years ago.”

“Why?”

“A friend suggested I do it.”

“Jinx?”

“No. He came with me.”

“The one who suggested it ... is this a close friend?”

“He’s the closest thing to family I have.”

“Besides Jinx?”

I didn’t answer because it seemed rhetorical. I wasn’t sure whether she was trying to get a feel for my relationship with Jinx or merely working him into the conversation. Either way, she could learn the minutia from him. I’d already told her far more than I’d intended to divulge.

“Do you see this friend often?”

“As often as I can. We’re both busy.”

I noticed Laikyn’s eyes slide toward the kids at the next table. Occasionally, she would turn her head away from them as though shielding her face.

“What’s wrong?”

She cleared her throat. “Nothing.” With a smile, she leaned toward me. “I think they just figured out who I am, so we might want to jet while we can.”

I stood when one of the kids at the next table pointed. “That’s her. That’s Laikyn Quinn. Monica Quinn’s daughter.”

“Who’s she with?”

“Dunno. He looks familiar.”

“Dude, we need to get a pic.”

I watched as Laikyn's expression shut down, and she seemed to turn inward on herself.

"Hey, Laikyn! Can we get a pic?"

She didn't respond.

I took her hand and pulled her to her feet. Linking her fingers with mine, I walked with her into the restaurant in order to reach the parking lot.

The kids seeking her photo were behind us, getting louder and drawing attention from others inside. Before we were at the door, a couple more teenagers were moving our way.

"Holy shit, bro. That's The Fixer." The kid's excitement level amped up. "LQ's with The Fixer."

I put my arm over Laikyn's shoulder and shielded her against my side. I pretended not to notice how easily she put her arm around me or how fucking good it felt when she placed her palm on my chest as she ducked her head and allowed me to guide her to my car.

"Hey, man! Can we get a pic?"

I didn't respond, and I didn't look back. The kids weren't a threat to her physical safety, but I sensed Laikyn's need to escape them, so I pretended not to hear them. Even after I got her into the car and walked around to the other side. A couple of phones were out, camera flashes on as they snapped photos and videos, likely to share on social media or sell to someone who gave a shit.

"By tomorrow, the paparazzi will have caught wind of me having dinner with the Hollywood Fixer," she said when I got in the car. "Your life will be turned upside down until they get the story. I'm sorry about that."

Before I could think about it, I reached over and took her hand, clasping it in mine. "Don't worry about me. They won't find anything I don't want them to find."

The feel of her soft, cool fingers against my hand was enough to set off sparks in my veins. I couldn't remember a

time when that had happened, and since I remembered every damn thing, I knew it hadn't.

“You want me to take you home?” I asked, releasing her and placing both hands on the wheel.

“If you're offering to keep this first date going, I wouldn't mind going to the beach.”

I couldn't tell her no, so I drove.

## Laikyn

WHEN RULE TOOK MY HAND, SOMETHING SHIFTED in my chest. It was the strangest feeling. Like falling from a high distance and not expecting the drop. My heart beat erratically for several pumps, then returned to a normal rhythm. When it did, I felt safe for the first time in my life.

I knew I shouldn't. Not only because I hardly knew him but because Rule was a man people feared, not someone you could lean on. As those kids had said, he was known as the Hollywood Fixer around these parts. The man who cleaned up other people's messes, regardless of what they were. And while those kids thought he was cool—and maybe he was—he certainly wasn't someone you could trust your heart with.

Not that I had a heart to begin with. Not the kind people boasted about in poetry. Mine pumped blood; it didn't get hysterical or mushy. Not for my mother or my friends, and definitely not because of a man. I often wondered if mine was broken or if I was simply a byproduct of my upbringing. When you had a mother who cared only for her own well-being and worried about what strangers thought of her over her daughter's needs, it wasn't surprising that I was what therapists considered an ideal subject for research on a variety of emotional disorders.

But my heart didn't have to be involved because my body was in tune with his. I'd spent the better part of an hour looking into Rule's eyes. Although he was guarded, I felt as though those gorgeous brown eyes gave me a tiny glimpse into his soul. And what I saw there ... well, I wasn't trying to determine whether he could love me. That didn't matter. I was looking for something tangible, something I could feel and taste. I sensed a dark passion beneath the gruff exterior. There was no doubt in my mind that he would satisfy me in a way

I'd never been before. I wanted that. I wanted to let go with him for a little while, to give him my body and let him do wicked, dirty things to it. He would. Of that I was sure.

I just wasn't sure what approach to take. He reacted to my taunting and teasing, and I could tell I was wearing him down, but I knew he would never make the first move. I would have to take charge, or he would keep turning a blind eye to the chemistry between us. For whatever reason, I got the feeling Rule wanted to protect me. And by not fucking me, he thought he was.

The drive to the beach took only a few minutes, and we did it in silence. I watched him as he drove, admiring his big, strong hands and the dark hair on his forearms. I snuck a peek at the strong column of his neck and the flex and pull of the muscles in his chest. I wanted those big, callused hands on me, those strong arms around me. I wanted to hear the rapid thump of his heart against my ear. I wanted him to wrap me up tight while our bodies were joined so I could feel something for the first time. I could all but guarantee the sensations would be heightened because of that electrical spark that arced between us, the one he was readily ignoring and I was constantly being singled by.

When I got out of the car, I realized I probably should've brought a sweater. The breeze was chilly coming in off the water, even when the temperatures were in the high 70s. Being a native of California, it was cooler for me than those who'd grown up in colder climates. I figured this might work in my favor, though, since Rule didn't seem to be having problems with the temperature.

As we walked along the short wooden platform down to the sand, I took a moment to admire the sunset. It would be dark soon enough, but I didn't mind. Sunrise or sunset, I could find beauty in either for the most part. My favorite part of the day was when the sun was low in the sky, casting the last of its radiance on the day as the sky darkened and the light was slowly consumed by darkness.

"What got you in the line of work you're in?" I prompted when it was clear Rule wasn't going to spark up a

conversation.

“Happenstance.”

“Meaning someone needed your help and was willing to pay you a million a pop to take care of it?”

He glanced down at his feet and smiled. “My fee fluctuates depending on what I need to do.”

“So not everyone has to pay a mil?”

“No.”

“Interesting.”

He cut his gaze to me. “How so?”

I shrugged. “I figure I might one day need your services, and since I don’t intend to have any dead bodies lying around, I’ll expect a discount.”

He chuckled. “Hopefully, you won’t need my services.”

“To what extent will you go to fix a problem?”

His forehead pinched, and his eyebrows angled into a V. “I won’t cause a problem to fix one. That’s my rule.”

“Meaning ... you won’t inflict bodily harm if someone wants someone to go away?”

“Not unless I have to.”

I knew he said not to think of him as the hero, but I couldn’t help thinking there was more good in him than he was willing to acknowledge.

“Where’d your name come from?”

“It was a nickname.”

“Is Jinx a nickname?”

“It is,” Rule confirmed. “I gave it to him when we were kids.”

Interesting.

“How’d your name come to be?”

“I have a lot of rules.”

“Really?” That intrigued me. “And you legally changed it?”

“I did.”

“Why?”

“Someone dared me to.”

I believed that. Rule did not seem like the sort to back down from a dare.

“What was your name before?”

“Irrelevant,” he said softly.

“You didn’t like it?”

“It was given to me by someone who felt sorry for the diaper-wearing kid found in the police station. I had no value, nor did the name they gave me.”

“So you think it was irrelevant.”

He glanced my way. “No, I think *I* was irrelevant.”

Remember when I said I didn’t have a heart? I think I was wrong because that statement ripped my chest wide open, flayed me straight down the middle. The way Rule said the words ... as though he truly believed them ... it caused something inside me to shift.

Because I could tell that was not a topic he was willing or eager to venture into, I shifted tactics.

“Does it bother you that I’m asking all these questions?”

“No.”

“Would you tell me if it did?”

“Yes.”

“I believe you.” I grinned, tucking my hands in my pockets to warm my fingers. “I like to ask questions. I like to know things about people.”

“But you don’t let people know you.”

There was no heat in his tone, no accusation. “It’s easier that way. Lessens the chance of disappointment. Plus, most

people don't want to know *me*. They want to know my mother. I'm merely a path to get them there." I glanced over at him. "You're not exactly an open book, either."

He didn't respond, but he tended not to when I didn't voice a question.

"You said you wouldn't fuck other women while we're married. Why not?"

I think I surprised him with my candor because his gaze snapped to mine before he could hide his reaction.

"I don't want to," he said gruffly.

"But you don't want to fuck me either? Why is that?"

"Because that's not what this is."

"Then what *is* it, exactly?" I stopped walking because I wanted to look him in the eye when I asked my next question.

Rule stopped, too, but he didn't turn to look at me immediately as though sensing what I was going to ask.

"What's in it for you, Rule? This marriage, I mean."

"Nothing."

I wished I could've detected a lie in his answer, but I didn't. Whether that was because I didn't know him well enough to detect one or because he was telling the truth, I wasn't sure. He assured me he wouldn't lie because he had no reason to. Was that true? Or was that a lie simply to keep me from thinking the worst?

"Nothing besides three million dollars, you mean?"

His eyebrows pinched.

"You know it'll take me a hundred years to pay off that debt, right?"

"I know."

"You're really going to waste your life married to someone you don't even want to fuck?"

His eyebrows dipped low.



“Did you do this to punish my mother? Because she doesn’t care.”

“She cares.”

I snorted, peering out at the horizon and the wash of color splashed across the sky. Soon, it would be swallowed by night, but for a few minutes, it was the most beautiful thing in existence. With the exception of the man beside me.

We were both silent for a moment, staring out into the distance. I figured Rule was hoping I would drop the subject, and I was taking the time to gather my thoughts.

I sighed. “I didn’t ask you for details on my mother’s part in my kidnapping because I don’t want to know the truth. I know what she’s capable of. I can’t tell you how many times she’s used me to gain favor with the press. I’ve been used my entire life as a pawn for her image. She even used my father.”

“I thought she didn’t know who he was?”

“That’s what she said in an interview when she was pregnant with me. She garnered favor for being strong enough to venture into motherhood as a single, working woman. She latched onto that image, stood by it.” I sighed. “I think she knows who he is, but she likes how it makes her look to the media.” I glanced at him. “She plays the doting mother for the cameras. Behind the lens, she’s a selfish bitch. But I never thought she’d put me in harm’s way.”

He didn’t say anything.

“I do believe she did it. I believe she thought she had a valid reason and that it would all work out in the end.”

“It did.”

He was so wrong about that. “No. Not really.”

This time, he turned to face me, his dark eyes moving over my face.

“I have nightmares,” I admitted. “I wake up in a cold sweat more often than not. I never feel safe anymore. Maybe I never did, I don’t know.”

“Did he hurt you?”

He was referring to Diggy. I hated thinking about what happened, but I figured if anyone deserved an answer, it was the man who had saved me.

“No. But he threatened to, and I believed him. I pretended I didn’t. Pretended those bars were in place to keep him out, not me in. But I kept waiting for it. For the day he would make his way into the cage and do horrible, vicious things to me. The way he looked at me ... watched me...” I shivered from the memory and from the cold penetrating my bones. “I think if the time had run out, he would’ve hurt me. He would’ve raped me because he’d built it into this big thing. He was convinced that was the way to knock me down a peg. He said that.”

His tone was cold and hard when he said, “I put a bullet between his eyes.”

“I know.” I met his stare. “I never thought of myself as a violent person, but I’m thankful for that. It’s the only reason I can sleep at all. But Diggy wasn’t in charge. He answered to someone. I always wondered who that was. The day you came, he thought you were Javier. What if Javier’s out there waiting for a chance to kidnap me for real? If my mother never paid the ransom, what’s to say he won’t get his money one way or another?”

They were all rhetorical questions, ones I’d asked myself a million times. I appreciated that Rule didn’t placate me with nonsense. He didn’t try to tell me the boogymen wasn’t real or that there wasn’t some slighted asshole hellbent on getting back at Monica Quinn for the money he was never paid. We both knew it would’ve been lies because, if I had to guess, Javier was out there. Whether he was looking to exact revenge on my mother was a question no one would have an answer to except for him.

“Are you cold?” Rule asked.

I realized I was shivering, but it was only partially from the cold. “Yes.”

Rule stepped forward, closing the gap between us. He pulled me against him as he took a deep breath. His big, callused hands moved over the bare skin on my arms, infusing warmth into my body. I rested my head on his shoulder and inhaled his musky scent. He smelled so good I did it again, pressing my nose to his neck. I didn't think about what I was doing or the fact that I was technically making the move I'd been wanting to make. I wasn't trying to seduce him, but I *was* trying to get closer.

“Laikyn.”

His breath was warm against my ear, his voice so low, I hardly heard it over the sound of the surf.

I couldn't resist sliding my hands beneath his shirt so I could feel the warmth of his skin. He breathed in deep, his muscles tensing beneath my fingertips, but he didn't pull away.

“We can't do this.” His voice was a guttural growl that sent another chill over me.

“So you've said. I promise not to let you get attached.”

He chuckled softly, and the sound reverberated through my entire body.

I pulled back and peered up at him. “What if I promise not to get attached?”

“Can you do that?”

I could tell he wasn't asking because he believed it.

I opted for complete transparency. “There's a rule about love. To have it, you have to be willing to be hurt. I'm not willing. I've been fighting for attention all my life, and when I think I might get it, my mother steals it from me. It's not worth it. So yes, I can promise you I won't get attached.”

For a brief moment, I thought I saw a glimmer of sympathy in his gaze. But I didn't want that from him either.

“I'm not a virgin, Rule. I haven't been for a really long time. I know how to separate sex from love.”

His hands stilled on my arms, his fingertips pressing into my flesh. I wasn't sure if he was gearing up to push me away or trying to hold himself back. I hoped for the latter because, although I was hiding it well, his constant rejection was battering away at my self-esteem.

Taking the lead, I leaned into him, bringing my lips closer to his. For a moment, we shared the same air. But the second I pressed my mouth to his, he pushed me away, taking a step back. He didn't look angry but perhaps disappointed. Instantly, I felt like an idiot.

"Sorry," I said, turning to walk back toward the car.

Fuck. Why did I do that? It was an open invitation for more rejection, and I jumped right in with both feet. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

"Laikyn, wait."

I didn't. I couldn't. "You told me you didn't want me. I didn't listen. I shouldn't have done that."

*I should've listened.*

It took every ounce of my self-control not to run to the car. I didn't want to admit it but his rejection hurt. I mean, I'd married the man, and he couldn't even stand to kiss me.

I pounded up the steps to the parking lot, my chest heaving but not from exhaustion. I was angry. At myself. At the situation. And yes, I was angry that he'd pushed me away, but I had no one to blame but myself. He had warned me, and I didn't listen.

I was almost to the car when I heard a guttural "Goddammit, girl" from behind me.

Rule's hand curled around my arm, spinning me around. When he took a step forward, I stumbled, my back hitting the car. The next thing I knew, his mouth was on mine. I whimpered, blaming it on surprise, but the heat that pooled deep in my core called me a liar.

The kiss was brutally beautiful, the way his tongue thrashed against mine as though getting inside me was the

only thing that mattered. I kissed him back with equal passion, my brain short-circuiting.

“Damn you, Laikyn,” he groaned against my lips before kissing me again.

I clung to him, wanting to stay like this forever.

“First off,” he growled hotly, “I never said I didn’t want you.”

His hand curved behind my head, his body pressed to mine as his tongue thrust into my mouth. He wasn’t gentle, and this wasn’t a sweet exploration. A part of his body was inside mine, and though it was his tongue, it could’ve been his cock for the sensations that blasted through my being. I felt that kiss between my thighs.

Rule twined his fingers in my hair and pulled so our mouths separated. He was breathing as hard as I was, his eyes so dark I could no longer see the gold flecks in them.

“Don’t think for one second that I don’t want to fuck you,” he growled, his hips pressing forward, the evidence like a steel rod between us. “I’ve never been tempted by anything like you before.”

I assumed that was a compliment, but my brain wasn’t functioning well enough to form words.

The chirp of a siren ruined the moment. Rule instantly released me, stepping back. I glanced toward the sound and noticed a patrol car stopped near the entrance.

“Get in,” he snapped. “We’re going home.”

I got in the car.

\* \* \*

## **Jinx**

THE MOMENT LAIKYN CAME INSIDE, I KNEW something happened.

I could only assume it wasn't good since Rule didn't come in with her. And since he didn't text to let me know of a job, I had to assume this was one of those instances when he was running away. That was something he was good at, too. Even Waldo was used to it, giving the sound only a cursory glance before huffing a sigh and flopping back onto the ground.

Since there wasn't a television in the house, I was sitting on the back porch when I saw Laikyn emerge from her room a short time later. She'd changed out of her jeans into a pair of loose pajama pants and a long-sleeve T-shirt that looked about three sizes too big. Strangely enough, she was sexy as fuck, and I found myself shaking my head at the nonsense that was brewing in my brain.

I had no business thinking Laikyn was sexy.

"Oh, hey," she said, her expression a mixture of sadness and surprise as she carried a glass of water outside.

Waldo lifted his head from his spot in front of the couch. His gaze skimmed her before he flopped back down to continue snoozing.

I patted the cushion beside me, urging Laikyn to sit. The fact she opted to sit on the very spot I patted wasn't quite what I had in mind, but I refused to acknowledge that it meant anything.

"What are you watching?"

I tapped the button on the remote to show her the menu.

"*The Breakfast Club?*" She set her glass down, then smiled at me. "Very interesting, Jinx. I didn't take you for a Molly Ringwald fan."

I shook my head.

"Ally Sheedy?"

I shook my head again.

"Judd Nelson?"

I nodded, then grinned.

“Me, too.” Laikyn leaned back, her shoulder resting against my side. “Not so much in anything else.” She laughed softly. “Except maybe, *Fandango*.”

The girl wasn't born until 2001, sixteen years after both movies were made. Then again, her mother was an actress, so movies could be her thing. Nothing in the information I'd unearthed revealed as much, so it was nice to learn something about her that I didn't already know.

While she stared at the television, I grabbed my phone from where it sat on the armrest and typed a message using only one hand, then hit send.

“Are you talking to me, Jinx?” Laikyn asked when her cell phone chimed.

I typed YES, then hit send.

Her phone chimed before she had a chance to look at the first message, and she laughed again.

I liked the sound of her laugh. Far more than I should.

“How was your date?” she read from her phone screen. “Great. Right up until I kissed Rule, and he rejected me. Then it pretty much sucked. Until he kissed me. But that didn't happen until *after* he chased me down the beach because I ran away with my tail between my legs. That was actually pretty great, too. The kiss part, I mean. Not the running. Then he dumped me here and ran away.”

Laikyn leaned into me, resting her head on my shoulder. “Tell me something, Jinx. Am I not his type?”

That was one of those double-edged questions. Rule was adamant about keeping her at arm's length for her own good, so anything I told her would be to keep his cover. And more than likely a lie. But if I didn't tell her he was interested, she would be hurt. More than she appeared to be already.

“I'm sorry,” she said before I could come up with a way to respond. “Ignore me. It's not your problem. I don't mean to drag you into it.”

I patted her shoulder, ignoring how good it felt to simply touch her. I couldn't remember the last time I'd touched a woman and paid attention to how it felt. The majority of my interactions with women were sexual, and none of them left a lasting impression. It was more about satiating the urge and moving on—for them and me. Not many women were interested in a man who didn't talk. Once they realized it, things usually became awkward. Rarely did I meet a woman like Laikyn who was willing to put forth the effort to communicate on a deeper level. Not that I was complaining. I didn't give a shit. I had Rule, Rhyan, and the twins when I needed to converse, though those were rare, too.

“I know I shouldn't,” Laikyn said, snuggling closer, her hand resting on my chest, her head on my shoulder. “But I like him. I think there's more to him than meets the eye.”

I was glad she did because Rule deserved that. He was a tortured soul who did his best to keep his distance from everyone. The four of us were the exception, but he didn't open up to any of us either. Not the way he should. And that wasn't for lack of trying on our part.

“When I say I like him, I don't mean I want him to fall in love with me,” she continued, but I wasn't sure she was talking to me so much as trying to work through the problem. “I'd like to fuck him, sure. But I also like him. I think we could be friends. Definitely fuck-buddies.”

I smiled to myself. I liked that she was brutally honest about her desires. It was refreshing.

At the same time, I got the sense she used sex as a coping mechanism. Similar to the way Rule did. As a distraction. They'd turned the act into something that was only supposed to be felt, not accepting it as an experience that allowed you to get closer to someone.

Laikyn yawned, her body relaxing against me. I knew I should've excused myself, but I didn't. I remained where I was, staring at the television screen and doing my best not to fall for the sweet woman who was simply trying to follow the new course set for her.



“I like you, too, Jinx,” she said softly, patting my chest.  
“More than I should.”

The feeling was certainly mutual, but rather than text that to her, I held Laikyn until she fell asleep. It was my intention to carry her to her bedroom. It would've been the noble thing to do.

Instead, I stretched out beside her and fell asleep with Laikyn in my arms. The couch wasn't the most comfortable place to sleep, but I slept better than I had in years.

## Rule

“WHAT IN THE *EVER-LOVING* FUCK IS *this*?”

Her voice grated on my nerves, pulling me out of a restless sleep. I shifted, every muscle in my back spasming.

“Don’t tell me you slept here,” Rhyan scolded, her footsteps heavy as she moved to the windows.

A moment later, I was blinded by the morning sun.

I grunted and pushed to a sitting position, silently cursing the hard fucking couch.

“It’s morning, and we’ve got shit to do,” she announced as though I didn’t already know that based on the harsh sunlight beaming me in the face.

I leaned back, dropping my head against the wall and closing my eyes.

“Why did you sleep here? Where’s your wife?”

“Why can’t you shut up?” I grumbled in response.

“You don’t pay me to be quiet.”

“I will if you’ll shut the fuck up.”

Rhyan laughed. “Seriously? Problems in paradise?”

“Get me some fucking coffee,” I snarled, eyes still closed.

“Get your own fucking coffee,” she said snidely as she walked out of my office.

I took a few deep breaths, then forced my eyes open. The world came into focus, and the sun wasn’t quite so harsh. I glanced down at the couch and silently cursed the damn thing. My body hurt like I’d gone ten rounds with a heavyweight and lost. I was getting too fucking old for this shit.

“Are you drunk?” Rhyan shouted from the other room.

I didn't bother answering her. She knew I wasn't. I didn't drink. Not because I didn't long for the void I could find in the bottom of a bottle. At times, I craved it more than air. The same way I craved nicotine. But I knew from experience a bottle wasn't going to solve problems, only cause more. I'd witnessed it on more than one occasion, and while I was clearly a glutton for punishment—marrying a woman who tempted me in a way no other ever had just so I could save her from her ruthless bitch of a mother was proof—I wasn't a fucking moron.

“Why are you here?” Rhyan asked.

Again, I didn't answer. I wasn't about to tell her I'd come here last night to eliminate the risk of fucking Laikyn. I'd wanted to. Fuck, I'd wanted to. And despite my one-and-done rule, I probably would've still been fucking her right now because I knew the moment I let myself have her, I would never want to let her go.

*There's a rule about love. To have it, you have to be willing to be hurt. I'm not willing.*

Laikyn's words had been on repeat in my head since I dropped her off at the house, claiming I had business to tend to. I was trying to imprint those words in my brain because she was right. If you opened yourself up to love, you risked getting hurt. I'd spent my entire life avoiding situations that would open me up to the pain. I'd had more than enough for a lifetime. I damn sure wasn't inviting more.

Until her, I'd never questioned it. Never had the desire to have something of my own. But I felt a connection to her. Like magnets. Her north was attracting my south, and there was nothing I could do. The force was too strong. It was eerily similar to what I felt for Jinx. Thankfully, Jinx wasn't the sort who needed validation. He didn't harp on me about the future or what it meant when we were fucking. When we were together, we simply were.

But it wasn't the same with Laikyn. With Jinx, I knew I would get his friendship in return. I knew he would be there

for me because I was there for him. Not as lovers but as friends. Laikyn had made it clear she wanted one thing from me, and though I wanted to fuck her, I could no longer promise I wouldn't get pulled into her. I refused to do that. For both our sakes.

“Here.”

I took the white mug Rhyan held out to me—the one that said *Fuck Off. I mean, good morning*—sparing a glance her way. “Where's Jinx?”

“On his way in.”

“Good. Did he get what I needed?”

“He did. Did you get what *he* needed?”

I exhaled heavily and got to my feet. “No. Not yet.”

“Until you get that, we can't get any firm answers.”

I was well aware. Not that I needed a DNA test to prove that Laikyn Quinn was Jeremiah Montgomery's illegitimate daughter. There was a paper trail that documented that. However, Jeremiah was dead, so proving to Knox Montgomery that she was his sister did require proof. Mostly because the man was going to have to part with a portion of his ridiculous fortune, and without hard evidence, he would merely laugh in her face. Which meant stealing a hair from her hairbrush wasn't going to cut it. I needed a blood sample or a cheek swab, and since the latter would be a dead giveaway, I had to get creative.

“Have you told Creed yet?” Rhyan asked.

She was referring to my knowledge that Creed's good friend Knox Montgomery had a long-lost sister.

“No.”

Rhyan's hands landed on her narrow hips. “Why the fuck not?”

Because the man I considered my brother would ask questions I wasn't ready to answer. As it was, he would doubt the validity of my claim. He was friends with Knox

Montgomery, and this would look like some desperate attempt at extortion if I came at him without documented proof. I mean, how could it not? At the very least, it would look like I devised some convoluted scheme to deceive a man out of millions, perhaps billions. What were the odds that I would find a woman who was the illegitimate love child of a man whose son so happened to be a friend of a guy I grew up with? It sounded far-fetched, even to me.

“When does she get access to her trust fund?” Rhyan asked, leaning her shoulder against the doorjamb.

“Ninety days from the date of the marriage,” I told her, relaying the terms verbatim.

“And you’re positive she doesn’t know?”

“Yes.”

“But her mother does.”

It wasn’t a question because Rhyan knew some of it. I’d never told her the details, but we’d been watching Monica set Laikyn up with numerous guys since Laikyn’s twenty-second birthday, so it only made sense that Monica knew.

“She knows *enough*.”

“Dumb it down for me, boss.”

I perched on the corner of the desk, took a sip from the mug, then set it down and exhaled heavily. “When we were doing background on Monica after she approached me about...” I waved a hand, not willing to dredge that shit back up.

“You don’t have to remind me. Go on.”

“It took some serious digging and a stroke of pure luck, but Jinx came across a trust set up in Laikyn’s name. I was arguing with Monica about the stunt she pulled, and I brought it up in the heat of the moment.”

“Oh, shit.”

Yeah.

“Tell me you didn’t give her the details.”

“I didn’t. But she paid someone to dig into it.”

After all, it involved an obscene amount of money, so it only made sense that Monica would take an interest. Especially in her current financial situation. It wouldn’t do well for the world to discover that she was flat broke. It wasn’t easy for a woman who raked in millions to make movies to end up damn near penniless with very little to show for it.

“And...?”

“At the very least, I think she knows the terms. Jeremiah either knew who he was dealing with, or he was a paranoid bastard because he set up a blind trust. I assume to avoid a potential conflict of interest with her brother. On top of that, he made it so Laikyn couldn’t access it until she was twenty-five. Or *after* she turned twenty-two *and* had been married for at least ninety days.”

“Thorough. You think he did it because he thought Monica would try to get her hands on it?”

“No idea.” And that much was the truth. I had no idea about the former relationship between Monica and Jeremiah Montgomery. And up until recent years, Monica hadn’t been hurting for money. At the moment, I wouldn’t put anything past the woman.

“What about the brother? You think Knox knows?”

“No.” I was certain of that. “It was set up so that it wouldn’t come to light if something happened to Laikyn before the stipulations were met. Only Jeremiah’s lawyer knows the details.”

Never mind that I’d been paying Jinx to conceal the information for the past six years. He was a hacker with unrivaled skills, but that didn’t mean the details were impossible to find. However, Knox Montgomery would have no reason to go digging, so it was safe to say he was oblivious.

“You think Monica knows the stipulations?”

“I’d be surprised if she didn’t. She’s set Laikyn up with three guys this year.”

“You think it was to get one of them to marry her?”

I shrugged. “More than likely. I’m not sure she knows everything, but I think she’s aware of that clause.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Why else would she set Laikyn up with a creep like Wes Carver?”

Rhyan’s chin jutted outward. “I didn’t realize he was a creep. Seems relatively harmless to me.”

“Not so much.” I took a deep breath. “Jinx found a payment Monica made to him. Ten K. If I had to guess, it was part of her plan to get him to seal the deal so they could get their hands on Laikyn’s money.”

“She really is a conniving bitch, huh?”

She was something, all right.

“If she’s financially strapped, that means she’s stuck,” Rhyan mused. “Now that you married the girl, she has nothing.”

“This is Monica Quinn we’re talking about. She’ll find a way.”

Which was why I wanted to get everything squared away as soon as possible. I didn’t want to leave Laikyn in the dark for a minute longer than I had to. As soon as I told her I’d married her so she could access the trust, she would likely demand an annulment.

I just needed to find a way to keep my hands off the woman and get everything lined up before she found out. She wasn’t going to forgive me for manipulating her, and I couldn’t blame her. But at least she wouldn’t think I was a selfish bastard on top of it.

Maybe.

\* \* \*

## **Laikyn**

FRUSTRATING.

Infuriating.

Vexing.

Annoying.

Exasperating.

With every word that came to mind, I slapped more paint on the canvas. Thankfully, I'd put a drop cloth on the wall; otherwise, I would've had to do some touchups to the lackluster gray satin that was currently on them.

Not that I cared whether I destroyed Rule's wall. He deserved it. The man was ... maddening. Yes, that was another good word to describe him. I still couldn't believe he had dropped me off here last night and left. After he kissed me like that!

Was the man insane?

No. He wasn't.

That would imply he didn't know what he was doing. And we both knew that quick departure was Rule's way of running away from whatever this was.

He was an aggravation I didn't need in my life. Why had I agreed to this in the first place? Seriously. I couldn't figure out what had prompted me to go along with his crazy scheme. I still had no idea what this marriage was getting either of us.

Why? Why had I done it?

Oh, I'd had more than enough time to ponder that question and come up with a few good answers.

*It was a knee-jerk reaction to finding dead bodies in my mother's bedroom.*

*I wanted a job, but the interview process seemed too rigorous.*

*I'd ingested some kind of psychedelic drug at the party that night, and I didn't have control of all my faculties.*



Regardless of how I tried to rationalize it, the simple fact was I was crazy. If I'd been in my right mind, I would've laughed in his face.

Probably.

But no.

The bigger question was, why was I still here? Why hadn't I left? It would be the work of a moment to call an Uber and get a ride back to my mother's house. Rule wasn't forcing me to stay. Not that I could tell.

I knew part of the reason I wasn't in a hurry to leave, but I refused to give a name to whatever this was I was developing with Jinx. I wanted to say it was friendship because that was the only thing it could be. However, after last night and then this morning... after waking up in his arms, I wasn't so sure it wasn't something more. On my side, I mean. Not his. I could tell Jinx was merely trying to be a good friend, and I respected that. I had to.

Again, trying to rationalize any of this was doing me no good. I wasn't leaving. In fact, I was making myself more at home. I'd moved all my art supplies to the recreation room at the back of the property—which was empty, by the way—and taken over the space. The first time Rule left me alone, I kept waiting for him to return. Now, I was moving on with my life. Only in his house. I won't lie; I was pretending it was mine since I was alone with all this extravagance.

And yes, despite my initial accusation that the house was depressing, it wasn't as bad as I'd made it sound. Sure, the furniture needed an overhaul because only hipsters bought pumpkin orange sofas and glass-top tables. But the concept was incredible, and the fact the builder had wanted to bring the outdoors in as much as possible proved they knew the charm of living in LA.

I stabbed the large brush into the green paint and wielded it like a sword before arcing it forward to spatter the paint on the canvas. When I finished, this would be garbage for sure, but for now, it suited my mood. Later, when I'd calmed down, I

would work on the sunset painting I'd started this morning. It was still as vivid in my mind as that stupid kiss.

Several hours later, after I'd put away my paints and rolled my eyes at the result of my morning tantrum, I went in search of food. Thanks to Jinx, there were a few options in the refrigerator and pantry, but nothing really struck my fancy. I ended up with some cheese and crackers, which I ate in the outdoor living space, leaving the retractable walls open behind me.

No matter how hard I tried, I could not stop thinking about that kiss. About the way Rule had owned my mouth for that too brief time. The way his tongue stroked mine, his hand clutching my jaw, holding me in place. I'd never been kissed like that before. Never with so much domination. I'd loved every second of that kiss, and I wanted another, only now Rule ran away. And he could tell me otherwise, but it would be a lie.

It didn't help that Jinx had left, too. Now Waldo was the only one here. And while he was great at keeping me company, he wasn't quite as good at distracting me from my wayward thoughts. In fact, after last night, my thoughts were now plagued by Jinx, too. In my attempt to stop thinking about one of them, I inadvertently thought about the other.

But no matter what, I continued to dwell on that freaking kiss because *hello!* I'd been married to the man for seventeen days, and that was the first time he kissed me. Just the thought of Rule's mouth raised my body temperature until I was crossing my legs in an attempt to ease the ache. Even the brush of my arm on my breast drew a gasp from my lungs. My entire body was one giant nerve center, eager to be stroked.

I groaned, causing Waldo to lift his head.

"Ignore me, boy. It's fine. I'm fine. Everything's fine."

He didn't appear impressed, but he dropped his head to his paws and closed his eyes.

If only I could do the same.

“Fuck Rule,” I muttered, letting my frustration with Rule grow until it became a living, breathing thing inside me.

I jumped from the sofa and stormed into the house, marching to my bedroom. The throbbing between my legs increased in intensity just thinking about how angry I was at him.

But if Rule wouldn't take care of me, I would damn sure do it myself.

I closed my door to ensure Waldo didn't come in. I figured there were some things dogs didn't need to see, and this was one of them.

I rummaged through my nightstand until I found the velvet bag that held my most prized possession. I tossed the bag, then flopped back on my bed, vibrator in hand. Within seconds, I had my panties and shorts shoved down, the silicone tip of the toy pressed against my clit. I wouldn't get fucked, but this was good, too. I could come like this. From the vibration on my clit and the sound of his voice in my head.

*Don't think for one second that I don't want to fuck you. I've never been tempted by anything like you before.*

“Then do it,” I demanded, rocking my hips.

I let the sensations swim in my veins, closing my eyes and picturing that kiss. The way the car pressed against my back while Rule's body covered me from the front. I could still smell his intoxicating cologne and feel his fingertips gripping my jaw and the gentle pressure on my scalp when he pulled my hair.

“God, yes,” I moaned, pressing the vibrator more firmly on my clit. The more worked up I got, the less intense the vibration became.

I let my mind wander, fantasizing about his mouth on me, pretending his tongue was on my clit and he was licking me to orgasm. I could almost picture Jinx standing beside him, watching as Rule's tongue drove me crazy. In my mind, I stared down at Rule, daring him to make me come. I could almost see the wicked gleam in his eye, the promise that—

The vibration stopped.

“What the hell?”

I opened my eyes and stared up at the ceiling.

The vibrator buzzed again, but only briefly.

Frowning, I glanced down at where the toy was pressed between my legs.

“Son of a bitch!” I screamed. “You have *got* to be kidding me!”

I sat up, unscrewed the end of the toy, and looked at the batteries as though that would bring them back to life. I’d taunted Rule that this had happened, but instead of waiting for him to tell me where the batteries were (in the event I would need them one day), I’d moved on.

And now the fucking batteries were dead.

“Figures.”

I stood up, tossing the vibrator on the bed and jerking my panties and shorts up. My eyes skimmed the room as though there might be something I could use to fix this problem.

Too bad I didn’t have an electric toothbrush. The vibrating base would’ve been perfect.

I walked into the bathroom and stared at the shower. “Of course no one thought to update the guest room with a handheld shower sprayer.”

Then the lightbulb in my brain came on, and I turned on my heel, a spring in my step as I wandered out into the hall, taking a left and making a beeline for the stairs. From what I could tell, the entire top floor was dedicated to the owner’s suite, a good fifteen hundred square feet of underutilized space. If I had to guess, Rule used the bed, the shower, the toilet, the sink, and the closet. I didn’t imagine he did much more than sleep and get dressed since he spent far more time away from the house than in it.

I didn’t pause to search the space, heading directly for Rule’s bathroom. Surely, being that it was the primary

bedroom, it would have the fanciest bathroom.

I wasn't wrong. It was actually more than impressive, if not a little dated, due to the previous owner's preference for '70s decor. If it weren't for the fact the furnishings were expensive, it really would've been depressing.

On the right side of the bathroom were rectangle double sinks inset in a beautiful wooden base with awkward chandeliers hanging over them from above. A larger, floor-to-ceiling cabinet sat at the end, which I figured held towels and other bathroom necessities.

Opposite the vanity was the water closet, and a little farther down was the shower. I wish I could say that was the most impressive part, but the credit for that went to the large soaking tub that sat on a concrete platform in front of a picture window that overlooked the hills beyond. On both sides were mirrored walls, which made the ample space feel twice as big.

Although the tub was tempting, I was here with one goal in mind, so I turned to the shower, opening the large glass door to peek inside.

Yep. Just as I thought. Hand sprayer.

The house had instant hot water, so I didn't turn on the water until I'd stripped off my clothes and stepped into the glass-enclosed shower. The door was self-closing, the glass dark, offering the illusion of privacy, although the lights made it possible to see everything on both sides.

"Let's see what you think when you find out I did this," I muttered, turning on the water and letting it rain down on my head.

I didn't waste time, trying desperately to hang onto the rush I'd created from my previous fantasies. I pulled the removable sprayer down from its holder and changed the setting from spray to pulse, then pressed my back against the concrete wall and propped one foot on the bench. As the steam grew around me, I relaxed, allowing the pulse of the water to ease the tension from before.

When my leg muscles began to tremble, I sat on the bench, holding the water right where I wanted it, letting that pulse of liquid heat beat against my clit. I could almost envision a wickedly skilled tongue delivering the pleasure. At this point, I didn't care if it was Rule or Jinx. Either would be fine with me. Or maybe both. That could certainly get interesting.

I ended up flat on my back, my foot pressed to the wall, the other on the floor while I let the sensation take me right to the edge. I let the fantasy take shape, this time with Jinx kissing me while Rule sucked hard on my clit—

I grunted and moaned before hissing out a very satisfied, “*Yesss!*”

The orgasm those fantasies produced was one for the record books.

I shivered as the tension drained from my body, and the pleasure lingered, refusing to acknowledge that I'd come harder than I ever had in my life simply from thinking about two hot men and their wickedly skilled mouths.

My body came down slowly, eyes closed, my smile remaining on my face.

“See, Rule,” I said to no one. “I don't need you to pleasure me.” Although I wouldn't deny that my fantasies of him were better than porn. “I do just fine on my own.”

“Is that right?”

*Shit!*

## Rule

I WAS PAYING FOR MY SINS.

That was the only way to explain finding Laikyn orgasming in my shower. The angels were calling in their chit, and I was being punished for all the bad things I'd ever done.

And fine. Perhaps I'd been here to see some of the buildup, but it was *my* fucking shower. I had every right to be here. I damn sure hadn't expected to find Laikyn on her back, practically molesting my shower sprayer. If I had, I wouldn't have allowed Jinx to tag along.

Or perhaps I would have because his presence added to the eroticism, although I wasn't quite ready to admit that.

I should've responded to Jinx when he attempted to drag me away as soon as he saw her, but I didn't. Nor did I let him escape when he tried. I'd grabbed his wrist and forced him to watch because it was the only option I had. With him present, I wouldn't give in to the urge. Probably.

Using him as an excuse, I'd stuck around and heard her taunting me. I surprised her by responding, but she quickly masked that and was now tormenting me by not moving, although I could see the dramatic rise and fall of her chest, which did amazing things to her beautiful breasts. I followed the trail of butterflies that fluttered along her left side from her hip before disappearing around to her back. I wanted to trace those tattoos with my tongue.

Laikyn turned her head to the side and stared at us through the dark-tinted glass. If it bothered her to find us both there, she didn't show it.

"I didn't know you were home."

Casual as you please, she was. No fretting over the fact she was flat on her back, naked, and had just cried out in pleasure.

“I didn’t know you were in my shower.” I tried to keep my eyes on her face, but it wasn’t easy when her breasts practically beckoned my mouth.

She had perfect tits. Firm and round. Large enough to overflow my hand with rosy-brown nipples that stood erect as I stared at her. I wanted her to cup them so I could slide my cock between the warm flesh. No doubt, it would feel fucking amazing.

“The batteries in my vibrator died.” She grinned. “For real this time.”

“I think they call that karma.”

Her smile intensified. “Or luck.”

My body hardened even more when her gaze began raking over me, from my neck to my bare feet. Since I hadn’t realized she was in there, I’d started pulling my clothes off before I came in. I was standing in only my boxer briefs, with no way to hide my erection from her penetrating gaze.

Jinx’s state of dress was similar, and I was waiting for her to ask why we were in there together. Telling her I’d intended to fuck her out of my system by using his body as an outlet might not go over well. Or, you know, it might make this encounter impossible to resist.

Laikyn crooked her finger at me. “Would you care to join me?”

No. No, I would not. But only because I refused to touch her. Laikyn thought she was in control. She wasn’t. And the only way to prove that was to hold my ground.

“Fine,” she said as she sat up. “Your loss.”

Definitely.

Rather than exit since this was my bathroom and she had her own, I remained where I was while Laikyn placed the shower sprayer back in its holder and stepped beneath the



spray. She slicked her hair back from her face, all that chocolate brown silk gliding down her back.

I pretended I wasn't affected. Pretended that my cock wasn't acting as a divining rod, seeking the one thing that could sate this unbearable ache. Pretended that I hadn't spent the entire day thinking about how good it would feel to fuck this woman.

I held my ground right up until she picked up the bar of soap and slid it slowly over her smooth, golden skin. Despite what I pretended, I didn't have the strength of ten men, and my resistance began crumbling until it was a pile of rubble at my feet.

I was a sinner. I was going to hell anyway. Why the fuck shouldn't I savor the nectar of the gods before I did?

With permission from my cock—because he was clearly making all the fucking decisions—I opened the top drawer of the vanity and grabbed two condoms from the box I kept there. I passed one to Jinx, palmed the other, and then stripped my boxer briefs off. My legs moved, carrying me to the shower. I opened the door, then left it open as I joined her.

“Both of us,” I said, waiting for her to look at me.

Her eyes slowly opened as she rubbed the soap over her breast. “That doesn't sound like a question.”

“It wasn't.” That didn't mean I wasn't waiting for her permission. “Both or neither. It's your only option.”

Her smile was seductive as she looked past me at Jinx. “Why are you standing way over there?”

I didn't look back to see if Jinx was joining us. I prayed he was because I wasn't sure I had the restraint to walk away from her right now, and it was the only other choice I had. No way could I be alone with this woman. Not without doing something insanely stupid like falling for her. It wasn't in my nature, but there was something about Laikyn that compelled me to go against every rule I'd ever set for myself. I'd known that long before I married her.

The glass door silently closed behind Jinx, stirring the steam. Before it sealed us in, I was on Laikyn. I had her jaw in my hand and my mouth covering hers.

The soap fell to the floor when she put her arms around me and crushed her breasts to my chest. Her tongue met mine, thrust for thrust as I tried to inhale her deep into my body. She rubbed herself against me like a cat, seeking warmth and friction. I fucking loved how soft and smooth she was, how her pebbled nipples teased my chest, how she curled her leg around mine in an effort to get closer.

I moved her away from the wall so that her back was to Jinx, nipping her lush bottom lip. “You sure about this?”

“God, yes,” she hissed, leaning into Jinx when he stepped up behind her.

“There are rules,” I informed her.

Laikyn’s eyes lifted slowly to my face as she grabbed Jinx’s hand and brought it around to cover her breast. “How did I know you were going to say that?”

I watched as Jinx brought his other hand around and tugged her nipples firmly.

She leaned back against him, tilting her head and thrusting her chest forward. “Oh, God ... Jinx...”

Her hand slid along his hip as she let him hold her up. His big hands were covered in tattoos, adding to the eroticism as he plucked and pinched her nipples.

“You like that?” I asked, stepping closer but keeping my attention on her tits.

Laikyn’s fingers curled around my dick. “Very much.”

“You ever had two men touch you at the same time?”

“No.”

I cupped her bare mound, teasing my middle finger along her slit. She was so smooth and so soft. I grazed her clit and watched as her lips parted on a soft moan.

She whimpered, spreading her feet wide, inviting my fingers to wander. I teased along her cleft before venturing lower, finding her tight entrance.

Laikyn covered Jinx's hand with one of hers, then placed her other hand on mine, attempting to hold us where she wanted us.

I pulled my hand back and cupped her jaw instead, leaning forward so my mouth hovered over hers.

"You don't deserve a reward. You deserve punishment for tempting me."

She grabbed my dick again, pumped it more insistently. "Punish me, Rule."

"No foreplay," I growled, pulling her to me and forcing Jinx's hands to fall from her body.

"I've had mine," she said with a sassy smirk.

"Not yet, you haven't. But it'll have to do because you're about to get fucked twice, baby."

I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her with me over to the bench. I sat, forcing her to straddle my legs. I couldn't wait. I needed to be inside her. I didn't give a shit if this was my only opportunity; I refused to go another minute without feeling the sweet heaven of her cunt wrapped around me.

"Put it on me," I said, passing the condom to her.

Laikyn pulled back, her attention shifting to her task while I stared at her beautiful body. I plumped her tits while she ripped the foil packet open. I pinched her nipples when she retrieved the latex. I dropped my hands to her hips when she rolled it over my length, her touch sending sparks along my spine.

Her eyes met mine.

I held her stare, daring her to take what I was offering without saying a word. I couldn't. I refused to stake a claim on this woman. She wasn't mine to have, despite what the fucking marriage contract said. She was unraveling me strand by strand, but I refused to take something I didn't deserve, and

God knows I did not deserve this woman. But she could have me if she wanted me. I wasn't strong enough to resist.

"Fuck me," I whispered. "Use me, Laikyn."

Her gaze shifted over my face. She was debating.

I thought for a moment she would refuse me, but lust won. Her hand curled around my dick, guiding me to the warmth between her thighs. When the head breached her opening, I pulled her onto me, tunneling deep inside.

"Yes," she hissed, her arms wrapping around my neck, her forehead pressed to mine as she rolled her hips, fucking herself on my cock. "Oh, fuck yes. This is what I wanted. Your cock deep inside me."

Her muscles flexed and released, milking my dick as she lifted and lowered on me. It was all I could do to hold her, to let her use me the way we both wanted her to. The silky glide of her cunt was better than I imagined. Better than anything I'd ever felt before. I could die right now and be content that I'd had the most intense experience of my life in the few seconds I was buried inside her and Jinx's heated gaze was stroking us from only two feet away.

At first, I let her control the momentum, a slow rocking of her body against mine. When her gasps turned into moans, I pressed my thumb on her clit, circling it with enough pressure to make her whimper my name again and again. I guided her along my length, the friction stealing my sanity until my muscles violently tensed in anticipation of release.

"Laikyn..." I didn't mean for her name to tumble from my lips, but I couldn't stop it. Every second she rode me, I was losing a piece of myself.

She put her hand on mine, pressing my thumb more firmly on her clit as she increased the tempo.

She hummed and moaned. "Yes ... fuck ... so good ... so good."

I grunted, trying to hold on, but the tension had built to the point of no return. My balls were tight, as was my chest. The

tingling in my spine had become an electrical storm, brewing stronger with every thrust.

Laikyn's body jerked, and she grabbed my shoulders, digging her nails into my skin as she shuddered violently, her pussy clamping down like a vise.

“Fuck. You're so goddamn tight, baby.”

I grunted, gritting my teeth, trying to hold on. The grip on my control was razor-thin, and then I made the mistake of looking up at Jinx. The fire I saw banked in his eyes was enough to send me soaring. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen him as turned on as he was at that moment.

I growled and groaned, giving in to the pleasure and letting it carry me along with Laikyn.

Sanity returned almost instantly, and I managed to refrain from throwing her off me. I damn sure didn't want to, but it was a knee-jerk reaction. Self-preservation in its most disgusting form. I managed to ease her off my dick, then urged her toward Jinx before getting to my feet. I stripped the condom off, tying it in a knot, then dropped it to the floor as I stepped beneath the spray.

When I turned, I found Laikyn kissing Jinx, their mouths fused, his big, tattooed arms curled around her. They looked so fucking hot together. Her beauty to his beast. It was enough to make my dick jerk and twitch.

If anything could speed up recovery time, it was watching the two of them together.

\* \* \*

## **Jinx**

LAIKYN WAS IN MY ARMS. HER LIPS were on mine, her hands moving over me.

Ten minutes ago, I'd been anticipating an orgasm, but this wasn't the path I thought I would take to get there. With Rule, yes. Laikyn, no. And both of them? Only in my wildest fucking fantasies.

Watching Rule with Laikyn had damn near brought an end to my evening before my dick got anywhere near either of them. The way he touched her as she rode his cock ... I'd rarely seen his touch so gentle, but he'd maintained it with her despite the fact he'd been fraying around the edges. It was sexy as fuck.

"Jinx." Laikyn's fingers glided along my jaw as she pulled back to meet my gaze. "Are you sure about this?"

I nodded without hesitation, then mouthed, "Are you?" back to her.

"So sure," she whispered before pulling my head back down so our lips fused.

Her kiss wasn't what I expected. It was both sensual and sweet. As though she was savoring while deciding whether to devour. I allowed her to guide the kiss, not relinquishing control completely but wanting to *feel* her. I got the feeling we were a means to an end for Laikyn, and while that didn't usually bother me, I wanted something different with her.

I didn't want to be her distraction, I wanted to be the one she sought when she needed that something more that she was pretending didn't exist. It was the same thing I'd wanted from Rule in the beginning—back when we'd started out and he pretended I was a convenience and vice versa. Over the years, that facade had slipped, although I wasn't sure Rule even realized it.

Laikyn was so much like him in that regard. I felt like I knew her, and at the same time, she was a stranger to me. I knew the details captured in documents but not the important things. Not her likes and dislikes, the things that made her laugh, those that made her cry. I wanted to know every nuance about her.

But in the meantime, I wasn't willing to give up the chance to be with her. This would have to be enough. For now.

I turned her so her back was to the concrete, crushing my body to hers as I feasted on the sweetest lips I'd ever tasted. I

inhaled her mewls and moans while licking her tongue, giving her a glimpse of what was to come.

“I want you inside me,” she said, her tone filled with urgency. “Don’t make me wait.”

I wouldn’t. Hell, I couldn’t.

She took the condom from my hand, then made quick work of unwrapping it before rolling it along my iron-hard cock. I gasped, the sensation blissfully brutal in its intensity. As soon as she had me sheathed, I took over, unwilling to let her hold the reins. I hadn’t anticipated this, but I damn sure wasn’t going to let the opportunity pass me by. Last night had been the worst and the best night of my life. Holding her in my arms while she slept, unable to touch her the way I wanted, had left me hard and aching all fucking day.

Lifting her right leg, I propped her foot on the bench as I pressed my hips forward, guiding my cock to the slick flesh between her thighs. If I thought I could hold onto my sanity, I would’ve dropped to my knees and licked her pussy until she screamed my name. Unfortunately, I wasn’t sure I would last if she came all over my face, and I wanted to feel the tight sheath of her body more than I wanted air.

“Oh, fuck yes,” Laikyn cried out, her head pressing back against the wall as I sank to the hilt inside her. “You’re so fucking big. Oh, God ... Jinx.”

Her words brought me back from the brink, reminding me to take pleasure in the moment rather than race to the finish line. I wanted to savor this for as long as she would allow me. Even through the latex, I could feel the blistering heat, the snug grip of her pussy as she took me deeper. I watched as her chest rose and fell with every desperate gasp.

“More, Jinx. Please ... fuck me.”

Gripping her hair, I pulled her head to the side and pressed my lips to her neck, nipping the skin while I drove my hips forward, burying my cock as deep as her cunt would allow. She was so fucking tight, her moans so fucking perfect.

She clawed my shoulders. “So good ... so ... fucking ... good.”

I loved how vocal she was. Loved the way her nails dug into my skin as she held on while I impaled her. Her pussy milked me, caressing every inch.

“Harder,” she demanded.

I gave her what she asked for, nailing her to the wall, taking what she was offering because I was too fucking weak to resist her. And when that wasn't enough, I pulled out, then spun her around so I could fuck her from behind. Laikyn planted her palms on the wall, pushing her hips back as I drilled into her, gripping her luscious ass in both hands, kneading the firm globes, admiring the little puckered hole that taunted me. I pressed my thumb against the tiny hole, seeking a reaction, but not sure what it would be.

“Oh ... oh, yes. Fuck me there. Yes. Please.”

I glanced at Rule to see he was staring; his eyes locked on my thumb as I pushed it deep into Laikyn's asshole while my cock tunneled in and out of her pussy. His cock was hard, his hand slowly caressing the long, thick shaft. I wondered if he was thinking the same thing I was ... about how good it would feel to slide my dick into her ass, to feel her body lock down on me while Rule claimed her pussy one more time.

The thought of both of us fucking her pushed me dangerously close to the brink. I held on, rhythmically pumping my thumb in her ass while my cock slid in and out of her tight pussy..

“So good ... that feels ... oh, fuck ... Jinx!  
Ohfuckohfuckohfuck!”

Laikyn's pussy clamped down on my dick, convulsing as I gritted my teeth and held on for one ... two ... three more thrusts before I drove in one last time and let myself go.

When it was over, I pulled out, stumbling to the bench. My legs wouldn't hold me up any longer, so I flopped down, dragging deep gulps of air into my lungs. I had no idea how long I sat there with steam billowing around me, but it was



long after Laikyn walked out as though what we did hadn't been transcendental.

We would definitely have to work on that.

## Laikyn

WHEN I WOKE THE NEXT MORNING, I felt better than I'd felt in ... well, maybe ever.

Last night ... fucking Rule and Jinx ... even the thought sent a shiver down my spine. I would admit I hadn't been exactly picky about the men I fucked in the past. My only requirement was that they were safe and clean and could hold a relatively intelligent conversation. Other than that, it was fair game.

For the most part, the encounters had been good. Not great, not terrible. Just good. I measured that by whether I achieved orgasm. Most of the time, I did. I didn't believe in faking it because it wasn't worth the hassle, and if that meant rubbing one out while they watched, so be it. If I was going to give my body to someone, by God, I was going to get something out of the deal. And if they couldn't do it the first time, I wasn't willing to risk a repeat. For that reason and others, I tended to keep my encounters casual. At least since I graduated from high school.

But last night, I learned that good sex wasn't great sex. Not even in the same ballpark.

Good sex was achieving orgasm. Great sex was ... well, it was Rule and Jinx fucking me in a way I'd never been fucked before. Part of it had to do with their impressively large cocks. I'd gotten a good look at Rule's long, thick dick, and let me just say, he was not average by any stretch of the imagination. When I sank down on him, I thought Rule was going to split me in two, but then Jinx buried his monster dick inside me, and I realized I hadn't known what big was until him.

No doubt, any man who came after them would probably pale in comparison.

However, size wasn't everything. While it certainly didn't hurt, the best part was the way they used the tools they'd been given. Never had a cock stroked me so intensely from the inside. No doubt, with age, came experience, and they'd been paying attention because they knew the exact right things to do to make my head explode. I had a feeling I was going to have to be pickier with my selection of men in the future because not only did Rule and Jinx have the goods, but they knew how to use them. I'd never had an orgasm like the ones they gave me. Never.

Maybe I should change my rating system based on the intensity of the orgasm instead. That would put Rule and Jinx at a ten on the Richter scale and the next best at around a three.

Kinda sad, really.

Because I knew Rule was going to avoid me like the plague, I took my time getting up. I showered and dressed, then ventured out to get something for breakfast, smiling with every step because the soreness between my legs was a constant reminder of what we'd done last night.

"Hey, Waldo," I greeted when the dog lifted his head from his doggy bed. "Are we here by ourselves?"

His tongue lolled out of his mouth, and I swore he smiled.

"I know. It's kinda fun being home alone, huh?"

Or it had been. For whatever reason, I was hoping I'd have a chance to see them before they left for the day.

"Oh well," I muttered to myself.

As soon as I walked into the kitchen, I stopped, a laugh bubbling up from my belly when I saw all the packages of batteries sitting on the island. Evidently, Rule remembered me mentioning AAs because there were probably three dozen or so—all unopened.

"Sorry, husband of mine. The vibrator no longer holds my interest."

If he thought I was reverting to getting myself off, he was sadly mistaken. I had every intention of fucking both of them

again. I now knew what it felt like to take a drug. That first hit was euphoric, and now I would go to the ends of the earth for another.

I was an addict.

They were my drug.

Rehab wasn't an option.

I glanced in the garage to see if Rule's car was there. I hadn't expected it to be, and I was right. He was becoming predictable in that regard. As for Jinx... His motorcycle was still there, but that didn't mean he was home. Since he was attached to Rule at the hip most days, I assumed he'd gone with him.

I returned to the kitchen and pulled the loaf of bread out of the pantry. I took out a piece and dropped it into the toaster. While the bread browned, I grabbed the butter from the refrigerator and a knife from the utensil drawer. I purposely left the bread loaf out but couldn't be so cruel as to leave it open, so I tied it up and tossed it carelessly on the center island.

When the toast popped, I buttered it, then left the knife on the counter. Again, my inane desire not to waste things caused me to return the butter stick to the refrigerator. After that, I took a trip through the house, nibbling on the toast, aware that I was leaving crumbs in my wake. I didn't care. Waldo would get to them eventually, and if he didn't, well, this was Rule's punishment for leaving me home alone. I mean, sure, it was nice not to have anyone to answer to, but the least he could've done was stick around the morning after.

Then again, I was the one who walked out on them, leaving them to stare after me dumbfounded. I hadn't wanted to, necessarily, but I knew it was the only choice I had. I'd told Rule specifically that I would not get attached, and lingering for cuddle time felt far too intimate for what we were doing.

Didn't mean a text good morning wouldn't have gone a long way to making me feel like it had been as good for them

as it had been for me. But there were no texts, no voicemails. Not even a note beside the batteries.

Once I was finished with my breakfast, I went out to the rec room, which I'd been using as an art studio. When I stepped inside, I came to an abrupt stop, my heart leaping right into my throat.

“Holy fuck.”

Those were the only words my brain could process as I stared at the room. It was entirely different than it had been yesterday when I was out here. And I don't mean simply rearranged. It was ... *different*. The walls had been painted a brilliant white—no more satin gray—and dozens of lights had been installed overhead along tracts, making it possible to position them all around the room.

But the most impressive were the rows of shelves and the rolling cart and the desk—all in a glossy white that allowed for real organization of the space. My blank canvasses had tripled in number, all neatly arranged in a section designed to hold them. There were supplies of all kinds in the tubs and bins attached to an enormous steel pegboard permanently fixed on the wall.

How had they done this? No doubt they would've had to stay up all night, not only shopping but painting. How? Why?

I was grinning when I noticed a bright orange Post-it note stuck to the top of the white desk. I moved closer, then leaned down to read it.

THOUGHT MAYBE THIS WOULD HELP. LET US  
KNOW WHAT ELSE YOU NEED.

~ R/J

Fine. So maybe the text wasn't necessary because this ... well, *this* said it all.

“You aren't going to make it easy on a girl, are you?” I muttered to myself, giggling as I took another look around. If they didn't want me to fall in love with them, they were doing things all wrong.

I spent the next few hours organizing the space so that it worked better for me, then working on my sunset piece. It was turning out better than I anticipated, but I figured I owed Rule for that. I will never forget that moment for as long as I live because my brain had documented that kiss with an ethereal sunset. It was my duty to capture the moment on canvas.

By lunchtime, I was bored, so I checked my social media accounts, then found myself lost on TikTok for two freaking hours while I lounged on the back patio with Waldo keeping me company. When my eyes started to drift closed, I tossed my phone aside and went back into the house. With every day I was there, I was getting nosier and nosier. I'd already gone through Rule's records, which was pretty much the only real thing he owned in this house. He didn't have any photographs to peruse, no knickknacks to admire, and there were no books to nose through.

My curiosity got the best of me, so I headed down the hall to the bedrooms, bypassing mine. I tried the door to Jinx's room but found it locked. Hmm. Interesting.

Waldo stared up at me from a few feet away. "Does he hide the key around here somewhere?"

I felt along the top of the door frame for a key but came up empty.

"Looks like we're SOL, my friend."

Since my B and E skills were sorely lacking, I gave up and went in search of something else to snoop through. I ended up in Rule's bedroom, Waldo right behind me. While he hopped up on the padded bench at the end of the bed, I went through Rule's drawers, leaving them haphazardly open along the way. Socks, underwear, shorts. Check, check, check. All were neatly folded and arranged in a fashion that was appealing to the eye.

When I went into his closet, I flipped on the light. There was a large safe—the size of a small closet—in one corner. I checked it. Locked.

Probably best I didn't know what was in there anyway.

I skimmed through his clothes. He had a very casual style. Mostly jeans and cotton Henleys with graphics of some sort on them. His choice of footwear was shit-kicker style boots with laces. He had them in two colors—beige and black. He had a pair of Adidas—black with white stripes—and a pair of black Gucci loafers, which probably went with the one suit hanging nearby. That was the extent of his shoe collection. No boat shoes or flip-flops for this man.

Because I was feeling petulant, I pulled one of his T-shirts off the hanger and brought it to my nose. It smelled clean. Like laundry detergent, not his unique, intoxicating scent. I rummaged through the drawers in the closet until I found a small bottle of cologne. I spritzed a tiny bit on the shirt, then stripped off my clothes and pulled it on. I left my clothes on his closet floor and didn't bother to close the drawers or cabinets. By the time I was finished, it looked like someone had ransacked the space, searching for something.

Bored and with no idea what to do next, I crawled up into his unmade bed and slipped beneath the blanket. I rested my head on the pillow that had an indent on it, and that was when I smelled him. I smiled to myself, closed my eyes, and drifted off to thoughts of him.

\* \* \*

## Rule

IT WAS STILL DAYLIGHT WHEN I GOT home, but the sun was beginning to set. Jinx had stayed at the office to work on a job he was helping Rhyan with. She offered to drive him home, and since I'd been too restless to hang out, I spent an hour driving around, hoping that some of the anticipation of seeing Laikyn would wear off.

For the record, it didn't.

I wasted a little more time stopping at the Chinese restaurant around the corner from my house to pick up dinner for the three of us. I didn't know what Laikyn preferred to eat,

and since she hadn't turned her nose up at Chinese food when Rhyan and Willy brought it, I figured it was a safe bet. Since I knew Jinx didn't care what was on the menu—when you spent months on end eating only scraps of whatever you could find, it affected your palate—I ordered a variety of shit.

Now, as I sat in the garage with the aroma of moo shu pork filling the car, I found myself both eager and reluctant to go inside. After last night ... I knew there was no fucking way I would be able to keep my hands off Laikyn. Not unless she specifically ordered me to. Sure, there was a good possibility that would happen since I'd insisted she fuck both of us or neither. That hadn't been my finest moment, and though I'd enjoyed the fuck out of it—far more than I expected I would—that didn't mean Laikyn was on the same page. I hadn't heard anything from her all day, and I wouldn't pretend I hadn't checked my phone a few dozen times, hoping for a text message.

“Suck it up,” I muttered, grabbing the bags of food and forcing myself out of the car. When I walked inside, the house felt different. I couldn't explain what it was exactly, but it was ... off.

Waldo came racing across the floor, sliding on the hardwood in his haste to get to me, his tail whipping and wagging back and forth.

“Where is she?” I asked him.

As expected, he didn't answer, but he shoved his nose against the bags of food.

“Not for you, man. Yours is in here,” I told him as I made my way to the kitchen.

I set the bags on the counter, noticing the bread was out and a butter knife was lying on the counter. The batteries I'd left for Laikyn were still there, unopened. The retractable walls at the back of the house were open, and the outdoor living area lights were on. Laikyn's phone was on the small table, but she wasn't lounging around. Nor was she in the pool.



I ventured out to the recreation room but knew before I reached it that she wasn't there, either. Whenever she was, there was always music coming from inside. I went in anyway. The lights were off, so I flipped the switch, the room brightening instantly.

I felt a strange sense of relief when I noticed she'd been out here. This was one of the reasons I'd been expecting a text. Jinx had talked me into spending the entire night working out here, painting walls, installing shelves and lights and shit to make it more of a space for her. He was considerate like that, while I would've assumed she was content with whatever she had until she told me otherwise.

It looked the same as it had at five this morning when we finished and returned to the house. Only now, it felt more like Laikyn's space because she'd rearranged several things. The place was both messy and organized, although I wasn't sure how that was even possible. The important things like her pencils, brushes, and paint were neatly set on a shelf, while drop cloths and canvases were strewn out everywhere.

My gaze snagged on the piece that looked like a child had been throwing paint, not caring where it landed. When I first saw it yesterday, I noticed the drop cloths arranged around it to shield the wall and the floor, which I took to mean the design was intentional. For whatever reason, I liked this one. It made me smile. Had Laikyn been pissed at me when she did it? If so, it would be the first sign of genuine emotion I'd seen from her since I first met her. Although she had no problem talking about her life, she managed to mask her feelings with sarcasm, wit, and seduction. This felt real to me.

When I turned to go back to the house, I noticed another painting, this one definitely not done from frustration. I moved closer, admiring the brush strokes, the way Laikyn had made the colors pop as though they were coming off the white background. It wasn't finished, but it felt familiar. As though I'd seen that particular sunset before.

Something pinched in my chest, but it wasn't the first time that day. Whenever I thought about Laikyn, I had this foreign

squeezing sensation in the center of my body. I was doing well to ignore it. Mostly.

Okay, fine. I wasn't, but I damn sure didn't want to admit that it could mean something.

Feeling petulant myself, I returned to the house, my destination her bedroom. Laikyn's door was open, but she wasn't in there. I turned on my heel and headed for the stairs, a tightness in my groin beginning as I thought about what Laikyn had been doing in my bathroom last night. If she were at it again, I would have to paddle her ass for taunting me.

The air slowly leaked out of my lungs, and a sense of peace settled over me when I found her asleep in my bed. She was under the blankets, her dark, multi-colored hair fanned out on my pillow.

She looked good there.

Also something I wasn't going to admit aloud.

I took in the room, most notably the drawers hanging out of the dresser and the nightstands. I grinned, then detoured to the closet and found it in the same state of disarray. A pile of clothes was on the floor—far too small to be mine. I crouched down and picked up the delicate white lace. Laikyn's panties. Beneath them, her bra, her shorts, and her T-shirt.

If her clothes were here...

I returned to the bedroom and moved closer to the bed. She wasn't naked because I could see gray cotton covering her shoulder.

Waldo came over, sniffing her hand where it rested.

"No," I said firmly, then pointed for the door.

He peered up at me for a moment, then turned and sauntered out. There was a good chance the food would be strewn across the kitchen when I went down—Waldo wasn't one to sulk gracefully—but at the moment, I didn't give a shit. He could have it.

I tapped Laikyn's arm gently, then nudged her more insistently when she didn't budge.

Finally, her eyes fluttered open. A moment later, a smile formed on her face.

I cocked an eyebrow and met her gaze. “You’ve been busy, I see.”

She rolled to her back, brushing her hair from her face. I resisted the urge to sit down beside her. I had this ridiculous need to be closer to her, but as I’d told myself all day, it wasn’t in her best interest. Or mine. Once she figured out what I was up to, she was going to hate me. That was going to be difficult enough to deal with. The last thing I wanted was to have her body imprinted on mine. I didn’t need her haunting my soul for all of eternity, yet I feared that was exactly what was going to happen when all was said and done.

Odd since I’d never had this sort of attraction to any other woman from my past. They’d been appealing on a physical level, and when available to sate the urge, I’d accepted what they were offering. But this thing I felt for Laikyn, whatever the fuck it was, was unnerving. I damn sure didn’t want to give in to it.

Laikyn glanced around the room momentarily. “What time is it?”

“A little after seven.”

She stretched. “Is Jinx here?”

“Will be soon. I brought dinner.”

“Yeah? What are we having?”

“Chinese.”

Her smile made my dick thicken. “You don’t leave your comfort zone much, do you?”

“Figured it was a safe bet. Until I know what you like...” I let the sentence trail and immediately realized my mistake when her hand slipped from under the blanket.

I was standing next to the bed so she didn’t have to reach far to graze her knuckles over the ridge of my cock, currently protected by my jeans.

“I happen to be quite fond of this,” she said, gently rubbing my dick.

My brain ordered my feet to move, to take me out of the room, but they remained rooted to the floor, encouraging her not to stop.

Laikyn turned her hand over, pressing more firmly against my dick, rubbing vigorously enough to have the blood redirecting, throbbing with an urgency I’d never felt before. Her green eyes were locked on mine, and I could sense the dare. She knew how to push my buttons already.

“About last night...” I grunted when she kicked the blankets away, revealing her mile-long, *bare* legs.

“You were saying?”

What the fuck *was* I saying? I didn’t know because my attention was now on the smooth, bare skin between her parted thighs. Only then did I notice she was wearing my shirt.

“Rule?”

“Hmm.” I couldn’t look away when she brushed her fingertips over her bare mound, teasing me.

“Maybe we should have dessert first.”

The words didn’t penetrate my gray matter until I felt the tug on the button of my jeans. She deftly freed it and was working the zipper down before I had the mind to step back.

“We can’t,” I told her, and I fucking *hated* that it sounded like a goddamn question.

“Attached already?” she teased, sitting up and pulling my shirt over her head.

Fuck.

“How about you let me suck your cock. That way, you don’t risk falling in love with me more than you already are.”

This was not supposed to fucking happen. I’d never gone back for seconds before. Never allowed myself to indulge more than once because it confused things. With the exception

of Jinx, of course. But he was different. What I felt for him ... it was different. Right?

But Laikyn wasn't Jinx, which meant sex was meant to be simple. It was a biological urge that could be sated by pretty much anyone.

*No one but Jinx has ever sated you like her.*

I hated that fucking devil on my shoulder. He'd been there all damn day, taunting me with reminders of how fucking good Laikyn had felt wrapped around me. How much I'd enjoyed watching her and Jinx together. How I'd wanted to join them, to crush Laikyn between us, to slide into the hot depths of her body at the same time as him so I could feel them both.

It made no fucking sense, but that never stopped the memories from assaulting me.

"Do you need to wait for Jinx?"

I met her gaze. "What?"

"Jinx? He's your safety net, right?"

I stared at her, forcing my eyes to remain on her face and not her gorgeous breasts.

"That's why you had him join us last night, isn't it?"

How the fuck could she be so perceptive?

"Did it work?" she asked.

Not the way I'd intended, no. If it had, I wouldn't be here right now, my cock straining against my jeans in a desperate effort to get closer to her.

"It's okay," Laikyn said. "I enjoyed him as much as I enjoyed you."

This woman ... the fact that she spoke her mind so freely was unnerving. I never knew what would come out of her mouth. She was talking about last night as though it had been her idea and not mine.

"Did you really?" I asked. "Enjoy him, I mean?"

Her forehead creased, but she answered. “You have doubts? You watched us.”

Yes, I definitely watched. And I found that watching was almost as satisfying as participating. That didn’t mean she didn’t have reservations about the encounter.

“What are you afraid of, Rule?”

I turned away from her, thrusting my hand through my hair. I didn’t want her to see the truth on my face because I couldn’t hide it. I was afraid of everything, that’s what.

Every.

Goddamn.

Thing.

“I get it,” she said, and I forced myself to turn around to look at her again.

Huge mistake.

“What do you get?”

She smiled coyly, palming one beautiful tit. “You don’t know how to keep sex and love separate.”

The hell I didn’t.

She dropped her feet to the floor and stood up slowly.

“But you set the course for what happened last night. You can’t take it back.”

“Actually, I can,” I told her.

Laikyn shook her head. “No. You gave me a taste, and now I have a craving. You can’t deny me.”

“And if I do?”

Her eyes lifted to meet mine. “You’re not the only one I crave.”

I held her stare for a moment. I sensed she wasn’t as confident with that admission as she wanted to be. Did she think I was going to accuse her of cheating? It had been my

idea. Not to mention, this marriage wasn't real. She could fuck Jinx all day, every day, if she wanted.

“Does it bother you that I'm attracted to him?”

“No.” The word came out too quickly.

“I didn't think so.” She moved toward me. “You're not the kind of man who would let someone else play with your toys if you weren't interested, too.”

I didn't back away, refusing to give her more ammunition. She was taunting me on purpose. It was what she did. Admittedly, I fucking liked it, even if it made her impossible to resist.

“No means no, Rule,” she said, her fingers dipping into my jeans. “All you have to do is say the word.”

Two letters.

One syllable.

It should've been easy to say, but only a fucking idiot would tell this woman no, and I wasn't a fucking idiot. I had a genius-level IQ and a highly superior memory. I'd skipped three grades in school because I was far more advanced than most people. I took the SATs for shits and giggles after studying for one day. I scored 1590, but only because I purposely skipped two questions on the math portion. I was dared to take the LSAT—law school admission test—and after studying for one day, I scored 175. I purposely answered five incorrectly because it amused me to do so. I pointed out which five they were before the test was graded.

As I said, I wasn't a fucking idiot.

“Yes or no, Rule?”

I grabbed Laikyn's wrists, pulled her arms behind her back, and pressed my chest to hers. She gasped, her eyes wide.

“I won't refuse you, sweet butterfly, but you have to understand one thing?”

Her eyes shifted to my mouth. “What's that?”

“You don't make the rules. I do.”

Before she could come up with a snide remark, I kissed her, crushing my mouth to hers as I steered her toward the curved lounge chair near the fireplace. I'd always wondered what the fuck I was supposed to do with a chair in my bedroom. Now I knew. I released her arms and gently pushed her down onto the chair. She giggled, but it died on a moan when I put my hands under her knees and forced her legs back and wide so I could admire her beautiful pussy up close.

“No means no, Laikyn. That goes for you, too.”

She stared up at me, her beautiful eyes full of heat. “I’ll never tell you no, Rule.”

I wasn’t so sure that was true, but I wasn’t about to go into it now. My mouth watered with the urge to taste her, but my brain ran through the repercussions of letting this happen. I lived by a code, and I was violating every rule after knowing this woman for such a short time. She was a weakness I couldn’t afford, yet I couldn’t resist her, and there was no sense pretending otherwise.

“Fuck it,” I muttered, dropping to my knees. “Totally worth it.”

I leaned forward and licked her from entrance to clit.

Her back arched into the chair, her pelvis tipping, bringing her pussy closer to my mouth. Her soft moan was a melody I wanted to plan my nights by.

I did it again. Slower this time. Savoring.

She tasted like sin. A delicacy that should be bottled and sold on the black market so those daring enough could savor her sweetness.

“I’m not a gentle lover,” I told her, folding her legs back so her knees were closer to her chest.

“Good.”

I got the sense she didn’t believe me. That or she preferred it rough.

It was time I showed her what she was up against.



## Laikyn

I'D NEVER KNOWN A MAN TO TURN down an offer of a blow job. In fact, it was usually a requirement before I could get my own needs met.

Rule had turned the tables on me before I knew what was happening. And now that his mouth was on me, I was worried I'd bitten off more than I could chew. That damn shower sprayer had nothing on his wicked tongue. And fuck that vibrator. As far as I was concerned, it was fired. Rule licked me like he knew the location of every nerve ending between my legs. He sucked and flicked my clit like it had offended him, then worshipped me like I was a delectable treat. He kept me on edge, never giving me enough for the tension to break, but it continued to intensify until I thought I would implode.

"Please!" I cried out, trying to reach for his head, wanting to hold him down, to force him to finish me off.

He grabbed my hand and held it against my chest. I tried with the other. He did the same thing, using his forearms to keep my legs pinned back while he fused his lips to my clit, lashing at me until tears leaked from my eyes. It was the most intense thing I'd ever felt, and while I never wanted it to end, the pressure was too much.

Rule paused, lifting his head and meeting my gaze. I could see my juices on his beard, and that sight was so damn erotic it was almost enough to send me over.

But he had other plans.

"Hold your legs back."

He placed my hands where he wanted them as though he didn't trust me to figure it out myself.

"Spread yourself wide. Let me see your pussy."

My chest heaved as I did what he said while he stood up. His eyes remained locked on my most private parts while he pulled his shirt over his head.

Good gracious, the man was beautiful. Tall, lean, and muscled. The tattoos added to the beauty, the designs formed along his musculature, highlighting the deep grooves and sexy planes.

“Tease your clit,” he instructed, and suddenly the room warmed about thirty degrees.

Using my index finger, I lightly teased the swollen nub. When I had his full attention, I slipped the tip of my index finger inside my pussy and dragged my juices over my clit for an easier glide.

He took a step back and sat on the bench at the end of the bed. He propped his foot on his knee and untied his boot, removing it slowly while ogling my pussy.

“There are a few things we need to set straight.”

“Hmm?” I couldn’t form words; the heat of his gaze as it molested my pussy was too much. I was touching myself, but it felt like his fingers for the pleasure that coursed through my veins.

“First of all, if we’re doing this, we’re doing all of it.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant, but the only thing I could do was cock an eyebrow to show my confusion.

“Meaning we fuck because we enjoy it. No games, no expectations, Laikyn.”

I nodded. I was completely on board with that. Especially right now. I was swollen and throbbing and so desperate I was tempted to thrust my fingers inside me just to ease the ache. The only reason I didn’t was because I didn’t want him to walk away, and he’d already given me instructions. To violate them would be risking something I wasn’t willing to give up.

“And I know you want Jinx. I see the way you look at him. I’m not blind.”

“I wouldn’t have acted on it,” I countered, unwilling to take the blame for what happened last night. That was his idea, not mine.

“I know.”

Since we were being truthful, I added, “But now that I’ve been with him...”

“You want more?”

I nodded despite my head not moving much.

When he wore only his jeans, he stood up, returning to me so he could drag one thick finger along my seam, shoving my hand aside and grazing my clit lightly before slipping lower. He pushed that finger inside me, and my muscles tightened around him, wanting to hold him there.

“You need to know something,” he said, teasing me ruthlessly.

“I’m not the only one fucking Jinx?” I said, voicing my suspicion.

His gaze swept over my face.

“I see the way you look at him,” I said, throwing his words back at him. “And the way he looks at you.”

Rule didn’t respond, nor did he stop fingering me. He was lighting me up from the inside.

“Do you have a problem with that?”

I shook my head. I honestly didn’t. Although if he asked, I wouldn’t deny that I hoped one day to watch them together. I wouldn’t make the request because it felt like a violation of the rules he was setting, but it didn’t change the fact.

“You want to watch,” he said as though he could read my mind.

I nodded. No sense denying it.

He added another finger, pushing two deep inside me. “You’re a dirty fucking girl, aren’t you?”

I whimpered. “You have no idea.”

I wasn't sure what the appeal was about their being together, but something told me it would be an experience I would never forget. I'd fantasized about it briefly when I first suspected it. Now that I knew for sure, I would become obsessed until I witnessed it.

"So, can I?" I prompted.

"We'll see." A smirk formed on his perfect mouth. "If you're giving me this"—he pumped his fingers inside me—"then you have to give me this, too."

I gasped when his thumb grazed my anus.

"Understood?"

I was willing to give him anything as long as he would ease the ache. "Yes."

His thumb continued to tease the delicate nerve endings of my back hole. "Have you ever been fucked here?"

"No." Until last night, until Jinx had fucked me with his thumb, no one had breached that entrance. It surprised me how good it felt, how taboo it was.

The look on his face was pure sin. I got the feeling he liked that I was an anal virgin, and he looked forward to ridding me of that pesky detail.

I looked forward to it, too.

His thumb continued to taunt my anus as he pulled his fingers out of my pussy, then put them in his mouth. "You taste so fucking good."

I wasn't sure what to say. I was mesmerized by the look on his face. The darkness that I sensed in him. I knew that he was going to show me things I hadn't even fantasized about. Things that would never be discussed in my social circles because that wasn't what stuck-up rich people discussed.

His other hand fell away. "Sit up."

Disappointed but eager, I lowered my legs and sat up on the end of the chair.

In one swift move, he turned me around, manhandling me as though I weighed nothing.

“That’s where I want you,” he said when my feet were at the top of the chair, my head angled on the downward curve of the bottom, his denim-covered cock hovering above my face.

Watching him upside down was disorienting but exciting at the same time. I licked my lips, trying to urge him to hurry.

He didn’t. He took his time pushing his jeans and underwear down his legs, freeing his cock. Rule’s big hand curled around his beautiful dick as he stepped out of his jeans and kicked them away. I watched as he cradled his balls with one hand and stroked himself with the other. When he stepped closer, I opened my mouth, wanting to taste him.

“Lick,” he instructed.

I had to lift my head to reach as he dragged his balls over my lips. I licked and savored as much as I could reach, his salty flavor going straight to my head.

He stepped back and brushed the head of his cock over my lips, painting them with pre-cum. It was the hottest thing I’d ever experienced, and I eagerly awaited his next instruction.

“I want you to suck me. Nice and easy. Like you’re making love to my dick with your mouth. Don’t you dare make me come, or I’ll stop.”

Before I could ask, “Stop what?” he pressed one knee on the chair beside my head and leaned over me. I could feel the heat of his breath on my pussy, the firmness of his hands as he spread my legs wide. I propped my feet on the headrest and bent my knees outward, giving him full access to where I needed him most.

“Suck me,” he growled, his words reverberating through my pussy.

I tilted my head to take him in my mouth, but it wasn’t easy. He was even bigger than I thought. My lips stretched so wide I thought the corners would crack as I took him as deep as possible. In this position, he had more control than I did, but he didn’t fuck my face, he let me control the movements. I

licked along his shaft, trying to learn the ridges, listening for sounds of his pleasure so I knew where to focus. Or trying to.

I used my hands, sliding them over his waist, his hips, the smooth, hard globes of his ass. Touching him was a treat in itself. He was so warm and so hard. I wanted to learn every ridge and plane of his body with my tongue.

My attention was divided because the sensation of his mouth between my legs was overwhelming, distracting me from pleasuring him.

“Keep going,” he said, nipping the inside of my thigh.

I whimpered, the pain sending a surge of pleasure through my veins.

“Ah, you like that.” He pushed one finger inside me, then nipped my leg again.

There was no denying it because my pussy contracted around his finger.

I tried rocking my hips, urging him to finger fuck me, but he was in complete control. Then he shifted, moving his supporting leg outward, giving me more room to maneuver beneath him. When I could move my head, I took him in my mouth again and fought to rival the sensations he was causing. I’d never had a man pay that much attention to me. Never had one who seemed as eager to give head as to receive.

When I began bobbing too quickly, he pulled his mouth from me.

“Slow, butterfly. Slow.”

I’d always found pet names awkward and amusing, but for some reason, I liked that he called me that. Butterflies were my spirit animal, if you will. I wasn’t sure that was his reason for calling me that, but it felt unique to me, as though he saw me as a thing of beauty that had emerged from a life in the shadows, not merely a means to an end.

I eased up, taking him as deep as I could, pushing the edge of my gag reflex more and more each time until the thick head

pressed the back of my throat. I choked and pulled back, then started all over again.

I could hear him mumbling praises as I worked him while he licked me thoroughly, fondling my clit, fucking his tongue into me. I was hanging on by a thread, but I wanted to please him. I wanted to give him what he was giving me, but I wasn't sure it was possible. Nothing had ever felt as good as his mouth and his fingers.

I was so focused I didn't realize that the world was tilting because he was rolling us. Suddenly, he was under me, his feet on the floor, his back curved with the arch of the chair. I moved my knees in tight to his body so I wouldn't fall off and returned to my task. I had the ability to use my hand, so I curled my fingers around the thick base of his beautiful cock and stroked, my fingers meeting my mouth halfway down.

"Thata girl," he groaned, pumping his hips. "Fuck yes. Suck me, Laikyn. Take my dick in your throat."

The vibrations of his words and their sinful vulgarity caused sparks to dance behind my eyelids. I was going to come, and he wouldn't be able to stop me. I tried not to grind myself on his face, but I couldn't help it. Pleasure bordered on pain because I was so close but not quite there.

Rule wrapped one arm around my hips, pulling me flush to his mouth. He sucked my clit, flicking it ruthlessly. I pulled him from my mouth and rode the waves of sensation as they racked my entire body until I was soaring higher and higher ... then free-falling into ecstasy as the electrical current moved through me, escaping through my fingers and toes.

I didn't get a chance to catch my breath before Rule had me on my back once again. I shifted so I was once again reclining in the chair, watching his tight ass as he strolled into the bathroom, returning a moment later with a condom in his hand. He didn't waste time, tearing it open with his teeth, then rolling it down his beautiful cock. When he moved over me this time, I stared into his face, wanting to see him as he stretched me.

His eyes darkened as he pushed in, sinking in slowly, my body accommodating, the muscles relaxing around his girth. I curled my leg around his hip, pressing my ankle against his ass.

“You ready?”

*To fall in love with you? No.* “Yes.”

Rule pulled out slowly, then punched his hips forward, impaling me in one violent thrust. I came, the orgasm surprising me with its intensity. His eyes glittered, and a smile curved the corner of his mouth as he began to fuck me into the chair.

He punished me with ecstasy, taking me to places I didn't know existed. I came three more times, although I wasn't sure how. As the last tremor faded, he slammed into me one final time, his body tensing as his cock pulsed. I held onto him, digging my nails into his back as I pretended time didn't stand still for those few precious moments when he was vulnerable and completely mine.

“You okay?” he whispered, pressing his face into my neck as he gasped for air.

*Not really. I'll never be the same.* “Definitely.”

As I lay there smiling beneath him, I realized I was going to have to up my game if I expected to keep up with him.

Good thing I liked a challenge.

\* \* \*

## **Jinx**

AS SOON AS I WALKED INTO THE house, I heard them. Grunts and moans echoed from upstairs, tempting me to see what they were doing.

I managed to refrain. I pretended it was my right to go upstairs and that I chose not to because I wanted to give them time alone. Truth is, I didn't know where I stood in the grand scheme of things. I knew what I wanted, but my craving for



Laikyn felt like a betrayal to Rule. Last night, he'd told her it was both of us or neither, but I knew that hadn't been for my benefit. Rule had been protecting himself. By keeping me there, he wasn't alone with her and didn't risk getting in too deep. The man pretended he didn't have feelings, but I knew better. He did. He simply didn't acknowledge them.

Until Laikyn.

Her presence was changing him.

I rubbed Waldo's head when he pressed his nose to my knee. He was hungry, if I had to guess. I patted his head and then pointed toward the kitchen, letting him lead the way. I went to work preparing his dinner, then pulled plates and silverware out of the cabinets to go with the bags of food on the counter. They were still warm, so I knew Rule had detoured after he got home.

Before I had all the cartons out of the bag, I heard footsteps on the stairs. I looked up in time to see Laikyn coming down, wearing one of Rule's T-shirts and, based on her bare legs, nothing else.

When she saw me, she smiled, and it did something to my insides.

"Hi. I didn't know you were home."

I held up one finger, then shrugged and added another.

"Only for a couple of minutes?" she said, translating.

I nodded, then pointed to the food.

"Yes, I'm starving. But first..."

I was about to pass her a plate, but Laikyn stepped between me and the center island, her body pressing against me.

"I'm glad you're home."

Her lips pressed to mine, and I was instantly lost. No one had ever greeted me like that before, and I couldn't pretend I didn't like it.

Gripping her ass with one hand and the back of her head with the other, I angled my mouth over hers and kissed her like the starving man I was. Her soft moan tickled my tongue and made my dick kick hard in my jeans. When we surfaced for air, I felt a shift in the air and realized Rule was strolling toward us.

Instantly, I felt guilty because I'd taken what Laikyn freely offered, but I hadn't thought about him before I kissed her back.

Fuck.

"He gave me permission to ravish you."

I looked at Rule, my eyebrows lifting skyward.

He shrugged as though it was no big deal, his tone gruff when he said, "And she gave me permission to fuck you."

That caught me by surprise and had me stepping back from Laikyn. I frowned. Should I have been a part of this conversation? It seemed to have been centered around me, so perhaps I should've had a say in the matter.

"Unless you have objections," Laikyn tacked on, clearly seeing my confusion. "I only wanted clarification. I did marry him, yet he let me fuck you. I wanted to understand the playing field."

Yeah, that would be good for me to know, too.

Laikyn's expression sobered. "Clearly, I approached this the wrong way. I'm sorry. I should've—"

My frustration had no bearing on my need for her. And though I would certainly be tackling the conversation at a later time, for the moment, I was content to kiss her because I'd spent all fucking day thinking about her, wanting to see her, to touch her, to feel her.

"Oh!" Laikyn squealed when I jerked her to me and crushed my mouth to hers.

Her arms went around my neck, her cool fingers teasing my skin, and this time I caressed her ass with both hands

beneath her shirt so I could feel the smooth, rounded globes against my palms.

“While you two do that, I’m gonna eat,” Rule said, and I didn’t miss the edge in his tone.

The reference to food made my stomach growl in response and caused Laikyn to laugh as she pulled her mouth from mine.

“Perhaps we should eat first and play later.”

I would prefer to eat while playing, but I nodded in agreement. I was hungry, and honestly, I was fucking exhausted. We’d stayed up all night working on her studio, and although I’d caught a two-hour nap on the couch in Rule’s office, it wasn’t enough. I needed to sleep for a solid eight before I would feel like my normal self again.

“He won’t get his until you get yours,” Rule told Laikyn. “But get all you want because he’ll eat the rest.”

Laikyn’s eyebrows lowered as she backed up. “Is that your thing or what? That’s the second time someone’s told me that.”

I felt Rule’s eyes on me as he walked outside and took a seat on one of the sofas. He cocked an eyebrow, so I nodded, permitting him to tell the story so I didn’t have to drag it out over text.

“His parents were addicts,” Rule explained while Laikyn spooned food onto her plate. “When he could stay with his grandmother, he had enough food. When he couldn’t, he was lucky to get scraps. When his grandmother died, he was left to fend for himself.”

“When did she die?” Laikyn asked, directing the question at me.

Rule answered for me. “When he was ten. He went into foster care when he was eleven. That’s how we met.”

“This is plenty for me,” Laikyn said, then gestured to the remaining food. “Eat. You’ll need your strength.”

I shook my head and smiled as I dumped the remaining food on the last plate. I grabbed a fork and joined them on the

patio.

“You were in a group home?”

I looked at Rule.

“I told her my story,” he admitted. “And yes. He was thirteen when he came to the group home I was in. I was sixteen.”

“Did you go to the same school?”

Rule shook his head. “I graduated high school when I was fifteen, so no.”

“Oh, right. You’re ridiculously smart.” She laughed.

When Laikyn looked at me, I pointed to Rule, turned two fingers toward my eyes, and then pointed to my chest.

“He kept an eye on you?”

I had to admit, it thrilled me that Laikyn could read me so easily. The fact that I didn’t talk, rather than couldn’t, had the ability to put people off. When I was a kid, my parents would beat me if I didn’t use my words. They never understood that my anxiety made it impossible. As I got older, the anxiety eased up, but I attributed that to having a consistent routine and people who didn’t push me to do shit I didn’t want to do. It helped that Rule made me feel safe. Even now, when I was capable of holding my own against anyone, I knew he wouldn’t leave me to fend for myself. And while I didn’t suffer anxiety attacks nearly as much, I couldn’t speak. My brain simply wouldn’t direct my voice to work.

Laikyn glanced between us. “Since we’re tackling difficult subjects, when did you two start fucking?”

Thank God I wasn’t taking a bite. However, I did choke on nothing.

“Oh, sorry. Should I have worded it differently? Maybe you refer to it as making love?”

Rule snorted. “No filter.”

“Who me?” Laikyn grinned. “No, definitely no filter. So? When?”

“Has anyone told you you ask too many questions?”

“Many times,” she answered simply. “Your turn. When?”

Rule shook his head, but I could tell he was grinning. I was grateful Laikyn wasn't expecting me to answer because I wasn't sure this was a subject I cared to venture into. Although she seemed open to the idea, and I detected no judgment, it wasn't something I was necessarily comfortable discussing. However, the question did trigger the memory.

*“Hey? You good?” Rule asked when he walked into the motel room.*

*I glanced up at him from where I sat on one of the queen beds. We'd been on the road for three days, taking our time to get from Oklahoma to California. Rule wanted the sightseeing route, claiming it had been far too long since he'd been able to breathe fresh air without someone telling him how long he could do it.*

*Since I was simply along for the ride, I didn't care if it took a year to get there. I had no plans. I was here to pay Rule back for saving my life. I didn't know how exactly I would do that, but I figured he would tell me at some point.*

*“Did you eat?”*

*I nodded.*

*“You wanna grab a drink?”*

*I didn't respond because I didn't care one way or the other. If he wanted to head for the bar, I would gladly go with him.*

*“Yeah. Me neither.”*

*I grinned. I found it amusing that he filled in my answers for me when he wanted to.*

*Rule flopped down on the other queen bed and exhaled heavily, staring at the ceiling. “Can I ask you something?”*

*When his eyes cut to my face, I nodded.*

*“Have you ever been with a man?”*

*I shook my head.*

*“Are you opposed to it?”*

*I cocked an eyebrow, curious where he was going with this.*

*Rule’s grin was slow and wicked. “You’re gonna make me say it, aren’t you?”*

*I held his gaze and waited.*

*“I wanna fuck you, Jinx. You have a problem with that?”*

*I shook my head. I wasn’t opposed to it. In fact, I’d been hoping.*

That night, I gave myself to Rule. And whether he knew it or not, I’d been his ever since.

“Okay, fine,” Laikyn huffed. “You win. I won’t ask about your sex lives. Clearly, you’re both sensitive.”

Rule barked a laugh. “Keep it up, butterfly. I’ll put you over my knee.”

“Ooh. I might like that.” Laikyn looked at me, her eyes imploring me to believe her. “I really might.”

If I thought for a minute life would be dull with Laikyn around, I was delusional. And I got the feeling I’d only seen a glimpse.

## Rule

“ALL RIGHT. WHAT DO YOU SAY WE change the subject,” I told Laikyn.

She huffed. “Fine. I don’t want to offend your delicate sensibilities, and you’re both far too prude to talk about sex anyway.”

I snorted and looked at Jinx. I wasn’t sure what was going through his head, but he was clearly amused. That hadn’t been the case when I walked in on him and Laikyn in the kitchen a short time ago. If I were to wager a guess, I would’ve said he was a bit taken aback by the woman. I knew the feeling. When she dug her claws into something, she did not let go. After all, look at the lengths she went to push me to my breaking point. She knew I wanted her, and she pulled out all the stops to get me to give in.

She was something else.

“What exactly do you do all day?” she set her plate aside and reached for her water glass. “I mean at work.”

“Whatever needs to be done.”

“So you’re like on call or something?”

“Yes.”

“And when someone calls, you come running?”

“Yes.”

“From what I’ve read online, you’re the only person the FBI’s looking into. Do they know about your ... employees?”

“They know what I let them know.”

Laikyn chewed on her lip for a moment. “And your employees ... do they do whatever you tell them?” She waved

her hand at Jinx. “Or are they the brains behind the operation?”

I smirked. “We all do what’s necessary to get shit done. No, they don’t sit behind a desk all day. Unless that’s the job.”

She was sitting cross-legged on one sofa, wearing nothing but my T-shirt, and since I was sitting across from her, I had the perfect view between her legs. Of course, the little minx knew that, and I got the feeling she was torturing me on purpose.

“Is it safe to talk about ... stuff here?” Laikyn peered around as though seeking someone lurking in the bushes.

“Yes.”

She traded her glass for her plate once more. “You don’t worry someone will overhear?”

“No.” I had security measures in place for that, but I didn’t bother telling her that.

Her expression sobered for a minute. “What happens if you get caught?”

I avoided looking at Jinx when I answered. “Then I get caught.”

“And everyone else?”

I wasn’t sure what she wanted me to say.

“Will you take the fall for *everything*?”

“They wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for me, Laikyn. I see no reason for them to go down, too.”

I could tell she didn’t like that answer, but that was the way it worked. Back when I went to prison for beating the shit out of those two kids who’d nearly killed Jinx, I realized that it didn’t matter what I said. The prosecutor insisted I was the one responsible for hitting Jinx with that pipe and then beating the other two because they’d witnessed it. If they’d actually bothered to look, they wouldn’t have found my prints on that pipe. I never touched it. But I took the blame without



argument because I *was* responsible for my part. The rest didn't matter.

“You know it was on the news, right?”

It took a moment to realize Laikyn was changing the subject.

She poked at her food. “A famous director and his wife were found dead at their Hollywood Hills home. Murder-suicide. Apparently, at least according to the media, they liked to party. Cops found drugs.”

It sounded like she was quoting right from the newscast.

“I heard that, yes.” My team was good at monitoring all media outlets for information. Not to mention, Rhyan was the best at staging a scene. Her attention to detail was unparalleled.

Laikyn took a bite and talked around the food. “Sad. They were married.”

“What was sad about it?”

“That they were looking outside the marriage for ... whatever they were doing,” she said without hesitation.

“Isn't that technically what we're doing?” I asked, keeping my expression bland as I peered at Jinx.

Laikyn barked a laugh, then fell into a fit of giggles. “And he tells jokes!”

I shook my head and grinned as I continued to eat, pondering what she said about looking outside the marriage. In Hollywood, deception and greed were par for the course. At least when it came to people with more money than sense. That was the first thing I learned when I moved here. They took what they wanted and didn't give a shit about who they hurt.

“What about you, Laikyn? Are you dating anyone?”

She chuckled, curling her knees up and rolling onto her side as she looked between me and Jinx. “A little odd to be asking that *now*, don't you think?”

I shrugged.

“But, no. I *was*. The night it all happened, I went to a party with this guy. His name’s Wes. We’d been dating for a couple of months. Mostly he took me hiking and shit. He was super health conscious. Said success was about more than the mind. He believed the body had to be in perfect shape for the mind to focus accurately. I guess I was his pet project.”

“What?” I didn’t understand.

“I think he was trying to get me in shape.”

I reached for my glass. “You’re perfect as it is. What the fuck would he want to change?”

Laikyn’s eyes widened, and I realized I’d said the words aloud. And there’d been a hint of vehemence behind them. I didn’t like the idea of anyone trying to change this woman. She was fucking perfect exactly as she was.

“Thank you. I think.” She smiled and relaxed. “He would try to tickle me and tell me I could stand to lose some belly fat. I mean, for him, it wasn’t enough to be skinny.”

I glanced at Jinx, noticing the way his jaw clenched. I was in agreement. The guy was a douche. Any man lucky enough to be in her company should’ve been riveted by her beauty, not coming up with ways to change her.

“What happened to him?”

“I broke it off when he took his drunk ex-girlfriend home that night.”

“You caught him cheating?”

She laughed. “No. Didn’t have to. He was pretty upfront about his feelings based on the way he drooled around her. She was the one who invited us to the party. He claims she’s now his best friend. He texted the next day like nothing had happened. I told him it was better this way.”

She didn’t seem fazed by the fact a guy she was dating had been with another woman. I figured it wasn’t the time to tell her that the guy’s breakup with his girl was merely a ruse. Wes Carver had been in a serious relationship with Chastity Moore.

That had remained the case even after Wes started dating Laikyn. I knew because Red Wally had been monitoring the situation after Monica set Laikyn up with guy #2. At that point, Jinx and I figured Monica had learned of the stipulations of the trust, and her plan was to marry her daughter off.

“How’d you meet him?” I asked.

“My mother introduced us. He’s the son of her plastic surgeon.”

“Did you like him?”

“Not really, no. I mean, he was nice. And by that, I mean he was simple. I didn’t have to think too hard to be around him.” Laikyn shrugged. “I was only trying to fuck him, anyway. What about you two? Any girlfriends going to come around trying to get you back?”

“Never had one.”

Her eyebrows slowly rose toward her hairline. “Never?”

“No.”

“But you’ve dated.”

She knew I had because I told her about my *first* first date when we went to dinner the other night. Since it wasn’t a question, I didn’t respond, waiting for her next question. I didn’t have to wait long.

“You?” she asked Jinx directly.

He shook his head.

“Have you ever been in love?”

Jinx’s gaze dropped to his plate as he answered with another shake of his head.

When Laikyn looked at me, I said, “No.”

“Ever loved anyone *at all*?”

I could tell she was trying to get to the root of whatever problem she thought I had. It would’ve been easy to tell her that I’d loved someone once, but that was a mistake I didn’t intend to make again. I’d wrongly believed I could find a

home, a place where I belonged, perhaps parents who wanted me. After the fourth foster home, I realized that was an impossibility, although, at the time, I thought I was fitting in, that they were welcoming me with open arms. That was until I overheard the foster mother telling my social worker I was unlovable.

I told Laikyn none of those things because they didn't matter. I didn't live my life intending to find someone to love me. It wasn't going to happen, so why bother?

"No," I said simply, then turned my full attention to finishing my food.

"Want to go for a swim when we're done?" Laikyn prompted, glancing between the two of us.

"Sure."

Clearly, she was changing the subject for my benefit. I couldn't help wondering how often she'd had to do that in her life. Switch things up because her curiosity went too far. I liked that she asked questions. I liked that she wanted to know things about people. I spent so much time around people who kept their personal details to themselves. Rhyan was the only one who talked about her past, her present, even her future. Sometimes to the point of too much information, but she was the only one comfortable talking about personal shit.

As for Jinx. I knew his story because his story had collided with mine long ago. We didn't classify whatever this was, nor did we feel the need to. It simply was.

Twenty minutes later, after I'd taken our empty dishes to the kitchen, I returned to the patio to find Laikyn wading into the swimming pool. She was naked, every curve outlined by the night and backlit by the lights in the pool. I had never seen a more stunning creature in my life.

But it wasn't only her physical beauty that ensnared me. I liked her outlook on life. For whatever reason, we had a connection. Although her mother had raised her, I got the sense that Laikyn had abandonment issues that mirrored my

own. Although she'd never had to worry about shelter or food, Laikyn had looked after herself because her mother's attention rarely strayed beyond her own needs.

I couldn't help wondering if things would've been different if Laikyn had known who her father was. Based on what I knew of Jeremiah Montgomery, he'd had a single-minded focus, building an empire that would outdo anything before it. He'd been childless until very late in life when he met Katherine Wybler, a twenty-one-year-old woman with a single-minded focus of her own. Jeremiah had been seventy-one when he got her pregnant. They had one son, Knox, but Jeremiah never married Kitty, as she was known by her friends.

Thirteen years later, at eighty-four, Jeremiah had an affair with a vibrant eighteen-year-old named Monica Quinn, an up-and-coming actress looking to make a name for herself. I would never understand the appeal of an age gap quite that drastic, but clearly, it had worked for Jeremiah, and I wasn't referring to his virility, although, *goddamn*.

However, from what I could tell, Monica hadn't fought for his attention. That or Jeremiah had managed to keep it all under wraps. He'd certainly had the sort of money that made improprieties such as that one go away. It wasn't as difficult as it sounded. I'd played a hand in hushing a few myself over the years.

“Are you two going to join me?”

Realizing I was staring at Laikyn as she floated in the pool, I shoved the thoughts away. I would reveal those details to Laikyn soon because she deserved to know. But until I had all the pieces in place, it would only cause more questions. Questions I couldn't answer yet.

Jinx pushed to his feet and stripped his shirt over his head, revealing a body that should've been on the cover of a fucking magazine. He certainly hadn't looked like that back in Purgatory. The transformation took place while I was in prison because when I saw him the day of my release, he'd buffed up and inked up in equal measure. The tattoo work had continued

over the years, and now I wasn't sure there was much space left for him to decorate.

Laikyn's eyes locked on Jinx as he moved toward her. I found it interesting that she didn't hide her fascination with his body the same way she didn't hide her intrigue for mine, something I noticed when I stripped off my jeans and waded into the water, watching Laikyn as she watched me.

She didn't move closer when we joined her. I could tell she wanted us. She didn't try to hide that, but she wasn't clingy or aggressive. Part of me wished she was, but I shoved that part down deep, reminding it that attachments weren't allowed. They always backfired, even when I wasn't harboring secrets that were going to change lives.

Jinx went to the corner and leaned against the side, his arms spread wide as he watched her with unabashed interest. I joined him, taking a seat on the concrete bench that lined the corner.

We remained like that for a few minutes, the two of us watching her. She seemed content with the silence that settled around us, and I was, too. I'd long ago gotten used to it, having spent a good amount of my adult life with Jinx. His silence never bothered me. When he needed to tell me something, he would find a way to do it.

Like now, as he brushed his fingers on the back of my head.

I glanced up at him. His eyes were hooded, his jaw tense. I knew without looking that his cock was hard. Mine was, too. Just looking at Laikyn did that to me.

His hand curled more firmly on my head, nudging me toward where he wanted me. Our position cast us in shadow but highlighted enough for Laikyn to see me when I turned toward him, gripping Jinx's cock and stroking.

Her mouth fell open, and she stopped moving.

"She's fascinated with the idea of us together," I told Jinx, keeping my voice low enough she couldn't hear. "You want her to watch, don't you?"

He nodded, gripping me by the hair and tilting my head toward his cock. That was one thing I liked about Jinx. He wasn't subtle with his needs. When he wanted me, he ensured I knew it. I, on the other hand, tended to act out to get his attention. It wasn't intentional. At least it hadn't been in the beginning. Now, I did it because I liked his aggressive response when I did. I needed that from him, and he knew it. It had taken a while to get him around to my way of thinking, but the moment he did, everything had changed between us.

With my fist around the base of his shaft, I guided him into my mouth. I was aware of Laikyn the entire time, the way she moved closer, but not too close. She didn't say a word, but her breaths became choppy.

Jinx snapped his fingers to get her attention, and the next thing I knew, she was approaching, her hand moving over my arm, then my back.

I reached for her, wanting to feel all that smooth, silky skin wrapped around me. I curled my arm around her hip and jerked her to me. She straddled my thigh and put her arm over my shoulders, leaning closer to Jinx's cock, which was pumping past my lips.

"God, that's so fucking hot," she whispered, her palm sliding over Jinx's washboard stomach.

He grabbed her wrist and guided her hand to his cock, forcing mine away so she could take over stroking while I continued to suck him.

"Do I get a taste?"

I let Jinx maintain control, and when he guided her head down, I released him from my lips. I sat up, watching as Laikyn licked the head of his cock. Jinx's stomach muscles flexed as he pumped his hips, helping her along. Laikyn didn't hurry, savoring him until he was fisting her hair and pulling her back.

"Your turn," she told me, then peered up at Jinx. "I want you to come in his mouth."

As Jinx was known to do, he became aggressive, grabbing my hair, shoving his cock in my mouth. He controlled the movement, the pace. I sucked him, intimately aware that Laikyn was breathing harder as she observed.

Her hand moved over Jinx's stomach as though she wanted to be included but not intrude.

Jinx grunted, and I knew he was close. I could feel the pulse of his cock against my lips, the tension in his body as he rocked into me. I took a deep breath through my nose, allowing him to drive deep into my throat. He groaned, the sound emanating in his chest, his hand loosening on my hair as he came with a jerk of his hips.

I barely had a chance to sit up before Laikyn's mouth was on mine. She thrust her tongue past my lips as though she was seeking his essence. I kissed her, barely managing to hold her at bay when she turned, straddling both of my legs and sliding her arms around my neck. It wasn't easy to resist when my cock was settled between the juncture of her thighs. One adjustment, and I would be buried to the hilt.

"We aren't fucking," I warned her, pulling my mouth from hers.

She smiled, not at all fazed that I slowed things down. "Do you need more time to recover? I get it. You're old...er." She giggled. "It takes longer."

I pressed my hips forward, my cock rubbing along the slit of her pussy. "Does that feel like I need time to recover?"

I didn't tell her that my dick hadn't been soft for a moment since I met her.

"Mmm." She rocked her hips, rubbing herself on my shaft.

I tightened my hold on her. "Can you get yourself off like that?"

"Probably."

"Do it."

"What if I said I'd prefer your big dick inside me?"



“No condom.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Do we need one? I’m on birth control.” She lifted her arm and gestured toward the underside. “Implant. Good for three years.”

I already knew about the birth control. I knew far more about Laikyn Quinn than she could even imagine. More than she would probably approve of. The details were listed in page after page of background and history we’d unearthed about her after I learned what her mother had done.

And while I knew there was no risk of pregnancy if we were to go bareback right now, that was only part of it. It was one thing to show her my STD test results, or even Jinx’s (which were both negative the last time we took them), but I couldn’t tell Laikyn that I knew she’d been tested four months ago after screwing one of those fuck-ups her mother set her up with and that the test had returned clean. I wasn’t supposed to have that information. Plus, I needed to use the situation to my advantage.

“Until we’re all three tested, we use condoms.”

She didn’t sound offended, merely curious, when she said, “You don’t trust me?”

“Do you trust *me*?” I countered.

“Yes.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“Do you have a disease?”

“No. But how could you possibly know that?”

“Because I just asked, and you’re the one who said you would never lie to me.”

I had said that.

Obviously, she wasn’t going to let this go, so I tried to shut it down. “It’s the smart thing to do.”

“I’ve never had sex without protection,” she said defensively.

Nor had I. Except for with Jinx, but I didn't admit that.

"Fine," she hissed, grinding herself along the ridge of my dick. "We'll get tested tomorrow." She looked up at Jinx. "All three of us."

She gasped when I pressed on her hips, holding her against my cock while she bounced gently, rubbing her clit furiously along my shaft. If she questioned how this was different from actual penetration when it came to transferring bodily fluids, she didn't voice it. Truth is, if it weren't futile that I get a blood sample for the DNA test, I would've been fucking her bare right now. My resistance was fucking shit when it came to her.

Laikyn wrapped her arms around me and buried her face in my neck, her soft moans close to my ear. I held her tighter, angling her hips, helping her along. It took tremendous restraint not to drive my cock inside her. I wanted to feel her again, and I knew I shouldn't. I was forming an attachment, and it was going to backfire in my face.

"Come for me, beautiful butterfly," I whispered, pretending for a brief moment that an attachment to this woman wouldn't be the worst form of torture when it came to an end.

Laikyn gasped and shuddered in my arms. A moment passed before she relaxed, then eased back, grinning like a cat.

She stood and brushed her hair back from her face.

"Good night, boys," she said sweetly, leaning forward and kissing Jinx on the lips before turning toward the house.

I found the loss of her disappointing, but it was exactly what I would've done if Laikyn had been any other woman. For some reason, she was abiding by the rules—don't confuse sex for love—while I was lingering dangerously close to uncharted territory.

\* \* \*

## **Jinx**

I WATCHED LAIKYN WALK AWAY. WATCHED THE sway of her sexy ass as she tiptoed quickly toward the house, probably hoping to ward off the chill.

When I turned back, I found Rule standing, his gaze pinned on me.

“She might be off limits for the night,” he said gruffly, leaning closer. “But you’re not.”

I held his stare, my cock swelling with renewed interest. He stepped closer, pressing his hips to mine, his erection sliding against mine.

“You’ve got two choices,” he said, his voice low as his hips began to rock, his cock sliding against mine. “Shower or bed.”

I held up two fingers, letting him know I’d take the second option. It had been a while since Rule fucked me in a bed. Our encounters were generally spontaneous and occurred in all sorts of places, here and at the office. I would never admit it, but while I enjoyed the spontaneity, I really liked it when he slowed things down. It was rare.

“Let’s go,” he said, turning away.

I stared after him, admiring every glorious inch as he prowled toward the house. The man was unlike any I’d ever met. From the first day I met him, I knew he was different. And I wasn’t referring to his intellect or his slightly warped sense of morality. Back then, Rule looked out for only one person. Himself. Or at least that was the impression I got. It wasn’t long before I’d become someone he looked after as well. I’d never asked him to, but he took it upon himself.

That was what Rule did. It was how we ended up being friends with Rhyon. It was also how we met the twins. People gravitated toward Rule, and if you were one of the lucky ones he allowed into his orbit, you could remain there as long as you were loyal. Rule never asked for anything and pretended he had nothing to give back. He was wrong, but he would never see it, even if it was spelled out for him.

I followed Rule into the house, then headed up to his bedroom while he closed everything down and locked it up. I didn't see Waldo, so I assumed he had followed Laikyn to her room. He was one lucky dog; I could say that much. He was the only one of us who had the pleasure of sleeping in the same bed as her, and he didn't even realize how fucking lucky he was.

In Rule's room, I retrieved the lube from the bathroom drawer and returned as he walked in. He didn't shut the door, which intrigued me. There was a good chance Laikyn would hear us. Was that what he wanted? For her to know that he was capable of turning her down but that he would fuck me?

I wasn't sure what to make of this situation. Earlier, when Rule had come into the kitchen to find Laikyn kissing me, I could've sworn he was bothered by it. Then in the pool, he seemed content to suck my dick while she watched. I'd been testing the waters then, trying to figure out the rules because he wasn't forthcoming with them. The only thing I knew for sure was that something had changed last night after we fucked her in the shower. He was no longer holding back.

Rule didn't hide his approval as his gaze raked over me. I'd never questioned whether I turned him on. I knew I did. From that first night he fucked me in the motel room, I'd felt the sizzle of our mutual attraction. It was powerful enough to have gotten us this far. Through all the years we'd been together, it was the one thing I could rely on.

He approached slowly, his eyes sliding up to my face. "I watched you and her last night."

I knew he did. I'd felt his gaze lingering when I was fucking her. It had added an intensity I hadn't anticipated.

"I couldn't look away."

Rule stopped directly in front of me. I noticed how his shoulders tensed and the cords in his neck stood out. He was holding himself back.

"I wanted to fuck you then," he admitted, taking one more step until there was only a breath between us. "I wanted to

drive my cock in your ass while you fucked her.”

My skin heated at the image his words painted.

His voice dropped an octave. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

I held my ground when he pressed his chest to mine, exerting his dominance.

“I wasn’t supposed to give in.”

But he had, and clearly, he wasn’t happy about that.

“You didn’t stop me.”

Ah. So that was what he’d expected me to do? To stop him from taking what he so obviously wanted. I couldn’t ask him why he thought I was capable of doing that when I’d never been able to stop him from doing anything before.

His voice was barely more than a rough growl. “You were supposed to stop me, Jinx.”

I took control, grabbing his head and crushing my mouth to his. I knew what he needed, and I would gladly provide an outlet. I needed it the same as he did. Rule gave me something no one else ever had. He gave me safety and security even though he swore he didn’t have it to offer.

Rule’s kiss was hard, rough. We fought for dominance for a moment before I surrendered, allowing him to shove me to the bed. He straddled my thighs, grinding his cock against mine as our tongues thrashed, hands grabbing for purchase. We were rough, but it was what we both needed. I’d never been able to tell him how I felt, so I had settled for showing him. Matching him kiss for kiss was my way of proving I was worthy of what he was unwilling to give. His trust, his love. I would never hurt this man, and he knew that. Deep in his soul, I knew he did. That was how we’d come this far. Twenty years was a long time, but I wanted twenty more and twenty after that.

I would never tell him, but I would show him.

Rule planted a hand in the center of my chest and held me to the bed as he ripped his mouth from mine. I stared up at

him, dragging air into my lungs in ragged pants while he reached for the lubricant. He watched me as he slicked his cock, and his eyes never strayed, even when he repositioned so my legs were free.

I knew what he wanted, and I didn't hesitate, spreading my legs, welcoming him. He inched forward on his knees, one hand pressed to my shin, forcing my leg back as he used the other to guide his cock into my hole. I relaxed, allowing him entry because it was exactly where I needed him.

"Fuck," Rule hissed, his head falling back on his shoulders as he pushed his hips forward, his cock sliding in deep.

I welcomed the initial discomfort because it was a reminder that he was still mine. I would gladly share him with Laikyn, but on some level, we would always have this. Just us.

Rule leaned forward, planting his hands on both sides of my head, rocking his hips, fucking me slow and deep.

"I want her," he said, staring into my eyes. "I want her with every fucking breath I take."

I gripped his hips, guiding him to a pace that worked for both of us.

"I've only ever wanted one person," he whispered.

Me. I was the only person he'd accepted fully into his life. But he'd never admitted it before. Never told me that he wanted more than what we had. He wouldn't. I wasn't disillusioned. He was overwhelmed at the moment, confused by his feelings for Laikyn. It was causing him to see things from a different perspective. Once he worked that out in his head, he would go back to insisting the only thing he wanted was nothing. From anyone.

I knew better.

Grabbing the back of his neck, I pulled him down, fusing my mouth to his. Giving him the distraction he needed so he could allow himself to feel, if only for a few minutes. He fucked me for the longest time, slow, deep strokes. And as he pulled himself together, his pace quickened, as did the storm brewing inside me. It wasn't long before he pulled his mouth

from mine and rammed into me, hard and deep. Finesse took a backseat to assuaging the deep-seated lust that continued to pulse.

“Come for me, Jinx,” Rule hissed.

I grabbed my cock and jerked roughly, timing my strokes with the jarring of his thrusts until I was right there.

“Ah, fuck,” he growled, his hips jerking as he tried to hold on.

I waited until he met my gaze, and I let go, dropping my head back and closing my eyes as the tension broke and ecstasy flooded my system.

“Oh, God, yes!” Rule rammed into me one final time and came with a barely restrained roar.

\* \* \*

## Rule

THE NEXT MORNING, I LINGERED AROUND THE house longer than usual. Long enough to have breakfast with Laikyn and Jinx before we took her to the clinic for the blood test. I found it interesting the way she chatted away as though there was nothing unusual about getting tested for STDs first thing on a Monday morning. Never mind the fact she was with two men she was currently intimate with.

Nothing seemed to faze this woman.

The actual testing was uneventful. We waited our turn, then waited some more for everyone to finish. Afterward, Jinx headed for the office while I dropped Laikyn off at the house and told her to be good before going to work. All morning, Laikyn had acted as though nothing was different between us. Just three people enjoying the benefits of the situation we found ourselves in. I wanted to do the same, but my objectives made that impossible.

When I arrived at the office, Willy and Red Wally were standing in Rhyan’s office.

“Wow. Did you sleep in this morning, boss?” she called out as I stopped at her office door.

I ignored her razzing. “You should be able to get a blood sample for the DNA test.”

She stared at me, coffee cup—this one read: SOME PEOPLE JUST NEED A HIGH-FIVE. TO THE FACE. WITH A CHAIR.— to her mouth, clearly confused by my response.

“I took Laikyn to the clinic this morning. STD test.”

“Ah. That’s creative.”

More so because I’d let Laikyn believe it was her idea. For her, it allowed us to have sex without worry. For me, it provided what I needed to prove who her father was. And because we already had something to compare the results to, it was only a matter of time before her paternity was settled.

“I need you to get it done,” I told Rhyan. “Soon.”

“Got it.” She stood up. “I’ll take Red Wally with me. He always proves to be a good distraction.”

She was talking about the office staff at the clinic. And she was right. Red Wally had a personality as bright and distracting as his red hair. People were drawn to him. They trusted him, which was important considering his line of work.

But the truth was, I didn’t care how Rhyan got the sample. As long as she did. Although we were working on a specific timeline, I wanted everything in place by the time the ninety days were up. Something told me that it wasn’t going to be nearly as easy to walk away from Laikyn as I’d anticipated it would be.



## Laikyn

I STOOD IN RULE'S BATHROOM, STARING AT myself in the mirror as I toweled the water from my hair.

It had been ten days since we'd gone to the clinic to get the blood test to determine whether we had sex ever again. I mean, I knew these things took time, but seriously. The past ten days had felt like ten freaking years.

Even before I opened the letter that the postal carrier had delivered to the house this afternoon, I'd known what the results would be. I was clean because I had results from a test taken *after* the last guy I had sex with. Plus, I hadn't been lying when I told Rule I'd never had sex without protection. It was a hard and fast rule that I lived by, and something told me Rule and Jinx were sticklers for protection, too. I trusted them, even though Rule said I shouldn't.

And now that I had the indisputable proof, it was time for me to experience sex without the barrier of latex for the first time. To do that, I had to kick this thing between us into high gear.

I'd resorted to using Rule's shower because the water pressure was better. At least, that was what I told him. Truth is, I liked using his things. Mostly because I could tell he wasn't sure how to react to it. Rule had the ability to shrug off almost anything except for me. He wasn't sure how to handle me. Because of that, I'd taken to tormenting him as much as possible.

Well, because of that and because I was spending so much time alone. At first, it was fun. Not so much anymore. I mean, sure, it was nice to have Waldo around. Because of him, I wasn't going completely out of my mind, but I was lonely despite my one-sided conversations with him. Not to mention

sexually frustrated, thanks to Jinx and Rule and their ridiculous sex hiatus until the results came in. When I told Rule that condoms were still an option, he'd shut me down, telling me it would be good for me to learn patience. Yeah, right.

Since I wasn't allowed to jump them whenever I wanted, I had plenty of time to devise ways to torture both of them.

It wasn't hard. Certainly not now that Rule had given me a way to contact him when he wasn't home. Last night, he'd given me a burner phone and told me to use it only to contact him, no one else. If I wanted to text Jinx, I needed to use my cell phone. Something about security and encryption and whatnot. I was disappointed when I realized the burner phone didn't have a camera because it meant I couldn't send him lewd photographs. However, there was a texting capability, so I was working with what I had.

**—We got the test results.  
We're all clean. You should  
come home and fuck me.**

I honestly wasn't expecting a response, so I was surprised when half an hour later, a text message came through.

**—I'll be home in ten minutes. I want you  
naked, on the couch, using your vibrator to  
tease yourself.**

A slow smile crept on my lips. "Holy shit."

**—Do not come. If you do, I'm gonna turn  
your perfect little ass red.**

I probably shouldn't have been turned on by the threat (or pleased that he called my ass *perfect* and *little*), but the mere thought of Rule spanking me made my blood run hotter. I'd tried in the past to compel some of my fuck buddies to venture to the kinky side, but either they weren't interested, or they needed me to spell out what I was talking about. When you took the spontaneity out of kink, you ended up with bad dialogue and boredom. And the easiest way to dampen arousal

was to hear a guy make a command with a question mark at the end.

Since I was still naked, I merely had to drop the towel, which I did, leaving it on the floor of Rule's bathroom. If he was bothered by my deliberate messiness, he hadn't said anything yet. I figured that time was coming because I was even annoyed by it, and I was responsible.

I stopped in my bedroom and retrieved my vibrator from the nightstand. I hadn't replaced the batteries yet, but I'd taken them in the event I needed them. Good thing, too. I quickly changed them out, then went to the living room and flopped down on the sofa.

Waldo came over, sniffing as though he wasn't sure what was going on.

I pointed toward his dog bed in the corner. "No. You get to go sleep on your bed this time."

He gave a little doggy pout, then turned and sauntered over to the big fluffy bed near the back door. He flopped down with a huff.

Pretending the dog wasn't ogling me, I got situated. It took a few tries to get to a position I was comfortable in, one that I thought would be appealing to Rule when he got home. Turned out that seducing with words was much easier than trying to put on a show. I was uncomfortable with my nakedness, but my lust was significantly more potent than my modesty. At least for the moment.

I honestly didn't expect playing with myself to arouse me. I usually required something to stimulate me mentally—erotic short stories, porn, or a damn good fantasy. Going from zero to sixty had never been my thing. Not until Rule and Jinx, anyway.

It only took a few minutes with the vibrator and my dirty thoughts of them before I was wet enough that I would no doubt leave a spot on the sofa. Even that made me hot. Especially when I thought about Rule's response when he noticed I'd sullied his sofa because I was wet for him.

When the garage door opened, I forced myself to relax, waiting for him to appear. My eyes were glued on the hall he would come from, and the moment I saw him, I felt a jolt like I always did.

I'd been attracted to plenty of men before, but never one as devastatingly dark as Rule. I wondered if that feeling would ever go away. If I would one day be so used to seeing him that I didn't notice how hot he was. I decided I wouldn't because I would never have the chance. I still didn't know what Rule was up to or why he'd insisted on marrying me, but I knew it was going to come to an end. It obviously wasn't serious since he was letting me fuck Jinx, too. No, I got the feeling Rule was motivated by something, and one day, either he would tell me, or I would find out on my own. For the moment, though, I was enjoying this. It felt like a brief reprieve from my humdrum life, and I wouldn't lie and pretend I wasn't having a good time.

“Stay,” he told Waldo as he moved toward me.

With his hands tucked in his pocket, Rule leisurely strolled around to the ottoman that acted as more seating, his gaze hot as it raked over every inch of me. My heart rate kicked up, and my respiratory system went on the fritz as I let the sensation of the vibrator mixed with the heat from his gaze work me closer to orgasm.

“Did you come?”

I shook my head because I couldn't form words.

“Good girl.”

He sat across from me, resting his elbows on his knees as he leaned toward me, his gaze locked on my face. “You've got a greedy little pussy, baby.”

I nodded because it was true. My pussy ached for his cock. It didn't matter if I was freshly fucked and recovering from a mind-altering orgasm, I still wanted him. Although I found myself drawn to this man in a way I'd never been drawn to anyone else, I only gave myself permission to want him. I wouldn't cross the line, wouldn't confuse sex for love, but I

could give in to my baser urges. There was no reason we couldn't seek the pleasure the other offered since our circumstances allowed for it.

“Jinx will be here in a minute.”

As though he knew my thoughts were pinpointed on him, leave it to Rule to bring up Jinx.

Not that I minded. I would give my body to Jinx any day of the week. More than once if he would have me. But with Jinx, it was different. We had a foundation built on friendship. Not a deep one, but we'd started slower, and I knew more about him than I did Rule. With Jinx, there really was the risk of me falling for him because I didn't merely lust for him, I genuinely liked him.

Rule didn't say anything as he watched me, and I found myself relaxing, letting the glimmer in his eyes steer me toward the impending release. Minutes ticked by, and I knew I wasn't going to last. I was caught up in his eyes, in the heat I saw there. No one had ever looked at me like that before. People saw beauty when they looked at my mother. Compared to her, I was too plain, too average. I wasn't a sex goddess, but I almost believed I was when Rule turned that intense stare on me.

“You're so fucking wet. Push that thing in your pussy.”

I angled the thick silicone toy and pushed it against my entrance. My body resisted, but I pushed past it.

“Now pull it out.”

I did, then teased my clit with the slick vibrating tip.

“In again.”

Within minutes, I was fucking myself at his urging.

“I can't ... Rule ... I need ... God, I'm going to come.”

His face remained impassive, but I swore I saw satisfaction in his eyes.

A sound came from behind me, and I noticed Waldo sit up, his tail thumping with excitement. I knew without looking that

Jinx was home.

“She’s playing with herself,” Rule said without looking at Jinx.

A moment later, I felt Jinx’s callused fingers graze my shoulders, my neck. He moved my hair back, then let his hands trail over my chest.

“Oh, God.” I sighed, my nipples tightening to the point of pain from the gentle graze of his hands. “It’s too much.”

Jinx lightly teased, his pinkies grazing my nipples while I fucked the toy in and out of my pussy. My muscles clenched and released, spasming in warning. I was going to come, and I couldn’t stop it.

“Please ... Rule ... I need...”

“Come for us, butterfly. Come on the toy, then I’ll give you my cock.”

I inhaled sharply as I fucked myself with abandon, eager to earn my reward. I could make myself come like this, but it wouldn’t be nearly as satisfying as having him inside me. I wanted that. I wanted to feel him without the barrier of latex. I wanted every ridge of his iron-hard cock to rub inside me.

I pushed the vibrator in deep and succumbed to the orgasm, gasping and moaning as I went limp.

The toy fell to the floor with a thud as Rule stalked toward me, unbuttoning his jeans as he did. By the time he reached me, his cock was in his hand. He manhandled me into position, forcing one leg up, draping my leg along the back of the sofa, my other foot dangling above the floor.

The cushion dipped, and then he was impaling me, ramming in so hard I thought he would split me in two.

Rule held himself above me, holding my gaze as he pounded into me. I grabbed his arms, holding on, accepting every brutal thrust. This time, I didn’t worry about seeking permission. It was futile. He drove me over the edge within seconds and never gave me time to come back down as he took what I so freely offered.

He leaned forward, pressing his hips to mine as he pumped deeper and deeper, his pelvis grinding against my clit. I exploded, surrounded by heat and light.

“I’m gonna come inside you,” he said through gritted teeth. “I’ve never...”

I dug my nails into his arms and tilted my hips, allowing for deeper penetration. I held my breath, wondering if I would survive the moment because no one had ever come inside me before, either. Not without the barrier of latex.

“Ah, Jesus ... fuck ... Laikyn...”

My name on his lips was the last thing he said as he slammed forward, grunting as his body jerked. I felt him inside me, felt the pulse of his cock and the warmth that came from his body. It triggered another orgasm, which dragged a ragged groan from him when my muscles clamped down on him.

His gaze lingered on mine for what felt like an eternity before he finally withdrew.

When he walked away, I stared after him. I looked around, expecting to see Jinx nearby, but he wasn’t. He’d left, too.

I won’t lie ... there was a hint of regret that pinched in my chest.

Regret that they would one day be walking away for good, and for the first time in my life, I was hoping that wasn’t the inevitable outcome.

\* \* \*

## **Jinx**

I DOUBTED LAIKYN OR RULE EVEN REALIZED I had walked away when I had. They’d been too caught up in each other to notice me, so I’d taken my leave.

Perfect timing, too. The instant I heard Laikyn’s cry of pleasure when Rule rammed his dick into her, I would’ve lost my shit if I’d stuck around. If I could’ve explained what came

over me in that instant, I would have. I couldn't. I wasn't sure whether it was jealousy or pure adrenaline that flooded my system, but something knocked me for a loop.

Rather than insert myself where I clearly wasn't needed, I disappeared into my bedroom and opted for a shower. If lucky, they wouldn't be fucking in the living room when I was finished. I needed dinner, and if I didn't get food soon, my stomach was going to start eating itself.

Yes, that was me being dramatic. So fucking what? I was feeling a bit rejected, so what the fuck did it matter?

Why I thought Laikyn or Rule would've invited me to their couch party, I wasn't sure. Rule had spoken as though he'd welcomed my attention, but the moment she got herself off with that damn toy, a flip had been switched. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen him as intensely focused as he'd been when he prowled toward her.

As I was pulling shorts on, a knock sounded on my bedroom door.

"Hey, Jinx. What are you hungry for? Rule's going to order food."

Since she knew I couldn't answer, I figured she was waiting for me to unlock the door and let her in. I wouldn't. Hell, I couldn't. I was pretty fucking sure she wouldn't understand. In fact, she'd likely think I was some sort of psycho for having the collection at all.

She knocked again. "Jinx?"

Taking a deep breath, I moved to the door and unlocked it. I opened it enough to get out and locked the knob behind me, the key tucked in my pocket.

Her gaze shifted to my face, then to the door, and back again.

Her smile was slow and mischievous. "Are you hiding something in there?"

I played it off, grabbing her shoulders and turning her in the other direction. She giggled, leaning into me and letting



me steer her through the house.

“You smell good,” she said, leaning her head against my chest as we walked.

I did my best to maintain a detachment that wasn't working for me. Whatever my feelings for her were, they were superseded by Rule's. He had married this woman, and I had to remember that. Even if the marriage wasn't real, it still loomed between us, a silent sentry warding me off until Rule gave me permission to share what belonged to him.

When we reached the kitchen, Rule lifted his head. He had adjusted his jeans, but his shirt was missing. I could see the scratch marks on his arms and figured there were matching ones on his back. It sent a chill dancing down my spine when I thought about the marks Laikyn had left on me the other night after our tryst in the shower.

“Pizza?” Rule prompted, raising his eyebrows in question.

I nodded.

“No bell peppers, please,” Laikyn tacked on. “I can deal with just about anything else but that.”

I nodded again so Rule knew I was in agreement, then moved around Laikyn toward the refrigerator. I grabbed a beer from the back and carried it out to the patio. I grabbed the remote and flipped on the television as I took a seat, propping my feet on the table. I had a whole two minutes to pretend I gave a shit about what was on the screen before Laikyn joined me. Although I didn't look her way, I sensed her hesitation.

Feeling like a bug under a microscope, I finally turned and cocked an eyebrow. She took that as an invitation to move closer.

“Did I do something wrong?” she asked, placing a knee on the cushion beside me.

I shook my head, turning my attention back to the TV. I didn't want to get into this right now. Which was partly why I left my phone in my pocket. Without it, the best she could do was guess my answers, and if I were lucky, she would give up and move on.

Her cool fingers slid over my shoulder as she tucked her other foot underneath her so she was kneeling at my side. “Jinx. Look at me.”

I forced myself to, wishing like fuck that I could shake the feeling of rejection. It was stupid, for one thing. Laikyn didn’t belong to me. Nor did Rule. And no one said that our encounters would be all-inclusive. I had no right to be upset.

“What’s wrong?”

She knew I couldn’t answer, but it was obvious she wanted something. I shook my head and took a long pull on my beer, feigning disinterest in the topic.

The next thing I knew, Laikyn took the beer from my hand and set it on the table. She straddled my thighs and forced me to shift my legs.

Her eyes skimmed my face, and if I didn’t know better, I would’ve said she was trying to read my mind.

“You’re upset.”

It wasn’t a question, so I didn’t confirm or deny.

“Because of what happened earlier?”

I met her gaze and got lost in the emerald depths, wishing my words wouldn’t fail me. It was rare for me to even care that I couldn’t speak. Only once or twice in my life had I wanted to formulate words to relay my feelings. A couple of times with Rule and now with Laikyn. Not that it mattered. It was hopeless.

“I didn’t want you to leave,” she said, leaning in closer, her fingers gliding along my jaw as her eyes caressed my face. “You could’ve stayed.”

That sounded like a pity invitation, which was the last thing I wanted. It was petty and childish, but I attempted to peer around her to see the television. She fixed that by turning my chin, forcing me to meet her gaze.

“I don’t really know what the rules are,” she said softly, leaning in. “All I know is that I want you and Rule. I ache for you.” Her breath fanned my lips. “I crave you.”

I knew seduction when I heard it, and I could tell she was attempting to make me feel better by drowning me in it. I appreciated the effort, but it wasn't her problem.

“Let me make it up to you.” She pulled back and met my gaze, her hand sliding down my chest, my stomach.

The moment she tried to cup my dick, I grabbed her wrist.

A frown creased her forehead, her eyes snapping to mine.

I shook my head, willing her to see that it wasn't solely about sex for me. Sure, I could've whipped out my dick and let her get me off, but that would've given her the impression that was the only thing I wanted. That might be the case for her and Rule, but it wasn't for me. And for whatever reason, I'd thought she was beginning to realize that. For the past ten days, although she'd been taunting us both, we'd refrained. And even with sex out of the equation, I thought we had enjoyed ourselves.

She was back to the full-time seduction, and I wasn't eager to play the game.

“Okay,” she said, jerking her hand back. “You win. I'm sorry. I shouldn't—”

Before she could jump to her feet, I grabbed her around the waist and brought her down on her back. I moved over her, my face close to hers. I held her stare, listening to the gasp of her breaths as my lips hovered over hers.

When she stopped struggling, I kissed her. Gently. Lightly. Not a seduction. Not this time.

Although she didn't try to pull away, even returning my kiss, Laikyn's hands remained at her sides for several minutes before she finally relented to my coaxing. When she traced her fingertips over my bare back, I inhaled sharply, letting her know how much I liked her touch.

“I wish you could tell me what you need,” she whispered against my mouth.

Lifting my head, I propped myself on one arm and pointed to the center of her chest with my finger.

Laikyn frowned.

I pressed firmly.

“Me?” she asked. “You need me?”

I nodded. Laikyn and Rule were the only ones I needed. Hell, they were the only ones I’d ever *wanted*. I learned at a young age not to rely on others and not to get your hopes up because most people failed you. Until Rule came into my life, I thought the only person who would ever make me feel safe was my grandmother. He proved me wrong, and until Laikyn came into the picture, I hadn’t realized how much I’d come to rely on him.

“You have me, Jinx,” Laikyn whispered. “The question is, what do you want to do with me?”

Since I couldn’t tell her, I decided to show her by easing down on my side so that I was lying beside her. I slipped my arm beneath her head and cupped her jaw with my other hand, continuing to kiss her softly. When she turned into me, I inhaled deeply, soaking up her warmth.

In all my life, I’d never made out with a woman. Not like this. I’d fucked plenty, but even my first time hadn’t been anything special. I’d lost my virginity to a woman a decade older than me, and while she’d been good at getting me off, she hadn’t wanted anything more. At seventeen, I hadn’t realized there was more to it than that, so I’d mirrored that encounter with my future fucks, keeping them at arm’s length because it made sense to me.

With Rule, it was different. He would say it was purely physical, but he was lying to himself. We both knew it. While there was more there than either of us admitted, we didn’t cuddle. Hell, we didn’t even sleep in the same bed. Maybe once or twice when one of us was too exhausted to move. We took for granted what we had because we expected the other to always be there. If the day ever came when that wasn’t the case, I knew he would be as lost as I was. I didn’t need him to tell me as much, although it would’ve been nice if he acknowledged it.

I never realized what I was missing out on until the night Laikyn had slept in my arms.

Since then, I'd hoped to explore more of that. I didn't mind fucking for the sake of fucking, but I wasn't going to pretend there wasn't something more here. She might not feel it, but I did. And while I didn't have to admit it, I damn sure wasn't going to pretend I wanted nothing more than to shove my dick inside her to sate the urge.

\* \* \*

## Rule

AFTER PLACING THE PIZZA ORDER, I STOOD at the back door and stared at Jinx and Laikyn, watching as they made out on the couch like a couple of teenagers. Oddly, I didn't feel the urge to roll my eyes even though I was sure that was the correct reaction.

No, I found a foreign sense of relief in their interactions, the way Jinx loomed above her, kissing her gently while her hands moved over him. It was the exact opposite of the encounter I'd experienced with Laikyn a short while ago. I'd fucked her like a starving man. And when it was over, I wanted to fuck her again. Only I didn't because I'd realized Jinx wasn't there. I wasn't sure when he slipped out or why, but I'd felt his absence.

I'd never felt that before. That absence. Like a part of me had disappeared, and deep down, I feared it was gone forever. I wasn't supposed to feel shit like that. For anyone.

Laikyn was changing me. That was the only conclusion I could come to. She was making me see things from a different perspective. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Or rather, I hadn't been sure until I saw Jinx and Laikyn making out on the couch. Now ... well, now I wasn't sure what the hell was going on because something about this entire situation felt oddly right. As though the three of us were meant to be right here, right now. Together.

And yes, I realized how fucked up that sounded. I'd insisted Laikyn fuck both of us or neither because I'd wanted to keep my distance from her. Two weeks later, here I was, writing endings like this was a romance novel or some shit. Endings that didn't make sense because there was no way that Laikyn was going to want to have anything to do with me when this was all over. Once she realized I'd manipulated her the same way her mother did, she would walk away and never look back. I wouldn't even blame her.

Yet, for this brief moment I wanted to pretend that the future wasn't laid out already. That the ending wasn't written because there was more to this than I'd anticipated.

## Laikyn

*“HELLO, PRINCESS. I DIDN’T EXPECT TO SEE you back here so soon.”*

*“What? No. No, no.” I spun around, searching for an exit but finding only bars surrounding me. “I’m not supposed to be here.”*

*“But you came to me.” Diggy’s crooked-toothed smile sent a shiver up my spine. “I always knew you’d be back. You missed me, didn’t you? The way we used to talk for hours into the night.” He sneered as he moved closer. “You liked hearing all the dirty things I was going to do to you when that timer hit zero.”*

*“No,” I countered, my chest squeezing. I had to get out of here. “Rule saved me. He killed you.”*

*“Rule? Is that his name? The guy who put a bullet in my face?”*

*“Leave me alone,” I told Diggy, running my hands over the bars on the far side, searching for a way out.*

*“You came back, princess. You came back to see me.”*

*“No. No, I didn’t. I hate you.”*

*“Your mouth says so, but your body says otherwise.”*

*“No!” I stepped back when Diggy moved toward the door to the cell. “Leave me alone! I mean it!”*

*“Javier!” Diggy shouted, turning his attention to the top of the stairs. “She’s back. I told you she’d come back.”*

*My gaze swung toward the sliver of light that peeked from under the door. “No, I didn’t! I’m not back!”*

*“Javier told me we’d see you again because your mommy promised. And people don’t break promises to Javier. She owes us.” Diggy’s eyes were wide, imploring me to believe him. “She said if she didn’t come up with the money, we could have you.”*

*She didn’t say that. I wouldn’t believe it. My mother was a lot of things, but...*

*Diggy reached for the padlock, and I moved backward until my back hit the metal bars on the other side. I wrapped my hand around one bar and tried to jerk it free. It didn’t budge.*

*“We don’t have to worry about time anymore, princess.”*

*I searched for the countdown timer, but there wasn’t one. “No!”*

*The barred door squeaked open. There was nothing between me and Diggy. Nothing to stop him from doing those horrific things he’d promised.*

*“Remember this?” He lifted his hand, and a big metal pipe appeared. It was the one he used to clang against the other bars.*

*“I promised I’d fuck you with this when the time came.”*

*“No!” I grabbed the bars behind me and shook, trying to wrench them open.*

*“Now’s the time, princess.”*

*“No!” I shouted when he took a step toward me. “No! Leave me alone!”*

*I jerked back when a hand touched my shoulder. It wasn’t Diggy, but he was still approaching. I stared, my breaths choppy and shallow. His demonic grin seemed to be backlit by fire.*

*Another hand on my shoulder. This one rougher, more insistent. Shaking me gently but firmly.*

*“No!” I screamed, trying to kick my legs, but something was holding me down.*



*Right before my eyes, a hole bloomed in the center of Diggy's forehead, but he didn't fall to the ground. He wasn't dead.*

*"I'm coming for you, princess."*

*"No!"*

*A hand cupped my face, a thumb brushing over my lower lip, warm breath near my ear. Fingers glided along my cheek, a light flutter that brought more warmth. Light began to seep in, drowning out the darkness.*

*"I'm coming for you, princess," Diggy said, but now he sounded like he was underwater. "I'm coming—"*

I was on the verge of the dream world, one half of me in reality, the other lingering in the nightmare. It took a moment for my brain to register what was happening, where I was.

A house. A bed.

Not a cage in someone's basement.

I wasn't alone. A lamp was on, highlighting the man sitting on the bed by my hip.

"Jinx," I whispered, realizing tears were streaming down my cheeks.

His eyes held a wealth of concern as he regarded me closely, his thumb brushing the tears away.

I lurched up and threw my arms around his neck, clutching him tightly, clinging to the security he provided simply by being here.

His warm hand glided up and down my back. He was so solid, so warm.

It took a few minutes, but my rapid heartbeat slowed to relatively normal, and I released him, lying back on the pillow.

"It was a nightmare," I told him.

He nodded, his head tilting to the side. I could feel his worry. It was in the gentleness of his touch and the brightness of his blue eyes.

“I’m okay.” I wiped my hair back from my face as my breath shuddered. “I promise. I’m all right.” I swallowed, looking past him because looking him in the eye was difficult. “I have them all the time. Nightmares. I know I shouldn’t. It’s over, and I should be grateful.”

Jinx’s hand curled around my jaw, and he turned my head so I was forced to meet his gaze. His mouth opened, and I thought for a second that words were going to come out, but they didn’t. I could tell he was at a loss because he wanted to ease my fear with his voice.

“I don’t need you to talk,” I assured him. “You’re here. That’s all I need.”

I proved it by sitting up again and sliding my arms around his neck. Slower now that the panic had abated. I held on tightly, letting his strength and heat wash away the last vestiges of the dream. I’d felt him in my dream. His presence had been reassuring even though I hadn’t realized he was there.

“Don’t go,” I whispered. “Stay with me, please.”

He nodded as he peeled my arms from around his neck and settled me back on the bed. He joined me, sliding his arm under my head so I could press up against him. I held on, afraid to let go.

Jinx kissed my forehead, and that was all it took. That sweet gesture sent a wash of warmth under my skin, replacing the bone-chilling cold of fear with something else.

“Stay here with me, Jinx,” I whispered, pressing a kiss to his chest.

His arm tightened under my head, and he pulled me closer.

I pressed another kiss to his chest, but I didn’t stop there. I couldn’t. Since our make-out session earlier, I’d wanted to feel more of him. But he’d been so gentle and sweet that I’d ended up leaving him, insisting I was tired. I’d been shocked by my feelings for him, surprised that I’d wanted what he was offering more than I’d ever wanted anything else. And I wasn’t talking about sex. I was referring to the intimacy that

came with slowing down for a moment and just breathing. He'd forced me to do that by not allowing me to seduce him, and it had scared me. The intensity of what I'd felt had scared me.

I kissed along his collarbone, then up his neck, along his jaw, shifting so that I was practically covering him as I sought his mouth.

"Make love to me, Jinx." I breathed the words between us, hoping he would feel my need, my desperation. It was a hunger, but not the same as what I usually felt. I wasn't merely seeking an orgasm.

I wanted to feel him. I wanted to be as close to him as I could possibly be.

And I couldn't wait any longer.

\* \* \*

## **Jinx**

I WAS FALLING.

That was the only way to describe the feeling of being with Laikyn. Like stepping off a platform at thirty thousand feet and being battered by the wind while your insides were topsy-turvy and you plunged headfirst toward the ground.

Only there was no fear of death, only a sweet rush from the adrenaline and the knowledge that everything was right in the world. If only for that one precious moment.

Crawling in bed with her hadn't been my intention when I'd shot out of my bed at the piercing shrill of her scream. The sound had sent chills down my spine and put my body on high alert. I hadn't thought about the danger as I bolted out of my room and across the hall to find her flailing on the bed, clearly trapped in a nightmare. It had taken what felt like an eternity to wake her, and for the first time in my life, I'd hated myself for being unable to speak. I'd tried to say her name, but the sounds never came, so I'd touched her, gently shaking her in an attempt to pull her out of it.

The sight of her tears had nearly ripped me in half, but then she threw her arms around my neck, and she managed to put me back together with her touch alone.

But this...

“Please, Jinx,” she whispered against my mouth. “I want to feel you.”

Walking away from her wasn't an option. I would not allow her to think I didn't want her because I did. And the thought of making love to her ... it was the same rush as launching out of an airplane.

When her lips sealed to mine, I welcomed the kiss, sliding my tongue against hers as I slipped my hand under her tank top, slowly peeling it from her body as I shifted closer, hoping to soothe her with the heat of my body. She wasn't trembling anymore, but I knew from experience that the nightmares lingered longer than you wanted. She was using me as a distraction, and I was okay with that.

I broke the kiss so she could pull the tank top over her head, my gaze sliding lower, over the rounded curve of her smooth shoulder, the swell of her breast, the peak of her nipple. Before I knew what I was doing, I cupped her breast, gently rolling her nipple between my thumb and forefinger.

I met her gaze, seeking permission as I leaned in.

“Yes,” Laikyn whispered, her hand on the back of my head as she urged me closer.

I licked the pebbled tip, circling it until it was hard against my tongue.

“Oh, God, yes.” Laikyn's fingertips pressed insistently against my scalp.

Laving her nipple, surrounded by her soft mewls, I felt as though I was outside my body, watching myself claim her. It was an incredible feeling. Addictive. I would need more; there was no doubt in my mind that I would never get enough of this woman.

Shifting, I worshipped her other breast the same way while pushing her shorts down, wanting them out of the way. Laikyn assisted, using her feet to kick them off and away.

Suckling her breast, my hand curled around her ankle and slid higher, over her calf, her knee. Her smooth skin tickled my palm, and I loved the way she shivered at the touch. I sucked more insistently as I cupped her sex, sliding my middle finger along the seam. She was wet and hot. My blood began pumping faster through my veins, my cock throbbing with the need to be inside her.

When I pressed the tip of my finger against her slick entrance, Laikyn's back bowed, her chest thrusting upward. I gently bit her nipple as I pushed my finger inside her, the tight, hot clasp of her body making my head spin. I'd thought about being inside her again nearly every minute since the first time.

I fingered her as she rocked her hips, setting the pace. When she dug her nails into my scalp, I added another finger.

“Jinx ... oh, yes ... touch me.”

I continued to touch and lick, kissing my way up to her neck as Laikyn's hips rocked more urgently, her body brushing mine as she attempted to get closer.

“Inside me,” Laikyn whispered, bracketing my hips with her knees. “I need you inside me, Jinx.”

It was the work of a moment to shove my shorts down. As soon as they were gone, Laikyn pulled me, urging me over her so her lithe little body was underneath me. I propped myself on my elbows, my hands cradling her head as our lips melded. I was aware of my weight, not wanting to crush her, but she didn't seem to care. Her arms banded around me, holding me to her as she rubbed her slick pussy along the shaft of my cock.

With my mouth on hers, I aligned our bodies, guiding my cock to her soft, slick center. As soon as I pressed the head against her tight hole, Laikyn pulled back.

“Look at me, Jinx,” she whispered, her hands cupping my face. “Look at me while you enter me.”

Our eyes met and held as I sank in, inch by delectable inch, her body welcoming mine, stretching to accept me.

Her lips parted, and her eyes rolled back as she tilted her pelvis, taking me deeper.

“Yes, Jinx. I want all of you.”

A violent pleasure ripped through me, tightening my skin and making it difficult to breathe. But I never looked away, watching her beautiful face, memorizing every expression, every soft gasp, every delicious moan.

*You are the most beautiful woman in the world.*

Her eyes opened, skimming my face, and I briefly wondered if she could hear the words that echoed in my head, begging to be freed.

She caressed the side of my face with her palm, a reverence in her touch that surprised me. As I pushed in even deeper, her lips parted with a soft sigh, her hips rocking to meet my thrust. At that moment, when our bodies were joined, and she was looking into my eyes, I knew I loved her. I’d suspected it before now, but there was no denying it. I’d fallen hard.

I pulled out, pushed in again. Slow. Impossibly slow so that I could relish the slick glide of our flesh. It was a pleasure so intense it bordered on pain. Nothing should feel this good. I did it again and again, fucking into her with long, deep strokes while her body shuddered under mine.

“Oh ... oh, Jinx...” She gasped and whimpered, her hands clutching my shoulders as the pleasure consumed us both. “I never want you to stop.”

I maintained a pace that sustained us for long minutes, and when I pressed my hips down, my pelvis rubbing her clit, Laikyn’s sighs turned into moans, her arms wreathing my neck, holding me to her. I took care not to crush her even as we were intimately joined, touching from chest to knee, my cock tunneling inside the slick depths of her pussy.

Laikyn’s mouth was next to my ear, her warm breath fanning my skin.

“This ... I’ve never wanted this before you,” she whispered. “I think...”

When she didn’t finish the sentence, I slowed, lifting up, forcing her to meet my gaze. I wanted her to finish that sentence. I *needed* her to finish it.

Her smile was both sexy and sweet. “You want me to say it, don’t you?”

I nodded, rocking my hips, driving in deeper.

Laikyn gasped, her head tipping back. “Yes. Don’t stop doing that.”

I did it again and again, then paused until she met my gaze once more.

Her eyes glistened with what looked like tears, but then she pulled me down, her arms banding around my shoulders, her mouth once more at my ear.

“I’m falling for you, Jinx.”

I grunted, the sound ripped from my chest as I drove into her. Hard, deep.

“Oh, my God,” she cried out. “Yes. Jinx. Oh, yes.”

Driven by a hunger so primal, I wasn’t sure I would survive it, I fucked her. Those words triggered a beast deep inside me, releasing him from his cage, setting him free so he could claim the only woman who’d ever made him feel whole.

Locking my arm beneath her, I held Laikyn against me as I rammed my cock deeper into her tight sheath.

“Yes!” Laikyn’s arms tightened. “Jinx ... yes ... oh, fuck yes!”

*Come for me, baby. Come for me.*

Laikyn cried out, my name tumbling from her lips as her body trembled, her pussy milking my cock until I was helpless to stop the release that tore through me with a strength that rivaled anything Mother Nature could’ve come up with.

I groaned, the sound reverberating low in my throat as Laikyn held onto me.

“Nothing,” she whispered against my ear. “Nothing has ever felt like that.”

She was right. And I had a feeling that nothing ever would.

I probably should’ve gone to clean up or allowed her to, but I couldn’t let go of her. I didn’t want to. Not yet. Instead, I rolled to my side, then turned her so her back was to my chest. I spooned up behind her, one arm under her head, the other draped across her.

“Don’t leave me, Jinx,” she whispered, clutching my arm and holding onto me.

I wasn’t sure whether she meant tonight or ever, but it didn’t matter. For as long as I was drawing breath into my lungs, I would be hers if she would have me.

When she shivered, I dragged the sheet over us and held her until her breathing deepened and her body relaxed.

It wasn’t until I closed my eyes that I thought about Rule and what he was going to think when he found out that I’d fallen in love with the woman he’d married. The woman who was supposed to be temporary in our lives. We’d agreed, and for the first time since I’d pledged my life to Rule, I’d gone back on my word.

As I gave myself permission to sleep, I decided that he didn’t need to know. The same as he didn’t need to know that I’d been in love with him for nearly two decades. With Rule, denial was always the best path to take.



## Rule

WAS THIS HOW JINX FELT WHEN HE watched me fuck Laikyn on the couch? Had he felt the same gut-wrenching pain that tore through my insides as I watched them sleeping?

As I stood in the doorway of Laikyn's room, watching her and Jinx curled up together like lovers seeking comfort in their dreams, there was a churning in my gut. Every so often, it twisted, a dull-edged blade slicing but never enough to open me completely, only enough to cause more pain.

It was evident by their state of undress that they'd succumbed to exhaustion after taking their pleasure in one another. How or when this had come to be was anyone's guess. Last night, after their make-out session on the couch, Laikyn had disappeared to her room without a word to me. Jinx hadn't stuck around much longer after that, leaving me to wonder what had caused all the suffocating silence.

Now I had only more questions. Had this been their plan? Had they been looking for privacy?

Shockingly, that wasn't the part that bothered me. Not really. I was the one who brought Jinx into this ... marriage? Relationship? I wasn't sure what to call it. It was supposed to be a temporary ruse to keep Laikyn occupied and safe until she could get her inheritance. Never mind that I hadn't told her about it or that I'd been lying to her this entire time, letting her believe she owed me a debt. Truth is, she owed me nothing.

But maybe she should. If I treated her like a piece of property, perhaps she would stop burrowing under my skin. From the looks of it, it was already too late for Jinx. He appeared rather cozy curled up to her like that. Only once in all the years I'd known Jinx had we ended up in a similar situation. Not the first time we fucked, nor the twentieth. It

hadn't been until years later. After a heated night when we'd slaked our lust, finding solace in one another, I'd given myself free rein to imagine a life with him. It wasn't intentional, but it had happened all the same. For ten minutes, I'd remained beside him, my arms around him as we fought to catch our breaths. Neither of us had moved, and for six hundred seconds, I'd felt more complete than I ever had before.

I was the one who put an end to it, getting out of bed and heading for the shower, refusing to let myself feel anything for anyone. Deep down, I knew it was a facade because I cared about Jinx. I'd cared about him before I went to prison and more so when I found him waiting for me the day I was released. I honestly couldn't imagine my life without him.

As I watched them now, I was aware of that vicious ripping as that dull-edged blade sawed at me from the inside. It was jealousy trying to root its way through my guts. I was fucking jealous. Of him? Of her? Both? I didn't know, and I didn't fucking like it.

A soft whimper sounded, and I looked down to see Waldo staring up at me. It was time for his breakfast, and he wanted to ensure I knew that.

I nodded as I stepped back, intending to leave Jinx and Laikyn in peace.

My gaze swung over them one final time, and that was when I noticed Jinx was watching me. His eyes were open, but he hadn't moved a muscle since I found them like this. How long had he been watching me? How much had he seen? Like it or not, Jinx knew me better than anyone. He could read me like a book, which was the very reason I kept him at arm's length. It was easier that way. For everyone.

Without a word, I turned and headed for the kitchen.

An hour and a half later, after feeding Waldo, showering, and driving to work, I walked across the main floor toward my office. My footfalls were loud, gaining the attention of Rhyan,

Willy, and Red Wally. They fell into step, eager to give me the morning update as they did every morning when I arrived.

“Where’s Jinx?” Rhyan asked, looking around as though I had the guy tucked in my fucking pocket.

“Give me updates,” I told her. I wasn’t in the mood for small talk, and I didn’t give a shit where Jinx was at the moment.

“Well,” Rhyan drawled the word into far too many syllables. “We’ve got a new client.”

“Who?”

“Astrid Levington,” Rhyan stated.

She said the name as though I should know who that was. “Which means *what* to me?”

“The movie studio exec? She was in the news last year?”

Red Wally lifted a hand. “She’s the exec brought in to testify about that actor’s alleged sexual misconduct.”

Rhyan picked up the conversational ball. “She claimed she had no knowledge of any misconduct and had never had direct contact with him.”

I wasn’t sure why any of that mattered, but I indulged them anyway. “And now what?”

“She’s being blackmailed,” Willy offered, obviously feeling the need to confuse me more.

Of course she was. Because that was what happened when people lied. They set themselves up for extortion. If ever they learned not to lie, I would be out of a job.

“Who’s blackmailing her?”

“That’s what she wants us to find out.”

“What are they targeting her with?”

“Evidently, someone’s got photographs of them having coffee together a couple of years ago. Just two days after the first victim said he raped her.”

I hated these cases. I didn't understand why people felt the need to lie about stupid shit. However, I'd been in this business long enough to know she hadn't lied because she had coffee with the guy. No one would've given a shit. There was more to the story.

"Was the guy convicted?" I asked, glancing between them.

"No," Rhyan said with a huff.

"Do you think he's guilty?"

"Yeah."

That made it even worse. Not so much for the woman being blackmailed. I didn't give a shit about her. My job was to stop the blackmailer and to ensure nothing came to light. However, I didn't take kindly to anyone taking from someone who didn't give their explicit consent. I knew how the justice system worked, and too many times, it was in *my* favor. There was no justice for the victim, only a nice juicy cover-up for the guilty. Unfortunately, money and prestige trumped justice.

"There's also a video," Red Wally noted. "Of them ... *together* ... after they had coffee."

I figured *together* was a euphemism for fucking. That made far more sense than a photograph of them chatting over a cup of joe. That was real leverage and clearly something this woman didn't want to get out.

"Have you seen it?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"Rhyan? You think we should take this one?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

"Why?"

"Easy money."

I nodded. "Fine. But if you find any proof of that bastard doing what he was accused of doing, it better see the light of day."

"It will," she said firmly. "I assure you."

“Good.” I glanced between them. “What else?”

“Nothing pressing on my end,” Willy said.

“I’m good,” Red Wally added.

I looked at Rhyan. I could tell she wanted to ask me what my problem was, but she knew better than to do so in present company. I wasn’t in the mood to hash out my feelings or any of that other emotional bullshit she claimed I needed to address directly.

She narrowed her eyes and hesitantly asked, “Is Jinx coming in today?”

“Don’t know. Ask him.”

With that, I turned my attention to my computer. I had shit to do, and it didn’t involve worrying about what Jinx or Laikyn were doing, but if I didn’t get busy, that was the only thing I would be thinking about.

\* \* \*

## Jinx

THE MOMENT RULE WALKED THROUGH THE DOOR, I knew he was in one of his moods.

I’d spent the better part of the day giving him space because if I confronted him about what he saw this morning, he would shrug and tell me he didn’t give a shit. He did. I knew it. He knew it. So, it was better for me to let him stew in his confusion for a little while.

As for Laikyn, she had surprised me this morning when she woke up and curled up against me. Part of me had expected her to come awake with regrets about last night. After all, she was married to Rule, and while this wasn’t a traditional situation we found ourselves in, what we’d done hadn’t exactly been something either of us should be proud of. Not where Rule was concerned, anyway.

Not that I regretted a second. I didn’t. I wouldn’t. Hell, I couldn’t because making love to Laikyn had been the most

incredible moment of my entire existence. And that included the first time I was with Rule when I thought life couldn't get any better than that. With Rule, sex was incredible. It was wild and unencumbered by emotional weight because we both put forth the effort to leave all feelings at the door. It wasn't merely sex for me, but I pretended for his sake. I didn't think it was for Rule, either, but he would never admit it.

"Where's Laikyn?" Rule patted Waldo on the head when he greeted Rule at the back door.

I turned my attention from the television and nodded toward the small building that was now Laikyn's art studio.

Rule stared into the night briefly before his gaze swung back to me. "Did you enjoy yourself last night?"

I held his stare for two heartbeats, letting him see my sincerity so he wouldn't think I was being an asshole as I slowly nodded. I'd never enjoyed anything more, but I couldn't relay that to him. Not without typing up a text message. And since Rule had ignored all the other text messages I'd sent him today, I wasn't in the mood to waste any effort now.

"It was bound to happen sooner or later," Rule said, his tone flat, devoid of emotion.

He turned on his heel and went back inside.

Before I realized what I was doing, I was on my feet, following behind him. Before he could get past the kitchen, I grabbed his arm and jerked, spinning him around. I grabbed his jaw and forced him to look at me, wanting to see the turbulence in his gaze. It was there, but it wasn't the same as I was used to. This was real. Rule was hurting.

"Take care of her, Jinx," he said softly, grabbing my wrist to pull my hand from his jaw. "She deserves you."

Rule dropped my hand, but I didn't let him walk away. I grabbed him again, this time shoving him up against the wall that separated the kitchen from the living room and acted as a support for the ceiling. Rule grunted, the torment in his gaze morphing into fury in a blink. Before he could launch into a

tirade, I crushed my mouth to his, gripping the back of his neck so he couldn't pull away.

His hands were on my hips, but he didn't shove me. He pulled, bringing me closer as our tongues thrashed and our teeth clashed.

"I don't want this," Rule said between attempts to devour me. "I've never wanted this."

I knew he was attempting to talk himself through the problem at hand. Which, if I had to guess, were his feelings for me and Laikyn. I couldn't explain how it happened, but Laikyn's presence had changed everything. There was something about her that simply clicked. For me. For Rule. She brought sunshine, burning off the dark clouds that we lived under. She was sassy and funny and not at all afraid to say what was on her mind. It worked for me in ways beauty alone could never do. Yeah, she was smoking hot, but couple that with her witty personality and she was utter perfection. I knew Rule saw it, too.

"I'm jealous," Rule said, his teeth gritted as he grabbed me by the neck and stared at me. "Of you. Of her."

Because I couldn't fill in the blanks with questions or assumptions, Rule had always been the one to talk. He was very vocal when it was just me and him, and though he rarely delved into an emotional landfill like he was now, I'd always figured it was only a matter of time. He didn't like to keep me guessing.

"Do I fit into this?" His voice was so low I only heard it because of our proximity.

I looked him in the eye and nodded.

"How?"

I kissed him, ensuring he understood I wanted him as much as I wanted Laikyn. Yes, I could imagine my life with one or the other because I was captivated by them both. But the two of them ... at the same time ... I couldn't imagine a more perfect existence. And why the hell not? Why couldn't we venture down that road? Laikyn and Rule complemented

one another in so many ways. He was reason to her chaos. She was confidence to his reticence, energy to his restraint. Together, they were unstoppable. Together, they completed me.

Rule's bewilderment gave way to need. He took control, owning me with his kiss. I found myself backed up to the kitchen island, the weight of him holding me there as his tongue plundered my mouth. I kissed him back, but I surrendered, letting him know that nothing had changed. We were still us. We always would be.

Finally, some of the tension in his body eased, and he released me, stepping back to look me in the eyes. I remained there for a moment until I was satisfied I'd relayed my intentions as best I could. He gave a quick nod, then turned and left the room. I expected to hear the garage door slam, but I heard footsteps on the stairs instead. He wasn't leaving, he was going to his bedroom.

I returned to the couch on the patio, but I was no longer watching television. My thoughts had ventured down a dark and winding path. One that included the three of us. Together. In all ways that mattered.

\* \* \*

## Laikyn

WITH SATISFACTION EMANATING FROM EVERY PORE, I stepped back and studied the painting. I wasn't sure I'd ever been more proud of something I'd created as I was this sunset. It spoke to me. Perhaps not because of the vivid colors of the sky, the shadows that darkened the depths of the water, or the white cresting the tips of the waves. Those brought it life and gave warmth to the image, but it was more than that.

It reminded me of Rule and the moment that led up to where we were now.

Of course, I wasn't exactly sure where that was. My attempts to talk to him today had gone unanswered. Since that wasn't unusual, I'd pretended not to worry. I refused to regret



what happened with Jinx last night, but I would be the first to admit I hadn't thought about Rule one single time. Not until this morning when I woke up, still in Jinx's arms, wishing that Rule had been there, too. Not in Jinx's place, but there with us.

It was crazy. I knew that. To think that I even deserved men like Rule or Jinx was absurd. And to fantasize that somehow this could turn into more with both of them ... I was obviously losing my mind. It was one thing to have sex with them, to be shared between them, because sex had nothing to do with love. Yet, over the past month, I'd gotten quite comfortable with both of them.

Sighing, I pulled my smock off and draped it on the hook by the door. I took a few minutes to put away my paints and clean my brushes. I was stalling. I wasn't sure whether Rule was home yet, but I hoped the longer I took, the more time he had to get here. I needed to talk to him about last night, to let him know that something had changed between me and Jinx. At least for me. I didn't want Rule to see it on my face because I doubted I was capable of hiding it. Never had I experienced anything like that before. It had changed me, and there was no reason to pretend otherwise.

As I stood at the door, I glanced around the room, cataloging everything to ensure it was where it belonged. More stalling. And when I clicked off the light, I took a deep breath and opened the door. I pressed the button lock on the inside knob and double-checked that I had the key in my pocket before pulling the door closed.

I could do this. I could talk to Rule without trying to seduce him. Without trying to use sex to make a complicated situation ... not complicated. And perhaps, between now and then, I could come up with the right words to tell Rule that I was in love with them both, although I'd promised it would never happen. Words that wouldn't have him running for the hills or throwing an *I told you so* in my face.

Before I made it out of the small alcove that hid the door from the outdoor entertainment area, I heard voices. The only lights came from the house, spilling out over the outdoor living space. I stopped instantly, gripping the wall as my brain

processed the scene before me. There weren't multiple voices. Only one. One very dominant, very gravelly voice that trickled into the night, carried on a wave of lust.

Rule's voice.

I sucked in a gasp when I realized I was watching Rule fucking Jinx.

Every inch of my skin flashed hot, and my core clenched tightly. Arousal flooded my system and caused my blood to rush loudly in my ears.

Jinx was standing on one foot, the other resting on the cushion, his hands curled over the back of the sofa as he leaned forward. Rule stood behind him, a hard grip on his waist as he railed him with punishing thrusts of his hips. I knew I should step back into the alcove, close my eyes, and block it out, but I couldn't look away.

I heard the guttural growl of Rule's voice, but I couldn't make out what he was saying. I imagined a dozen dirty things coming out of his mouth, each one filthier than the one before.

*No one can give you this. No one but me.*

*Is this what you want? My cock buried deep in your ass?*

*Take me, Jinx. Take every fucking inch.*

My nipples were so tight they hurt, and my pussy clenched and released as though that might relieve the ache that built as I watched Rule fuck Jinx. But when Rule curled his hand around Jinx's throat and pulled his head back as he rammed in harder and faster, I nearly came from the visual alone. Rule grunted and groaned, the sounds growing louder, drifting off into the night. Jinx grabbed his cock and began jerking roughly as Rule leaned in, his mouth close to Jinx's ear.

Oh, how I wished I was close enough to hear what Rule was saying. What dirty words were causing Jinx's body to draw up tight? Whatever he said, it triggered Jinx's release because he came, his cock in his fist. A second later, Rule slammed into him one final time and roared his release to the heavens.

I did step back then, hiding in the alcove as I hugged the wall and hoped they hadn't realized I'd been there. As hot as it was to witness, I had no business watching them. Not without their permission, anyway.

As I wrangled my breathing under control, I smiled, hoping that the next time, I would have their permission. Not only to watch but to participate.

## Rule

“SO, I WAS THINKING MAYBE WE COULD grab dinner,” Laikyn said when I walked into the house the following evening.

I hadn't even made it three steps into the room when she was on her feet, moving toward me.

“Dinner?”

She nodded.

“Where's Jinx?”

She shrugged.

“He's not home yet?”

She shook her head.

“Is there a problem with your voice box, too?” I asked, staring at her as she stared at me.

It was the first time I'd laid eyes on her since I found her and Jinx in bed together. Last night, when I came home, she'd been working in her studio. After a momentary lapse in self-restraint when I'd fucked Jinx on the back patio, I'd skipped dinner and headed to my bedroom. I never knew when she came in, and she'd still been asleep this morning when I left for work.

A small, coy grin pulled at the corners of her mouth.

“Nope.”

She said nothing else, so I took that to mean she was waiting for me to make a decision.

It was obvious she had something on her mind, but with Laikyn, baiting her to reveal it before she was ready was a risky endeavor. God only knew what would come out of her

mouth. Considering I was still a bit shaky from recent events, I decided to bypass that test of patience for the time being.

“Fine. We’ll go to dinner.” I let my gaze rake her from head to toe, ensuring she didn’t miss the suggestion. She looked good. Really good. The kind of good that made a man hungry for something that wasn’t food. With her short flared black skirt, an oversized cream-white sweater, and black leather boots, she made it difficult to see the appeal of calories.

I decided last night that I was going to stop holding back. From Laikyn or from Jinx. I had no idea how this was going to play out, but I was tired of walking on eggshells. I had to accept that something had changed with Laikyn’s presence, even if I wasn’t ready to acknowledge it. The only thing I knew for sure was that I wasn’t willing to let the two of them have all the fun.

“Did you have somewhere in mind?”

“Yep.”

That was all she said before she hurried to her room, leaving me staring after her, wondering what she was up to.

An hour and a half later, we were walking along the water’s edge.

“You know, you could’ve just asked me to bring you to the beach,” I told Laikyn.

Granted, I probably should’ve figured it out when she returned from her room wearing flip-flops instead of boots. They didn’t have quite the same impact, but the woman was still hot as fuck. Even more so now that the flip-flops were dangling from her fingers and her feet were bare.

“And you would’ve brought me? No questions asked?” She regarded me closely as though expecting me to lie.

“Yes.”

She shrugged. “In this case, you got a hamburger out of it.”

True.

“What’s on your mind, Laikyn?” I prompted when it was apparent she was going to pretend there wasn’t something she wanted to ask me. I’d sensed it since we got in the car. Every so often, she would open her mouth but close it just as quickly.

And while we ate, I lost count of how many times she set her barely eaten burger down, wiped her mouth with a napkin, and regarded me with determination only to falter at the last second. Because of that, she’d hardly finished half her dinner.

It took a full minute as she kicked sand, inching closer to the water.

“Are you ever going to tell me what your agenda is?” She paused to test the temperature of the water as it washed up near her toes. She took a few steps closer to the water, letting it slide over her feet completely. She shivered, clearly cold, but she pretended as though it didn’t bother her, so I did, too.

When she started walking again, I fell into step. “What agenda might that be?”

“The reason we had to get married. And don’t tell me it had to do with payment for services rendered. I won’t believe you anymore now than I would’ve in the beginning.”

Honestly, I’d been waiting for her to bring this up again. I knew she was curious the same way I knew she hadn’t believed this was ever about paying a debt.

I came to a stop just under the pier. “Would you accept that it’s not something I can tell you right now?”

She peered up at me, her eyes sliding over my face. “Is that what you want me to accept?”

“Yes.”

“Then I might be convinced.” She leaned back against the large wooden post. “Under one condition.”

“What’s that?”

There were times when Laikyn was impossible to read. Then there were times like this when I knew she was about to

proposition me. She was damn good at it, and I could admit I'd come to enjoy it.

"You have to make me come." Laikyn grinned. "Right here."

I shoved my hands in my pockets to keep from reaching for her. "I think there's something else we need to talk about first."

Her eyes were wide, and there was possibly a hint of concern glittering in them.

I kept my tone flat, purposely without accusation. "I saw you and Jinx in bed together."

Laikyn's expression sobered. "I didn't realize." She looked down, dragging her toe through the sand. "I had a nightmare, and he came in. One thing led to another."

I appreciated that she didn't deny it.

Her head lifted, her pretty green eyes meeting my face. "Actually, that's not true. I mean, I did have a nightmare, and he did come in to wake me up out of it, but saying the rest makes it sound ... too simple."

"It's complicated?"

She swallowed but never looked away. "My feelings for him are becoming that way, yeah."

I nodded. That didn't surprise me. I'd known Jinx long enough that I had a good read on him. Something had changed between him and Laikyn in the past few days. Now I knew it wasn't one-sided.

"Does it bother you?" Laikyn's tone held an edge, concern causing a crease on her forehead.

"No," I lied. It bothered me, but not the way she would think if I told her the truth. The part that bothered me was my insecurity over where that put me in all this. I was the one married to her. I was the one who'd spent the past two decades with Jinx. Before Laikyn, I could pretend what I had with Jinx was merely a friends-with-benefits scenario. It was more than that, and while I'd never considered what my life would be

like without him, now that I'd seen them together, the fear of losing that was real.

But I was the one who didn't want the complexity of a relationship, so I couldn't very well blame either of them. Nor could I prompt some heartfelt conversation that would result in me being overwhelmed by shit I never wanted in the first fucking place.

Feeling my frustration rise, I took a slow, deep breath and exhaled.

"It doesn't bother you at all?" she asked, her words tinged with skepticism.

"No."

She canted her head to the side. "Then I've got something to confess."

Every bone, every muscle, every cell in my body went still.

"I saw you, too."

I frowned. "What?"

"You and Jinx. Last night. Outside."

My cock twitched to life behind my zipper. "And?"

"You didn't know I was there, did you?"

"No." I wasn't sure it would've made a difference if I had. Last night, I'd been ... off. And Jinx's stunt in the kitchen had thrown me for a loop. I'd gone upstairs intending to shower and pass out but ended up coming right back down and fucking him like an animal. I couldn't resist. At that moment, I needed him like I'd never needed him before.

Her eyes darkened, and she licked her lips. "I should've given you privacy," she said softly. "But I couldn't look away."

I stepped toward her. I already knew how many people were moving up and down the beach. It wasn't as crowded as it had been a month ago. Now that we were moving into October, things were slowing down. Fewer tourists lingering



now that fall was making an appearance, officially sweeping summer away.

I kept my eyes on hers as I stepped up to her.

“I wanted to move closer,” she whispered, tilting her head back and holding my gaze. “I wanted to hear what you were saying to him.”

No, she probably didn't. She'd been the topic of conversation as I plowed my dick into Jinx's willing body.

“Is that an option?” she asked.

“What? To be there when I fuck him?”

Laikyn nodded.

“Depends.”

“On?”

“Is it an option for me to join you and Jinx next time?”

“Always.”

She gasped softly when I dragged my finger up the inside of her thigh, slipping beneath the hem of her short skirt.

“You planned this,” I accused as I slid my hand to the outside of her leg, gripping her thigh and lifting it against my leg. “You intended to taunt me about last night. That's why you wore the little skirt.”

“You know me well.”

That was part of the problem. I did know her well. Far better than I should, considering. But the new details were what made me like her more. The way she left things scattered about when she was in a huff, but the fact she couldn't bring herself to be wasteful. The way she hummed softly when she attempted to cook. And she was a godawful cook. Or how she would flip through social media on her phone and laugh merrily when she found something that amused her. Those were things that hadn't been dredged up through research. I'd witnessed them firsthand because she lived in my house. Over the past month, I'd gotten used to being with her. Being with Laikyn was easy.

“You better have on panties,” I said, slipping my other hand under her skirt.

“I do.”

I grazed the cotton covering her pussy. “You’re wet.”

“You do that to me.”

“Walking on the beach with me makes you wet?”

“Thinking about you makes me wet.”

“About me fucking Jinx?”

Laikyn shrugged. “Yes. But my thoughts don’t always include both of you.”

“No?”

She shook her head. “I think about the time you fucked me in the shower.”

“If I recall correctly, *you* fucked *me* that night.”

“True.” Her eyes sparkled with heat. “But on that chair in your room ... there’s no question who fucked who then.”

No, there wasn’t.

“And I think about that all the time,” she rasped softly. “Your mouth on my pussy.”

I loved that she spoke her mind, that I didn’t have to wonder what she liked.

I tugged her panties aside with my free hand and slipped one finger along the seam of her cunt. She was warm and slick.

“Is this what you want?” I pushed one finger inside.

Her lips parted with a sigh, her eyes moving back and forth on my face as though she was memorizing my expressions.

We were hidden from view, and I kept her skirt covering my hand, but if anyone walked too close, they would be able to tell that I was fingering her.

“Put your arms around me.”

She casually grazed my chest before curling her fingers behind my neck. She teased the hair at my nape while I leisurely worked two fingers in and out of her silky heat. She was so fucking tight, but I worked her until I could push three fingers in.

“You’re lucky I don’t fuck you right here,” I told her, my voice little more than a growl.

“How does that make me lucky?”

“I can’t get enough of you.”

“You’re the one holding back,” she countered, whimpering when I pushed my fingers in deep, seeking that delicate spot inside her.

“Not anymore, Laikyn.”

She whimpered, her hips jerking as I teased her G-spot. “Oh ... oh, fuck, yes.”

“I want you to say my name when you come.”

She panted softly near my ear, her cheek pressed to mine as she let me finger-fuck her on the beach.

“Rule ... more ... please.”

I granted her wish, thrusting my fingers as deep as I could, retreating, then driving them in again. She whimpered and moaned, holding onto me.

“Look at me, Laikyn.”

Tipping her head back, she met my gaze. Her eyes were glassy, her lips parted as she rode the sensations.

“Come for me, butterfly,” I whispered. “Let me watch.”

“Oh, God ... Rule...”

I loved when she said my name. I loved that she knew exactly who was doing this to her.

“Thatta girl. Come all over my hand.”

“Rule!”

Her cry echoed beneath the wooden structure, but she didn't seem to care. A homeless man was not too far off the beaten path, but he wasn't paying any mind to us.

I pulled my fingers from her pussy.

“Open your mouth.”

She did, and I slipped one finger at a time between her lips, allowing her to suck them clean.

“When we get home, I'm gonna fuck this sassy mouth of yours,” I whispered as I leaned in. “I want to bury my cock in your throat.”

Her response was a kiss that sent my blood pressure soaring and my patience unraveling.

It took effort not to come apart completely during the drive back to the house. Laikyn tormented me by rubbing my dick, grinding the palm of her hand along the denim-covered ridge while I attempted to pay attention to the traffic laws. As soon as I parked the car in the garage and the door closed behind us, I turned off the engine and reached for her.

“Don't you dare get out. I want your mouth on me now,” I growled, moving the seat back to give her room.

She was already working to free my cock from my jeans. I shifted so she could push the denim down, then reclined the seat while she went to work.

“Fuck ... that mouth.” I finger-combed her hair while she sucked. “You're such a good cocksucker.”

She shivered, something I noticed she did whenever I was vulgar. It turned her on, made her fucking wild.

“That's it. Deep throat me. All the way.”

I urged her with my hand on the back of her head, guiding her down. I didn't hold her at first, allowing her to set the pace. But as she brought me closer to detonation, I started pressing firmly, pumping my hips, using her mouth as much as she was using my cock.

“I'm gonna fuck your face, baby.”

She moaned around the dick lodged in her mouth, and I felt her relax, allowing me to take control.

I grabbed her head with both hands and held her, pushing her down while I thrust my hips, driving in deep. I groaned each time the head hit her throat.

“Fuck, yes ... Laikyn ... ahh, fuck yeah, swallow.”

She did, and the sensation shot me over the edge. I held her head while my cock spurted, and like a good cocksucker, she swallowed every drop.

Neither of us hesitated to get out of the car. We met at the front, our bodies crashing, mouths devouring. I maneuvered us into the house, kicking the door closed. We made it as far as the hallway before I crushed her against the wall. Her tongue thrashed against mine as I shoved my jeans down and tugged her panties to her knees. She kicked them off a second before I grabbed her ass with both hands and lifted her off her feet.

Her legs wrapped around my hips when I pushed her against the wall, using it to balance her. She pressed kisses over my mouth as I rocked my hips, attempting to get my cock where I needed it to be. It took some finessing, her pussy stroking my cock while I shifted, angling toward her entrance. I finally pushed deep into the silky warmth of her body. I gave her a moment to acclimate to the intrusion, then I unleashed the beast. I'd thought about fucking her again every single minute since the last. I knew the next time I got my hands on her, I wasn't going to let her go. As much as I wanted to pretend this was only about sating an urge, it was a lie.

“Oh, God, Rule. So fucking good.”

That was an understatement.

I couldn't get enough of this woman. She could get me off, and still, I was hard for her. I'd gotten used to it, the same way I'd gotten used to the tight, wet heat of her.

I wasn't gentle, pounding my lust into her body, forcing her to lean her head back so it didn't slam against the wall. I gripped her ass with one hand, her hair with the other, and

rode her until she screamed my name, then I made her come again before letting go for the second time since we got home.

## Laikyn

AFTER THE TRIP TO THE BEACH ON Saturday, Rule, Jinx, and I settled into a routine. Nothing overly domestic or anything, but we did seem to find a rhythm. While they worked, I spent time in my art studio. When they were home, I spent time with them. Jinx cooked because, as Rule told me, I was terrible at it. He was right. I was good at plenty of other things, so it didn't bother me.

“What's on the agenda tonight?” I asked as I helped Rule clean up the dinner dishes on Thursday night.

He'd come home earlier than usual, likely encouraged by the vulgar texts I'd sent him all afternoon. I hadn't expected him, so I was in my art studio when he arrived. My punishment came in the form of him forcing me to my knees and making me take every inch of his beautiful dick down my throat. While I was easily persuaded, I didn't make it too easy for him. It ended with us covered in paint and him fucking me from behind on one of the drop cloths. Afterward, we showered together, and he made me redo the blowjob, which I gladly did.

To say that the sex was even better than I ever imagined it could be was an understatement. I couldn't get enough of this man, and now that he wasn't holding back, I knew it was only going to get better.

Jinx wasn't holding back either, but I could tell they were attempting not to overlap too much. Last night had been my turn with Jinx. I'd timed his arrival perfectly, getting into the swimming pool as soon as I heard the sexy rumble of his motorcycle. When he came out, he found me naked. It took him no time at all to join me. Seriously, no time since he came into the water fully dressed. I climbed him like a tree, and he

fingering me to orgasm three times before I even had a chance to say hello.

“I was thinking we’d—” Rule’s sentence ended when his cell phone beeped.

I knew what that sound meant. A normal vibration required him to read and possibly respond. A beep meant he would be out the door within minutes.

He answered, then strolled into the other room for privacy.

I finished loading our dishes into the dishwasher as I exhaled my disappointment. I’d been looking forward to spending a little time with him. Although I craved his body, I genuinely enjoyed talking to Rule. I hadn’t learned too many deep, dark secrets about him during the month and a half that we’d been married, but I was getting to know him in other ways. He wasn’t as tightlipped as I expected him to be, although I figured what he revealed barely scratched the surface. Still, I longed for companionship.

Being here alone all the time, while freeing at first, was no longer a blessing. I was starting to miss interacting with the world the way I used to. I’d used this as a hiding place for long enough, and I knew my restlessness meant it was time to look for something to keep my attention. And I didn’t consider coming up with new ways to avoid my mother as a good way to spend my time. She was relentless, especially now that she was counting down until the fundraiser I hadn’t yet committed to.

I shut off the water as Rule was walking back into the kitchen.

“You have to leave, huh?”

“Yes.”

I grabbed a towel and dried my hands. “Do you know when you’ll be back?”

His eyebrows lifted slowly. “No.”

I tried to hide my disappointment, but I clearly failed.

“What’s wrong?”



I plastered on a fake smile. “Nothing. I’m just ... bored. That’s all.” I waved him off. “Go do your thing. I’ll—”

“Come with me.”

“Wh—huh?”

“Come with me, Laikyn.” He nodded toward the living room. “Go change. I need to leave in five minutes.”

I couldn’t contain my excitement. I ran over to him, bouncing as I pressed a kiss to his bearded cheek before running toward my room. It took me less than five minutes to pull on jeans and a T-shirt—I took my cues from what he was wearing—and slipped on my favorite Vans before brushing my hair out and pulling it up into a ponytail.

When I returned, I found Rule waiting by the door to the garage. A minute later, we were pulling down the driveway.

“Can you tell me what the job is?”

“A car was towed.”

My excitement fizzled out instantly. “Seriously? And what? You’re going to get it out of the impound?”

“Not exactly.”

A little fizz returned. “Whose car is it?”

“Rich Mulvayne.”

“No shit?” I laughed. “The lead singer of Diamond Heist?”

“One and the same,” he said as he drove.

“What happened? Was he driving drunk? Did he get into an accident?”

“There *was* an accident, but he wasn’t in it,” he said.

“You’re being cryptic, Rule. Just tell me.”

“His *friend* was driving. Ran a red light and got T-boned.”

“*Friend*? Is that code for girlfriend? He’s married, isn’t he?”

“He’s married,” Rule said simply.

“So his girlfriend was driving the car, got in an accident, and he doesn’t want anyone to find out?”

“Not a girl,” he said.

I stared out the window, trying to put the puzzle pieces together.

“Oh, shit,” I said when they all clicked into place. I shifted so I was turned toward Rule. “Not a girl, then must be a boy. A male lover?”

His dark eyes cut to me, but he didn’t respond.

“How do you fix something like this? There’ll be an accident report, right? The car’s VIN recorded and all that. It’ll trace back to Rich no matter what, right?”

“I need to get a few things out of the car, then we’ll pay a visit to the *friend* and ensure he understands the story he’s permitted to tell.”

“Please tell me you’re not going to rough him up.”

“I’m not.”

He sounded sincere, but I still had my doubts.

“Can I help?” I offered when he pulled up to the impound lot, which wasn’t so much a lot as it was a building. The cars were inside, which made breaking into it impossible.

“Depends.”

“On?”

“Can you distract the guy at the desk?”

I glanced toward the building as though that might give me an answer. “Probably.”

“Good. Do that.”

I peered back at him. “Really?”

“Show me what you’ve got, butterfly.”

That nickname caused my belly to churn like a swarm of them had been stirred up.

“Okay.” I took a deep breath and got out of the car.

I glanced both ways before crossing the street, adjusting my T-shirt as I went. I tied the bottom into a knot and bared my belly. I pushed the waistband of my jeans as low as I could get them before I sauntered into the building. I only hoped whoever was at the desk liked women; otherwise, my efforts would be in vain.

When I noticed two men working the desk—both older—I freed my hair from the ponytail holder, shook it out, then tucked it neatly behind my ears. It made me look more like a teenager, which was the goal. I figured there were two ways this could work. Either they'd find my youth and naivety endearing, or they'd find it hot. With men, it was difficult to tell which box they would fall into.

“Can I help you?” the younger of the two men asked without bothering to look up at me. I would peg him for his late thirties, maybe early forties. Not quite old enough to be my dad, but he could be someone's.

Another guy was behind him, sitting in a chair with a book in his hand. Behind him were several monitors with security camera feeds playing on each.

*Here goes nothing.*

I cleared my throat and summoned my inner Monica, forcing tears to form on my lashes.

“My car...” I stammered and sniffed. “Actually, it's my mom's car ... I wrecked it.” When they both looked at me, I amped up the drama. “She's going to kill me. I can't believe I did it. I just looked at my phone for one second and...” I let out a tormented cry and covered my eyes.

“Miss?”

“I'm sorry,” I said, dabbing at my eyes before lifting my head. I feigned a shudder and pretended to pull myself together. “My mom ... you might've heard of her. Her name's Monica Quinn?”

That got their attention because they looked at each other, and a smile passed between them.

“She’s...” I fumbled momentarily when I noticed movement on the bottom left monitor. It was Rule. He’d gotten inside the building and was weaving through the cars.

“How can we help?” the one who’d been at the counter asked as he stood up, prepared to save the damsel in distress.

I let the tears come again. “I wrecked her car. It’s not the first time. Maybe the ninth or tenth, I don’t know. She’s going to let them take my driver’s license away if she finds out. I just ... I need to get the car out. I can get it towed to a shop. They can fix it. She never has to know.”

I purposely rambled on as fast as I could, making it impossible for them to interject or look away. I discreetly glanced at the monitor, watching Rule and trying to keep them occupied. When the guy who’d been watching the monitors started to turn, I went all in.

“I can pay whatever I have to. I just need someone to help me. Or if ... you know ... if you don’t want money, I’m sure I can make a deal some other way.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes when they both looked at my chest. My T-shirt revealed nothing, but I was pushing my bosom forward in an effort to distract them.

And into the perve box they went.

I licked my lips and glanced between them, giving them big doe eyes filled with hope.

“She just can’t find out. I’ll do *anything*,” I pleaded, glancing between them.

“I’m sure we can work out a trade,” the younger of them said. “Right, Paul?”

“Sure. What’d you have in mind?”

On the monitor, Rule was slipping back out the way he’d come. As soon as he was out of camera range, I gave my audience wide eyes.

I sniffled. “Don’t you want to look up the car first?”

“If that’ll make you feel better, sure.” The counter guy put his hands on the keyboard. “Do you have the VIN?”

My phone buzzed in my back pocket. I held up a finger as I pulled it from my pocket.

—*All clear. Let’s go.*

“Oh, my,” I said dramatically. “That was ... the car’s not here.”

“Are you sure?” the camera watcher asked my boobs.

“I’m sure.” I pouted. “I’m so sorry to cause you trouble.”

“No trouble. Maybe you want to hang around for a bit.”

I smiled brightly. “Nah.” I clapped cheerfully. “My mom’s not gonna find out after all. Time to get to the next party.”

I added enough swagger to keep their attention as I strolled out of the building, pleased that I’d done my first job.

Not too shabby for an amateur.

\* \* \*

## Rule

“DID YOU GET WHAT YOU NEEDED?” LAIKYN asked as soon as she was in the car.

“I did. You have any problems?”

“Nope. Distracting straight guys is easy.”

Considering she still had her shirt hiked up to beneath her breast, I could only assume she’d used her sex appeal to distract them.

“Now what?”

I started the car and pulled out onto the road. “Now we visit the *friend*.”

She untied her T-shirt, returning it to its original state. “What did you get out of the car?”

I glanced her way and weighed my options. I could tell her outright and see her reaction or attempt to keep it discreet until we got to the friend's house.

"It was drugs, wasn't it?"

Looked as though I didn't need discretion after all. "Yeah."

"Do you do this a lot? Break into impound lots and help someone get their drugs back?"

"I'm destroying the drugs," I informed her.

"Oh."

"The point wasn't to help him get high," I explained as the navigation directed me where to go.

"It was to protect Rich," she said softly. "He'd go down for it if the cops found drugs in the car."

"He just finished a stint in rehab."

"I heard something about that." Laikyn drummed her fingers on the center console. "So why's he hanging around a guy who still does them?"

"Not my concern."

She turned toward me. "It should be, though, right? I mean, you're the clean-up guy. If he wasn't hanging out with the druggie, you wouldn't be slinking around impounds to steal drugs in the middle of the night."

"I do what they pay me to do."

Laikyn nodded. "I guess there are worse ways to make money. Is Rich Mulvayne a repeat client?"

"He keeps me on retainer."

She laughed, and the rich sound filled the car. "That makes sense. Do you have a lot of those kinds of clients?"

"Yes."

The navigation informed me that we'd reached the destination. I pulled into a gated apartment complex and typed in the code Mulvayne had given me. It took a few minutes to wind my way through to the building at the back.

“Can I go in with you?” Laikyn asked before I could tell her she should stay in the car.

I stared at her. I would prefer she didn't, but I felt bad telling her that, considering she'd already helped and she looked so eager to do more.

“Please,” she whispered with a sexy smirk. “I'll make it worth your while.”

I huffed a laugh. “Fine. But don't talk.”

She mimed zipping her lips before hopping out of the car. I led the way up to the second-floor apartment, knocked on the door, and waited.

The door opened, and a dark-haired kid answered. I realized then that this wasn't the same guy as the last time I'd bailed Mulvayne out of a hole. This one was a few years younger. Twenty-one, maybe twenty-two.

“Rory?” Laikyn said from beside me.

The kid's eyebrows slammed down, his forehead creasing with confusion. “Laikyn?”

She looked at me. “I know him.”

“I figured as much.” I sighed, then passed the small bag to Rory Bingham, the dumbass kid Rich Mulvayne was stringing along.

“Is it really you?” Rory asked Laikyn.

“Of course it is.” Her gaze snapped to the bag, then to his face. “What the hell are you doing with drugs?”

“They're not mine,” he whined.

She snorted a laugh. “No?”

Rory shook his head.

Laikyn reached for the bag. “Then you won't mind if I—”

Rory jerked the bag out of her reach. “It's not what you think.”

Laikyn pushed her way into the apartment. I followed, amused by the scene. More so by the way she dominated the

situation. The woman never ceased to amaze me.

“And what is it that I think, Rory?” she asked, scanning the room, taking in the mess.

“I dunno,” he said softly, eyes wide as he stared her up and down. “You look good, Laikyn.”

“I know,” she said sternly, then cocked a hip as she faced off with him. “Is this what my mom’s money buys? Cheap furniture and drugs?”

Her mom? I was lost.

Laikyn must’ve felt my confusion because she looked at me. “Rory and I used to ... date back in high school.”

Ah. Now I knew why the name sounded familiar. It was in the detail we’d gathered on Laikyn.

“I made the mistake of introducing him to Monica. She gave him a hand job. His parents threatened statutory rape. She paid them off.”

She made it sound simple, as though that was the shit she dealt with every day.

“It wasn’t quite like that,” Rory countered, his brown eyes shifting to me. “Laikyn broke up with me. She ruined me.”

Laikyn laughed. “I *ruined* you?”

“Yeah.” He dropped the bag on the table. “You did. I loved you, and you loved me.”

I looked over in time to see Laikyn’s lips twitch, and a sheepish expression slid over her face. She spun away from Rory under the guise of checking out his space.

“So now you’re fucking rock stars and doing drugs, huh?”

Rory shrugged. “He pays me.”

I shook my head and rolled my eyes. There were some things I didn’t need to know about my clients and plenty of things—like that little nugget—that I didn’t *want* to know.

“You want a drink?” Rory offered Laikyn.



“No.” She stepped closer to me. “Thank you,” she tacked on. “We’ve got things to do. But that”—she pointed at the bag on the table—“that’s bad news, Rory. You need to clean up your act.”

“Can I call you?”

Because I could tell she wasn’t sure how to respond without hurting his feelings or possibly sending him into a darker spiral, I put my arm around her shoulders and pulled her to my side.

Rory noticed the move, and his eyes widened.

“That’s not gonna happen,” I told him.

“Oh.” He glanced between us. “Got it. That’s cool.”

“Take a cue from Rich,” Laikyn said, leaning into me. “Get some help, Rory. You’re better than”—she motioned her hand around the room—“this.”

When she went to the door, I followed.

“Bye, Laikyn,” Rory said.

She waved over her head but kept going.

“So you and Rory, huh?” I asked once we were in the car.

She shrugged and smiled. “He was my first.”

“You loved him?”

“He thinks I did.”

“Why would he think that?”

“Because I told him what he needed to hear to get what I wanted.”

“Which was?”

“Sex.”

I started the car. “How long did that last?”

“We were together when I was kidnapped. It wasn’t the same after.”

“And your mom ... that really happened?”

“Oh, yeah. Monica’s a piece of work. I knew better, considering all the shit she’d stirred over the years.”

“Like what?”

Laikyn relaxed in her seat. “There was my third-grade teacher. She had sex with him in his classroom. Another teacher caught them. He was fired. She dumped him. There were actually two tutors, both college-aged guys. The first one she screwed when he was supposed to be helping me with trig. Three days a week for two weeks. I never had a single session with him. The other was smart enough to spend the hour he was being paid for with me, *then* proceeded to screw my mother. That lasted two weeks.

“Of course, we can’t forget my high school principal. She convinced him to leave his wife. The moment he did, she dumped him. He got fired for stalking her. Everyone hated me for that because the new principal was a royal bitch.” Laikyn sighed. “And then there was Rory. She *felt him up*”—she used air quotes—“which was the term we all agreed on. What she did was give him a hand job at the dining room table while they were waiting for me to come down. What they didn’t realize was that I *had* come down. The instant I saw that, I went back upstairs.”

I didn’t tell Laikyn that she had covered a good number of people on the list, but she’d left out several. I figured what she knew of was more than enough trauma for one kid to go through.

“Rory was a good guy,” Laikyn continued. “But he was freaked out when I came back. He didn’t believe me when I told him I wasn’t raped. He couldn’t fuck me after that, so I moved on. Too many fish in the sea.”

Yeah, I noticed that was her outlook on sex. Her senior year of high school had been inundated with numerous guys. Jinx and I had a list of the ones she *dated*, but I suspected some were for show. Even I noticed that Laikyn wasn’t the same girl she’d once been, although she clearly wanted to believe the kidnapping hadn’t changed her. Or, at the very least, she didn’t want to admit it.

“Don’t feel sorry for me,” Laikyn stated firmly.

I cut my gaze to her as we approached a red light. “I don’t.”

It wasn’t true. I had sympathy. Who wouldn’t, considering all she’d been through? But I was smart enough not to tell her that. Laikyn was strong, possibly the strongest woman I’d ever met.

Her eyes skimmed my face in the dim light from the dash. I couldn’t resist leaning toward her. When she didn’t lean in, I curled my hand behind her neck and urged her closer. I pressed my lips to hers and sparks ignited.

“The light’s green,” she mumbled against my mouth.

So it was.

“Where to now?” she prompted, sounding less forlorn than a moment ago.

“Until there’s another job, we go home.”

“We should go see a movie,” she said after a few minutes of silence.

“A movie?”

I could feel her eyes on me. “Yeah. You know. It’s a big screen where you can watch people act out a story.”

I barked a laugh. “I know what a movie is.”

“Just checking. With you, it’s hard to tell. You don’t really do much to have fun.”

She was right. I didn’t. Work and home. That was the extent of my existence. Before her, I would deviate from my routine on occasion to fuck someone, but these days, that urge was satisfied by the two people I had at home.

“What do you say?” She put her hand over mine on the gear shift. “Will you go see a movie with me, Rule?”

I didn’t pull away. And for the first time in my life, I didn’t want to.

“Yeah.”

The little squeal of excitement that burst from her lips was almost as satisfying as an orgasm.

Who would've figured?

## Laikyn

SEVERAL DAYS LATER, I WAS STILL THINKING about the impound lot. Every time I did, I was filled with giddy anticipation. I wanted to do it again. I wanted to go on another job to feel that rush.

Although I was pretty sure I'd done a satisfactory job, Rule didn't seem excited by the idea of me helping him, so I turned my attention to Jinx, hoping to wear him down so he would take me along.

It worked, but not the way I thought. Turned out Jinx didn't do those sorts of jobs. His involved computers. Hacking, mostly. And while I was impressed with his skills, it wasn't exactly what I'd been hoping to do, so I settled for pouting a little. And when that didn't work, I shifted into vixen mode, propositioning them at every turn.

"What're you working on?" I asked Jinx when I found him sitting on the outdoor sofa, his laptop in front of him.

Waldo was laid out on the ground closer to the pool, soaking up the mid-day sunshine, his brown coat gleaming. Now that he was used to me, he didn't jump up every time I came around. Sometimes, like now, he didn't even lift his head. Granted, if I called his name, he would hop up like it was time for a party, but I decided to let him snooze in peace.

"Anything fun?" I asked Jinx as I stepped up behind him.

He shook his head.

I peered over his shoulder, watching the screen as letters and numbers scrolled by in one of the many open boxes. It was a jumbled mess of nonsense. At least to my untrained brain. Since his fingers were moving over the keyboard, I had to assume he knew what he was doing. Not that it helped me.

“So I was meaning to ask you something,” I said casually, flopping down on the sofa and putting my feet out, tucking my toes under his thigh.

Jinx glanced my way briefly but turned his attention back to the screen.

“The other night ... when Rule fucked you out here...”

This time, his head snapped over, his eyes wide.

I flashed a smile. “Oops.”

Jinx’s eyes narrowed.

“You didn’t know I was watching, huh?”

His left eyebrow cocked.

“Yep.” I couldn’t stop smiling. “It was hot. The way he bent you over this sofa and railed you.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat. I couldn’t tell whether he liked that I was talking about this, but he hadn’t turned red, so he didn’t appear to be embarrassed. I was purposely being crass because I knew it was the only way to get their attention.

“I asked Rule if I could join next time. What do you think?”

Jinx’s eyes shifted above my head. I glanced over my shoulder to see Rule standing in the doorway.

Well, shit. I hadn’t heard him come in.

“What?” I asked Rule. “It’s not like I’ve got a lot to keep me busy. Unless, you know, you want to take me on another job.”

His eyes crinkled with amusement.

“It’s that, or I talk about sex. Your choice.”

Rule joined us outside, taking a seat on the sofa opposite the one we were sitting on. I shifted, draping my legs over the back of the sofa and letting my head hang off the edge, looking at him upside down.

“Is something wrong with your voice box, too?” I huffed when he didn’t speak.

Rule reclined back as though he didn’t have a care in the world, his gaze swinging to Jinx. I couldn’t tell if they were having a silent conversation, but they were obviously trying to get a rise out of me.

It was working.

I was bored to tears. Now that I had a taste of the excitement that was their job, I wanted more.

When neither said anything, I decided they would have to deal with my vulgar recollection of their private moment.

“It was an accident,” I told them. “I was in my studio, and after I cleaned up, I was gonna go to bed. Then lo and behold, what do I see but the hottest two men on the planet fucking. Right here.”

They weren’t indulging me, I could tell.

I continued, closing my eyes and letting the memory play again in my mind. “Rule, gloriously naked, standing behind Jinx. All those mouth-watering muscles on display as Rule pumped his hips ... fucking in deeper ... and deeper ... and deeper.”

I was starting to sweat.

“It was so fucking hot to watch, to see prime male specimens seeking pleasure in one another.”

My nipples were sharp tips poking at the fabric of my bra.

“All sweaty and slick, fucking without inhibitions.” I gasped, arousal flooding me in waves, drenching my panties. “I wanted to be right there, to hear the harsh rasp of your voice as you spoke in low, gruff tones.”

I opened my eyes to make sure they were watching me. I jerked upright and looked around.

They were gone.

The bastards.

\* \* \*

## Jinx

STANDING IN THE KITCHEN, I WATCHED AS Laikyn sat up, clearly surprised to find we weren't sitting there listening to her relay our encounter in graphic detail. I could still hear her. No way was I going to miss that, but I'd taken my cue from Rule, sneaking away when she had her eyes closed.

It served her right. My damn dick was iron-hard, and I knew there would be no helping matters unless I found solace inside one of them. And soon.

“Seriously?” Laikyn stood at the back wall of the house, her hands on her hips. “I knew you liked to run from a challenge, but—” She squealed loudly when Rule came from behind and picked her up off her feet.

“Hey! That's cheating!” Laikyn giggled, throwing her arms around his neck as he carried her toward the stairs. I followed, gesturing for Waldo to find a place because this entertainment was not meant for him.

“No one ever agreed to play fair, little butterfly.”

I wasn't sure when the last time I'd heard so much levity in Rule's tone. He was always so serious, so *hard*, but with Laikyn, he was no longer keeping himself cloaked in darkness. He was doing things I never knew him to do. Like, take Laikyn to the movies. I'd listened to her relay the story about how she convinced Rule to sit through *The Equalizer 3*. Hell, I was pretty sure he'd never seen the first two, but according to her, he'd been the perfect date.

Of course, perfect for Laikyn had involved the two of them fucking at the back of the theater. I'd had the distinct pleasure of hearing her relive it play-by-play in graphic detail. So I wasn't exactly sure how much of the movie Rule had actually seen, but to know he was letting down his guard some made him even hotter in my eyes.



By the time I reached the second floor, Rule had tossed Laikyn on the bed. She was laughing, her face lit up like the surface of the sun. She was so damn beautiful. And seeing her smile ... I'd never seen anything as radiant.

Rule quickly relieved her of her shorts and panties while she hurried to strip off her oversized sweatshirt. Her bra went next. Then she was lying on the bed like a wonton goddess eager to have us feast on her.

I didn't need to be told twice. Before Rule could figure out his next move, I elbowed him out of the way, gripped Laikyn's ankles, and pulled her to the edge of the bed. Eating this woman's pussy was the equivalent of feasting on a delicacy. It was a rare treat, I won't lie, something that didn't occur nearly enough, so when the opportunity presented itself, you could bet your ass I was going to jump on it.

I could feel the heat of Rule's stare as he stood behind me, looking over my shoulder as I spread her legs and teased her slick folds with my thumbs, admiring the soft, pink flesh and that tiny nub peeking out, begging for my tongue.

Before I leaned in, I looked up to see Laikyn watching me. Her gaze shifted between me and Rule and back.

"Lick me, Jinx ... oh, God, lick me."

I dipped my head, let my breath fan across her delicate flesh, and inhaled her rich scent. I licked her, savoring her taste and the soft glide of her flesh against my tongue. She sighed, relaxing as her knees fell wide, her pussy open and eager for my hungry mouth.

Rule surprised me, stepping up behind me, his legs bracing my hips and his hands sliding over my head. He was ensuring I knew he was there. As if I could ever pretend otherwise. I was aware of Rule at all times. Always had been. Ever since the very first day I met him. The years that had passed between then and now hadn't dulled my desire for him. If anything, they'd intensified it.

"I'm not sure I'll survive both of you," Laikyn whispered, propping herself up on her elbows and watching as I licked her

pussy. “But I’m willing to die trying.”

I purposely avoided her clit at first, easing her into it. Then, I grazed it a few times with the barest brush of my lips. Then my tongue. By the time I was sucking on the little pearl, Laikyn was moaning my name, trying to pump her hips.

Rule shifted away, but he never went far. I was aware of him undressing before he returned, this time standing at my side. His hand returned to my head, and he palmed it roughly, forcing me away from my feast so he could push his cock into my mouth.

Laikyn gasped as she tried to sit up.

“Down,” Rule insisted, pointing at her. “We’re not done with you yet.”

“But I want to see this ... oh, fuck, that’s hot.”

Her approval caused fire to lick at my nerve endings, my cock throbbing painfully against my zipper.

Rule looked down at me, meeting my gaze and holding it while he pumped his hips, gently fucking my face. His dark eyes glittered with something I’d never seen before. I was at a loss to name it, but whatever it was, I wanted more of it. I wanted him to let himself enjoy this. To enjoy me. Us.

Laikyn attempted to get up again, and this time, Rule stopped her with a hand on her chest.

“You’re an impatient little thing.”

She giggled. “Include me, and I won’t be.”

“Trust me, baby. You’re gonna get all you can handle of us soon enough.”

“Promises, promises.”

Rule released my head and urged me back to my original treat. I didn’t hold back this time, tormenting Laikyn with ruthless flicks of my tongue on her clit, loving how vocal she was.

“So good, Jinx ... God, you’re so fucking good at that.”

“Don’t finger her,” Rule said. “Only your mouth. Her pussy won’t get anything until you put your cock inside her.”

And I took that to mean he was going to fuck her ass.

I certainly didn’t have a problem with that. Being that Laikyn hadn’t had anal sex—something she confessed outright—it would take far too long to prepare her to take my ten-inch dick in her ass. Rule wasn’t too much smaller, but there was a better chance he wouldn’t split her in two.

When Laikyn was seconds away from coming, Rule put his hand on my head and stopped me. I didn’t need direction, but I understood his objective. He wanted her hanging on by a thread when we fucked her. It would serve as a good distraction for her first time.

I stood, but before I could pull my shirt off, Rule was there, doing it for me. I tried to hide my surprise, but the smirk on his mouth said he had noticed. He’d never undressed me before. In nearly two decades of fucking, we came together at the same time. He never coaxed me into it or vice versa.

His palms flattened on my stomach and glided upward, lifting my shirt. He took it off and tossed it away, his eyes meeting mine.

*I see what you’re doing.*

The slight tilt of his chin told me he was aware of my acknowledgment. Surprisingly, he didn’t alter his course. He continued, unbuttoning my jeans, pushing them down, then kneeling in front of me to get them off my legs. I stared down at him, and for a brief moment, I didn’t notice Laikyn’s presence. It was only me and Rule, his dark eyes glittering with passion. I gripped my cock at the base and angled it toward his mouth. I didn’t force him. I didn’t have to. He took me inside willingly, licking and sucking the head first before sliding down as far as he could until the swollen tip bumped the back of his throat.

“God,” Laikyn moaned. “I’ll never get tired of seeing that.”

Although I loved Rule's mouth on me, I wanted Laikyn's, too. As though he understood my intention, Rule pulled off me and nodded before getting to his feet.

I joined Laikyn on the bed, easing onto my back and holding my cock. She turned over, getting to her knees and giving me room to position myself on the bed. I propped my head on a pillow and gestured with my free hand for her to come closer.

For the next few minutes, as she bathed me with her tongue, I was in heaven. But it was only the beginning.

\* \* \*

## Rule

THEY LOOKED SO FUCKING GOOD TOGETHER. JINX'S lean, ink-covered body with Laikyn's lithe form kneeling between his legs, his cock tunneling in and out of her eager mouth. My body wanted me to move, but my brain was content to stand there and watch. My dick certainly preferred I participate, but I wanted to memorize this for all of eternity. When the time came that I no longer had this, I wanted to be able to reflect on it.

I shrugged off the thought. I'd promised myself I wouldn't dwell on the future. I'd done far too much of that my entire life. For now, I was trying to live in the moment. Until those ninety days were up, Laikyn needed me, even if she didn't realize it. That meant I still had another month and a half to enjoy this.

"Take all of him," I urged Laikyn, stepping forward and putting my hand on the back of her head.

I didn't apply pressure but guided her further each time she bobbed on his dick. Jinx was gasping for breath, his head lifted so he could watch as she sucked him, bathing him in liquid heat. I'd seen him look at me that way many times, but I'd never put much thought into it. I'd never noticed the pure adoration in his gaze or the reverence that accompanied it. He wasn't merely enjoying this, he was in heaven. Was that how

he felt when we were together? Did he want more than the physical aspect of our joining? I'd honestly never considered it an option.

Shaking off the thought because the last thing I wanted was to go down that road, I released Laikyn's head and retrieved a bottle of lubricant from the bathroom drawer. I considered getting a condom but decided against it. I wanted to fuck her ass bare. I wanted to feel her tight channel clasp my dick as I sank inside her one inch at a time.

My cock jerked with excitement as I returned to find Laikyn and Jinx in the same position. She was still sucking his cock, her hands sliding over his stomach, his chest, as though touching him was as exciting. It was. I knew because I felt that same excitement when I touched him. I'd just never considered it might mean more.

Again, I shrugged the thoughts away and joined them on the bed, kneeling behind Laikyn. I urged her forward, forcing her to release Jinx's cock. She repositioned so that she was straddling him, relaxing on his chest.

I massaged her beautiful ass, kneading the muscle and separating the globes so her pretty pink pussy peeked out between her legs.

It was my turn to feast, and I did. I started by tonguing her pussy, then sliding up to her asshole, rimming the tight little ring until Laikyn was moaning loudly.

"Rule ... oh, my God ... don't stop."

I tongued her hole, fucking into her, enjoying how animated she became as she tried to fuck back against me, eager for more. I gave her more in the form of my finger, slick with lubricant. While I fingered her asshole, I stroked Jinx's cock, moving in close so I could rub my shaft against his iron-hard length every so often.

I stretched Laikyn's back hole, taking my time, adding two fingers, scissoring them while Laikyn kissed Jinx, her body undulating over him, her soft moans filling the room.

"Please, Rule ... please ... fuck me."

“Here?” I asked, pushing my thumb into her stretched back hole.

“Yes. Yes. God, yes.”

I angled Jinx’s cock toward her entrance. “Put his cock in your pussy.”

Laikyn reached down, guiding Jinx’s cock as she lifted her hips. I watched as she slowly dropped down on him, his enormous cock disappearing inside her.

“Now fuck him,” I instructed, continuing to watch while I generously lubed my cock.

Laikyn began to lift and lower, her gasps and moans making my dick throb incessantly. Pre-cum spilled from the tip simply from watching his dick slide into her greedy little cunt.

When I couldn’t take anymore, I urged her down, her chest pressed to Jinx’s. She stopped fucking him, shifting to a gentle rocking motion as she whimpered and begged me to fuck her.

“Relax,” I urged when I pressed the head against the tight ring that was insistent on keeping me out.

I took my time, watching the way her back arched, her muscles shifting as she bore down, pushing back against me, trying to take me deeper. She was so fucking tight. I drizzled more lube over her asshole as I pushed in, easing the way even more when I felt the hard ridge of Jinx’s cock pressing against mine inside her.

This wasn’t the first time we’d taken a woman like this, but it was by far the most intense.

On one knee, I put my other foot on the bed for leverage, gripping her hips for balance, and began to fuck her. Slow and deep, I hissed at the sensation of Jinx’s cock brushing against mine, only a thin membrane separating us.

“Fuck me,” Laikyn pleaded. “Both of you. I won’t break. Oh, God. Fuck me, please.”

I met Jinx’s gaze over her head and nodded. He began to fuck her, alternating every plunge of my cock into her ass.

Time stood still as the three of us were joined as one, the pleasure consuming every inch of me.

Jinx's hand slipped between her legs, and I knew he was rubbing her clit, eager to get her off first.

“Harder!” Laikyn cried out. “Don't stop. Harder. Deeper.”

We gave her everything she begged for and then some. My thigh muscles burned, and I was on the brink of explosion when she arched her back, her asshole locking down on my dick as she screamed our names in rapid succession. I didn't hold back, letting the friction of Jinx's cock send me right over the edge as soon as I felt the heavy pulse of his cock inside her.

I pulled out and dropped down beside them, our sweat-slick bodies piled together.

“That was ah ... maze ... ing,” Laikyn breathed, her eyes opening to look at me as she rested her head on Jinx's chest. “We're definitely going to do that again.”

I laughed and rolled to my back. There was a good chance we might've met our match.

## Rule

EVER SINCE I GAVE MYSELF PERMISSION TO live in the moment, that was what I did. It mainly consisted of fucking Laikyn because she seemed to be under the impression we couldn't keep up with her. She was wrong. For the past three weeks, I'd fucked her every chance I got. Up to three times in a given day. Morning, noon, night, whenever she was willing, that had become the routine.

Laikyn was equally as eager, usually instigating it with a text message or when one or both of us would come home to find her naked, sometimes doing mundane things like cooking dinner. She was a terrible cook, by the way, but she'd made several attempts to improve ever since we'd started playing house.

And when I wasn't fucking her, Jinx was.

I never thought I'd say this, but it was a damn good thing there were two of us. Turned out our sweet butterfly had a seriously strong libido.

As her signs of cabin fever started to increase, I solved that problem, too, by taking her out of the house.

She called them dates, and technically, they were. I tried to vary them, not only taking her for dinner. We went to the Santa Monica pier and rode the Ferris wheel. We logged miles on the beaches, talking about whatever her inquiring mind wanted to know at the time. She forced me to go on a wine tour, and I hated it as much as I thought I would, which seemed to please her immensely. However, the treks she made me take through a variety of art museums weren't nearly as bad as I expected. Probably because she was so passionate about art. It was hard not to like something she loved. She even talked me into trying out the Escape Room experience. As it happened, I



wasn't the best date for that because it took me no time at all to follow the breadcrumb clues to the exit. Laikyn found it amusing. At that point, she started testing my knowledge, exploiting it in a sense.

And while I let myself enjoy my time with Laikyn, I had an ulterior motive. I needed her to be seen out in public with me, to be photographed as much as possible. That was also the reason Jinx hadn't come along on these excursions. It wasn't long after the first photographs leaked from our night at Chipotle that the tabloids started talking about Monica Quinn's daughter getting married. It didn't hurt that I had Rhyan and the twins following us occasionally to snap a picture or two that they would discreetly leak to the tabloids. Our frequent outings over the two weeks helped to fuel the flames until she became a *Page Six* frequent flyer.

But we still had another month before her ninety-day marriage requirement was met. I was starting to question whether I would make it that long before I did something stupid, like fall in love with the girl. Hell, there was a good chance I was already there, but I was pretending not to notice the signs. Finding love had never been a problem for me because I stopped looking for it after being let down so many times as a kid. With Laikyn, it was easier to hide behind the wall of lust that was proving to be a damn good distraction.

It helped that Laikyn was treating it like a game, trying to see just how far she could push me. I'd suspected she was daring, but I hadn't realized how much until she urged me to take our sexual exploits out of the house. And I didn't mean into the backyard. Unfortunately for her, she was far too vocal when it came to sex, so that didn't work out so well for us.

Not that I minded. I would take her anyway, anywhere, anytime.

And based on the scene in my kitchen, I got the feeling the next time was going to be now, here, and with her wearing whipped cream topping on her tits.

"What's this?" I asked when I joined Jinx and Laikyn in the kitchen.

Jinx was standing near the counter, leaning casually while sipping coffee, watching the naked woman splayed across the island.

He shrugged, and a smirk followed it.

“I want to go on another job with you,” Laikyn said, a hint of a whine in her voice.

“Yeah? I’m not sure that’s the appropriate attire for a job.”

“I can be dressed in under two minutes.”

I dipped my finger in the perfect mound of whipped cream covering her nipple. “With or without the stickiness?”

“Fine.” She turned her head and glanced between me and Jinx. “I just need to shower. Then I’ll be ready.”

I glanced at Jinx.

He shook his head.

“What does that mean?” Laikyn asked him. “Why are you saying no already?”

“I don’t think he’s saying no to you helping with a job,” I explained. “I think he’s saying no to you taking a shower right now.”

Jinx tapped his nose and smirked, confirming I was correct.

“Oh.”

“You clearly had a plan.” I turned to the coffee pot and emptied what was left into a mug. I slowly turned back around. “Show us what you’ve got.”

Her eyes heated, and she reached for a cherry from the bowl sitting beside her head. She dangled it over her mouth, looking at us to ensure we were watching before teasing the fruit with her tongue.

I leaned toward Jinx and lowered my voice in a conspiratorial whisper. “Is that all she’s got?”

“Hey!” Laikyn laughed. “I didn’t have time to practice.”

I huffed a laugh. “Is that what you do when we’re not here? Practice seducing us?”

Trust me, the woman didn’t need practice. She was perfect, exactly as she was.

“Maybe.”

“What exactly do those entail? Your practice sessions?”

She grinned wickedly. “You probably don’t want to know.”

She was right. I probably didn’t. Considering what she’d been doing with my shower sprayer the first time I caught her in my bathroom, there was no telling what kind of trouble she got herself into. Or what appliance she utilized to get herself off.

“So, can I go on another job, please?”

Before I could tell her I would think about it, her cell phone rang.

Jinx picked it up and looked at the screen.

“It’s Monica,” Laikyn said with a huff. “It’s the third time she’s called this morning.”

Jinx held up four fingers, correcting her.

“Whatever. I don’t want to talk to her right now.”

I understood her reasoning, but still, I had to ask. “When’s the last time you talked to her?”

Laikyn shrugged.

I raised my eyebrows and waited for her to give me a real answer.

She huffed. “She wants me to go to that fundraiser on Friday.”

I glanced at Jinx. His expression remained strangely masked. I could only assume that meant he knew something about it. I would have to ask him for the details later.

“It’s been on the calendar for a while,” Laikyn explained. “Before I met you, actually. She put me as her plus one, but I don’t want to go.”

“What’s the fundraiser for?”

“Mental health options for LGBTQIA+ youth. We go every year, but I usually insist *she* go, not the other way around.”

“Sounds like a good cause.”

“It is. That’s not the problem.” She huffed. “My mother’s the problem.”

“This Friday?” I asked Laikyn.

“Yeah.”

“She’s expecting you?”

“So.”

I glanced at Jinx. This could work to our benefit. A way to solidify that our marriage was solid and steady. Now that we were nearing the three-month point, it was imperative that we remained in the spotlight. What better way to do it than a public event that would have a nationwide impact?

Jinx obviously knew what I was angling for because he nodded his head.

I looked at Laikyn. “You need to make an appearance. If you need something to wear—”

She shook her head and sat up quickly, grabbing for the hand towel. “I already have the gown. What I don’t have is a desire to be anywhere alone with my mother.”

“You won’t be alone.”

She paused her tantrum to look at us, her eyes shifting between me and Jinx. “You’ll go with me?”

I wasn’t sure why she sounded so surprised.

“Yes.”

“You have to wear a tux.”

Based on her enthusiasm, you would think she was telling me I had to choose which limb I needed to cut off. Obviously, she knew dressing up wasn’t my favorite thing in the world, but I’d been known to do it on occasion.

“I’ll suffer through,” I assured her.

Laikyn looked at Jinx. “You have to come, too.”

Jinx’s eyebrow arched as his gaze shot to me.

“What? What’s that look for?” Laikyn asked, wiping the whipped cream off her breasts, but she didn’t attempt to cover her nudity.

“Jinx prefers quiet nights at home.”

“So do I,” she countered. “But if I have to suffer, both of you have to suffer.”

When I looked at Jinx, he gave a small shrug, which was the equivalent of leaving the decision up to me.

“Fine. We’ll both go with you.”

She smiled, then tossed the towel onto the counter.  
“Good.”

I watched as she started toward her bedroom. “Where are you going?” I chuckled and brought my coffee cup to my lips. “You haven’t seduced us yet.”

“The time has passed,” she sang merrily.

“Well, that’s too bad.” I meant it.

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten about working another job with you,” she called out, not looking back at us. “You can think about it, but you better have an answer before you get home. And it better be the *right* answer.”

“Or what?” I shouted back at her.

“You don’t want to know.” Her giggle followed her down the hall.

I looked at Jinx. “I really don’t.”

He grinned and shook his head in agreement.

\* \* \*

## Laikyn

AFTER RULE AND JINX LEFT FOR WORK, I puttered around the house. Waldo and I spent time out on the patio while I had breakfast. A meal that didn't consist of cherries or whipped cream. I still couldn't believe they hadn't fallen for that trick.

Then again, this was Rule and Jinx. They liked to keep me on my toes. They could pretend all day that they hadn't been affected, but I knew better. Their cocks made a rather distinct impression on the front of their jeans when they were turned on, and they had certainly been excited to see me.

However, they weren't as easy as I sometimes wished they were. Not that I had any room to complain. I was getting laid on the regular, so I didn't mind when they pretended to play hard to get now and then.

My cell phone buzzed with a text message from my mother.

“God, woman! Can't you just leave me alone?”

I gritted my teeth and read the message.

— **Laikyn, honey, I wish you would stop being like this. I deserve to spend time with my daughter.**

*Deserved?* That was my mother for you. She thought the entire world owed her. The good news was she'd stopped calling, but she hadn't stopped attempting to get my attention. I'd avoided all her messages about the fundraiser for the past week. I honestly wanted to skip it this year. Yeah, it was for a good cause, but I knew Monica. She always made it about herself. I expected no less this year.

“I really don't want to go to that fundraiser, Waldo.”

He lifted his head and watched me for a second before flopping back down to snooze.

“She wants to use me, I'm sure. Whatever she needs to get the attention she thinks she deserves.”

And in this case, I wouldn't put it past her to use my recent surprise wedding to her advantage.

Thanks to a rather gossipy gallery curator, I was trending on social media because of my impromptu marriage to Rule, the sexy, enigmatic Hollywood Fixer, as they liked to refer to him.

It was my fault for introducing him as my husband when I encountered her on one of my “dates” with Rule. I should’ve known better, but these days, I was enjoying married life, and to be honest, I’d wanted to put Rule on the spot simply because I could. Didn’t matter that he had played it off brilliantly.

That little tidbit of information didn’t stay within the walls of the art gallery for long.

The next thing I knew, I was being tagged on all my social media platforms as people speculated as to why I got married so quickly. Not to mention so quietly. Most of the rumors pointed to me being pregnant. Everyone was expecting me to start showing any day now. I even received a couple of DMs from designers of maternity clothes, asking if I’d be willing to wear their stuff. A couple of tabloids stated that I’d been dating Rule for several years, hiding the romance because of our age difference. One even claimed that I met him while working as a stripper. Where they’d come up with that, I have no idea. I’d never stripped a day in my life. Unless you counted the show I put on for Jinx and Rule last week.

So, yeah, that was another reason I was avoiding my mother. I wouldn’t put it past Monica to want to officially announce my marital status at this gala. It was precisely the sort of thing she would get excited about.

But I didn’t care what *she* wanted. What bothered me was that I knew my mother was responsible for my kidnapping, yet she hadn’t mentioned it once since I left. Surely, she knew I was aware since Rule knew exactly what she’d done. But Monica was doing what she did best. Pretending that whatever ill deed she was responsible for never happened.

My phone buzzed in my hand.

**— Please call me, Laikyn. There’s something I want to discuss with you. It’s**

**not about the fundraiser.**

“Do I fall for it, Waldo?” I asked the dog. “Do you think she’s lying?”

His head lifted, and I could see in his big brown eyes that he thought the same thing I did. Yes. She was most definitely lying.

However, there was only one way to find out.

I tapped her image, and it brought up her contact info. I pressed the phone icon to dial.

“Here goes nothing,” I told Waldo.

“Laikyn?” Monica sounded breathless and full of wonder.

“It’s me.”

“It’s you, honey. It’s really you.”

We’d already established that.

“It’s so good to hear from you, sweetheart. I’ve been thinking about you a lot lately. There’s so much going on. You were the first person I wanted to tell.”

“To tell what?”

“I’m getting married, honey.”

*Screeeeeeeeech.*

That was the sound of my world coming to a grinding halt. “What?”

“I know. It seems soon, but it’s not. You, of all people, know what it’s like. When you know, you know.”

I sat up straight, staring at the blank screen of the TV, waiting for her to enlighten me. She didn’t disappoint.

“His name’s Devon Ledger. You remember him, don’t you, honey?”

I frowned. The name was familiar, but I couldn’t place him.

“He’s an attorney. One of the best.”



Best what? Criminal defense? Family law? Bankruptcy?  
Entertainment?

I didn't ask her any of those questions because she plowed right through.

"I ran into him at an event a couple of weeks ago."

Meaning she instigated a meeting and made it look as though it was a happy accident.

"We got to talking about some financial matters I'm dealing with."

Meaning she made up a story to catch his interest.

"It's been a whirlwind ever since."

Meaning she seduced him, kept him in her bed, and convinced him they would live happily ever after.

"He proposed two days later."

Lovely.

"Aren't you going to congratulate me, Laikyn?"

For what? There wasn't even a tiny part of me that believed she would go through with this. I honestly couldn't count how many marriage proposals Monica had gotten over the years. Or how many of those she'd accepted on a whim only to renege later. Her only stipulation was that she waited long enough that it would seem like a betrayal for her to give the ring back.

Now that I thought about it, she could likely pawn that little collection—which she kept in a lighted jewelry display case—and get more than enough money to pay Rule the three million she owed him.

Monica was one of a kind, that was for sure.

"Congratulations," I said dutifully.

"Oh, honey. Thank you. That means so much to me."

"When's the wedding?"

"Saturday."

“*This Saturday?*”

“Yes. It’s going to be a small affair.”

By small, she meant there would likely be a couple hundred people surprised at the last minute by an invitation they felt they had no right to decline.

“I want you to be there.”

“I can’t,” I said before I could think about it.

Monica was silent, but I could practically hear her seething through the phone. She was expecting me to be doing cartwheels and showering her with love and admiration. She wasn’t going to get that from me.

Her tone went from gleeful flutter to harsh scold in a breath. “What do you mean you can’t?”

“I mean, I can’t be there. I’ve got ... plans.”

“What could *possibly* be more important than your mother’s wedding day?”

I choked on a laugh. “Are you serious right now?”

She spoke as though I hadn’t. “If you know what’s good for you, Laikyn, you’ll be there. You can tell Rule I said that. *Exactly* that.”

I frowned. “Rule has nothing to do with this.”

“He has more to do with it than you know.” Monica cleared her throat, and her chipper tone returned. “Oh, honey, look at the time. I really must run. I’ve got a date at the spa. Devon is taking me to lunch today.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll see you at the fundraiser on Friday night.”

It wasn’t a question but a statement. “Yes.”

“Good. We can talk more about the wedding then. Ta-ta.”

When the call disconnected, I lowered the phone to my lap and realized I was still staring at the blank television screen.

What the fuck just happened?

\* \* \*

# Jinx

I WAS SITTING IN MY OFFICE, STARING at the screen and watching the computer code drift by rapidly. I was running a program I designed that would pull Laikyn's name out of various databases I'd developed a back door into. Most of what I was doing was illegal, but the risk of getting caught was low, provided the program ran without hiccups, erasing all digital footprints after the fact.

I'd been running it for a few years without issue, so I wasn't worried. In the beginning, it was to learn whatever I could about her and relay that information to Rule. These days, it was to keep apprised of what was being said about her. I'd gone one step further and included Monica Quinn's name this time around simply because I wanted to know what we were walking into by going to this fundraiser.

My computer beeped, and another box opened, revealing the details of a marriage license that had recently been filed. I leaned in, positive I was reading it wrong.

Oh, shit.

I disconnected the laptop from the power cord and carried it to Rule's office.

"What's up?" He didn't bother to look up from his computer.

I walked in and set the computer in front of him, spinning it so he could see the screen. He glanced at it briefly, then looked up at me.

"What am I looking at?"

I pointed to the box.

"What is it?"

I waited for him to read it. When he did, his eyebrows slowly rose toward his hairline.

He leaned back in his chair. "Monica's getting married."

I nodded. That wasn't the problem.

I pointed at the screen again. It was who she was marrying that was the issue. But I figured it would only take a moment for Rule's ridiculously impressive brain to skim all those notes it had photographed over the years until he came up with—

“Devon Ledger.” Rule looked at me. “He's a family law attorney.”

I nodded. One of the best in the business.

I turned the computer around and typed a few words into the search engine before turning it back to Rule so he could read the article.

Devon Ledger was responsible for getting that pop star deemed unfit to care for herself after she was photographed at a party that was later reported to have alcohol. The woman had gone to rehab in her twenties, and there were no reports of her relapsing—not before then or at that party. However, with Devon Ledger's help, the woman's estranged father had used that information against her. The judge awarded the woman's father conservatorship over her fortune as well as her person. At thirty-seven, her right to decide for herself had practically been terminated.

After he finished reading, Rule looked up at me. “She wouldn't.”

I canted my head because we both knew she would. In a heartbeat.

“Fuck.” Rule leaned back in his chair. “What do you think we should do?”

I turned the computer around and opened a blank document. It was easier than texting.

SHE NEEDS TO KNOW THE TRUTH.

I spun the computer back around.

“The truth? About what?”

ALL OF IT.

I could tell by his expression that he didn't want to go that route. I didn't blame him. In the past couple of months, we'd built a good thing with Laikyn. Although Rule had never said anything, he was as in love with her as I was. Telling her the truth would rip the rug right out from under us. But if we didn't, there was a good chance Monica Quinn was going to do something drastic. I wouldn't put it past the woman. And I wouldn't put it past her to be doing this as a preemptive strike, waiting for the ninety days to be up before she went in for the kill. At that point, she would get her hands on the small fortune Laikyn's father had left for her, and there would be nothing Laikyn could do about it.

I typed another message and turned the computer around.

IF SHE WANTS TO AMBUSH HER, A MENTAL HEALTH FUNDRAISER IS THE PERFECT PLACE TO DO IT.

Rule shook his head. "I can't tell her. Not yet."

I nodded. Ultimately, it was his decision. Not mine.

"Get Rhyan in here," Rule instructed.

I left my computer on his desk and went to Rhyan's office. I knocked on the doorjamb to get her attention. When she looked up, I canted my head toward Rule's office.

"Oh, boy. What did I do now?"

She followed me back to Rule's office and stopped in the doorway.

He was skimming my computer screen and looked up when he heard us. "I need you to get everything, and I mean *everything* on Laikyn's kidnapping."

"I thought we had everything."

"According to Laikyn, the guy I killed wasn't the man in charge."

"Right." Rhyan glanced between us. "But we've been over this. I can't find proof that there was anyone else."

"Try again," Rule barked. "Find a connection between Monica Quinn and Javier *Whoeverthefuck*."

Rhyan frowned, standing tall. “Javier *who?*”

“That’s what I want you to find out. Laikyn mentioned her captor thought I was Javier when I rescued her that day. I can only assume it was Diggy’s partner or someone Diggy worked for.”

Rhyan nodded. “Okay. When do you need this by?”

“As soon as fucking possible,” he snarled.

Rhyan turned to leave, but Rule called her name.

“Everything, Rhyan. Don’t leave anything out.”

She nodded, concern glittering in her eyes. “I will. I’ve never let you down before, boss.”

She was right. She hadn’t. But I didn’t think Rhyan realized that she’d never had a task quite this important.

## Laikyn

IF I NEVER HAD TO GO TO another one of these fundraisers, it would be too soon.

When I was younger, I didn't mind getting dressed up for the cameras even if I was left to trail behind my mother because heaven forbid she get photographed with her kid. She absolutely wanted the world to *think of her* as the strong, stoic single mom who took Hollywood by storm despite having the hardest job in the world. However, the last thing Monica wanted was for the world to *see her* as a mother. She feared if they did, she would stop being seen as a sex symbol and end up cast in parts that she insisted she was far too young to play.

It never really bothered me because I preferred to remain on the fringes, out of the limelight. At times, I'd even enjoyed being pampered and getting dolled up and planted in a limousine, being catered to all night long.

That was before my kidnapping. The last one. The one that had altered my life.

I skipped several public events in the year that followed my return from captivity. My mother used my absence for her gain, letting the media know that we (not *me*, but the two of us because if it were only me, she wouldn't be a part of it) were having a difficult time. She assured everyone that *we* would eventually get over the trauma the incident caused and be better than ever.

Yeah. Uh-huh. She would, no doubt. Especially since she staged the whole freaking thing.

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. I refused to get worked up about it now. Tonight wasn't about me or my mother. It was about a worthy charity that didn't deserve the

drama that would no doubt accompany Monica's presence. If there were any good to be had, hopefully, it would draw enough attention to get the charity the funds it needed to continue doing its good work.

Of course, Monica was already ahead of the game because she had publicly announced this morning that she had some exciting news to share at the fundraiser. For the life of me, I couldn't figure out how her marriage—a cis female and a cis male—could have anything to do with mental health awareness for LGBTQIA+ youth. I was sure there was no correlation, but, as usual, it was a ploy to get all eyes on Monica. That was what she did.

Ever the dutiful daughter, here I was, standing in front of the mirror, going through all the routines my mother had ingrained in me throughout my life. Ensuring there were no visible blemishes on my skin, no marks that needed to be covered, that the gown was hanging correctly from all angles, that my breasts were accentuated but not the focal point, that my hips didn't look too wide or too narrow, that my shoes didn't have scuffs, that the diamonds in my ears and at my throat glittered appropriately in the light, and last but not least, that there would be no nipple slippage should I lean over or turn too quickly.

Again, if I never went to another one of these—

“Are you ready?”

I heard Rule's voice a second before I saw him in the doorway. I was looking in the mirror, so I noticed how his eyes lit up when he saw me for the first time. I turned slowly, giving him the full effect of the dress at once.

His breath escaped in a small gasp as his eyes raked over me from head to toe.

Maybe this wasn't going to be as bad as I thought. If I could put that look on his face, then it was totally worth it.

A moment later, Jinx appeared. Rule stepped to the side so Jinx could see into the room. His eyes rounded, and his lips parted as he looked me over.



*Okay, gentlemen, you are officially good for my ego.*

“Do I look okay?”

“You look...”

I waited for Rule to finish, but he didn't. He simply stared.

Smiling, I turned back to give myself one more glance in the reflective glass. Satisfied that this would do the trick, I took a deep breath and grabbed the small matching clutch containing my phone and the few makeup essentials needed to get me through the night.

“How are we going to fit in your car?” I asked Rule as I stepped out of my bedroom and joined them in the hall.

He was still staring.

I looked at Jinx and laughed. “Okay, boys. Mouths closed, eyes open. We've got places to be.”

Rule seemed to snap out of it, but I was positive there was a hint of color on his cheeks. Was he blushing? Because he'd been caught staring?

“Three of us,” I repeated. “One car?” I gestured down the front of myself. “This gown.”

“Taken care of,” Rule said, gesturing for me to walk.

When I reached the living room, Waldo got up from his bed, his eyes on me. For a moment, I wasn't sure he recognized me. I mean, sure, I looked different, but not *that* different. Makeup and a fancy hairdo weren't the equivalent of a mask or anything.

“It's okay, boy,” I told him, walking his way so I could pet his head. “I promise it won't be an everyday occurrence.”

I stood tall and turned to look at Jinx and Rule, now that they weren't crammed together in the hallway.

They were both dressed to the nines, something I'd never seen before, and I realized that if I looked half as good as they did, it was no wonder they were speechless. For the benefit of humankind, there should be a law that men had to dress up in tuxedos at least once or twice a year so that women could ogle

them and reignite their reproductive systems. My ovaries were certainly dancing.

Rule's phone buzzed.

When he didn't immediately reach for it, Jinx nudged his arm.

"The car's here," Rule said when he got with the program.

"Car?"

He nodded, then gestured toward the front door.

Jinx beat me to it, opening the door for me with a grin. I could definitely get used to this.

Parked in front of the house was a sleek black stretch limousine, the driver standing at the back door, awaiting our arrival.

"Good evening, Ms. Quinn."

I did a double-take when I heard a slightly familiar voice. From underneath his formal cap, Red Wally winked at me.

"Just Laikyn. No last name," I corrected, then winked back. "I'm married now."

"Yes, ma'am."

I stepped into the car and shifted to the far side of the seat. Rule and Jinx climbed in behind me, settling on the opposite side, neither saying a word.

I waited until the car was in motion before I relaxed. Or tried to, anyway. No matter how much effort I put into dressing up or how good my men looked, I wasn't looking forward to tonight.

Not even a little.

\* \* \*

## Rule

I'D NEVER SEEN A MORE GORGEOUS CREATURE in my life.

Laikyn looked good on any given day, but today ... she looked like royalty. With her hair swept up and her eyes accentuated by makeup, she was absolutely breathtaking. And the dress ... God, that fucking dress. It was an inky bluish-green color—not quite blue, not quite green—that offset her skin tone and made her green eyes appear darker than usual. It was demure by every standard with the wide V-neck that hinted at her cleavage without being revealing. The back was made of a sheer material that had a lacy floral pattern interspersed. It was obvious she wasn't wearing a bra.

And her legs. Lord, she had legs that went on for miles, and the dress showcased every inch because the satin, flowy skirt was knee-length in the front and almost to the floor in the back, even with five-inch gold heels that put her at Jinx's height.

She was stunning, and I wanted nothing more than to muss her up a little bit. But I wouldn't. Tonight was a big night. Not only for the fundraiser but also for what I had planned. Jinx and I had spent the better part of the week putting together a plan to cut Monica off at the pass. And the favor I'd called in was going to ensure that Monica Quinn was kept on the fringes of this event. I wanted to give her a small taste of what I was capable of and let her know I would fight her tooth and nail, regardless of whatever selfish scheme she had in the works. No doubt, she intended to undermine me with Laikyn, but I wouldn't allow it. Never again.

My phone buzzed. I checked the screen. It was the message I'd been waiting for, and I relaxed somewhat. I sent a message back and tucked my phone away.

By the time we reached the oceanfront resort where the fundraiser was being held, I was ready for the night to be over. It hadn't even started, and I wished we could turn around and go back to the house, shuck the fancy duds, and get naked. I'd spent the entire ride staring at Laikyn, absorbing her beauty, surrounded by her intoxicating scent. This was one of those times when a photographic memory came in handy since I would forever have this image of her in my brain. I would need it for the day Laikyn learned the truth and walked away.

But that wasn't going to happen tonight.

Through the tinted windows, I could see a line of limousines, but there was only one I cared about. Our timing was crucial for what I had planned. I tried to be discreet as I searched for the elaborate Hummer limo. By a stroke of sheer luck—or more accurately, Red Wally's ability to time things correctly—it was in front of us, inching around the wide fountain that served as the U-turn for all being dropped off.

“You look stunning,” I told Laikyn, wanting to ensure I said it at least once out loud.

Her eyes cut to me, and a shy smile formed. “Thank you.”

It took several minutes before we were delivered to our destination, and not a moment too soon. I was starting to feel claustrophobic.

“Take a deep breath,” Laikyn said, but I realized she was talking to herself.

Red Wally opened the rear door, and Jinx got out first so he could assist Laikyn. I followed, nodding to Red Wally as I buttoned my suit jacket and exhaled slowly. There were cameras everywhere, event photographers as well as paparazzi snapping photos, but they weren't focused on us. Their attention was on the group in front of us.

*Phase one complete.*

I offered Laikyn my arm to Laikyn, and she looped hers through. Before we started walking, she waited for Jinx to come to her other side and did the same so that she was tucked between us. I peered at him, and his eyebrows were lifted in question. I nodded, letting him know this was Laikyn's show. If she wanted to be escorted by two men, she would be.

The group in front of us stopped to pose for the camera. Or at least it appeared that was what they were doing. I knew Creed Granger was actually stalling, waiting for my arrival. It was timed perfectly because Monica Quinn was behind us, a GPS tracker on her car had let us know where she was, and, as planned, Red Wally had casually intercepted, ensuring we arrived first.

Creed's gaze met mine as we approached the doors. His smile was brighter than I'd ever seen it. Considering the hell he'd been through the past year, it was good to see my oldest friend happy. And there was no doubt he was, considering he and his entourage had just moved into their new house and were preparing for the wedding of the century next April.

Creed spoke to the woman on his arm, then gestured toward me. The tiny blonde turned, her gaze searching before a wide grin formed on her mouth.

"Who is that?" Laikyn asked, tugging on my arm as we moved closer.

"Creed Granger. He's the friend I told you about. We grew up together."

"And all those people?"

I glanced over at her. "It's probably best I let Journey explain that one."

"Journey? She's the teeny, little blonde?"

I chuckled, then released Laikyn's arm so that I could shake Creed's hand.

"Creed, I'd like to introduce you to my wife, Laikyn. Laikyn, meet my oldest friend."

"And when he says that, he's not referring to my age," Creed clarified.

"But he could be." The man beside him stepped forward.

Creed rolled his eyes and ignored the man.

"Jinx, how are you?" Creed said.

Jinx nodded, then shook Creed's hand.

Creed gestured to his left before looking at Laikyn again. "The beautiful one is Journey Zeplyn. The pain in my ass is Jacob Hawkins."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Laikyn said, nodding in greeting to them both.

Several guests were already walking around behind us to avoid the chaos that was starting now that Jacob Hawkins had made his presence known. Although he hadn't been on the UFC circuit in quite some time, recent events had brought his former championship titles into the spotlight, and Hawk was using the notoriety to get the spotlight on Primal Instincts, LLC.

"Is it true that all five of you are in a relationship?" one reporter asked, moving closer to Hawk as he steered the attention his way.

It was then Monica walked up, her lawyer fiancé at her side. Or rather, one step behind her. Heaven forbid she not be the center of attention.

"It's true, yes," Hawk announced as the reporters' interest was piqued by the very untraditional aspect of Creed's relationship.

"Let's take this inside, shall we?" I whispered to Laikyn.

She glanced around as though trying to figure out where she was. I took her hand and felt the tension in her arm when she noticed her mother was behind us. I didn't give Monica a chance to pull Laikyn aside as we navigated behind Creed's group as they spoke candidly to the reporters.

"You did that on purpose, didn't you?" Laikyn asked, her eyes wide as we walked into the main doors of the resort.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

She turned to me, grinning from ear to ear. "Yes, you do."

I touched her face before I realized I was going to do it. I almost told her it was my job to protect her, but I refrained. It was the truth, but for the first time, I didn't want her to think that was all this was. As much as I was still fighting it, I knew it wasn't. Not anymore.

"Let's get something to drink."

"And here I thought I was going to be a spectacle with two guys," Laikyn said as we headed for the grand ballroom. "Is she really with all of them?"

“Yes.”

“How does one tiny woman keep up with four men?”  
Laikyn mused.

I chuckled and looked at Jinx. “We’ve been working hard to keep up with one woman. How do you know that’s not the case with them?”

Laikyn blushed even as she smiled at both of us. “Thank you for being here.”

Her thanks weren’t necessary. I would’ve been here whether she invited us or not. Protecting her from her mother was my endgame, after all.

\* \* \*

## Jinx

ALTHOUGH I COULD TELL RULE WASN’T FOND of this party, I didn’t mind it so much.

Perhaps that was because Laikyn was sticking close to me, creating a wall between anyone who came to speak to her. She would introduce me and then dominate the conversation without having to tell anyone that I didn’t speak.

I didn’t mind that people knew. It was the people, in general, that I had an issue with. Anxiety was a bitch. More so when you couldn’t blame it on one particular thing. I was anxious in crowds and around people I didn’t know well. Tonight was no exception. If it weren’t for Laikyn being there beside me, I would’ve exited through the back already.

“You okay?” she asked, turning into me when some movie producer who used to work with her mother walked away with her husband in tow.

I nodded, holding her gaze.

“Would you dance with me?” Her eyes swept over my face. “You can say no if you’d like.”

I nodded. I didn’t know how to dance, but turning her down wasn’t an option. Not out of obligation but for the

simple fact I was in love with this woman, and if it meant making a spectacle of myself and risking becoming the butt of everyone's jokes, so be it. The past two months with her had sealed the deal for me. After the night we made love, I'd been falling deeper and deeper. There was no way out at this point.

"Nothing fancy, I promise," she said as she took my hand and headed for the outside edge of the dance floor.

It took a moment before I picked up her rhythm, but I knew the moment I did because her smile amped up a few watts.

"You're a natural."

I shook my head. I most certainly was not.

"How well do you know Creed? Squint your eyes for a little, wide for a lot."

I squinted, grinning at her attempt to have a conversation when only one of us could speak.

"Does Rule spend a lot of time with Creed?"

I shook my head.

"He said he was his oldest friend. I take it to mean they were in foster care together?"

I nodded.

"Did you know Creed?"

I shook my head.

"So he left before you got to the group home?"

I nodded.

Her eyes moved over my face. "Is it weird that I'm doing all the talking?"

I huffed a laugh and shook my head.

The next thing I knew, Laikyn leaned in and pressed her lips to mine. I didn't think anything of it. We kissed all the time. What we didn't do was kiss in public. We'd been building this entire foundation of her marriage to Rule, and now here she was, kissing another man at a public event.



“So it *is* a farce.”

I stopped, putting my arm around Laikyn and pulling her to my side as Monica Quinn stepped in front of us. Her eyes implored Laikyn as though she could figure out her deepest, darkest secrets that way.

Laikyn appeared unfazed by her mother’s hostile approach.

Laikyn’s tone held a hint of snark when she said, “Monica, I’m not sure if you’ve met Jinx.”

Her mother’s gaze snapped to my face, but I noticed the immediate dismissal. She didn’t know me, so of course, I was of no use to her.

A male voice sounded a second before he appeared. “Is there a problem?”

Fan-fucking-tastic. And then there were four.

“It would appear my daughter isn’t as in love as she claims to be,” Monica told Devon, the asshole lawyer. “Her husband’s still in the room, and here she is, making out with—”

I felt Rule before I saw him. His arm brushed mine as he stepped up to Laikyn’s other side. He smiled, but there wasn’t an ounce of politeness in the gesture.

When Monica’s eyes shifted to me, I ensured she saw my wry amusement.

“Sorry about that,” Rule said, taking Laikyn’s other arm. “I needed to speak with Journey before she makes their big announcement.”

“What announcement?” Monica asked, her tone haughty, her initial argument forgotten. “The only person making an announcement tonight is me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Rule glanced between Monica and Devon. “I didn’t realize you were making a large donation to this charity.” He leaned in as though telling a state secret. “In case you’re wondering, theirs is easily six figures. You’ll need to go big or go home.”

Monica peered over at Devon, and I could practically see the calculation taking place in her brain.

“We *are* making a donation,” she said, tilting her chin up. “At the same time, we’re announcing our upcoming nuptials.” She batted her lashes at the lawyer. “Isn’t that right, honey?”

“Of course, dear.”

Wow. Hadn’t even made it down the aisle, and he was saying *of course, dear*. Match made in diva hell, I was sure.

“By all means, Mon, don’t let us keep you,” Rule said, dismissing her as we led Laikyn back toward our table.

“Six-figure donation?” Laikyn asked Rule.

“Eh. It’s really seven, but I didn’t want Monica to feel bad.”

Laikyn chuckled. “You do have uncanny timing, you know that?”

He winked at her. “I try.”

Yeah. Uncanny. That’s what it was.

## Laikyn

FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE NIGHT, I steered clear of my mother for the most part. I managed it effortlessly, I was proud to say. The more champagne I sipped, the easier it became to chat with people I didn't know. Whenever I saw my mother looking my way, I ensured I wasn't alone, exchanging pleasantries with everyone I encountered.

Granted, I didn't think my mother tried too hard to get my attention. She spent the first part of the night focused on making her big announcement. Although she tried to get Journey to go first, Creed Granger proved far more formidable than my mother had anticipated. He'd politely insisted that Monica take the stage first, being that she was Hollywood royalty.

Yes, he actually said that, using the exact words that would feed her ego. It was then I decided I liked him.

And it was definitely a good thing that my mother went first. While Monica had received a congratulatory clap for her one hundred thousand dollar donation that she overshadowed with her speech about her upcoming marriage to Devon Ledger, it would've landed on deaf ears if she'd attempted to go *after* Journey.

Journey had given a heartfelt speech about their dedication to the community and their ongoing support of LGBTQIA+ initiatives and had proudly announced Primal Instincts, LLC, would match the overall fundraising amount dollar for dollar. Considering they'd already raised close to a million dollars, Journey had pleaded for them to reach deeper into their pockets for more.

I liked her.

I mean, my first impression of her hadn't been positive. She was one of those flouncy little blondes that irritate me. Or so I'd thought. Within two minutes of talking to her, I realized how horrible my preconceived assumption had been. Sure, she was blonde, but she wasn't a tart. She was sweet and kind and a little chaotic, which I happened to connect with. Our too-brief conversation had concluded with a promise that we would meet for lunch soon. Something told me she'd been sincere in making the offer, and I was looking forward to it.

I was also looking forward to going home. But not before I went to the ladies' room. If I didn't, I was going to create quite a mess in the limo. I'd had one too many glasses of champagne—I lost count after five—and now my bladder was causing a ruckus.

"I'll be back in a minute," I told Rule and Jinx as they sat on opposite sides of me. "I'm going to the restroom."

As soon as they heard that, they relaxed in their seats.

I slipped out through one of the side doors and hurried down the hall. Thankfully, they had enough facilities to accommodate a crowd this size, so there was no wait. I took care of business, washed my hands, and tidied up my lipstick before heading back.

As I was nearing the side entry to the ballroom, the decibel level rose, so I took that to mean they'd concluded the official part of the evening and were leaving people to their own devices once more. I was grateful. It meant we would be able to slip out without anyone noticing.

I'd just stepped into the room, looking through the throng of people for Rule and Jinx, when my mother came strutting toward me, her expression hard.

She'd been waiting for me, no doubt.

"We need to talk, young lady."

As I mentioned before, there was a reason I didn't call her Mom, and it wasn't entirely because she didn't want me to. It was because she didn't act like a mother. I could count on one hand the number of times she'd scolded me in an authoritative

manner. Needless to say, her harsh tone was out of character for the woman who wanted everyone to like her.

“You don’t want to cause a scene, Monica,” I told her, keeping my voice low.

She glanced around, clearly looking to see if someone was watching us. No one was, unfortunately.

“We need to talk,” she said sternly, taking me by the arm and steering me toward the ballroom’s private terrace. The night was cool, which was likely why we were the only two people out there. I attempted to stop near the doors where the wind wasn’t quite so brutal, but Monica tightened her grip and pulled me toward the center.

“What are you doing?” I asked when she pulled me about a foot to the left as though positioning me on my mark.

Right before my eyes, she fell into character. I mean, I don’t think she realized I would notice the change in her demeanor, but she was my mother. I’d watched her perform many different roles over the years, and when she was preparing, she did this little head shake thing and relaxed her shoulders before tipping her chin up.

Exactly what she did now before she said, “I don’t know what it is you think you’re doing, but it needs to stop.”

Although her words were directed at me, her attention appeared elsewhere. She continued to glance at the doors as though she was expecting someone to appear.

I stared at her, confused. “What are you talking about?”

“This sham of a marriage.” Monica’s gaze shot to the doors, back to me. “It’s obvious why you’re doing it.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Enlighten me.”

Again, to the doors, then back to me. “I don’t even think your marriage is legal, Laikyn.”

“What? Of course it’s legal. We had a ceremony and everything.”

She looked skeptical, but again, she seemed more worried about someone coming.

“What is this really about?” I asked, leaning over in an attempt to get her to pay attention to me.

Before she could say anything, Rule and Jinx appeared, their expressions dark.

“You’re excused,” Monica told them with a flutter of her hand. “She doesn’t need your interference.”

I found it interesting that my mother was so enraged by their appearance. In fact, I found her entire demeanor tonight interesting. There was no doubt in my mind she was up to something, but I couldn’t imagine what. Well, besides the obvious. She had to have a damn good reason to be marrying Devon Ledger. With her, it always came back to two things: money or fame. Sometimes both.

“I think it’s time you come home, Laikyn,” Monica said, turning toward me and squaring her shoulders.

Gone was the scolding, frustrated woman from a moment ago. In her place, the well-trained actress who knew how to put on a good show, effortlessly stepping into the new scene.

“I’m not coming home.”

She sighed heavily and put her hand over her heart. Monica leaned in, worry etched at the corner of her eyes. She was putting on a damn good performance; I would give her that.

“Oh, Laikyn, honey.” She put her hand gently on my wrist. “I know you’re having fun playing grown-up for a bit. It’s the first time you’ve been able to since...”

“Since...?” I prompted.

Cue dramatic sigh.

*Lord, help me.*

Monica shook her head, forcing herself to keep going, playing it off as though it pained her to do so. “I don’t think

you're well enough to make the decisions you've been making."

"Excuse me?" I looked at Jinx and Rule, then back to Monica. "You don't think I'm *well*?"

"We can get you help."

"First of all, who's *we*?" I frowned. "And two, help for *what*?"

"It's obvious your ... incident ... a few years ago has caused some ... mental instability."

She was fucking serious.

I snorted. "My *incident*? You mean when I was kidnapped."

"Oh, honey." The lines on her face deepened with her melodrama. "You don't need to rehash it now. It's important that you talk about it, but I think it's best—" Her gaze swung to the doors again. "It's best that you speak with a professional. Someone who can get you the treatment you need."

If I didn't know my mother better, I might've thought she was sincere. But this ... this was her play, and she was the star.

"Do you want to do this now?" I prompted, nodding my chin toward the man trying to record this conversation discreetly. "Because what I have to say, you probably don't want to go public."

Monica shook her head dramatically. "Nothing you can say will change my love for you, Laikyn. You know that. I just want what's best."

"Do you?" I stepped closer. When I did, Rule and Jinx moved closer to me. "Do you really?"

Her hand went to her chest. "What does that mean? Of course, I do. You're my baby, Laikyn. I don't care how old you get, you'll always be my baby."

Her acting skills were stellar. Too bad she was tipping her head to the side, likely in an effort to get caught in the best

light. That was Monica, always angling for the perfect pose.

“I know what you did,” I said harshly.

Monica shook her head. “Honey, we’ve talked about this. They’re filling your head full of lies about me. None of it’s true.”

I looked at Rule and Jinx. “I think she’s off her meds.”

“Like I said, Laikyn,” my mother continued, her voice loud enough to be picked up by that phone’s microphone. “We’ll get you help. There’s a hospital that’s got—”

I took a step back. “A hospital?”

She was far too calm, too calculating. “Yes.”

“A mental hospital, I presume?”

“Yes, dear.”

I canted my head and studied her for a moment. “Is there any chance you met Javier at this hospital?”

That name caught my mother by surprise, and she was unable to hide her reaction. Even that not-so-discreetly placed camera would’ve caught her soft gasp.

“Yes. I know what you did,” I told her, keeping my voice low. “I know you had me kidnapped. You thought the insurance company would pay you out. How much was their cut, *Mom*? How much of the fifty million were you willing to part with?”

Monica didn’t have a comeback, but I didn’t wait around for one, either.

“Take me home,” I told Rule and Jinx.

“Go on,” Rule said, stepping back so Jinx could take my hand. “I’ll be right there.”

I was seething as Jinx led me through the ballroom and out the front doors.

\* \* \*



# Rule

“SHE NEEDS HELP, RULE. YOU KNOW IT as—”

“You can lay off the theatrics, Monica,” I hissed, nodding behind her.

When Monica spun around, Red Wally gave her a little wave with the cell phone he’d been recording the entire conversation with. I was prepared for this exact scenario after Jinx warned me about the lawyer Monica was marrying. Considering his history with getting parents custody of grown children and their fortunes, it dawned on me that Monica would have the same endgame. She wanted Laikyn’s money, and what better way to get it than to have her daughter deemed incompetent? So I’d had Red Wally sticking close by, prepared to record whatever confrontation Monica set up.

“We recorded the entire thing,” I informed her. “Including the part where you asked your friend over there to get it all on camera. So, if you attempt to modify your recording, I’ll ensure mine goes public. All of it. Including the information I ascertained about Javier Escobar. You remember him, don’t you, Monica? The guy you paid to kidnap your daughter?”

“I didn’t pay anyone,” she hissed.

“I know. You merely *promised* payment. Fortunately for you, Javier’s currently locked up in a Mexican prison for another crime. He assured me when he gets out, he’ll be seeking one of two things: restitution or retribution. He said it was up to you.”

Her eyes widened.

“He’ll be out in three months, so you might want to change your address. And perhaps your name.”

I turned to leave, but Monica grabbed my arm.

“You can’t do this. You know he’s going to come for me.”

I shrugged. “That’s not my problem.”

“It might be,” she snarled.

“Why? Because you’re going to leak to your fiancé that you kill—”

“Stop!” She exhaled heavily. “Just stop.”

“Only if you do.”

“Fine.”

I knew it wouldn’t be that easy, but at least I had her attention.

She stood up straight and shook her chin and her shoulders as though gearing up for another take. I rolled my eyes when she inhaled deeply and then exhaled slowly before fluffing her hair. It really was all just a performance for her.

Eager to be done with this, I said, “I’ve got a proposition for you.”

She looked around again, ensuring no one was out there. Red Wally was still behind her, but the guy with the cell phone had been ushered back inside by Rhyan, who’d come to enjoy the festivities.

Her furious gaze slammed into me. “What proposition?”

“I’ll take care of Javier for you. In return, you’ll leave Laikyn alone.”

“Why? So you can take her money?”

“I don’t want her money. I’ve never wanted her money, Monica. You’re the greedy bitch, not me.”

Her affronted gasp made me grin. Damn, she seriously deserved an Oscar.

“I won’t let you turn my daughter against me.”

“You did that all on your own.” I moved closer and lowered my voice. “Give her some time. Once all is said and done, you and Laikyn can sit down and talk. I’m sure if you’re honest, there’s a chance for you to salvage your relationship with her.”

“And you won’t stand in the way?”

“My only objective is to protect her, Monica. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“Protect her from whom?” She clutched her throat, her eyes glittering with fear. “You think he’s coming after her?”

For a smart woman, she could be dense. “From you, Monica. You’re the one she needs protection from.”

When it was clear she didn’t know what to say to that, I turned to go.

“I didn’t mean for her to get hurt, you know,” she called after me.

I didn’t respond. I couldn’t. That lie might make her feel better, but it did nothing for me.

“Hey, man,” I said when I found Creed talking to Garrison Walker and Nick Weston, two of his partners in business and in life. “We’re cutting out, but I wanted to say thanks. You know, for your part.”

“It was my pleasure, brother. Anytime you need me, I’m here.”

“It was good to see you again,” I told Hawk and Journey.

“Don’t be a stranger,” Hawk returned with a fist bump.

“Same goes.”

Before I walked away, Journey threw her arms around my neck and hugged me.

“What was that for?” I asked when she pulled back.

There were tears in her eyes. “For saving his life. I’ll never be able to repay you, but if you ever need anything ... don’t hesitate to call.”

I nodded and turned away before there was a chance for her to see the dark stain on my soul. It had gotten darker the night I saved Creed from a crazy fucker. I didn’t lose sleep over killing that bastard, and I would do it again in a heartbeat, but it wasn’t something I was proud of.

Five minutes later, I was in the limo with Laikyn and Jinx and a bottle of champagne she had appropriated from one of the servers.

“I hate her,” Laikyn muttered before tipping the bottle back and taking a swig. “Why do I let her pull my strings like that? I’m her puppet. That’s all I’ve ever been.”

She continued to ramble between long pulls on the bottle. At this rate, we would be carrying her into the house.

“She cool?” I muttered to Jinx.

He shrugged, clearly at a loss for how to make the situation better. He couldn’t. I couldn’t.

I knew when Monica insisted that Laikyn appear tonight that she had an ulterior motive. After our conversation, I could only hope she would let it go for the time being and give Laikyn time to come to terms with what her mother did. I didn’t tell Monica this, but I figured she would need someone to lean on once Laikyn realized I’d manipulated her into this marriage and kept some crucial information from her. Hopefully, her mother would be there for her when that time came.

Laikyn propped the bottle between her legs and looked at me. “I need a distraction.”

“Okay.”

“Distract me, Rule,” she slurred, her glassy eyes molesting me as she licked her lips.

I relaxed and draped my arm across the back of the seat. “How would you prefer I do that?”

She shrugged and took another swig from the bottle. “You should kiss Jinx.”

I smirked.

“What? You don’t want to kiss him?” She looked at Jinx. “He doesn’t want to kiss you.”

Now she was being petulant.

“I never said that.”

“Then why aren’t you kissing him?”

Yeah. Petulant and intoxicated. Not a good combination for Laikyn.

“If I kiss him, I’m going to fuck him,” I said, keeping my tone flat. “I don’t think this is the appropriate place to do that.”

“Why?” She leaned forward. “Are you scared?”

“Yes,” I lied.

Her eyes rounded like silver dollars. “Seriously?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you talk too much.” She took another long pull on the bottle. “I’d rather watch the two of you make out.”

“Is that what you want? To watch?”

She shrugged.

“Or would you prefer to *be* watched?”

That piqued her interest because she shifted on the seat, her gaze jumping to Jinx and then to Red Wally, who was driving, before coming back to me.

“Who’s going to watch?”

Well, I knew it wasn’t going to be Red Wally. He had his own woman to keep him entertained, so I wasn’t worried he would crash the car due to the show. With the partition down, there was a remote possibility he would catch a glimpse in the mirror, but not likely.

“Trade me places,” I told Jinx.

He did so without so much as a curious glance. I was sure he was interested in where this was going.

I sat beside Laikyn. When she tried to turn toward me, I put my arm around her waist and pulled her into my lap so her ass rested on my cock, and her legs were draped on the seat. I kept my arm at her back so she didn’t fall as she got situated.

“Pull up the dress,” I instructed, taking the champagne bottle from her and passing it to Jinx.

There was a hint of hesitation, but she managed to drag the skirt of her dress up until her lacy white panties were visible.

“Pull your panties aside.”

More hesitation, but she was inebriated enough to see what I had in mind. She shifted the lace to the side.

“Spread your legs.”

She angled her knee outward, revealing the delicate pink flesh of her pussy.

I ran my hand up her leg, from knee to thigh, teasing until she relaxed. She watched me the entire time, and I could feel her breaths becoming more labored with every passing second.

“Jinx, you should come over here.”

He didn't hesitate, getting to his knees on the floor between the seats. His full attention was on her silky flesh, which was becoming wetter the more attention we gave it.

“This is cruel,” Laikyn rasped. “You can't tease me like this.”

“Oh, we can,” I assured her. “And we are.”

And we did.

For the remainder of the drive, we dragged out the torment until Laikyn was panting and begging for one of us to do something.

\* \* \*

## **Jinx**

“TAKE HER UPSTAIRS,” RULE INSTRUCTED AS SOON AS WE WERE in the house.

Laikyn dropped her shoes on the floor so she could stumble toward the stairs.

I reached for her, but she smacked my hand away, giggling. “I can walk.”

Barely. At this rate, she was going to go ass over tea kettle down the stairs once she reached the top.

When it took her two tries to get her foot on the second step, I solved the problem by scooping her into my arms. Her arms wreathed my neck, and she dropped her head to my shoulder.

“Why does she hate me, Jinx?”

I rubbed my cheek against her forehead. Her mother didn't hate her. Monica simply had her own issues, and sadly, Laikyn was the only person who was consistently there for Monica. I didn't think Monica Quinn meant to hurt her daughter. She merely made some foolish decisions.

“I want to shower,” Laikyn mumbled when I reached the top of the stairs.

I shook my head. She was too far gone for that. Within a minute, she was going to be passed out.

Setting her on her feet, I kept my arm around her as I helped her to unzip the dress. Wearing only her panties, she turned toward the bed. I patted her ass, urging her to get in.

Even drunk, she looked like a seductress going in for the kill as she crawled onto the mattress, her beautiful ass wagging as she moved.

“Make love to me, Jinx.”

Fuck. The torment in her voice nearly broke my heart. I wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed with her and love her for the rest of the night, but I knew it was only a matter of time before she would be out like a light. I wanted her to sleep it off, and hopefully, come morning, she wouldn't be too worse for wear.

“Here,” Rule said, joining us in the room. “Drink this.”

“What is it?” Laikyn muttered, her eyes mere slits in her face.

“Water.” He passed her the glass. “Drink it slow. And here, take these.”

Rule gave her two aspirin and stood by while she drank the entire glass of water.

“Lie back,” he instructed, pulling the comforter down so she could tuck her legs under it.

Laikyn was watching me as she got situated. “Are you leaving?”

“He’s not going anywhere,” Rule answered for me. “We’ll be right downstairs.”

She looked up at him. “Will you sleep in here with me? Both of you?”

“Yes.”

I figured that was the reason Rule had wanted her in his bed. It was the only bed in the house big enough for the three of us. Something we’d learned over the past few weeks as we’d settled into this new thing we were doing.

“Okay,” Laikyn muttered, her eyes closed and her head relaxing on the pillow.

In less than a minute, she had drifted off, her face relaxed, her lips parted. She was so fucking beautiful it hurt to look at her sometimes.

“Come on.” Rule gestured toward the door. “Let’s go hang out with Waldo for a bit.”

I followed Rule back downstairs, removing my tie as we went. I shrugged off my jacket and left it on the couch before following him toward the outdoor living space. We spent the majority of our time out there rather than in the house. I wasn’t sure why, but we both preferred it. A few times, back when we first bought the place, we’d even slept out there on the enormous lounge beds that lined one side of the swimming pool. I hadn’t understood why the previous owners had them until the first time I passed out face-first on one. They were quite comfortable, and sometimes you simply needed fresh air.

Rule brought a beer and a bottle of water with him, passing the beer to me before dropping down onto the couch.

I eased down beside him.



“I don’t know what this is,” Rule muttered, sipping his water.

I knew he wasn’t referring to what was in the bottle.

“I don’t know how long it’ll last,” he continued.

Me either. My hope of forever seemed like a pipe dream. Deep down, I knew Laikyn was going to be angry when she learned the truth, but part of me wished she would be able to see reason. The other part was terrified that she would, and this thing we had going would become greater than the three of us. I knew Rule wasn’t considering this a relationship, although, by all measures, that was exactly what it was. The three of us ... together ... it felt right.

“Whatever happens...” He glanced my way. “The ride’s been worth it.”

Yeah. It certainly had.

## Laikyn

“WHAT’S GOING ON?” I GROANED, ROLLING OVER and covering my head with Jinx’s pillow.

“Get up,” Rule said.

“Why?”

I didn’t want to get up.

Now that the weekend was over, I had to settle in for a boring week at home while they spent all their time working. After my drunken escapade on Friday night, we spent the rest of the weekend relaxing. At least, that was the word I was using to describe it. It sounded far better than sulking, which we all knew I had definitely been doing. No one had brought up the scene I caused at the fundraiser or the things my mother had said. I hadn’t heard from Monica either, and when I realized that yesterday, I asked Rule what he said to her after Jinx took me outside, but he told me it was nothing.

I seriously doubted that. When Rule spoke, he had something to say, and he didn’t mince words. Either my mother was too traumatized to call me, or he’d told her not to. Not that I really cared. I didn’t want to talk to Monica. In fact, I wanted to shut the world out and sleep for—

“Get up. If you want to go to work with us, get your ass outta bed.”

That worked. I sat up, the pillow falling to the floor, forgotten. “I get to go to work with you?”

“Only if you’re ready in ten minutes.”

“I’ll be ready in five,” I announced, hopping to my feet and scurrying out of his bedroom.

I stomped all the way down the stairs.

“Morning, Waldo,” I called to the dog as I skipped toward the hallway leading to my room.

So five minutes really meant twenty, but Rule and Jinx were waiting for me when I returned, showered and dressed. My hair was still wet, but I hadn’t been willing to risk them leaving without me.

“Sorry,” I said as I approached.

They were standing in the kitchen drinking coffee. As soon as Rule saw me, he held up a hand and pointed toward my room. “Go back and dry your hair.”

“You won’t leave?” I glanced between them both.

Jinx shook his head, and I knew I could believe him. Rule would leave me out of spite, but Jinx wouldn’t.

Probably.

I hurried back and took the time to dry my hair and apply a little bit of makeup. Nothing fancy, but for the first time in weeks, I felt optimistic. Sitting idle had worn me down, and I was ready to get out in the world and do something.

Something exciting.

Something dangerous.

Something that might get me arrested.

Okay, not really. The first two, sure, but the last ... I would prefer not to spend any time in jail. But they could use me for the simple stuff. Like a distraction for when they do the things that might land *them* in jail.

This time, when I returned, Rule was holding a travel coffee mug. He passed it to me.

“I don’t drink coffee,” I said.

“Good thing it’s orange juice.”

Smiling, I took the mug and followed them out to the garage.

I was actually going to work today.

Two hours later, I was wishing I'd stayed home. At least there, I had Waldo to keep me company.

"This is boring," I muttered to no one as I sat in Jinx's office and looked around at the nothingness on the walls.

Seriously. His office consisted of a desk, a laptop, and a chair. There was no art on the walls, no cute little trinkets on the desk. Not a pen or stapler in sight. I mean, I knew his job consisted of hacking—I'd ascertained a little in the time I'd known them—but I'd expected more than this.

"We're heading out!" Rhyan shouted.

She paused as she passed by Jinx's office door.

Leaning in, she smiled. "Bored yet?"

"To tears."

She nodded toward her office. "Feel free to hang out in there. I've got a deck of cards. You can play solitaire if you want."

Oh, yeah. *That* sounded like fun. A game that drove home just how *alone* I really was.

"Rule should be back in a few. We'll be back in a bit," she noted.

"What exactly is the difference between a few and a bit?" I asked, but Rhyan was already heading down the stairs.

A second later, Red Wally and Willy passed, both waving at me as they went.

This was not what I had in mind when I thought about going to work with Rule. I wanted the excitement of going to the impound lot and distracting the security guards while Rule did his thing. I didn't want to sit in an office. Alone.

Wait. I was alone. Like completely alone.

Which meant I could snoop without anyone looking over my shoulder.

I got up from Jinx's desk and dragged my hand over the wood top as I moved toward the door. I glanced at the ceiling,

noting the cameras that were mounted.

Were they watching me? Waiting to see what I would do now that I was by myself?

“Screw them,” I muttered, continuing out into the main area of the office.

At one time, it had been a house. The bones of it were still there even if the layout had been modified. They worked on the second floor, which I assume had been mostly bedrooms. There were three offices, two bathrooms, and a large area that held a table and chairs. I’d seen Red Wally and Willy at that table when I came in, both with their eyes fixed on their laptop screens.

When I asked why they didn’t have offices, Red Wally explained that they spent very little time in the office. Since Rule and Jinx had only been there for a few minutes, I figured the same went for them. Apparently, grunts didn’t get to go out on jobs, though, because they told me I needed to stick around here for the time being.

It was punishment, no doubt. They didn’t want me harping on them about going on another job, so this was their way of showing me their jobs weren’t as glamorous as I made them out to be.

I wasn’t buying it. No way would Rule or Jinx do this every day. They would go insane sitting behind a desk.

I stopped at Rhyan’s office door and peeked inside. She had a couple of pictures on the wall—both looked like she’d picked them up at a thrift shop or someone’s garage sale. There was a photo on her desk of her and the twins, all three mugging for the camera. They looked genuinely happy.

Too curious to play card games, I kept going, opening several closed doors to find small storage closets that contained envelopes and paper, along with extra staplers and shit. I grabbed one of the staplers and took it to Jinx’s desk. I left it there because, hey, it felt more office-y that way.

I headed for Rule’s office. The door was closed but not locked, so I opened it and stepped inside. His was the largest

of the three, but not by much. It held a desk, a chair, and a black leather sofa that looked like it had been slept on a few thousand times.

I went to the desk and took a seat, scanning the space. The walls were painted charcoal gray, the trim vibrant white, and matched the two-inch wood blinds covering the two square windows. I couldn't picture Rule working in here. Not for any length of time. He was constantly in motion. How could he possibly stop long enough to even need a chair?

On the desk, there was a telephone with multiple lines, but I hadn't heard the phone ring once since I got there. I figured their clients called Rule's cell phone since he was always looking at the damn thing.

Led by my curiosity, I pulled open the top drawer. There were pens, pencils, a couple of notepads, and a set of small gold keys, like the kind that would open a filing cabinet or something.

The other top drawer had a calculator, a handful of paper clips, and two large binder clips.

Boring.

I opened the bottom left drawer. It had the brackets to hang file folders on, but there weren't any, only two spiral notebooks, both brand new.

It was almost as though it was set up to *look* like an office but not actually used as one.

Continuing my quest to find something interesting, I opened the bottom right drawer. Or tried to. It was locked.

Hmm.

I pulled open the top drawer and grabbed the gold keys. Fitting one into the keyhole, I turned it, and what do you know, it unlocked.

Grinning, I pulled it open.

“Pay dirt.”

At least a dozen file folders were hanging in this one, sorted neatly with those little tags on the top of the folder. Names were written in neat, bold letters. I walked my fingers over the plastic tags, reading each one.

R. MU

M. QU

L. PI

A. LE

T. DU

Clients names, maybe? M. Qu was shorthand for Monica Quinn, I figured. I leafed through the scattered papers in the file. Definitely my mother, but there weren't many notes taken. Nothing incriminating.

“Boring,” I sang.

I was about to close the drawer when I realized there was one more file at the very back. It didn't have a name tag on it. I spread the folder wide and peered at the first page inside. I saw my name scribbled neatly on the top corner of what looked to be an application.

I pulled the paper out and skimmed it. It was dated September 26, 2023.

DNA results. 99.9% match. The name of the match was Doe, John, but aside from being male, there was nothing else to say who the person was.

“What the fuck?”

\* \* \*

## Rule

EXPECTING TO FIND LAIKYN PACING THE OFFICE floors, we returned a few hours later after taking care of an issue that came to light overnight.

That was par for the course on Mondays. It happened often enough, Rhyan had a pool for how many weeks in a row we

could go *without* it happening. Jinx won this time around, having predicted three weeks.

I couldn't count how many times I would get called by a desperate parent needing help covering up something their wild, unruly kid did over the weekend. In this case, a college senior who was slated to be a first-round pick in next year's NFL draft was joyriding with a couple of his friends. They hit someone on a dark street. To their credit, they didn't leave the guy there to die, but that was about the only noble thing they did.

It would take some work, but I had the ability as well as the connections to make the problem go away. Had the kid not stopped, I wouldn't have been inclined to help at all.

"Hey," I called out when I reached the top of the stairs. "Where is everyone?"

I was met with silence, so I frowned over at Jinx. He shrugged and pulled out his phone. He glanced at the screen, then shook his head.

"Yeah, me either," I told him, doing the same thing, expecting to find a text or a call from Laikyn. "Check the cameras, would you?"

While he pulled out his laptop, I peeked in Rhyan's office. She wasn't there. Laikyn *or* Rhyan. I went back downstairs, through the first-floor living room and kitchen. All empty.

Where the hell was she?

I pulled up her number on my phone and dialed. I scaled the stairs, taking them two at a time, back to the second floor as it rang.

And rang.

And rang.

"She's not here," I told Jinx as I made a beeline for my office.

My heart was in my throat as fear clutched me.

I opened the door and saw it sitting on the desk.



“Shit,” I groaned.

The DNA test with Laikyn’s name on it was on the desk, the gold key still in the drawer’s lock.

“Son of a bitch!”

A soft knock sounded on my door. I turned to find Jinx standing there, his laptop in hand. He turned it so I could see the screen. He had one of the video cameras pulled up. He tapped a key, and it started to play. It showed Laikyn sitting at my desk, grinning as she went through my drawers. It was innocent enough. Right up until she found those keys.

“I should’ve taken the fucking keys. Goddammit.”

I didn’t need to see the rest. It was obvious by that single sheet of paper that had been left out for me to find that she knew what I’d done.

My phone buzzed.

— **She’s at the house.**

“Let’s go.”

The drive to the house took far too much time. Traffic was a bitch, as usual. Not to mention, the universe was out to fuck with me. No doubt, by the time we got there, Laikyn would be gone.

“How can you be so fucking calm?” I asked Jinx.

His head slowly turned, and I cut my gaze to him. Okay. So maybe he wasn’t calm. He merely wasn’t fidgeting.

“I know. It’s my fucking fault. I should’ve told her already.”

We had this exact conversation on Friday night after we got Laikyn to bed. Jinx and I sat outside for the longest time, talking—well, I talked, he texted—about how we wanted to handle this thing with her. We had agreed it was time to tell her the truth about her father. Jinx wanted to break it to her gently so we stood a chance of getting her to listen to reason.

So much for gently. I royally fucked this one up all on my own.

By the time we got to the house, I was sweating, and it wasn't even hot. My breaths were labored, and my adrenaline was flooding my system.

*Please don't let her be gone.*

I didn't bother with the garage, parking the car in front of the house and following Jinx inside.

I came to an abrupt stop when I saw what he was looking at. Laikyn was sitting on the ground by the pool, her arms wrapped around Waldo. As soon as he heard us, he turned, and she sat up. She spared us only a glance before she turned away.

I approached slowly, Jinx right beside me. "Laikyn?"

"I don't want to hear it."

"Hear what?" It was a stupid question, but I needed to know where her head was at.

"I saw it. I knew you had an ulterior motive. I knew it, but I tried to convince myself it would be something silly. You're both just like everyone else in my life. Always out to manipulate me."

"If you'll let me explain."

"Fuck that." She glared up at me. "I don't want to know who my father is. I don't even know why you'd think I would."

Of course, she didn't realize there was a financial fortune involved. She thought I'd set out to find her father for altruistic reasons.

"I can't go back to my mother's, but I just need a day or two to find a place to live. Then we're done."

"Laikyn..."

She shot to her feet. "I'm done with you, Rule. And you, too," she snarled at Jinx. "I don't know why everyone in my fucking life thinks I can't handle my own shit. If I wanted to know who my DNA supplier was, I would've figured it out. It's none of your damn business."

I could feel Jinx's eyes on me. I knew he wanted me to tell her. It was the perfect time to do it. Once she was armed with that knowledge, she could do whatever she wanted with it.

But I couldn't. I couldn't bring myself to say the words. Once I did, Laikyn would be gone. She would disappear from my life and...

And what? And I couldn't live without her?

The thought pissed me off. I'd sworn to myself a long fucking time ago that I wouldn't depend on anyone for my safety, security, or happiness. People didn't stick around. They bolted when shit got too real. They disappeared because they only cared about their feelings. Laikyn was no different. She didn't need me, but somewhere along the way, I'd started to rely on her being here. Looked forward to it, even.

"You know what?" I huffed and headed for the door. "You do whatever the fuck you wanna do, Laikyn. I don't give a shit anymore."

It would only be a matter of time before I believed it.

\* \* \*

## **Jinx**

SHIT.

I knew this would happen. From the day Rule married her, I knew it was going to end like this. But somewhere along the way, I thought we could find a way to explain it so that Laikyn wouldn't think we were evil, manipulative bastards.

Too late.

"Why does he get to be pissed?" Laikyn snapped. "He's not the one who was lied to."

Technically, we hadn't lied to her. We'd omitted a few things, so perhaps different sides of the same coin, but...

Shit.

I started typing a message to Laikyn.

**— If you let him walk away,  
that's it.**

Her phone was beside her, so she didn't have to pick it up to read my message.

“I don't care. I'm done.”

**— I'm serious. Once he's  
convinced you're done with  
him, there's no second  
chance.**

“I don't want a second chance.”

Because I knew she was being petulant and didn't truly understand the gravity of what I was telling her, I crouched beside her, grabbed her arm, and tugged so she was forced to look back at me.

“I heard you, Jinx,” she hissed, jerking her arm away. “I. Don't. Care.”

I stood tall, sighed, and typed out one last message.

**— He's got abandonment  
issues, Laikyn. You really  
should think this through.**

This time, I didn't give her a chance to respond. I went inside to look for Rule. The good news was he had left. I mean, it wasn't good in the sense he'd run away, but it was better than if he'd come inside and expected one or both of us to follow. Since neither of us had, there was a good chance Rule would be on his way to another state to start a new life.

For some, abandonment issues meant they expected someone in their life to walk away. For Rule, it meant he expected *everyone* in his life to walk away. He lived on borrowed time with those around him. He was always prepared to shut someone out if he got the hint that they were considering leaving him.

I knew, with Laikyn, this was doubly hard for him. He wouldn't admit it aloud, but he was in love with her. Hell, I saw it when he was with her. I'd known the man since I was a

fucking kid. Never had he looked at anyone the way he looked at her. In the past two months, so many of his walls had come down because of her. He was a different man.

Unfortunately, at his core, Rule was the same terrified kid who refused to let anyone get too close for fear they would rip his heart to shreds one more time. It didn't matter that I'd gone to that prison to pick him up or that I'd spent every single day since with him; he still didn't trust me completely.

It was true, though. I would never abandon him. Not for anyone.

Not even Laikyn, and God help me, I fucking loved her. It would kill me for those two to go their separate ways. I didn't want to choose. I prayed to God I didn't have to. My soul belonged to Rule while my heart was split straight down the middle; half was his, half was hers. If they split now, so would I.

I headed for my bedroom. I needed a minute to breathe. Music helped, and that was usually where I sought solace from the chaos that stirred my anxiety.

When Waldo trotted along beside me, I patted his head. I knew he felt the tension, and he didn't like it any more than I did.

I unlocked my bedroom door and motioned for Waldo to go in. He hopped up onto the bed when I flipped on the light. As I was shutting the door, Laikyn appeared, her eyes narrowed. I knew she was about to blast me one, but I didn't want to hear it. I needed a minute or thirty.

I shook my head and tried to shut the door, but she put her hand on the wood and pushed. Since I couldn't very well argue with her, I gave in.

Only when I took a step back did I realize my grave error.

“Look, Jinx. I can't be the one who—” Her eyes went wide as she looked at the walls. “Oh. My. God.”

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

“You ... these...” She spun around and pinned me with a murderous glare. “These are mine.”

Technically, they were mine because I’d purchased them outright. But she was correct in the sense that she was the artist.

“When ... how...”

I swallowed and reached for my phone.

“That’s why you didn’t want me in here,” she said through clenched teeth. “You knew who I was before I met you. How did you get those? They were commissioned by—” She gasped, a shocked look on her face. “You had them commissioned for yourself. That gallery didn’t want my work. You did.”

I wanted to type a message, but I was scared to look away from her. I didn’t want her to disappear before I had a chance.

“I cannot believe this! You played me. You both did. What else don’t I know, Jinx? Huh? What else are you hiding from me?”

“What the hell is going on?” Rule’s voice sounded down the hallway.

Laikyn spun when he approached the door. She stabbed him in the chest with her finger.

“You’re a liar. You both are. I hate you.”

Rule looked at me, and I started shaking my head. I didn’t want him to let her leave. If she did, there was a good chance we would never see her again. He could pretend all fucking day that he was okay with that, but we both knew better. Letting her go would ruin us both.

I pointed in the direction she went, but Rule simply shook his head. “I’m done.”

Fuck that. Fuck him.

I shoved past him and stomped down the hallway to Laikyn’s room.

She was pulling drawers out of her dresser and throwing her things into the suitcase she'd brought the first night she stayed here.

“I can't believe I fell for this. I can't believe I let myself freaking fall in love with you.”

She wasn't talking to me, but rather herself, her attention on her task.

“I'm a bigger idiot than I thought. I mean, *gawd*, I *married* him.” She threw her arms up and turned back to the dresser.

I held up my hand, attempting to get her attention. If she saw me, she ignored me. I could feel Rule behind me, but he didn't intervene. He was going to let her pack her shit and leave.

“I knew it was too good to be true.” Her eyes narrowed, and she spared me a glance. “What I don't understand is what's in it for you. Both of you. It's got to be something.”

She didn't give us a chance to respond just continued to pack.

I tapped out a message.

— **Let me explain.**

Laikyn didn't bother to look at her phone.

— **Please. Just stop.**

She ignored that one, too.

“I am so done with men. I don't give a shit if they are good for sex. I'm fucking done.”

“Stop!”

Laikyn jerked back, shocked by the vehemence in the word. Or maybe she was shocked because that word and the sound to go with it had come out of my mouth.

Rule was suddenly there, his hand on the back of my neck. His eyes locked with mine, and he stared in wonder.

I wanted to explain. I wanted to tell them how I was feeling about this whole fucking mess, but when I tried,

nothing came out. My brain wouldn't command my vocal cords to work.

I swallowed hard and took a deep breath before marching into Laikyn's room. I grabbed her phone off the dresser and held it to her face, forcing her to look at my messages.

Her eyes were glassy with tears when she finally nodded.

When she took her phone, I grabbed mine and typed a message, this time to both of them.

**— You two need to talk, and I need a minute. Don't you dare fucking leave. Either of you.**

"Okay," Laikyn said, all her bluster gone.

I looked at Rule, wanting him to agree.

"Fine."

Trusting that they would be there when I came back, I went into my bedroom, closed the door, and proceeded to have a panic attack.



## Laikyn

I KNEW I HAD A BEWILDERED LOOK on my face, but for the life of me, I couldn't do anything but stare after Jinx in wonder.

He'd actually spoken.

Only one word, but it had delivered the same punch as if he'd read a novel.

And that one word had taken the fight right out of me.

Oh, sure, I was still mad. Pissed, in fact. But the word ... his voice ... it was on repeat in my head, and I wanted it to go on forever.

"Come on," Rule urged, gesturing down the hall. "We owe him this."

"He's really never said a word before?" I asked as my legs carried me in the direction Rule wanted me to go even as I twisted to see behind me, wanting to know if Jinx was all right.

"Not since I've known him."

"And you've known him for how long?"

"More than twenty years."

When we reached the living room, I stopped to look back down the hall. "Will he be okay?"

"Eventually."

"What's he doing in there?"

"Probably having a panic attack."

I spun around to face him. "Shouldn't we go in there?"

"Waldo's with him."

“A dog?”

“Yes. Trust me, it helps. I don’t know how, but it does. Do you want something to drink?”

“Maybe,” I told him.

“What would you like?”

“I guess that depends on what you plan to tell me.”

He exhaled heavily, his shoulders falling with what looked a lot like defeat.

“I’ll take wine,” I said before walking outside.

It was a nice afternoon. Not hot, not cold. One of those days that made me glad I lived in California.

And while the sun was shining and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky, it felt gloomy in a sense. Was that the weight of betrayal casting a haze over my existence?

When I first found that DNA test, I chalked it up to them wanting to help me. Yeah, I felt betrayed, but during the Uber ride to the house, I had almost convinced myself that it was okay. After all, I had admitted to Rule that I wondered who my father was and that I’d even asked my mother. Uncovering that detail could be his way of showing me he cared. Based on the test results, Rule knew who my father was, although I never did find a name on the test, so I was still in the dark.

But then I had time to think about it when I got home. To let the realization fester until I was so angry at him for not telling me about it that I was right back where I was when I found the test in his office. Seeing him had pissed me off more. But him walking out ... saying he was done ... that took the fucking cake.

Yet, I’d still been willing to hear him out. If and when he returned.

However, seeing those paintings on Jinx’s wall ... that had changed everything.

I thought it was a coincidence that I’d encountered Rule again. That him showing up to help Monica out of a jam was

just one of those glitches in the matrix. Maybe the timing was happenstance since I doubted my mother intended to actually kill that couple, but now I knew his presence in my life wasn't. Those paintings proved it.

And this was a case of which came first: The chicken (Rule sneaking off with my DNA to find out who my dad was) or the egg (Jinx getting those paintings from the gallery that had commissioned them)? And did it matter? Obviously, they knew something I didn't, and I felt like the world's biggest idiot.

Rule came outside carrying a tumbler of clear liquid and a glass of wine. He passed the wine to me and took a sip of the other drink. I knew it wasn't vodka because there wasn't any hard liquor in this house. He didn't drink. However, I couldn't help but think he'd somehow convinced his brain that a glass of Sprite with ice cubes and a lime worked the same.

He perched on the arm of the sofa and stared out at the swimming pool.

"Did you marry me under false pretenses?" I asked when it was clear he wasn't going to talk first.

"Yes." He didn't hesitate, there was no prevarication, no pause for him to collect his thoughts.

For the first time since I met him, I wasn't sure I appreciated his brutal honesty because, like it or not, that answer hurt. I felt a pang in my chest.

Keeping my tone calm, I said, "I want to know why. Why did you marry me at all?"

He glanced at me over his shoulder, and I saw something in his dark eyes. Pain? Regret? I couldn't tell, but he felt something. In fact, that might have been the first time I'd seen real emotion in his expression. Besides amusement, of course.

"I deserve to know the truth, Rule. If that really is your name."

He cocked his head to the side in that gesture that said, *Seriously?*

“Fine. It’s your name,” I conceded. “And the rest?”

“I always intended to tell you everything, Laikyn. I’ve been trying to protect you.”

I scooted to the edge of the cushion and angled toward him. “Protect me? By lying?”

“I haven’t lied.”

“Omitting your reasons is the same thing,” I countered, unable to hide my frustration.

“Maybe.”

“There’s no *maybe* about it. It is. You had an ulterior motive when you married me. Has everything else been a lie?”

Rule stood and turned to face me. He took a seat on the cushion, only a foot remaining between us.

“Like what?”

I shrugged. “Everything.” I waved a hand to encompass the house. “Whatever this is that we’re doing.”

His eyes narrowed. “What is it that we’re doing, Laikyn?”

Okay, now he was trying to piss me off.

“Stop repeating my questions,” I snapped.

“I want to know, too,” he said, no inflection in his tone.

“And you think I know?” God, was he crazy?

“You said it earlier.”

“What? I said a lot of things earlier,” I grumbled, taking a sip of my wine and setting the glass on the table. I needed to move. Sitting still wasn’t helping.

Rule’s gaze followed me as I walked around the sofa toward the pool.

For the longest time, I stood there, staring out at the water, trying to wrap my head around what happened, wanting to organize the millions of questions running through my gray matter.

They had secrets they were keeping from me. I was angry about that. But at the same time, I wasn't. I'd come here under the guise of working off my mother's debt. That was the agreement we made the night he came to her house. However, I wasn't an idiot. Even then, I knew that wasn't what this was. But I never bothered to find out. I'd put blinders on and allowed this to become my new life. Allowed Rule and Jinx to lure me in, to make me fall in love with them. I never cared what the circumstances were because I was happy. Happier than I ever remembered being.

I felt Rule more than I heard him. One second, I was alone. The next, he was there, standing behind me. He didn't touch me, but he might as well have because I felt his nearness like a security blanket.

"It wasn't supposed to go like this," he said softly.

"Like what?"

"You and me. You and Jinx."

"You and Jinx," I added because he had never acknowledged that there was something between them. A hell of a lot more than sating a biological urge. I saw it with my own eyes. They might pretend it didn't exist, but there was no denying it when they were together.

He didn't respond, and I didn't turn around to see his expression.

"Jinx told me that if I walk away, that's it. There won't be a second chance."

"What do you want me to say to that, Laikyn? That he's right?"

My chest felt tight. I was upset and hurt that they'd lied, but the thought of Rule cutting me out of his life completely simply because I needed time to process ... what if one day I did need to put some space between us? Would that be the end of it, then, too? Would I always be manipulated into ensuring I didn't push him too far? God knows I wasn't perfect. Never would be.

But how was I supposed to live like that? Loving a man who was always waiting for the other shoe to drop?

\* \* \*

## Rule

WHEN LAIKYN DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING, I KNEW I had to tell her the truth.

It was the reason I came back.

I'd been hell-bent on getting out of here and never looking back, but I made it as far as the office when I realized I couldn't do that. Not this time. I had to own up to this. Once I told her everything, she could decide what to do with that information. But I wasn't going to be the one to leave. I refused to do that to anyone.

"I first met your mother about ten years ago," I told her. "She'd been referred to me by a lawyer because she found herself in a predicament he couldn't help her with. Not even the best lawyer would've been able to help her with the damning evidence that had come to light. So when she showed up at my door and asked me to make the situation go away, I didn't bat an eye. She was Monica Quinn. She had money and fame, and I was building my business, so I figured helping her would go a long way to establishing my credibility."

"What did she need you to do?"

I took a deep breath, resigned to answering all her questions. "Your mother was having an affair with a sixteen-year-old boy. The son of one of the production assistants on the film she was working on. The boy recorded them having sex. He claimed it was personal, just between them. Unfortunately for Monica, he lived with his parents, and they suspected something was going on. They found the video and were threatening to have her arrested.

"She claimed the kid came on to her first, but I didn't care. Honestly, I didn't want to know. The only thing I cared about was finding enough dirt to use against that kid's parents to

keep them from filing charges of statutory rape. They were ready to.”

“Who could blame them?” Laikyn shuddered. “I know she came onto Rory. He was seventeen at the time. She had to pay him off, but I didn’t know there’d been anyone before him.”

According to the information I dredged up about Monica, she had a penchant for much, *much* younger men. At least now, she did. At one point, it had been the exact opposite.

“Anyway, I took care of that for her. She paid me, and I figured that was the last I would hear from her.”

“Until she called you to find me.”

This was going to be the ugly part. Thankfully, she hadn’t turned to look at me yet, so it made it easier to tell her.

“Your mother never called me to find you.”

This time, Laikyn did turn around. “But I thought—”

I forced myself to look her in the eye. “Monica called me and asked me to stage your kidnapping so she could get the K and R money from her insurance company.”

Laikyn took a step back, her eyes wide with shock.

I grabbed her arm, stopping her retreat. “I turned her down flat, Laikyn. I don’t do shit like that, and I don’t associate with anyone who does. I even told her the K and R insurance didn’t work that way. She didn’t believe me.”

Her fingers curled around my wrist, and she held on. “When was this?”

“You were fourteen.”

She shook her head. “Oh my God. I can’t believe—” She pulled away from me, taking several steps around to the side of the pool. “It wasn’t a spur-of-the-moment idea for her. She...” She continued to shake her head even as she looked at me. “She planned it for two years? What? Did it take her that long to find some miscreant who would do it?”

I didn’t know the answer to that, so I continued. “Rhyan had just started working for me then. I told her what Monica

said. She was appalled.”

“Can you blame her?” She ran one hand through her hair and covered her stomach with the other. “God.”

“She was also worried,” I explained. “About you. So I tasked her with keeping an eye on you to ensure you were safe.”

Her eyes glittered with fury. “How’d that work out for you?”

“We kept tabs on you for a year and a half. I figured since nothing happened, Monica realized it was a terrible idea.” I swallowed past the lump that formed in my throat. “Then, six months later, I saw on the news that you were missing.”

Tears started falling down her cheeks. I moved toward her, unable to resist. I pulled her into my arms and cupped the back of her head.

“I hired Red Wally and Willy with the sole intention of finding you. The five of us started tearing apart Monica’s life, learning everything we could learn to find you.”

She looked at me. “You felt guilty?” Her forehead creased. “But it wasn’t your fault.”

“I didn’t care. My only goal was to find you. After a week, I gave up being discreet about it. I had Jinx tap her phone, and Red Wally and Rhyen bugged your mother’s house. I needed to know what she’d done and how to get you back.”

“Why didn’t you confront her?”

“I didn’t trust her to tell me the truth.”

“Oh.” She pursed her lips and nodded. “I wouldn’t have either, I guess.”

“I didn’t know about Javier until you told me,” I admitted. “His name never came up. We found you because Jinx hacked into traffic cameras and followed what we hoped was the van you were in. We lucked out.”

“So you didn’t know there was a time limit?” she asked.

“No.” I peered out at the water. “Not until after.”



“You realize how close I came to...?”

I nodded. “I took care of him, Laikyn. Javier. He won’t hurt you ever again.”

“Did you kill him?”

I hadn’t. Not yet. I was giving him one last chance to prove he deserved to continue breathing. But if he fucked up, if he so much as came within ten miles of Laikyn or her mother, I would put a bullet between his eyes, and he would go into the afterlife with a hole that matched Diggy’s.

“I’ve got eyes on him,” I told her, figuring she didn’t need to know the rest. She didn’t need a dark stain on her soul like me. “But I promise he’ll never hurt you. I won’t let that happen.”

Laikyn’s soft “okay” was warm with trust. It was something.

“I’ve been keeping an eye on you ever since then. My whole team has,” I clarified. “It was an invasion of your privacy on many levels, but I won’t apologize. I needed to know you were safe, so we dug into your entire life. I knew who you were dating and where you went. I knew about your high school boyfriend and the guys you dated after you graduated.”

“You mean the guys I fucked,” she said, her tone snippy.

I wasn’t going to respond. She was angry and had every right to be.

“Our digging led to learning who your father was.”

Laikyn stepped back. “*Was*? You mean...? He’s...?”

I nodded. “Yeah. He’s dead.”

She put her hand on her throat. “What? Why?”

“Natural causes.”

“Oh.” Her eyebrow quirked in curiosity. “How old was he?”

“Eighty-eight.”

Laikyn's head jerked as though that knowledge didn't quite fit into the spot in her brain where she wanted to store it.

"Eighty-eight? My father?" Her tone was skeptical. "The man who got my mother pregnant?"

"Yes."

"He was like a sperm donor or something?"

"No. He was just ... virile."

"I'll say."

"You were three when he died."

Her upper lip curled, and her nose scrunched. "My mother was eighteen when she got pregnant with me."

I nodded, letting her do the math.

"So that means my father was in his eighties when he got her pregnant?"

"Yes."

"I'm kinda grossed out by that."

"Maybe that's why she never told you."

"Yeah, I'm thinking maybe she blocked that out. An eighteen-year-old fucking an eighty-year-old." She shivered.

"Your father is—"

Laikyn held up her hand. "No. Don't tell me. Not yet." She turned and paced. "Maybe not ever. I'm not sure I want to know."

Well, if that turned out to be the case, we were going to have a bigger problem on our hands.

\* \* \*

## Jinx

AFTER I CALMED MYSELF DOWN, I TOOK a shower. As hot as I could stand it. I stayed in until the sting wore off.

By the time I got out, I was sweating, and Waldo was still on my bed, camped out for the foreseeable future. He was watching me, and I knew he was waiting to see if I was really okay. I was. Mostly. The fact that I couldn't make my voice work again bothered me. I obviously had the ability to talk, but even when I focused, nothing came out.

I nodded toward the door, signaling Waldo that we needed to go out there. Like a snail, he slid down from the bed as slow as molasses, as though I might change my mind before he got to the door. He was a lazy one, that was for damn sure.

I took a deep breath and ventured out into the hallway. I didn't bother locking my door. It was pointless now. Laikyn had seen the paintings. She knew the truth even if she didn't know the facts.

Expecting to hear raised voices and arguing, I panicked a bit, worried Laikyn and Rule had left.

With his doggy eyebrows lowered, Waldo looked at me like I'd lost my mind. He turned his attention toward the back of the house, and his ears perked. A good sign.

I waited to see what he would do. When he finally trotted toward the backyard, I ventured out into the living room.

Laikyn and Rule were squared off near the pool. She had her hand up like she was telling him to stop talking. Her voice wasn't raised, but that didn't mean anything. Rule delivered his most terrifying words when his voice was low. Maybe she did, too.

"Thank you for telling me," she said, her tone rife with sorrow.

I felt a tightness in my chest. An ache that resonated due to my feelings for this woman and her utter disappointment in us. We had failed her. I knew we would all along. Even with the best intentions, we'd kept things from her and shouldn't have.

"I need some time, Rule."

I moved closer.

“I don’t want to leave,” she tacked on quickly. “I just need time to process.”

A huff escaped as relief swamped me. It must’ve been loud enough for them to hear because Rule and Laikyn looked toward the house. I stepped forward, not wanting them to think I’d been eavesdropping.

Laikyn rushed toward me, stopping seconds before she would’ve bowled me over.

“Are you okay?” Her cool fingers touched my cheek, her concern emanating from her.

I nodded because it was mostly true. I would be okay. Provided we could fix this. If I lost either of them, then it would be a lie.

Her fingers glided over my chin as she took another step closer. She smiled as she brushed my lower lip. “You can talk.”

I gestured to my mouth and shook my head.

“You can,” she said softly. “You just need to realize you don’t have to. Once you stop pressuring yourself, maybe it will come.”

Yeah. Maybe. I wasn’t going to hold my breath.

Laikyn stepped back and glanced over at Rule. He was watching us, and when our eyes met, I felt his tension.

With a short glance at Laikyn, I walked over to him. I reached for my phone only to realize I’d left it in my room. With no other way to communicate, I did the only thing I knew to do. I stepped up to him until we were so close a breath wouldn’t slide between us. I put my hand on the back of his neck and urged him forward, pressing my forehead to his.

“I heard you,” Rule whispered. “I never thought I would.”

Even if I had a phone, what was I supposed to say to that?

“I want to hear you again.” He tilted his chin and angled his head, his breath fanning my mouth. “And the next time, I want you to say my name.”

Never in my life did I expect Rule to tell me how he felt about me. I wasn't even sure he realized how much he'd revealed in that single sentence.

I kissed him. Softly, gently. It was the first time in all the time I'd known him that our kiss wasn't a prelude to sex. He hesitated only briefly, but then he kissed me back. And in true Rule fashion, he took control, his hand curling behind my head, holding me to him as he adjusted the angle and slid his tongue into my mouth. I'd only ever felt so much intensity from a kiss once before. And that was the night I made love to Laikyn. We'd been completely vulnerable to one another that night, which was the only way to describe Rule at this moment in time. He was stripped bare.

I kissed him back, keeping the urgency at bay so I could savor him for those few precious seconds. It wouldn't last. Rule didn't allow himself to be unguarded, so this was a rarity. There was a good chance it would never happen again, but for as long as I lived, I would never forget it.

When I pressed my hand to his chest, Rule covered my hand and held it over his heart.

"I don't like this feeling, Jinx," he said, his words a mere breath between us. "It feels too raw. I'm too exposed."

Yeah, well, that was the nature of life. Even when we do our best to protect ourselves from everything that might hurt us, there are times when we can't. This was one of those times.

But I wasn't going to push him. We had a long way to go before Rule accepted that he wasn't in this alone. He'd spent his entire life anticipating the moment when someone else would leave him. I'd proven my loyalty by being there every day, and I would continue to do so. Deep down, he knew that was true. Now, he needed to accept it.

I could feel Laikyn watching us, and when I pulled back and looked toward the house, she was still standing there, her heart in her eyes and a smile on her face. It gave me hope. Gave me something to look forward to.

It wasn't over. We hadn't lost her. Not yet, anyway. There was still time to prove to her that, despite the circumstances, this was exactly where she was supposed to be. Where we were all supposed to be.

## Rule

I NEEDED SOME TIME TO GET MY bearings, so I left Laikyn and Jinx at the house with the assurance that I would come back. I sensed that Jinx didn't believe me, but I was determined to prove to him that I wasn't the same man I'd been two and a half months ago.

I drove around aimlessly for an hour before I went to the beach. The same one I'd taken Laikyn to on our first date. I walked, and I kept walking until the sun was low in the sky. I replayed everything that had happened since the night Laikyn called me with Monica's request for help.

That was when it started. This shift. The one that I would've said was impossible before then. That brief call, her fear-filled voice, had triggered something. I couldn't explain it, but even if I could, it wouldn't matter. It wasn't like I could change it now. It happened when I wasn't paying attention. I'd fallen in love with Laikyn, and my love for her had cast a spotlight on my feelings for Jinx. My love for him wasn't new, but I'd never acknowledged it. At the same time, I'd never denied it either. I simply hadn't recognized it for what it was.

Now I needed to figure out what I was supposed to do about it. Was I supposed to cut open a vein and prove to her that everything I'd done up to this point had been for her? Would she even believe me if I did? I'd dumped a lot on her already. It couldn't be easy to learn that your own mother had spent two years attempting to stage your kidnapping, and when she finally succeeded, it had gone awry. Laikyn was good at pretending her mother's betrayal didn't hurt her, but deep down, she was.

As I drove back to the house, I pulled out my phone and dialed a familiar number.

“Hey, brother. How are you?” Creed answered on the first ring.

“I need to talk,” I blurted before I could think better of it.

There wasn't a second of hesitation when he said, “I'm at the house. Come by. Journey's out with Nick. Hawk and Garrison are ... otherwise preoccupied.”

That admission made me smile. I couldn't deny I didn't understand their relationship, but it seemed to work for Creed, and that was all that mattered to me. Even after all these years, I considered him the closest thing I had to a brother. Nothing would change that. Not time. Not distance. And apparently, not love.

“I'm on my way,” I told him as I flipped on the blinker to make a U-turn.

“See you in a few.”

That was about how long it took for me to wind my way to Creed's new house. I'd been here once before, back when it was undergoing renovations after they purchased it. Creed had called me out of the blue, wanting to talk. He knew that wasn't my favorite thing to do, but he'd had things he wanted to get off his chest. After what happened, after I'd killed the man who had intended to kill Creed, he wanted to ensure I was okay. With the exception of Jinx, no one in my life had ever cared whether I was okay. It had been weird, yet strangely satisfying.

I parked my car in front of the monstrosity that Creed now called home with his four business partners, who also happened to be his partners in life. Three were his best friends, and one was the woman they all loved. I admired Creed. Hell, sometimes I was envious. He'd made something of himself by pulling himself up by his bootstraps and forging ahead. His start in life was eerily similar to mine, yet he wasn't like me in the sense he wasn't waiting for the next person to leave. He didn't care. I did.

The front door opened as I was standing there, staring up at all the windows.



“Get your ass in here,” Creed rumbled, a hint of amusement in his voice.

I took a deep breath and resigned myself to telling him the truth. About everything.

Forty-five minutes later, Creed stared at me like I’d sprouted another head out of my neck.

“Knox Montgomery is her brother?”

“Half-brother. Yes.”

“And you know this for a fact?”

“I already told you I’ve got the DNA results.”

“And you’re just telling me this now?”

I frowned. “I didn’t realize I was supposed to keep you apprised.”

“He’s a *friend* of mine.”

“Yeah. So?”

“Jesus Christ, Rule. You can’t just spring something like this on someone.”

I wasn’t sure if he meant Knox or Laikyn, but I figured it was a little late for that.

“I need to talk to him,” I told Creed. “He needs to know.”

“The hell he does. He’s thirty-five fucking years old. You don’t just waltz in and surprise him with a long-lost sister who now wants a stake in his fortune.”

“She doesn’t know about the money. Not yet.”

Creed’s expression was dubious. “Really? You’re telling me Jeremiah Montgomery’s daughter doesn’t know she’s an heiress to a fortune?”

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you,” I said firmly. “Because she doesn’t know she’s Jeremiah Montgomery’s daughter. Fuck. Haven’t you heard a fucking word I said? I haven’t told her.”

“You said she found the DNA test. It doesn’t have his name on it?”

“No.” I moved to the balcony railing and stared out into the night. “I had it done discreetly. I didn’t want it logged into some DNA database and Knox find out about it before I could talk to him.”

“He’ll want to do his own test,” Creed said with a huff.

“He’d be an idiot not to, but I needed to know for sure. It’s not like I want to waltz in and upend his life on a hunch.”

“But you don’t have a problem upending his life?”

I stared at Creed, confused by his animosity. “You realize life’s not solely about money, right? I mean, I get that you’re richer than God, but shit, Creed.”

He barked a laugh. “Don’t pretend you live paycheck to paycheck.”

I glared at him. He was right. I didn’t. But it was different. He flaunted his money with the big house and the fancy cars. Mine was locked in vaults because the government wasn’t aware I had it. It wasn’t like I could take a payoff and deposit the check in the bank. The Feds would have a field day if they knew who paid me. They were nosy enough as it was.

I held my ground. “Sometimes it’s about family.” At least where Laikyn was concerned, anyway.

Creed’s attention shifted to the house, but I could tell he wasn’t looking at the structure. He was seeing something else.

“You’re right,” he finally said with a sharp exhale. “And you went about it the right way.”

I didn’t need his approval, but I was grateful for it. When I set out to do this, I had one objective. To protect Laikyn from her mother. I’d failed her in the beginning because I’d given up too soon. I’d taken Monica’s lack of action as a sign that she had reconsidered her idiotic plan. Laikyn had been kidnapped because I’d become complacent.

It didn’t matter to me that Laikyn wasn’t ready to find out who her father was. I refused to do this half-ass. She needed to

have all the information. Once she knew who her brother was, they could settle the family estate however they wanted to. And I would know I'd done everything in my power to make her whole.

“So, what do you need from me?” Creed asked.

“Three things.” I turned to face him, holding up one finger. “Use of your jet on Thursday.” I added a finger. “The nicest suite Knox has in that fancy-ass Vegas hotel.” I held up a third finger. “And three, a meeting with Knox Montgomery.”

Creed stared at me for a long time before he finally nodded. “Done, done, and done. But there’s one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m going with you.”

Great. “I suppose you’re bringing your entourage.”

He grinned. “It wouldn’t be a party without them.”

“Fine,” I told him. “But my one condition is that you let me talk to him first.”

Creed’s chin jutted out, and he gently nodded his head. “Fine.”

By the time I got home, I felt better and worse for what I’d done.

Once again, I was going behind Laikyn’s back, manipulating her life. I wasn’t used to feeling guilt. It wasn’t an emotion I was acquainted with. I did what I did without concern for the consequences. At least until her. Now I worried that this would blow up in my face.

Was I supposed to warn her ahead of time? Or did I surprise her? With Creed and the gang coming along, I could easily play it up as an impromptu vacation, a way to shake up the monotony of life. But then what? If Knox was open to meeting his sister, and I sprung that on her while in Vegas, Laikyn was bound to get pissed. I wouldn’t even blame her.

I exhaled as I opened the door and got out of the car.

I had a couple of days to figure it out. For the moment, I needed to assess the status of my relationship with her. And yes, I knew it was a relationship. It was certainly more than a couple of signatures scribbled on a marriage license. It wasn't a facade, no matter what I tried to tell myself. I'd let her in, I'd opened myself up to her, and she'd slipped under my skin when I least expected it. I'd gone my whole life without worrying that I would fall in love because I didn't think I had it in me. Then Laikyn came along, and I'd been relieved of the notion.

I was surprised and disappointed to find the house dark and closed up tight. A glance down the hall told me Laikyn and Jinx had gone to bed, both of their doors closed.

With a sigh, I headed upstairs but stopped when I heard movement. I slowed my pace and let my eyes adjust to the darkness.

"Waldo?" I crouched down where he slept by my bedroom door. "Jinx kick you out or what?"

He gave a soft, doggy grunt before dropping his head to the floor again.

"All right then."

I went into my room and pressed the switch. The lamps beside the bed came on, bathing the room in soft light and letting me see I wasn't alone like I thought.

Jinx and Laikyn were in my bed, right in the center, as though that was where they belonged.

*Was* it? Did they belong right there beside me every night? It was difficult to want them anywhere else, so perhaps it was.

Laikyn was curled up against Jinx, her head on his shoulder, eyes closed. Jinx was wide awake, watching me as I moved into the room.

"What's this?" I asked, attempting to sound nonchalant even though my heart was currently donkey-kicking in my chest.

His eyebrows popped, which translated to *what do you think it is?*

“Have you said anything more?” I asked because I couldn’t help myself.

He shook his head.

“That’s too bad.” I pulled my shirt over my head and tossed it to the bench at the end of the bed. “Maybe you need someone to persuade you.”

His head tilted, and a sexy grin pulled at his mouth.

As I toed off my shoes, he pushed the blanket down, uncovering his steel-hard erection.

“Don’t pretend that’s my doing.” I pulled my socks off. “You’ve got the sexiest woman in the world next to you. She’s the one responsible.”

Jinx pulled back and looked at Laikyn. She was still breathing deeply, so unless she was a good actress, we hadn’t woken her yet.

I followed the shift of his arm down to where he was stroking his cock. It was a leisurely motion meant to entice me. It worked. I was open to the idea even if I was uneasy about where things stood between us. For the first time in my life, I was hesitant. I didn’t want to make any sudden moves that might shake the precarious foundation of my existence. There was no forging ahead without concern for the consequences of my actions. That was how I knew this was different. That *I* was different.

I stripped off my jeans, enjoying the way Jinx’s eyes glazed over, his passion and desire for me on full display. I’d always known it was there, and admittedly, I’d taken it for granted for a long time. Sure, I gave him what I thought he needed, what I thought had been all I was capable of giving. He’d hungrily accepted everything I offered, and never once had he asked for more. Was that because I was giving him more without knowing? Things felt the same between us, only ... more potent. Everything was in Technicolor now. No more

shades of gray cast over everything. Even the wings on my sweet butterfly appeared more vibrant.

“What now?” I asked, perching on the edge of the mattress and putting my hand on Jinx’s thigh.

He breathed in deeply, a soft gasp escaping. Had he always done that when I touched him? I’d never noticed.

I glided my hand over the hard muscle of his leg, letting the hairs tickle my palm. He hesitated, his hand stilling as he watched me. I saw it in his eyes. It was surprise. He wasn’t expecting this from me.

“I don’t know how to do this,” I admitted. “I don’t know what to expect, either.”

My hand inched higher, and I shifted to my knee before joining them on the bed. I stretched out beside him, propping my head on my hand and staring down the length of his body as I touched him. I couldn’t recall ever touching him before. Not like this. There was a sexual undertone, but it wasn’t the objective. I was content to simply lie there, to watch Laikyn sleep, and to feel Jinx’s presence.

Time stood still as we remained like that. I could feel Jinx watching me, and I wondered what he saw, but I didn’t ask. He couldn’t tell me. Maybe one day, he would be able to. Maybe one day, when he felt truly and completely safe, he would be able to speak. I wanted that for him. Hell, I wanted that for *us*.

I didn’t remember falling asleep, but I recalled the second my brain came online. I registered Jinx’s presence. And Laikyn’s. I was in my bed, and they were both there. Only now, someone was watching me sleep, and there was a callused hand sliding over my chest and a much softer one gliding over my stomach. Slowly, gently. As though they wanted to rouse me but not abruptly.

It was working. I was definitely roused. Not to mention *aroused*.

“Keep doing that,” I muttered, keeping my eyes closed.

The side of Laikyn's finger brushed the head of my cock. It could've been an accident, but I didn't think so. I knew it wasn't when she did it again, my cock stirring, filling with blood as it grew thicker with every beat of my heart.

As I shifted my legs to stretch out more, I realized I was no longer on the side of the bed. I was now in the middle, sandwiched between Jinx and Laikyn. It shocked me enough to have my eyes opening. The room was dark. Almost too dark to see anything more than their silhouettes.

"For right now, we're going to forget everything else," Laikyn whispered, her lips brushing my shoulder. "Only this."

I could live with that. I didn't want to think about the rest of it anyway.

"Only this," I echoed.

As soon as I did, Jinx tugged the sheet down, and Laikyn curled her soft fingers around my shaft. A second later, Jinx's fingers joined them, covering her hand, guiding it. My head remained on the pillow because it was too heavy to pick up. The pleasure hit me in waves. They were both touching me. At the same time. A maelstrom of sensation flooded my body, and my brain cataloged every stroke of their skin against mine. I fought the urge to pump my hips because I wanted this. For one moment in time, I wanted what they were offering. I didn't want to take control because I didn't need to. For now, they were in charge. They were responsible for me. I'd never surrendered myself to anyone, never put myself in their care. Not since I was a kid, longing for some sort of security that would keep my world on its axis.

Jinx and Laikyn were giving me that.

"Oh, God," I groaned, my hips bucking when a tongue grazed the head of my dick.

Another one followed and I gasped.

They kept going, alternating. First licking, then sucking until I was gearing up to control the amount of pleasure they were allowed to deliver. But the moment I moved my hand, eager to press down on their heads and force them to finish

me, I was restrained. Jinx held one wrist against the bed, Laikyn the other. I could've overpowered them if I wanted to, but I didn't.

This was...

Fuck. I'd never been as vulnerable as I was in that moment. I hated the feeling. I detested having my control removed, even the illusion of it. But I trusted them. I trusted no one else, but I trusted *them*.

They tormented me with pleasure, sucking my cock, fondling my balls, driving me closer to the brink.

"Sit on my cock," I growled. I didn't care who. I simply wanted to be buried inside one of them, and I wanted it now.

Laikyn was the one to move, shifting over me. Her skin was cool and soft, her breasts crushing against my chest as she straddled my hips. Her hands slid upward so she could keep my wrists down. Jinx's big hand was between my legs, and a moment later, he was guiding my cock into the tight, hot clasp of Laikyn's body.

My head tipped back as her slick heat enveloped me, sliding over my dick like a satiny caress. She was in complete control, rocking her hips, fucking me slowly. I gasped and moaned, focusing only on the pleasure as her pace quickened with every passing minute until she was using my cock to get herself off.

When she sat up and pressed her hands on my chest for balance, I grabbed Jinx, curling my hand behind his neck. He leaned in, and I kissed him, mimicking the thrust of my cock with my tongue. He kissed me back, and I was cognizant of them overpowering me. Mentally, emotionally. It was enough to have me jerking back and crying out, my orgasm ripping through me.

"Fuck yes," Laikyn cried out, her cunt milking my dick as she came with me. "Oh, God, Rule!"

As I lay there in the dark, attempting to catch my breath, I realized something.



If they left me, it wouldn't be like when my parents dumped me at a police station and someone renamed me, attempting to turn me into someone else.

If there were a next time ... there wouldn't be anything left of me to matter.

## Laikyn

YOU KNOW WHAT THE PROBLEM IS WITH broken people? Well, first, it's assuming that there's only one problem. I mean, come on. There's always more than one.

But the *real* problem comes when you underestimate their ability to pretend they don't have one.

That was what happened for the next two days. The three of us pretended that the world as we knew it wasn't different. For me, it was knowing that Rule had married me under false pretenses, although he had yet to fully explain what they were.

My fault.

I didn't want him to.

I was putting up a wall, insisting I didn't want to know who my father was because once I learned, I couldn't go back in time to those fun little fantasies I had of him being a world-renowned Parisian chef who had a whirlwind romance with my mother only for her to disappear on him one morning. Or an A-list actor who'd fallen in love with my mother only to be rejected. Neither of those pretend fathers knew I existed. At least in my fantasies.

But the truth would reveal what really happened. I wasn't ready for that yet.

Which was a good thing because Rule was acting as though we'd gone back in time a few days, and I'd never seen the DNA test. He went to work, he came home. We had dinner, talked.

Jinx wasn't much better. He acted as though it was normal that he had four of my paintings hanging on his bedroom walls. They covered nearly every inch of real estate, proving they hadn't been purchased as a means of fancying up the

space. I was touched in a sense because no one would do that if they didn't like them.

Because they were trying to pretend we were living in the same bubble we'd been in for the past two and a half months since Rule brought me here, I was in full-blown seductress mode. But the lovemaking from two days ago was no longer thick in the air. We were fucking. Seriously, fucking. I was doing my best to convince them I had more stamina than they did combined, but they were winning this time. I think the problem was my heart was just as invested as my body. I wasn't merely seeking an orgasm. I was grasping for that connection I felt with Rule and Jinx. Of course, I was also pretending that I wasn't.

It was exhausting, to say the least.

Yet here I was, gearing up for Round 473 (at least it felt like that many) while Jinx and Rule were inside the house, none the wiser. After picking at my dinner, I'd excused myself and come outside with my wineglass in hand. I settled on one of the enormous lounge beds that lined one side of the pool, waiting for them to join me.

I finished my wine.

I watched the sky turn various shades of brilliant color as the sun drifted below the horizon.

I counted the number of little bulbs on the string lights that were likely remnants of the former owner's outdoor decor. I couldn't see Rule or Jinx adding those as a finishing touch.

And still, they hadn't come outside.

I was beginning to think they were going to make me work for it.

Well, I was nothing if not pragmatic. I had brought my phone with me, so I took a moment to strip off all my clothes, then proceeded to send them a text, insisting that they come outside. Now.

Perhaps it was the way I worded it—maybe with a bit too much emphasis on there being a problem—but it worked.

And the moment they saw me, they had to know there wasn't really someone trying to break into the yard. Had there been, I wouldn't have been naked.

I lifted a hand and waved, pretending it was completely cool that I was sitting here naked and they were staring at me.

Jinx moved first, coming toward me, his eyes heating as he took in my nude state. Rule joined, too, walking around to the opposite side of what I assumed the former owners wanted to be a bed based on the sheer size of this thing. That and there was mosquito netting draped over the steel bars that made up the canopy.

The only thing I knew for sure was that it needed to be broken in, and I had a great idea of how to do that.

\* \* \*

## **Jinx**

SEEING LAIKYN LAID OUT LIKE A THANKSGIVING feast, I knew instantly that we weren't making progress.

Not in moving forward.

In fact, we seemed to be at a standstill. An impasse, if you will. All three of us were acting as though the bottom hadn't come out from under us on Monday. There were issues that we needed to address, but as had been the case for the past two days, Laikyn was turning on the sizzle.

No one could deny it was easier to ignore the tension that still robbed my lungs of air when I least expected it. I'd had two panic attacks since I spoke, but I was doing my best to keep them under wraps. I couldn't predict when the next one might come on, sending me into a spiral, but I'd learned over the years that sticking with a strict routine sometimes helped.

And if fucking Laikyn three times a day was how I was supposed to manage it ... who was I to complain?

"I think it's time she earns her orgasms," Rule said before I could join her on the square lounge chair. It was enormous, definitely big enough for three people, although, except for a

couple of times when I'd passed out on one, I was fairly certain Laikyn was the only person who'd ever been on it. At least since we owned the place.

“And how do you propose I do that?” she asked cheekily, sitting up so her breasts shifted invitingly.

“Start with blowjobs,” he said simply.

Laikyn's eyes lit up like Rule had just promised her her favorite dessert.

She wagged a finger at both of us. “Kinda hard to do when you're dressed.”

I solved the problem with haste, stripping off my shorts and T-shirt and leaving them on the grass. While Rule undressed, I joined Laikyn, taking my time so Rule could determine how he wanted this to play out. Honestly, I didn't care. We were biding time. All three of us knew it. And since pleasure wasn't something I was willing to turn down, I would gladly come along for the ride.

“Start with him,” Rule instructed as he moved around to the head of the bed.

He lifted it so that it was propped at an angle—roughly 145 degrees—and locked it in place with the metal bars beneath.

“Well, who knew? An adjustable bed,” Laikyn said with a grin.

I reclined on the part he propped up and waited for Laikyn to join me. She did, but before she could jump right to task, I tugged her arm. She lost her balance and fell onto me, exactly as I intended.

She knew what I wanted and didn't hesitate, sealing her lips to mine. It slowed her down, forced her to relax. This wasn't a race, but you wouldn't know it from looking at her.

Her skin was cool to the touch, so I rubbed my hands over her, attempting to warm her. It wasn't a cold night, but it wasn't exactly warm, either.

While she draped herself over me and we made out like teenagers, Rule went to the bottom of the bed and propped it up, too, forming a wide U. He proceeded to strip off his clothes before mirroring my position on the opposite side.

Laikyn pulled away to check out what Rule had done, turning sideways and sitting on her knees. She looked at both of us and grinned.

“This could get interesting.”

“Not *could*,” Rule corrected. “Will.”

Her eyebrow quirked. “How so?”

“You have to make us both come in less than ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes each?”

He shook his head, and his grin was pure sin. “Total.”

“Challenging but doable,” she said with eager anticipation.

“There are rules.”

She laughed, and I grinned. Of course, there were rules. Could he do it any other way?

“What are they?”

“You can only use your mouth and your pussy.”

I liked where he was going with this.

“Anything else?”

“You have to give us equal treatment.”

“Do you mean time or method?”

It was clear she was understanding.

“Method.”

She nodded, and I could tell she was letting that sink in.

“What do I get if I win?”

Rule’s expression darkened. “You get to keep pretending we don’t have something crucial the three of us need to discuss.”

Her back straightened. “And if *you* win?”

“We talk about it. On my terms.”

Laikyn looked at me. “What does that mean?”

I shrugged. I honestly didn’t know where this was going. Rule and I hadn’t talked about anything since Monday. We were pretending the same way she was that nothing happened.

But it looked like he was about to force the issue. I could already predict that even though we would all likely enjoy it thoroughly, this was not going to go Laikyn’s way.

\* \* \*

## Rule

“THE TIME STARTS ... NOW,” I TOLD LAIKYN AS I set the timer on my watch.

Determination glittered in her eyes as she leaned down and pressed a kiss to the head of my cock. I was already hard simply from her nearness, so she didn’t have to put too much effort into it. I figured the test would be to make us both come and still give us equal treatment.

Laikyn spent a few seconds laving our dicks with her mouth, alternating back and forth.

“No hands,” I said when she tried to reach for me.

There was a gleam in her eyes, but she pulled her hands back.

“I’m eager to see how you make this work,” I told her, urging her to continue. “No doubt in my mind you can make us both come. Hell, sometimes you damn near make me come with a look.”

That seemed to please her as she straddled Jinx’s hips, facing me as she did.

“Put your cock inside me,” she instructed Jinx, abiding by the no-hands rule.

I liked this angle. It allowed me to watch every expression on her face as Jinx's thick cock pressed against her entrance. She sank down on him slowly, her nipples pebbling and her chest rising and falling as the pleasure intensified.

I tapped the face of my watch, reminding her of the time.

"I need you to move closer," Laikyn told me. "So I can suck you while I fuck him."

I loved her candor.

I did as she wanted, moving so my legs bracketed the outside of Jinx's. There was enough space between us to stretch our legs as long as we kept our knees somewhat bent. As it was, he could've stroked my cock with his feet.

Not that Laikyn allowed it. She leaned forward and took me in her mouth, then began to fuck herself on both ends. She rocked forward and back, taking me to the root. On the reverse, she was impaling herself on Jinx's cock. I watched Jinx as he gripped her hips and guided her down. His eyes were hooded, and he was staring at the point where their bodies were joined.

It was hot.

Laikyn eventually reversed, sitting on my dick and sucking her juices off of Jinx's.

"Thata, girl," I groaned. "Fuck me, Laikyn. Your pussy's so fucking wet." I kneaded her ass. "You like this, don't you?"

Her body clutched me tightly, proof that the vulgar language was helping.

Although I had every intention of holding out, it wasn't nearly as easy as I thought it would be. Certainly not when she began bouncing on my dick.

She changed two more times, but each time, she was losing momentum, and I was sure she realized that. But she never stopped trying.

"How long?" she asked when she was once more sitting astride me, facing Jinx.



“Forty-five seconds.”

Her hips stilled for a moment and she lifted up. “Fuck it.”

I growled roughly when she dropped down on me, taking my cock as deep as she could. I felt her hand brushing the base of my cock. She was touching herself and Jinx was getting the show of his life.

“Oh, yes,” she hissed. “Oh, fuck. It’s too good.”

She was right. It was. I was dangerously close to detonating, my breaths sawing in and out of my lungs as she assaulted me with friction so fucking good it bordered on pain.

“Goddamn, girl,” I hissed. “Oh fuck. Make me come, Laikyn.”

I no longer gave a shit about the time. I was blinded by a need so intense I wasn’t sure I would survive it.

Laikyn groaned, the sound echoing with her desperation. I understood because I felt it, too.

When she whimpered, I knew she was close, and I gave myself permission to come when she did. It happened at the same time the watch beeped, signaling her time was up. She screamed, a sweet, tormented sound that triggered my release. I came inside her, gripping her hips, forcing her to be still as her pussy milked me.

As soon as I let go of her hips, she pulled off me and was on Jinx. She didn’t turn to face me as she straddled him, gripping the steely stalk of his dick and guiding it where she wanted him.

Arousal slammed through me when I realized he was drenched in my cum as soon as he lodged deep inside. There was a good chance he realized it, too, because he shifted, holding Laikyn’s hips and fucking her from underneath. She gasped as she bounced on him, groaning with every thrust until finally, Jinx wrapped his arms around her and thrust in one final time.

“Yes, Jinx ... oh, fuck!”

That went exactly as I'd expected. Only better. More intense.

When Laikyn rolled off Jinx, she flopped onto her back and giggled. "You win, but I don't care."

"No?"

She laughed, her eyes opening. "No. That was ... fucking awesome."

She damn sure wasn't wrong.

*The next day...*

## **Laikyn**

I HELD MY HANDS OUT IN FRONT of me, attempting to find something that would give me an idea of where I was. “Where are we going?”

“Just keep walking,” Rule said, guiding me by the elbow.

“I don’t like surprises.”

“It’s not a surprise.”

“Liar.”

He chuckled softly, and while wearing a blindfold, that sound was even sexier than usual.

“You know, if you want to talk, you don’t have to make it a big spectacle,” I said, turning my head as I attempted to listen for sounds that would tell me where I was.

Yes, it was fair to say I’d expected this. After all, those were the stipulations of our sex game last night. If I made them both come in under ten minutes, I could keep trudging along as though my world hadn’t been tipped on its axis with the announcement that Rule knew who my father was. And if I failed, he would handle the talking his way.

I disliked his way because it involved a blindfold. And no, I wasn’t scared. Not of Rule or Jinx. They were both with me, so I knew I was safe. In fact, I’d never felt safer than when I was with them. However, I was honest when I said I didn’t like surprises. I’d spent most of my life waiting for my mother to jump out and announce some big plan, and she was always claiming they were surprises. If history were to repeat itself, this would be about the time Rule and Jinx would let me know

they'd sprung for me to have a complete makeover, and I was about to be turned into a hobbit.

Like I said, my mother was responsible for my expectations.

"Can I take the blindfold off now?" I asked when the car stopped.

I assumed it was a limo since I was aware of them both sitting beside me during the trip. And we weren't in the Challenger because it didn't smell like Rule. I'd grown fond of the scent of leather and musk with a tinge of something lemony. At least it didn't smell like week-old hamburgers.

"I'll tell you when," he said gruffly. "Stop asking."

Yeah, well, now I intended to ask more insistently.

When Jinx took my hand and helped me out of the car, I went without argument. I even leaned into him when he put his arm around me and steered me where he wanted to go.

"You're approaching stairs," Rule informed me, his voice coming from in front of us.

As soon as Jinx drew me to a halt, I poked my foot out, searching for the step. I found it easily, then Jinx released me, and Rule took my hand. With one in front and the other behind me, I made my way up the short set of stairs.

"Duck your head."

I did and took a few steps.

"Okay, you can stand up straight."

I did that, too.

We made it a few more feet before Rule guided me into a chair. I sat, sliding my hands over the buttery soft leather.

"Where are we?" I asked because something about the chair felt familiar.

This time, when Rule spoke, his mouth was close to mine. His breath was warm and smelled like cinnamon.

I relaxed when he kissed me. It was a soft brush of his lips to mine, but it was enough to stop me from pestering him.

“Do that again, and I won’t ask any more questions for an hour.”

He chuckled, and I swore the sound was an aphrodisiac. It caused my pussy to pulse with need and my skin to tingle.

“We’ll kiss you as much as you want,” he whispered near my ear, “wherever you want in just a few minutes.”

Wherever? Now that was seriously promising.

I nodded as I dramatically clamped my lips shut, letting him know I was fully on board with that plan.

Fifteen minutes later, I was no longer on board with that plan.

“Where are we going?” I insisted, peering out the window of the private jet now soaring into the sky.

I knew I shouldn’t have trusted him.

“And if you tell me it’s a surprise, I’m going to knee you in the balls.”

Jinx was sitting beside me, and he took my hand, linking our fingers. I wanted to jerk my hand away like a petulant child, but I liked that he was touching me. I liked it too much, in fact. So I pursed my lips and stared at Rule.

“We’re going to Vegas,” he finally said, probably because he could see the steam coming from my ears.

“Vegas?” I looked at Jinx, then back to Rule. “Why in God’s name would you want to go to Vegas? We’re already married, Rule.”

His eyes glittered with heat. I’d noticed they did that whenever I brought up the fact we were married. He liked that we were. I’d go so far as to say he thought it was hot that we were.

He wasn't wrong. Even I could see the appeal of our abrupt nuptials. It'd been exactly two months and two weeks since we tied the knot in Rule's backyard. Seventy-five days since my mother killed two of her lovers, and Rule came to her rescue. Thanks to Rule and Jinx, I hadn't spent all that time terrified that the police would come to my door wanting the truth about what happened that night. I was doing my best to pretend it had been a nightmare. That was easier to do now that the media had stopped delving into all the reasons why a woman would want to kill her husband and take her own life—something that never actually happened. Because, like everything else in life, the news had a cycle, and it churned quickly.

“What's in Vegas?” I asked when I was sure I wouldn't spit an acerbic comment at Rule.

He met my gaze and held it for several heartbeats. “Answers.”

I turned my attention out the window. I didn't have to ask what he was referring to. I knew it had to do with who my father was. Rule seemed to think that beneath my denial, I wanted to know. He should've realized I preferred to be left in the dark. It was the reason I didn't want to know the truth about my mother and the hand she had in my kidnapping. From my experience, the truth hurt, and I'd had more than enough pain in my life. I liked my new life. The one I spent with Rule and Jinx, taking advantage of their sexual prowess and their hunger for me, going through each day utterly oblivious to the truth.

It was working for me.

And as long as I repeated it, eventually, I would believe it.

“If there are no questions, there should be no answers,” I muttered.

Jinx squeezed my hand, and I glanced over at him. The sympathy I saw on his face pissed me off, but I was too angry to do anything about it. I knew he meant well. If Rule were the one looking at me like that, perhaps I would've punched him in the nose, but I knew Jinx truly cared about me.

With a flop against the seat, I huffed, ensuring they both knew how against this trip I really was.

Not that they cared.

\* \* \*

## Rule

AND HERE I THOUGHT I WOULD SPEND the entire flight giving Laikyn details about who her father was.

I should've known she would ice me out.

It was my fault. She told me she didn't want to know, and for reasons I didn't want to look too closely at, I thought she deserved to know. Who wouldn't want to know who their parents were?

Evidently, not everyone was as damaged as I was. Not everyone wanted to know who could dump their two-year-old child off in the lobby of a police station and not look back. But that was my cross to bear, not hers. She had a family growing up. I'd had no one.

It was a good thing the flight was less than an hour from wheels up to wheels down. I could practically feel ice forming on my skin from Laikyn's glacial glare.

When we were safely on the ground, I unbuckled and got to my feet, holding out my hand for her to take.

"If you even *think* you're putting a blindfold—"

"Take my hand," I ground out, doing my best not to get frustrated.

Her eyes narrowed to slits, but she put her hand in mine. Then I did something I'd never done before. I linked my fingers with hers.

If she knew it was the first time I'd ever held someone's hand—at least that I could remember—she didn't say anything. However, she did relax, and her soft fingers curled around mine.

“Is there like some kind of shrine to my father here, or what?” Laikyn quipped as we were getting into the waiting limo.

“No.”

“I was being facetious, Rule.” She huffed. “You don’t make it easy, do you?”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that, so I remained quiet for the duration of the drive from the airport to the hotel. I could feel Jinx watching me, but I didn’t look at him. He’d already told me exactly what he thought of my plan, and to say he wasn’t on board with springing this on Laikyn was an understatement. However, he had conceded to go along with it, but not without telling me it was going to backfire in my face.

I only hoped he was wrong.

It wasn’t until we pulled into the Monolith Resort and Casino that Laikyn began to thaw.

“Have you ever been here before?” she asked as we headed for the VIP check-in.

“No.”

“I mean to Vegas.”

“Yes.”

She glanced at Jinx, looking for his answer. He nodded.

“I haven’t,” she said as we approached a luxurious reception area complete with complimentary drinks and snacks for those who wanted to eat while they waited.

Thankfully, we didn’t have to wait. We were checked in by a pleasant young woman who ensured we would have everything we needed for our three-night stay.

“Could you have our things delivered to our room?” Laikyn asked as the woman was finishing up. “We’d like to look around before we go up.”

She gave a radiant smile and a nod. “Of course, Miss Quinn.”



As we walked away, Laikyn looked up at me. “You know, it would help if you had a last name. Then they would know I was a Mrs.” She held up her hand. “Or a ring. One or the other would do.”

I concealed my surprise as best I could. At this point, I figured Laikyn was ready to divorce me. I damn sure hadn’t figured she was hoping for a ring that would publicly announce her marital status.

Again, I could feel Jinx’s eyes on me. I wouldn’t pretend to read his thoughts. He was better at concealing them than I ever would be.

“I need to take care of something,” I informed them when we reached the casino floor.

Laikyn studied me for a moment. “Whatever you’re up to, you should stop now. While you’re ahead.”

“My terms, remember?”

She turned to face me and stepped close. “I think I’d like a do-over.”

My cock swelled from the memory of her attempting to win the last time.

“That can be arranged,” I told her, holding her stare. “The outcome’ll be the same.” I leaned in, letting my lips brush hers. “But I’ll enjoy the hell out of watching you try.”

She gasped softly before stepping back. “I think you underestimate me.”

“Never,” I said with a smile. And I meant it.

Laikyn Quinn could hold her own. She was strong and fierce, and she had the power to make a man weak. I’d gone into this believing I knew what was best for her, and for the past two and a half months, she’d proven I didn’t know a goddamn thing. She’d turned the tables, and she didn’t even realize it.

But I was still determined to follow through. My ultimate objective was to ensure she was safe, and by procuring her inheritance, I would ensure no one could ever hurt her again.

Even without the money, I knew she didn't need me, but I would feel better knowing she had the means to take care of herself. And to know she had a family who would back her.

"I'll be back in a bit," I told Jinx. "Keep her out of trouble."

His eyes danced with amusement.

Yeah, I knew that wasn't possible, but still.

I could feel them watching me as I walked away, heading for the offices Creed had instructed me to go to when I arrived.

As I walked to my first meeting with Knox Montgomery, a man who had carried on his father's legacy and strengthened it in ways even analysts never predicted, I wondered whether he would be open to the idea of meeting his sister. Or if he would take for granted that he'd had a family the way most people lucky enough to have one did.

\* \* \*

## Jinx

"WHERE IS HE GOING?"

I pulled out my phone to respond, but Laikyn didn't give me a chance.

"Never mind. Don't answer that. I don't care."

Yes, she did, but I didn't need to tell her that. At the very least, she was curious. She knew this trip had something to do with her father. It was only natural to want to know how he figured into it. What would she think if she knew her half-brother owned this impressive resort casino? Would she want to stick around and talk to him? Or would she want to bolt?

The interesting thing was I got the feeling Laikyn would want to do both. It would depend on her mood.

Because I sensed she was getting antsy, I stepped up to her and cupped her face. I leaned in and kissed her. Not a soul-searing swapping of tongues or anything. Just a simple peck to let her know I was here and that I wasn't going anywhere.

It made my heart swell when she sighed and leaned into me.

“I needed that. Thank you.”

I stepped back and raised an eyebrow, then pointed toward the ceiling and then to the gaming floor.

“Do I want to go to our room? Or to play?”

I nodded.

“Hmm.” She stared out at the rows of slot machines that were mostly empty on a Thursday afternoon. “You know what?” She turned to me. “How about we find a quiet place to sit and have a drink?”

I nodded.

“Do you have your phone?”

I nodded again.

“Good. Because we need to talk about something. I’d like to get your opinion.”

Her tone was breathy and light, but I got the feeling the topic wasn’t. For the past couple of days, I’d been waiting for Laikyn to break down and finally ask the difficult questions. Like how and why I’d purchased the paintings in my room. Or what else I knew about her, or how long we’d been digging into her life. I wasn’t sure how to answer any of those, but I knew I had to go with the truth.

Rule had set about this course a long time ago. The only thing I could do was follow the path he had paved. I trusted he knew what he was doing even if his motivations weren’t exactly ... I wasn’t sure what the right word was. The fact that Rule had never had a family caused him to see things through a hazy lens. He’d told me before that people were stupid for not making the most of the family they’d been given. I was the exception, of course. That was what he’d said. Not me. I was the exception because I had a bad home life. My parents had been violent, neglectful addicts, so he understood my reasons. As though I was the only person in the world who’d endured neglect and mistreatment at the hands of family.

I didn't think Rule truly believed we were one of a kind. Logically, he knew that there were many families who had fractures and breaks in the branches of their family trees. We certainly weren't the only ones.

No, his way of thinking wasn't exactly rational, but I didn't tell him that because I understood what he meant. Rule had lacked that family bond. He'd been too young to establish it, and when he thought he'd found something to cling to, those people had turned their backs on him. His opinion of the world had been cemented when he was very young. It hadn't changed. But his perspective had.

I knew he had good intentions for wanting to introduce Laikyn to the family she didn't know she had, but I wasn't sure it was going to work out the way he wanted.

We made our way to one of the many bars scattered throughout the main floor. I let Laikyn order for us, then we found a small seating area tucked in behind a piano. I didn't rush her, didn't prompt her to tell me what was on her mind. She would speak when she was ready, and I had my phone out for when the time came.

Her first question came about ten minutes after she downed her first drink and asked a passing waitress for another.

"Why is Rule so adamant about me knowing who my father is?"

The question sounded simple. It wasn't.

If I answered from a philosophical perspective, it would be that Rule didn't have a family of his own, and he was relying on old feelings to sway his decisions.

If I answered from a technical perspective, it would be that Rule wanted her to have the fortune her father had left her in a trust so he could ensure she would always be safe.

The problem was those answers both applied, but they no longer mattered because this wasn't something the Hollywood Fixer could fix.

Rule could give Laikyn a long-lost brother to complete her family unit or a fortune that would ensure her financial security for the rest of her life, but neither would make it any easier for him to say goodbye to her. Or me, for that matter. And I truly believed Rule was expecting Laikyn to walk away. Connecting her to Knox Montgomery and filling her bank account with dollars and cents was his way of telling himself it was okay.

It wasn't.

Because letting Laikyn walk away was no longer an option. Not for either of us.

## Rule

KNOX MONTGOMERY KEPT ME WAITING FOR NEARLY forty-five minutes.

I thought nothing of it at the time. I was sure the guy was busy, and my appointment had been scheduled at the last minute, so I figured he was fitting me into a tiny sliver of time when he could multitask. He wasn't the first busy guy I'd ever met with. Plus, it gave me time to gather my thoughts and order them in a way that might make sense.

When the receptionist finally escorted me to Knox's office, I'd had plenty of time to think about what I wanted to say, but the moment the door opened, my brain went on the fritz, and every thought in my head vacated.

Well, except for recognizing my oldest friend, who was sitting cool as a cucumber across from Knox.

"What are you doing here?" I asked Creed.

He was lounging in one of the upholstered chairs in the small seating area near the windows overlooking the Vegas Strip, one ankle resting on the opposite knee, suit jacket unbuttoned, and a glass in his hand. It must be five o'clock somewhere.

"Good to see you too, brother," Creed replied, lifting his drink in a mock toast.

Across from him was Knox Montgomery, the man I'd only ever seen in photographs. They honestly didn't do the guy justice. He was every bit the spectacular specimen the media portrayed him to be. From his fancy suit and shiny shoes to his perfectly styled hair and mesmerizing grin, he was the sort of man who captured people's attention.

I skimmed his features for a few unnecessary seconds, attempting to find any resemblance to Laikyn. Maybe the eyes. Not only the color but also the shape. Other than that, not really.

Someone cleared their throat, and my gaze bounced between the two men. Luckily for me, Knox was a bit more refined than my childhood friend. He got to his feet and approached, holding out his hand.

“It’s good to meet you, Rule.”

“Yeah.” I glared at Creed as I shook Knox’s hand.  
“Likewise.”

“Please, have a seat. Can I get you something to drink?”

“No.” I continued to singe Creed with my glare. “Thank you.”

“He doesn’t drink,” Creed said with a smirk.

“Why are you here?” I repeated.

“I insisted,” Knox answered for him, then gestured again to the chair. “Please.”

Since I could tell his pleasantry was meant more as a command, I lowered myself into the chair next to Creed and watched as Knox sat on the black leather sofa. He was as refined and dignified as the media made him out to be. I figured that was what money could buy you, along with a resort casino on prime real estate in Las Vegas. Not to mention a vacation home in Malibu, one of the largest buildings in New York City, and a fancy three-story apartment building overlooking Central Park.

Yeah. I did my homework.

“Is she with you?” Knox inquired.

“Who?”

Knox looked at Creed and smirked. “You were right. You said he’d play dumb.”

Creed chuckled. “I did say that, didn’t I?”

I wanted to punch him in the face.

I refrained.

Barely.

“My sister,” Knox stated without a hint of skepticism.

I frowned, looking him in the eye for the first time. “You know about her?”

“I didn’t,” he said smoothly, sipping the amber liquid in his glass. “Not until Creed filled me in two days ago.”

Right after I told Creed. The fucking traitor.

“I made him,” Knox inserted.

“Somehow, I doubt that.” No one made Creed do anything.

“Don’t underestimate his power of persuasion,” Creed said with a gruff laugh.

Knox’s green eyes twinkled with amusement. “When a good friend calls me up and insists on getting my best suite for three days, and he only gives me a moment’s notice, I find myself curious. And I’m good at getting answers.”

“Too good,” Creed grumbled.

Knox laughed, then turned his attention to me. “I’d like to meet her.”

“Just like that?” I countered. “No questions asked? You don’t doubt the validity of the claim?”

“Should I?” His eyebrows angled down. “Creed tells me you’re damn good at uncovering truths because it’s your job to cover them up. Is he wrong?”

I didn’t answer.

“He said you had a DNA test done.”

“You don’t sound surprised that you’ve got a sibling.”

“I’m not.” He took another drink. “I loved my father, don’t get me wrong. I admired him for what he was capable of doing. He groomed me to follow in his footsteps. He was good at business but not quite as good with people. Jeremiah



Montgomery had a penchant for younger women. Much, *much* younger women. And based on my calculations, my sister's mother would've been a teenager when she conceived."

"Eighteen," I confirmed.

"And that would make my sister ... twenty-two?"

"Yes."

"What's her name?"

I looked at Creed, surprised he hadn't revealed that detail already.

He smirked and kept his eyes fixed on the glass in his hand.

"Laikyn," I told Knox. "Laikyn Quinn."

"And her mother?"

"Monica Quinn."

Knox's expression shifted, and I saw a hint of recognition followed by surprise. Creed really hadn't told him.

"The actress?"

"Yes."

When he said nothing more, I decided to get to the heart of the matter. The part I figured he wouldn't be nearly as happy to learn.

"Did you know Jeremiah set up a trust for her?"

Knox shook his head but said, "That doesn't surprise me. As I said, my father was good at business. He knew how to protect his money."

"It's not a small amount."

Knox nodded as though taking it in.

"And there were stipulations. Age and marital status. Both of which she's close to meeting."

His eyebrows bounced. "Is that right?"

“Yes. I married her on September 2nd. The clause dictates three months. It’s real. The marriage, I mean.”

“Real? Meaning what? That you love her?”

I refused to look at Creed because I didn’t want him to see the truth in my eyes. I did love her. I didn’t mean to love her, but it had happened all the same.

“I did it for her,” I admitted.

He still appeared amused, but instead of digging deeper, he chuckled and looked at his glass before finally looking at me again.

“That’s why you wanted to talk to me first? Why you didn’t spring her on me without warning? Because of a trust fund.”

I watched him, not replying.

“Not because you love her and want to protect her? Guard her from my initial reaction?”

I still didn’t reply.

“And you think a trust fund will change my reaction to her.”

“When you threaten someone’s livelihood, that tends to happen,” I told him.

This time, Knox’s laugh boomed through the office. “My livelihood.”

I didn’t know what he found funny.

He looked at Creed, then me as he gestured to the room. “I’m not sure what you’ve unearthed about me, but in case you can’t tell, I’m not hurting. My children won’t ever have to work if they don’t want to. My grandchildren, even. And that’s if I only kept *half* of my *liquid* assets.”

I knew his net worth, and it put him in a different stratosphere than the rest of the world. But the amount of money someone had was relative to the lifestyle they were used to. So I stood by my assumption that he wouldn’t want to part with the amount his father had left Laikyn.

I didn't look away. "It's easy to say that now."

Knox inched toward the edge of the cushion and angled so he faced me. "I want to meet my sister. If my father left her a trust, it was because he cared about her."

"He never met her. He died when she was three. She doesn't know who he is."

"Then that was his loss. Maybe he went to the grave knowing he'd missed out on something important," Knox said, his tone harder than before. "But I won't turn my back on my family. I don't care if she wants to fight me for every penny I've got."

I considered telling him she didn't want to do that, but it wasn't my business what Laikyn did after I made the introduction. I figured as soon as she realized that, with the right investments, her net worth would put her in the same stratosphere as the man the world referred to as the filthy hot billionaire, it wouldn't matter what I thought. She wouldn't have room for me anymore.

"Let's have dinner tonight," Creed interjected. "All of us."

Knox shook his head.

"No to dinner?"

"Dinner's fine," he said with a wave of his hand. "But I want to meet her now. I can introduce her to my husband and wife tonight, but I'd like to meet her first."

Husband and wife? How had I not uncovered that yet?

Creed dropped his foot to the floor and sat up straight. "Are Kieran and Emily here?"

"They will be. They're coming in for this weekend's auction."

Clearly, I looked confused because Knox explained.

"My wife owns Delta June's, the auction house."

Ah. Well, that made more sense.

“We spend most of our time in New York, but this is our home away from home.” Knox set his glass on the coffee table and got to his feet. He buttoned his suit jacket. “Please introduce me to my sister.”

That was the reason I was there, wasn't it? To introduce Laikyn to her brother? It wasn't like I could stall any longer.

I nodded as I stood.

On our way down to the casino floor, I texted Jinx to find out where they were. I wasn't exactly keen on the idea of throwing Laikyn to the wolf, which appeared to be the case here, but I wasn't sure how to stop it. The only thing I could do was stick close in case she needed me.

Not that she would. I knew her pretty damn well, and I didn't think there was anything Laikyn couldn't handle.

Jinx's response was almost immediate.

**— Sitting at the bar. Behind a piano. Fair warning, she's had a few.**

I turned my phone so Knox could read the screen.

He grinned. “Would you mind asking him to excuse himself? I'd like to meet her alone if that's alright with you?”

I messaged Jinx and told him of Knox's request. I assumed by his lack of response that he would do as I asked.

When the elevator stopped on the main floor, Knox walked out first, with me and Creed following behind him.

“Don't you dare confront her,” I warned. “Ask Creed, I'm a formidable enemy.”

Knox turned to face me. “You can trust me with her, Rule. I won't say anything to upset her. In fact, I may not tell her who I am yet. But if she gives me an opportunity to get to know even a little about her, I'd like to take it.”

I nodded. As though I actually had a choice.

\* \* \*

# Laikyn

*AND THEN THERE WAS ONLY ONE.*

*Me.*

I exhaled heavily and tipped back the rest of my drink as Jinx walked away. While we'd been intermittently chatting—him answering me with text messages—he sent one to say he'd be right back. I didn't ask where he was going, but I assumed the restroom. That or he was sneaking out the back with Rule, and I would have to find my way back to LA because they'd both abandoned me in this fancy hotel.

Did it really matter if they did? At the moment, I didn't care much about anything, thanks to the alcohol. The bartender had been generous with my doubles, and I could feel the warmth in my veins and a pleasant fuzzy sensation in my brain.

At least they'd had the decency to leave me in a nice place. I'd been to plenty of hotels in my lifetime, carted around because my presence suited my mother's image at the time. But she'd never brought me anywhere that looked like this. I found I liked the energy of the place, although I had no desire to gamble. Jinx had tried to persuade me shortly before he excused himself, but I'd declined his offer. I didn't trust myself not to get caught up in it, and right now, I had a feeling I needed to keep my wits about me.

Granted, the vodka tonic had started to diminish my wit. After the third one, I could finally breathe again. I was nervous, but I had no idea why I should be. Rule hadn't told me why he brought me here, but I knew he had a motive. Something to do with my father. Otherwise, why not just lay it all on the table back at home?

"Would you like another?" the waitress asked as she passed, heading toward the bar.

I glanced at the lonely ice cubes in the glass and then nodded. "Yeah. Thanks."

“I’ll have what she’s having,” a man said as he approached, his smile warm enough to tame wild animals.

He moved closer, maintaining a smile as he looked me over. There was scrutiny in his eyes, but it didn’t feel like he was assessing my potential as a possible notch in his bedpost.

“Mind if I join you?”

“I ... um...” I glanced in the direction Jinx went. “I’m here with someone.”

He didn’t sit, merely tucked his hands into the pockets of his ridiculously expensive slacks.

“Two people, actually,” I continued, unable to stop myself from rambling. “Rule and Jinx. They’re my ... uh...” I frowned. “I don’t really know what to call them.”

He didn’t speak, merely allowed me to continue spewing nonsense.

“One’s my husband,” I said, though my tone would lead him to believe I wasn’t certain about that status. “The other, my ... boyfriend?”

“And they know each other?”

“Oh, yeah.” I grinned. “Biblically.”

Oh, shit. I honestly hadn’t meant to reveal that.

The stranger chuckled, but he never looked away. He didn’t seem worried that my husband and boyfriend might return any second. Or that they might be off getting biblically acquainted with one another while I waited.

“I’ve got a couple of those,” he said, crossing his ankles as he leaned against one of the large columns that held up the ceiling.

“Biblical boyfriends?”

He laughed, and it boomed through the space. It was jovial enough to make me laugh.

“No. But I do have a wife and a husband.”

My eyebrows shot to my hairline. “I thought that was illegal.”

“I guess technically it is. I’m not legally wed to both of them.”

“Ah. You just sleep with them both?”

His forehead creased, and his green eyes glittered. “It’s a bit more involved than that. We’re building a life together.”

“So it can be done?”

“What? Being with two people?”

I nodded.

“If you’re in it for the right reasons, sure.”

“What about five people?” I mused, thinking back to Rule’s friend Journey and the reverse harem thing she had going on.

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Me neither.”

The waitress returned, passing me one of the drinks and another of those little cocktail napkins. “Thank you.”

She nodded, then handed the stranger the other. “Here you are, Mr. Montgomery.”

“Thank you, Lilly.”

“Wow. You must come here often if they know you by name,” I told him when she walked away.

“I own it.”

I choked on my drink.

Coughing and spurning, I did my best to stop my esophagus from revolting, but I couldn’t. Mr. Montgomery, as Lilly had referred to him, moved closer, his concern radiating from him.

I held up a hand and tried to swallow. “I’m good,” I wheezed.

It took a minute or two before I really was, but he simply took a step back and gave me my space.

When I finally stopped coughing and clearing my throat, he stepped forward and held out his hand. “Knox Montgomery. And you are?”

I shifted my glass to the other hand and took his. “Laikyn Quinn.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Laikyn.”

“Yes.” I nodded. “Same.”

He released my hand, and for a second, I thought he would walk away, but instead, he sat in the chair beside me. He didn’t get comfortable, instead leaning forward, resting his elbow on his knee as he regarded me.

“I’m fine, really,” I assured him in case he was worried I might hack up a lung again.

His eyes twinkled with mirth as his lips pulled upward.

“Why are you smiling?” I asked, feeling awkward and wondering when Jinx would return. I could use him right about now.

Knox laughed. “I’m hoping we can be friends.”

I forced a smile. “It’ll have to be a short friendship, I’m afraid. I’m only here for a couple of days, and I live in Los Angeles. So...”

“Something tells me that won’t matter.”

Okay, so now it was getting creepy. I mean, he wasn’t coming onto me or anything, but it felt like he knew something I didn’t.

Determined to ensure he understood I wasn’t interested, I tried to stand. It didn’t work as planned, and I ended up back on my butt. The signal that should’ve gone from my brain to my legs appeared to be interrupted by too much vodka.

“Easy now.” Knox held up a hand as though he might help me if I tipped forward onto my face, but he didn’t touch me.



I was attempting to come up with something to let him down easy, but I looked up and saw Rule and Jinx walking toward me. They were watching me intently.

“Can I tell you something?” Knox prompted.

“I ... uh...” I gestured toward Rule and Jinx. “Those are my...”

“Biblical boyfriends?” he said, tossing my terminology back at me.

“Yes.”

“I know.”

I looked at him. “What do you mean, you know?”

Instead of answering, he held out his hand again. When he continued to wait for me to shake it, I stared, confused. Did he forget he’d already introduced himself? Or was I so drunk I’d imagined that?

Figuring I could appease him, I shook his hand again.

He held my hand a bit more firmly than he had before. “Knox Montgomery.”

“We’ve kind of established that,” I replied.

“I’m your brother, Laikyn.”

I saw only sincerity and keen interest as I stared into his twinkling green eyes.

Every part of my body went completely numb, and this time, I couldn’t blame it on the alcohol.

\* \* \*

## **Jinx**

WE APPROACHED LAIKYN IN TIME TO HEAR Knox introduce himself as her brother.

I watched Laikyn’s face, the expressions that shifted over every beautiful feature as she processed that information.

I expected her to be bold and come back with some smartass remark. She didn't. She simply sat there staring at him as though she wasn't sure where she was or what was happening.

I started toward her. When Rule attempted to stop me, I pulled my arm from his grasp. I was done playing this his way. Knox shouldn't have sprung that on her without her having someone there for support. She'd had enough of that shit in her life, and I wanted her to know I had her back, regardless.

Knox looked up as I neared. I nodded my head, then put my hand on Laikyn's shoulder.

Her head tilted, and her eyes locked with mine. A moment later, her expression softened, and the vise squeezing my chest relaxed.

"Knox Montgomery," he said as he got to his feet and held out a hand.

I couldn't respond, but I didn't need to. Laikyn did for me.

She got to her feet and curled her arm through mine. "This is Jinx."

Knox's eyes crinkled as his smile spread. "It's nice to meet you."

I nodded again.

He didn't appear surprised that I didn't speak.

Knox leaned in toward Laikyn. "The boyfriend, right?"

She choked on a laugh and squeezed my arm. "Yes. He's not being rude. He doesn't speak."

Boyfriend, huh? I'd never been anyone's boyfriend before. I found I liked the title far more than I expected I would.

"Are you okay?" Knox asked Laikyn, his expression sobering. "I didn't mean to spring that on you so quickly, but after meeting you ... I simply didn't want to go another minute without letting you know."

Her lips pursed, and she nodded. I could tell she was putting up a wall to protect herself from whatever heartache

she expected him to send her way. After all, for Laikyn, family wasn't there to support her and lift her up.

"I was thinking perhaps we could all have dinner tonight," Knox offered, glancing between me and Laikyn. "I'll bring my wife and husband so you can meet them. Creed's here, too, so I can invite him and the entourage."

I hadn't realized Creed was in Vegas until I found him and Rule talking near the elevators shortly after Rule had summoned me. According to Rule, he hadn't expected Creed to come until later, but evidently, the guy wanted to prepare Knox for what was coming before he was blindsided. It made sense.

Realizing Laikyn was looking at me for an answer, I tilted my head to let her know it was entirely up to her. I would support her, no matter what she decided.

"Yes," Laikyn finally said, her shoulders no longer hugging her ears. "Dinner would be nice."

Knox looked at his watch. "Can you give me a few hours? Let's say seven-thirty?"

"Perfect."

I watched as Knox's gaze lingered on Laikyn's face for a few more seconds. I couldn't help but think he was truly happy to meet her. I honestly hoped that was the case. Otherwise, this was going to end very, very badly.

When Knox walked away, I cupped Laikyn's face and forced her to meet my gaze.

"I'm okay," she whispered. "At least, I think I am."

I leaned in to kiss her, and she pressed her lips to mine, her hand tightening on my arm.

"I'd like to go to the room for a bit."

Taking her hand, I turned to lead the way. Rule stood several feet away, his expression rife with torment and pain. And guilt. Definitely guilt.

I squeezed Laikyn's hand. Her gaze shifted to Rule at the same time she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. She stopped when she was directly in front of him, dropping my hand as she faced off with him.

"I'm not sure whether I should be mad at you or grateful. At the moment, I'm too drunk to really care. But I'm warning you, that might change in a little while."

He nodded, his eyes never leaving her face.

"Can we please just go to the room?" She took a step toward the elevator. "Before I do something stupid like break down and cry right here."

If she cried, there was a damn good chance I would, and we couldn't have that, so I urged her toward the elevators. Rule was right behind us, escorting us the entire way. I left it to him to get us there, and I kept my fingers linked with Laikyn's, wondering what was going through that pretty head of hers.

I found out about the time the elevator opened on our floor.

"Who's my father?" She asked Rule. "I mean, what's his name?"

He answered without an ounce of inflection in his tone. "Jeremiah Montgomery."

"Is he someone famous?"

"He created Montage Markets."

Laikyn abruptly stopped in the middle of the hall, her eyes wide. "Are you kidding me?"

"No."

I wanted to slap him upside the head because he answered as though this was some sort of test, not as though she was inquiring about her paternity when she'd spent the first twenty-two years of her life not knowing who the guy was.

At least he waited until we were inside the room before he dropped the next bomb on her.

The moment he did, I realized just how fucked up our entire situation really was.

## Rule

SHE WAS LOOKING AT ME DIFFERENTLY.

Like she didn't know me.

I wouldn't deny that I wished we could go back in time to the point before she found that DNA test. Before she realized I truly did have an ulterior motive. I would shred that test and just let it be. I would take Laikyn on a job and give her the life she deserved. At least as much as I was capable of giving.

Unfortunately, it hadn't played out that way, and now it was too late to change anything. I had to play all my cards and hope like hell in the end, my shitty hand would be enough to win her back.

I dropped the key card onto the table near the door and turned to look at Laikyn.

"Your father ... Jeremiah Montgomery ... he left you a trust fund."

She looked surprised, but no more than she did when I told her that her family legacy was one of the world's most profitable supermarket chain stores.

"A trust fund?"

I nodded and tucked my hands in my pockets. "It's the reason I married you."

When she stepped back as though I'd slapped her, I realized how horrible that sounded.

Laikyn clutched her throat. "You married me for *money*? Oh, my God."

"No." I reached for her, but she backed away. "That's not..."

“Not what?” Her eyes were bright with tears, but she was glaring daggers at me. “You thought you’d make the most of it? Marry the pathetic little traumatized girl and finagle it so you could get a payday? You really are an asshole, you know that?”

She spun toward Jinx.

“Did you know this?”

He stood like a deer caught in headlights.

“Did you know he married me to get my trust fund?”

“That’s not what I meant!” I snapped. Fuck.

Laikyn spun back around, slowly this time. Or maybe time had slowed down because I could hear the roar of my heart in my ears, and it wasn’t a sound I was fond of.

“Let me explain.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to hear anymore.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but she shut me up by putting a hand up.

“Get out.”

“Laikyn.”

“No!” She huffed. “And to think I loved you, Rule. God.” She thrust her hand through her hair. “I’m the world’s biggest idiot because I fell in love with you.”

I swallowed past the lump in my throat, unable to speak.

Her eyes were wild when she met my gaze. “I’m an idiot. You make it impossible. You don’t want anyone to give a shit, so you beat them to the punch by being a fucking asshole. You used me.”

“No.” I could see why she would think that, but it wasn’t true. I just needed a chance to explain. “That’s not ... it came out wrong.”

“Did it? Or maybe it just didn’t come out soon enough. I mean, you did suffer these past couple of months, forced to fuck me. Oh my God. I’m such an idiot.” She stood taller, and

her shoulders straightened. “I hate you, Rule. I hate you with every ounce of my being right now.”

Cold washed over me from the words. It suffocated every ounce of warmth I’d started to feel because of her. I welcomed it because it was the protection I’d sought all my life. As long as I was cold, no one could hurt me.

Laikyn pointed at the door. “I don’t want you here. Get. The. Fuck. Out.”

I was no longer in the mood to justify my actions. She’d made it clear that I was expendable. Irrelevant.

She stepped forward, getting right up in my face. Her voice became softer, more lethal. “I never want to see you again, Rule. Go back to the rock you crawled out from and leave me the hell alone.”

I glanced at Jinx. He still looked out of it. As though he was having a difficult time processing what I’d said. Not a good thing since he knew the reason I’d married her. He knew I’d done it so she could meet the stipulations to get the money. I didn’t want it for myself, but she refused to let me explain.

“Out!” Laikyn screamed at the top of her lungs.

I left.

Not only the room but also the hotel and then the state.

I didn’t look back.

Not once.

I couldn’t.

I didn’t want to see the remnants of my heart now that she’d ripped it clean from my chest.

\* \* \*

## **Laikyn**

AFTER RULE LEFT, I STARTED TO TEAR into Jinx but couldn’t come up with the words I wanted to say, so I locked myself in



the bedroom and passed out. Between the adrenaline dump and the alcohol, I'd drifted into a state of nothingness.

When I woke up, it was dark out, the curtains drawn back to reveal the glittering lights of the strip. I glanced at my phone screen to check the time. It was after eight, which meant I'd missed dinner with Knox. I would apologize to him at some point, but for now, I didn't want to see or talk to anyone.

I was no longer drunk, but now I had another problem. Without the alcohol dulling my senses, I felt a void in my chest. One that had taken up residence after Rule admitted he'd only married me for money.

How was I so blind? I mean, I knew he had a motive. He hadn't denied it from the beginning. He also hadn't told me what it was, but never once had it crossed my mind that money might be involved. And that was saying something since this all came about because of money—a three million dollar supposed debt, right? I'd played right into his hands. Everything had worked out like it was a movie he'd written the script for.

My mother needing his services, convincing me to call him. Monica not being able to pay.

Rule must've jumped at the opportunity because it couldn't have been more perfect, could it? My mother would've gone to jail if I hadn't agreed to marry him. Or, at the very least, I would've been stuck living with a woman who'd staged my kidnapping for financial gain.

I'd opted for the lesser of two evils. At least, that was what I'd thought at the time.

And for the past two and a half months, I'd fallen little by little until I could barely breathe for how much I loved him. Both of them. I'd gone headfirst in love with two men, and now I wasn't sure I could look at either of them.

I never intended to fall in love. I wasn't looking for love. Never had been. Not with one man, much less two. I'd intended to keep it about sex, but somewhere along the way, I'd given in to their pull.

Damn, they really did have a pull, too. Even now, as I stared at the glittering lights, I could see their faces in my mind, those crooked grins, and the gleam in their eyes. How could they do this to me?

A tear dripped down my cheek, and I rushed to wipe it away. I would not cry for Rule. I wouldn't give him so much as a second thought. How fucking selfish was he that he married me to get his hands on a trust fund? God, it was probably three million dollars, the exact amount he had charged my mother. Another perfectly-timed coincidence?

Jesus.

A knock sounded in the other room, and I stilled, listening for Jinx to open it. Another knock came a minute later. I peeked out the door and found the sitting room empty. The only thing in there was the one suitcase I'd brought. All the others were gone.

I swallowed past the painful lump that clogged my throat and fought the burn of tears in my sinuses.

When the knock sounded again, I jumped.

"I don't need room service," I said to whoever was on the other side, but my voice came out whisper-soft.

"Open the door, Laikyn."

I frowned. The voice was familiar, but I couldn't place it. Definitely not Rule or Jinx. When I peered through the security hole, I saw it was covered.

Because it seemed silly to insist on getting their ID first, I opened the door. Yes, another stupid-girl horror flick response, but I didn't give a shit at the moment.

Creed stood on the other side, a giant of a man looming over me.

He really was enormous. At least six and a half feet tall with steel-gray eyes and inky black hair, he was a bit intimidating.

"May I come in?"

I stepped back out of the way because I couldn't think of a reason to say no.

I was tempted to look in the hall and see if Knox was lingering, but I decided against it. I didn't care if some guy who claimed to be my long-lost brother didn't want to talk to me.

Then again, I was the one who'd stood him up for dinner.

"Rule and Jinx left," I informed him, in case that was his reason for stopping by.

"I know."

The squeeze in my chest came from confirmation that they really had. I was just guessing.

"They went back to LA," he said as though his previous words weren't shredding me enough.

"For the best," I told him, though it came out higher pitched because of the tightness of my throat.

"Why's that?" He took a seat in the living area without waiting for an invitation.

I hadn't intended to give him one.

"Why's what?" I asked, staring past him as it sank in that Rule and Jinx had left me in Vegas.

"Why's it for the best?"

I shrugged one shoulder. "Rule married me for my trust fund. I don't see any reason to drag it out any longer."

Creed's gaze tipped down, and I swore I saw the hint of a smile. "Sit down. Please."

If he hadn't tacked on the please at the last second, I would've told him to get the hell out, too.

Instead, I sat.

"If I know Rule, and I like to think I do, there's probably not much he's shared about himself."

"Not really, no." Most of what I'd learned about Rule, I'd gotten from Jinx. Save for the few glimpses I didn't think Rule

meant for me to see.

Creed looked at me, canting his head to the side. “He seems like a relatively simple man. He sets goals and achieves them. That’s all he knows how to do. He doesn’t ask for anything from anyone because he doesn’t think he *has* anyone.”

Based on the Rule I knew, that assessment was pretty accurate.

“But he’s got Jinx,” Creed noted. “And as of earlier this week, when he came to my house, I think he was under the impression he had you.”

“He did,” I snapped. “Right up until he told me he married me to get the money he claims I’ve got.”

“He said that?”

“Yeah.” I glared at him. “He said he married me for my trust fund. Which I didn’t even know I had until he said it. Hell, I still don’t know what all that’s about, but it doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“Okay, look.” I leaned forward. “I don’t need some cryptic psychobabble from you. The only reason I’m still here is because I’m curious about Knox. That and I fell asleep, and Rule and Jinx left me here.”

“You told Rule to leave,” he corrected.

“Yes. Fine. I did that. But I didn’t tell Jinx to go.”

Creed huffed a laugh. “At what point did Jinx ever give you the impression he wasn’t a package deal with Rule?”

I frowned. “I don’t understand.”

Creed exhaled and relaxed in the chair. “Rule spent six years in prison after nearly beating two kids to death. One of those kids nearly killed Jinx, and Rule intervened to stop it from happening. While he was pummeling that fuck he was jumped by the guy’s friend. Took a steel pipe to the face. Do

you know what a steel pipe does when it strikes the jaw with tremendous force?”

Hoping that was rhetorical, I didn't respond.

“It breaks it. Even with a shattered face, Rule still managed to beat the shit out of them both. When the police showed up, he got a punch or two in there, too.”

Prison? Seriously? Six years?

“And because Jinx couldn't speak to clarify what happened, Rule was pinned for all of it. The attack on Jinx *and* those fuckers. He served his time without complaint. Pled guilty without blinking an eye because he's the sort of guy who takes responsibility for his actions.”

My throat was suddenly tighter.

“The day Rule was released, Jinx was there. Just waiting for him in the parking lot. Geared up to pay Rule back for saving his life.”

“Pay him back how?”

“However Rule wanted him, too. They've been inseparable since then. Rule will tell you he has no one. That's not true. He has Jinx. He will always have him. Jinx is loyal to a fault, so that'll never change. They might love you, but they've spent two decades together, so if you tell one of them to leave, you're telling them both.”

I heard the words, but the only part that stuck with me was the *love you* part.

“They don't love me. He used me. For fucking money.”

Creed snorted. “Rule's got a safe in his closet.”

“I've seen it,” I admitted.

“You know what's in that safe?”

I shook my head. I figured there were guns or whatever.

“Money,” he stated firmly. “And that's only *one* of his hiding places.”

“Why does he keep it in his closet? It should be in a bank.”

His eyebrows rose, and I could tell he thought that was a stupid question. I waited for an answer anyway.

Creed exhaled, and I sensed his frustration with me. “The people who use Rule’s services can’t exactly pay him with a credit card, now can they?”

Since I wasn’t sure where he was going with this, I blurted, “What’s your point?”

“Rule doesn’t need your money. He’s got more than he knows what to do with. In that regard, he really is a simple man.”

“Then why did he say that?”

Creed got to his feet and stared down at me. “My guess is you weren’t really listening. That or you didn’t give him a chance to explain.”

“What’s there to explain? He said he married me because of the trust fund.”

“And he did.”

I huffed and stood up. “Why did you come here? Just to talk me in circles?”

Creed laughed, then leaned in and held my stare. “He married you so *you* could get that trust fund. The stipulation is you had to be twenty-two and married for ninety days before it becomes yours.”

I tried for a rebuttal but couldn’t think of anything to say. That made far too much sense.

“But let me tell you something, girl. I’ve known that man since we were kids. We were out of touch while he was in prison, but when he moved here, we settled into our old friendship. I know him better than anyone except for Jinx. And I know that man has never looked at anyone the way he looks at you.”

I swallowed, still unable to form words.

“He’ll pretend he doesn’t care that you kicked him out of your life, but it’s tearing him up.”

“What am I supposed to do?” I asked, the words ripped from my chest.

“If I were you, I’d catch a ride to LA and find a way to convince him that you love him.”

I didn’t bother telling him that wasn’t possible. I recalled exactly what I’d said to Rule before he left. And those words ... well, there was a damn good chance he would never forgive me for them.

“Try, Laikyn. Only a few people have tried with Rule, and those of us who did are still around. He pretends he’s a loner, which was probably true at one point. It’s not anymore. He just needs someone brave enough to show him he’s wrong.”

Creed walked to the door.

“If you want to catch a ride with us, the flight leaves first thing in the morning.”

I nodded.

“In the meantime, maybe you can chat with Knox. He’s another one of my friends who pretends he doesn’t need people. His reaction to you ... I honestly didn’t expect it. For whatever reason, he seems thrilled to have family.”

He didn’t have family either?

I didn’t get a chance to ask anything else before Creed slipped out of the room.

I stood there for the longest time, not sure how I’d gone from feeling like the victim to the bad guy.

And as for whether I liked Creed Granger ... well, the jury was still out on that.

\* \* \*

## **Jinx**

IF I EVER WONDERED WHAT IT WAS like to spend a considerable amount of time with me, I learned during the trip back from Vegas.

Rule didn't say a word. Not a single fucking word the entire time. We even flew commercial, and somehow, he managed not to speak to anyone when he was buying the ticket, boarding the plane, during the flight, or when we landed.

To be honest, it was a little frightening.

And since I could tell he didn't want to talk to me, either, I didn't bother texting him, telling him how I felt about all the shit that went down. In one day, we'd managed to blow up our entire lives.

*Your father ... Jeremiah Montgomery ... he left you a trust fund.*

*A trust fund?*

*It's the reason I married you.*

One poorly worded comment and everything went to shit. Had Rule given it careful thought, perhaps he could've said, "I married you so you'd get the trust fund." Instead, he'd worded it perfectly so that it sounded like he'd done it for selfish gain.

I couldn't blame Laikyn for her reaction. I was sure she'd been taken aback and hurt by her interpretation of his words. I would've been. But I could blame her for everything she said after. She immediately put up a wall and shut us both out without giving us a chance to explain.

Now, as we walked into the house, I wished for the first time that we could maintain the silence. I knew before Rule opened his mouth that I was going to hate what came next.

"I think it's time we go our separate ways, Jinx."

Of course he did.

Because that was how Rule handled emotional shit. He pretended that he was meant to be alone. It wasn't the first time he'd said something like that to me.

I shook my head.

"You don't really have a say in the matter anymore." Rule looked around. "I'm moving out. You can keep the house. And



the business.”

*That* was new. Usually, he told me I needed to move on with my life, to find some semblance of happiness with someone because he was tired of carrying my weight. I always ignored him because we both knew he didn’t carry shit. I was as much invested in our business as he was. And from the day I picked him up from that fucking prison, I’d been by his side. As a friend, as a lover, as a business partner. Not taking handouts but helping him build the life we had.

Rule sighed. “I’ll be gone in the morning. You can let Rhyan know she can keep the dog if you don’t want him.”

The dog.

Not once since we got Waldo had Rule ever referred to him as *the dog*.

Yeah, he was coming apart at the seams. It was only a matter of time.

I waited until Rule made it to his bedroom before I followed. I found him standing inside the room, staring at the bed. The pillows and blankets were askew, a vivid reminder that the three of us had slept in together last night. Another way we’d been pretending that everything was fine. I guess, in a sense, it had been much better than the current status of our relationship, but still.

Rule turned to face me. “What part of go away do you not fucking understand?”

I didn’t leave.

“I don’t need you, Jinx. I don’t even fucking want you!”

I still didn’t leave.

His face hardened, and for a brief moment, I saw every ounce of pain and anguish he’d dealt with in his life etched in the lines. “I’m so sick and fucking tired of—”

“Stop,” I said, the word coming out raspy, but the sound was there.

Rule’s eyes went wide.

For the first time in my life, a confrontation didn't instill panic. There was no tightness in my chest or a roil in my gut.

In fact, I felt a calmness I'd never felt before. I forced more words, these just as raspy and soft as the first. "I'm not leaving."

Rule gasped.

It would've been comical if it weren't for the fact I had stunned myself. My voice was weak, but the sounds were coming, and my brain wasn't having an issue relaying the information.

I stepped forward and whispered, "You're stuck with me."

He swallowed, and I swore I saw tears in his eyes, but they didn't fall.

"We will fix this."

"I don't—"

"Stop," I said again, a little louder this time, closing the gap between us.

"Jinx."

"Rule."

He huffed a laugh, and those were definitely tears in his eyes. "I always wanted to hear you say my name."

Now that I had, I wanted to say it a million times, but first...

I gripped his jaw and leaned in, pressing my lips to his.

"I'm not leaving," I repeated, still in a gravel-rough whisper. "Not you. Not her. We'll figure it out."

He shook his head, but he didn't push me away.

I kissed him again, more urgently this time, crowding him so he was forced to back up. I grabbed the hem of his shirt and lifted it. He let me pull it over his head. I did the same with my own before sealing my mouth to his.

Through hungry kisses, we managed to shed the rest of our clothing, and only when I had Rule on the bed, naked beneath

me, did I look him in the eye again.

His eyes moved over my face.

“I love you,” I said, forcing the words to be clearer than before. “I couldn’t say it. You wouldn’t’ve listened if I could, but I’ve been trying to prove that to you for years.”

Again, Rule shook his head. He was in denial. That had been his problem for so long. He couldn’t accept that anyone could love him, but I did. And despite what she said earlier, I knew Laikyn did, too. She just needed a minute to catch up to the rest of us. We’d kept her in the dark, and once she fumbled through it and realized that everything Rule had done had been for her, she would be here professing the same thing.

“Jinx, we—”

This time, I shook my head, effectively silencing him before I retrieved the lube that had been left out on the nightstand. It took minimal work to prepare us both, and then I was sliding inside him.

I took his hands and stretched them over his head, holding him in place as I rocked inside him.

“Look at me,” I whispered.

Rule’s eyes met mine.

As I made love to him, I witnessed his surrender, then proceeded to show him what words never could.

## Laikyn

I WOKE UP THE NEXT MORNING ALONE in my hotel room.

Granted, I wasn't sure you could call what I did last night sleeping, so I probably should've said I got out of bed. I'd tossed and turned, cried and blubbered, but I hadn't really slept.

I knew I looked as horrific as I felt, but I didn't care. At this point, nothing mattered. My entire life was a lie. Worse than that, it was a lie I hadn't been privy to but also one that I had perpetuated by my refusal to ask the difficult questions. I had known something was going on, but I'd chosen to put blinders on and live out a new existence in the dark.

It pained me to admit it, but I couldn't put the blame entirely on Rule and Jinx.

I wanted to. God, how I wanted to. In fact, numerous times through the night, I flip-flopped on where I stood, insisting I was the victim while knowing you can't be a victim when you played an active role in the plot. I knew going in that my marriage to Rule wasn't real, but I had played along, never thinking he'd done it for selfish reasons.

As much as I wanted to hide out here for eternity, I couldn't. It was time to go home. To return to whatever was left. I doubted there was anything to salvage, but it was time to face the music regardless.

As I was stuffing my clothes in my suitcase, there was a knock on the door. Creed hadn't told me when the flight was leaving, but I intended to be ready when he did. Since the sun was just coming up, I figured that was him at the door, coming to tell me it was time to go.

Without looking in the security hole, I unlatched the door and pulled it open.

Creed wasn't standing in the hallway.

Knox was.

He smiled. "Good morning."

"I can tell you now, there's nothing good about it."

"May I come in?"

I shrugged. I honestly didn't care what he did.

"Thank you."

He stepped back and motioned to someone behind him. A moment later, a man dressed in a uniform pushed a large cart into the room.

"I thought you might be hungry."

"Not really."

"Then how about coffee?"

"I don't drink coffee."

His eyebrow quirked, but my surliness didn't thwart him. "Juice?"

I shrugged again and watched as the man with the food placed everything on the dining room table.

While we waited for him to finish, we stood there in awkward silence. I was relieved when Knox finally turned to the guy and handed him a bill.

"Thank you, Phillip."

I couldn't see the denomination, but considering who Knox was, I was sure it was more than enough to keep that smile on Phillip's face for the rest of the day.

"You're very welcome, Mr. Montgomery." Phillip looked at me. "Ms. Montgomery."

"I'm—"

Before I could tell him I wasn't who he thought I was, Knox touched my wrist. "Merely a pleasantry. I informed the staff you're my sister. Evidently, I wasn't clear we had different last names."

"Whatever," I said, unable to conjure up an ounce of politeness. It was petty, but my heart hurt too much to worry who other people thought I was.

"Join me, please," Knox said, gesturing toward the dining table where Phillip set up what appeared to be a five-course breakfast.

I didn't want to, but I took a seat, figuring that would be the fastest way to get this over with.

"I realize you've got some things to deal with at home," Knox said as he took a seat after I did.

I shrugged.

Knox chuckled, but I couldn't figure out what he found amusing.

"Okay, clearly, you have nothing to say, so I'll do the talking."

I waited, but he took his time getting around to the conversation. I watched as he poured juice into my glass, then his, as he took the linen napkin from under the silverware and placed it in his lap, as he removed the silver dome from the plate in front of him.

As soon as he did that, my stomach rumbled. I hadn't eaten anything since yesterday morning before we left the house. I was starving, and the food smelled divine.

"Eat," he said. "I won't tell anyone. I'm good at keeping up appearances. All anyone else knows is you're on a hunger strike."

I couldn't keep from smiling as I relaxed and grabbed my silverware. Knox removed the lid from my plate, depositing them both on the other end of the table.

For the next few minutes, we ate while Knox took care of the small talk. He explained how he lived in New York, but the

Monolith Casino was their home away from home. He told me that they traveled here at least once a month and had a residence on the top floor of the hotel. I listened, pretending not to be interested in the tidbits he gave me about his wife and husband. I was curious. About all of it. Him. Them. I wanted to know everything there was to know about my brother, even if I wasn't quite ready to admit we were related.

When he finally ran out of things to say, I turned to him. "Why are you telling me all this?"

He paused, placing his fork down and wiping his mouth with his napkin. His patience was unnerving because I had to wait some more while he sipped his coffee.

When he looked at me this time, his expression was sober, not an ounce of amusement in his eyes.

"I learned about your existence three days ago, Laikyn." He leaned back in his chair. "When Creed told me, I think he expected me to be angry. And I was."

"Of course you were. Long lost sister looking to take your money." I rolled my eyes. "I don't even want your—"

"I was angry because I felt like I'd been cheated," he continued, talking right over me. "Cheated out of twenty-two years of knowing you."

I swallowed the lump that formed in my throat. I hadn't expected that.

"I don't have any siblings. Growing up, I was an only child. My mother married a man she claimed she loved. He had a daughter. Emily. I wasn't around much, so I didn't know her well. I encountered her at family functions, but it wasn't until she was an adult that I even started paying attention."

I raised my eyebrows, waiting for him to elaborate.

"Emily's now my wife."

"You married your stepsister?" I blurted, and yes, that was a bit of shocked incredulity in my tone.

He chuckled. "She's no longer my stepsister. And she hasn't been for a while. My mother and her father divorced

years ago.”

I wasn't sure that made it any better, but I decided not to offer my opinion. I doubted he cared.

“But my point is, I was never close to my mother. She's somewhat of a...” He canted his head, and a smile formed. “A manipulative bitch.”

I huffed a laugh. “I've got one of those.”

His smile brightened. “I think it's safe to say our father had a type.”

“Sounds like it.” I took a sip of my juice. “Based on my calculations, your father ... Jeremiah ... he cheated on your mother with mine.”

“In a sense, that's probably true. But my father never married my mother. He knew she was after his money.”

“So why'd he stay with her?”

“Because of me.”

Oh.

I dropped my gaze. “At least he wanted one of us.”

“I did some digging,” Knox continued. “My father did a good job of hiding your existence, but not for reasons you might think. At least if he's to be believed.”

He produced an envelope from his jacket pocket and passed it to me.

“What's this?”

“A letter from Jeremiah. It's addressed to you. His lawyer's been holding onto it. His instructions were to give it to you when you turned twenty-five unless you married before then. Then he was to give it to you after you turned twenty-two and had been married for ninety days.”

I didn't pick up the envelope. I didn't want to read it.

“He left one for me, too,” Knox added. “Explaining your existence and his reasons for doing what he did.” He exhaled. “I don't agree with how he handled it because I would've



preferred the chance to know you growing up, but I understand *why* he did it.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Why what?”

“Why’d he do it?”

Knox nodded toward the letter. “If he doesn’t explain it to you in there, you can ask me again, and I’ll tell you. But for now, I’d prefer you heard it from him.”

I wanted to tell him that it didn’t matter, that I didn’t care. However, Knox made it very difficult not to care. At least about him. I genuinely liked him, and I got the feeling he was being sincere when he said he wished things had been different.

So I didn’t tell him that.

“What happens now?” I waved a hand. “I mean, for us. Not the money.”

“I’d very much like to get to know you, Laikyn. I’d like to spend time with you. I want you to meet Emily and Kieran. As for the money, it’s set up in a blind trust. The lawyer my father hired is someone he had complete faith in, and based on my conversation with him last night, he made the right decision there. Your money ... it’s yours free and clear in fifteen days. The amount is in that envelope. He’s been investing it over the years, producing some rather impressive returns for you.”

The envelope was sealed, but that didn’t mean Knox hadn’t read it.

“No, I don’t know how much it is,” he said, as though he could read my mind. “It’s not my business. And that’s not the way I do things.”

I wasn’t sure I believed him, but I had no reason to call him out, so I didn’t.

“Rule married you because he wanted you to access that money as soon as possible. He didn’t bring it to my attention because he believed it would impact me financially.”

“Doesn’t it?”

Knox gestured toward the envelope. “Whatever money he left you is not something I’m privy to. I never knew about it. It was kept private for your protection. I think he partially did it so my mother couldn’t get her hands on it.”

I sighed. “It doesn’t matter. I’m divorcing Rule. He doesn’t love me.”

Knox chuckled. “Well, I disagree with you there, but that’s a topic for another time.”

I wanted him to elaborate, but he didn’t.

“As for a divorce, it won’t matter. It takes six months for a divorce to finalize in California, so even if you filed today, you would still meet the requirements for the trust to become yours.”

I stared at the envelope. “I honestly don’t care about the money. Maybe I will one day, but right now...”

“He loves you,” Knox said when I trailed off. “I only met him yesterday, but I saw it in his eyes, Laikyn. Everything he did, I have no doubt he did it for you. Not for himself.”

I couldn’t stop the tears that formed. “I want to believe that.”

And I honestly did, but why would I?

“Ask Creed,” Knox suggested. “He knows Rule, and he agrees with me.”

I knew that already. Creed told me as much yesterday.

I lifted my gaze to his. “So what am I supposed to do?”

“About?”

“Rule? Jinx?” I sighed. “Us.”

“I should tell you, I’m not the authority on relationships.”

“Is anyone?” I muttered.

Knox smiled, and there was more of that sincerity I saw before. “Stop fighting it. Just let it be. Trust me, it saves time.”

He sounded like he knew from experience.

“I suggest you go back to LA and confront Rule and Jinx. Tell them how you feel. How you *honestly* feel and see where it goes from there.”

“If only it were that simple.”

“I think you’ll be surprised how far an apology goes when you mean it.”

I stared at him, trying to fight the tears. “And you and me?”

“I’ve got a house in Malibu,” Knox said. “I’ve already told Emily and Kieran we’ll be making more frequent trips to California.” He reached out and touched my hand. “They’re very excited to meet you. Especially Emily. I think she likes the idea of having a sister-in-law. Plus, she’s been wanting to invest more time in the LA location. ”

“Location?”

“Delta June’s.”

“That huge auction thing?” I said, realizing how dumb I sounded. I didn’t know anything about it other than having seen some of the huge auctions that were televised.

Knox grinned. “Yes, the auction thing.”

“Sorry,” I said, embarrassed.

“Don’t be. When I told her you are an artist, she got very excited. She’s been hoping to move Delta June’s impressive art collection to one location. She mentioned wanting to talk to you about that.”

I swallowed, my heart jumping right into my throat. He knew I was an artist? He talked to his wife about me already? That made my heart a little lighter. I liked that idea, as well.

“We’ll figure this out,” Knox said. “I promise.”

I believed him because every fiber of my being wanted to. I didn’t want to walk away from him and never see him again.

I nodded. “Okay.”

Knox pushed his chair back and stood. “Good. Now let’s get you to the airport. Creed’s already pissed that I changed his flight plan without his knowledge.”

I giggled. “Seriously?”

“He’ll be the first to tell you I always get what I want. He’s not wrong. But he’ll get over it. He always does.”

The best part about taking a private jet from Vegas to LA was that I never had a chance to dwell on anything. Well, that and going through security. Missing that was definitely a bonus.

During the short flight, I spent the entire time talking to Journey Zeplyn, who, as it turned out, was engaged to Creed, Hawk, Garrison, and Nick. Legally, she wouldn’t marry all of them, but they were having an official ceremony, and based on her radiance, she was very happy.

At least one of us was.

Listening to her gave me a chance to ignore the heartache that threatened to choke me, as well as to pretend there wasn’t a letter from my father burning a hole in my pocket. I was afraid to read it, but I figured I needed to before I got to Rule’s house. I needed all the ammunition I could get if I had any hope of trying to salvage our relationship.

And I did. Have hope, I mean. I couldn’t explain it, but I knew I had to try to understand this from Rule’s perspective. I had to stop making rash assumptions and hear him out. If he even wanted to look at me. I wouldn’t blame him if he didn’t.

“Hey,” Journey said as the plane was beginning its descent. “I know it’s not my place to try to sway your opinion of Rule, but I thought you should know something.”

Her tone was serious, so I gave her my full attention.

“He’s a morally gray kinda guy, I know that.”

That was definitely a good assessment.

Journey continued. “I didn’t truly understand what that meant until he did what he did for Creed. I will never—”

I interrupted before she could continue. “What did he do for Creed?”

Journey glanced in Creed’s direction, then her husky voice lowered slightly as she continued. “We had some issues earlier this year. It was bad. Hawk was shot, and Creed was...” She swallowed, and tears formed on her lashes. “Sorry. When I think about how close I came to losing them...”

I waited her out because I could tell what she had to say was going to change something inside me.

“Rule saved Creed’s life. And Rhyan. She was there.” She exhaled slowly. “I won’t go into details because it’s a morbid story I don’t like to dwell on, but just know this. He walks the line between good and bad, but when it comes down to it, he’ll walk through hell to take care of the people who are important to him. You should know that.”

I nodded, fighting tears. Deep down, I knew Rule had more good in him than bad. Like Journey said, he was morally gray, meaning he wasn’t evil or good, he lingered on the line between the two, doing what was necessary. It didn’t surprise me that he saved Creed’s life. After all, he’d saved mine when he put a bullet in Diggy’s head. And, unlike my mother said, it wasn’t because he’d been hired to find me. He’d done it because he felt guilty that he hadn’t stopped my mother from staging my kidnapping. No one would ever convince me that he didn’t have a heart. I knew better.

“If you ever need anything, please call me.” Journey smiled. “Let me text you my number so you’ll have it. I’m serious about us getting together. I love these men of mine, but trust me when I tell you there are times when I’m jonesing for female companionship.”

Chuckling, I gave her my number, and she sent me a text. I saved her info in my contacts so I could reach out. She wasn’t the only one who needed a friend. I had none and wasn’t about to turn down an offer when it was presented.

When we landed, I learned that Creed had arranged a car to take me home. I sat in the back of the SUV, staring out the window, wondering if Rule or Jinx would even let me in the house when I got there. I wouldn't blame them if they didn't.

No, I wasn't completely over what they'd done, but deep down, I could forgive the lies because I honestly believed Rule hadn't done it viciously. Whether he wanted the money for himself or for me didn't matter. What transpired between us these past couple of months had changed our course. Reflecting back, I could see it. Rule's original plan had been to marry me, and that was about the only thing that worked as he'd wanted. After that, we veered onto an alternate path, and the three of us ended up in a very different place than where we started.

Lust and manipulation turned into love. There was no denying that.

At least not for me.

And if I had anything to say in the matter, they would own up to their love as well.

Perhaps once that happened, I could read the letter still burning a hole in my pocket.

\* \* \*

## **Jinx**

WHEN THE FRONT DOOR OPENED, I DIDN'T bother to move from my spot on the back patio. I was expecting to see Rule. He'd slipped out earlier with an excuse that he had some things to take care of. He hadn't asked whether I wanted to go with him, but I knew I wouldn't be good company, so I would've turned him down anyway.

I waited, expecting Rule to appear. A few seconds later, Waldo jumped to his feet, barking once before taking off inside the house.

Although Waldo was always happy to see Rule, he never reacted like that. Not since he was a puppy, anyway. These

days, he couldn't be bothered to greet anyone unless he knew for sure they were going to give him something.

Instantly, I was on my feet, moving slowly, fearful of what I might find. It wasn't the *who* that concerned me. It was what Laikyn was here to do that had my chest constricting and my throat tightening.

"Hi," she said, peering up at me as she overwhelmed Waldo with hugs and pats from where she was kneeling on the floor.

"Hi," I responded.

Laikyn stopped moving, her eyes wide and her jaw falling open.

"I know," I told her. "It's weird."

My voice was rough, likely from years of not using it, but I didn't have fear or anxiety constricting my vocal cords.

She stood slowly, shaking her head as tears began to drip down her cheeks. "Not weird." She swallowed hard. "Wonderful."

I was glad she thought so, but that didn't do anything to diminish the anxiety that was circulating in my bloodstream. It wasn't debilitating yet, but it would get there depending on what she did or said next.

"Is Rule home?"

"He went to take care of something."

Laikyn moved closer, and she didn't try to stop the tears leaking from her eyes. She stared at me as though she was seeing me for the first time in years, not merely hours.

I didn't get a chance to ask her what her intentions were because she kept coming until the only place for her to go was into my arms.

She put her arms around my waist, pressed her face against my neck, and sobbed. I held her, worried I would never be able to let her go and hating that I would eventually have to. I

fought the emotion that bubbled up in my throat, choking it down. I didn't want to cry. If I did, I might not stop.

When she finally pulled back, she wiped her eyes and sniffled. "I should've asked. Is it okay if I'm here?"

"Where else should you be?"

Laikyn smiled. "Your voice ... it's so ... sexy."

I laughed, some of the tension easing.

"It seems to be here to stay," I admitted. "Though I can't guarantee that'll always be the case."

Since I didn't know what had caused me to stop talking or why my brain had refused to work in tandem with my vocal cords all these years, I figured there was a chance I would one day relapse. For now, I wasn't going to worry about it.

"You need anything?" I asked.

Laikyn shook her head. "Maybe to sit with you for a while. If that's okay."

I took her hand and led her onto the patio. I pulled her down next to me, not releasing her. I was afraid to. I didn't want her to disappear.

When she leaned against me, I put my arm around her shoulders, holding her close. I didn't know how long we sat like that, but it was long enough for Laikyn to fall asleep, safe in my arms for a little while longer, at least.



## Rule

THE MOMENT I SAW LAIKYN AND JINX on the couch, my heart jumped into my throat.

I knew she was back in LA because Creed had texted earlier to let me know she made it safe and sound. I hadn't realized that she'd come straight home, though. Part of me had expected to learn she had gone back to her mother's. After all, she told me yesterday that she never wanted to see me again.

I'd spent a good part of last night lying in bed with Jinx beside me, trying to figure out the best way to fix this. If anyone was capable, it was me, right? I was the Hollywood Fixer. Fixing things was literally in my title.

And I would. Fix this. No matter what it took, when I was staring at the ceiling, reflecting back on every vivid memory of Laikyn, I decided I wasn't willing to let her go. Laikyn and Jinx were the best things life had given me, and I was smart enough to know that they were worth fighting for. With that said, I honestly figured it was going to take time simply to get her to talk to me again, much less to come here. So, seeing her there, sleeping against Jinx's side ... it was difficult to breathe.

When I moved closer, Waldo lifted his head and gave me a cursory glance before huffing and going back to sleep. The sound was enough to draw Jinx's attention, and he turned to look at me.

It felt ridiculous to admit, but I was seeing Jinx differently than I had before recent events. Last night had changed my outlook completely. I hadn't realized until he forced me to that I'd never surrendered myself completely to him before. I'd never allowed myself to truly accept what we had. My feelings for him were now as vivid as the blue sky overhead. I loved him.

Yeah, it was weird to acknowledge it, but it was like I didn't have a choice. I loved him. It was a fact. I couldn't change it, and I didn't want to. Now I had to learn to live with it.

"How long has she been here?" I asked, keeping my voice low.

Jinx glanced at the cell phone sitting on the arm of the couch. "Two hours, I guess."

She looked peaceful. Much different than she had yesterday when she was ripping me a new one in the hotel room. It was hard to admit, but I missed her. I'd gotten used to having her in my bed each night. Jinx had, too, and though we hadn't slept alone, her absence had been palpable.

"Is she open to conversation?" I asked, trying to gauge what I was dealing with.

"Yeah."

I was still getting used to hearing his voice. I couldn't explain the feeling I got whenever he spoke. I'd known this man for two decades, and I'd never heard a word out of his mouth, so to hear it now ... it was a gift I'd never expected to receive.

Laikyn shifted, coming awake slowly, blinking a few times before her gaze locked on me.

"You're home."

The fact that she referred to this place as her home gave me hope.

"Yeah."

"You think maybe we could talk?" she asked as she sat up, brushing her hair back from her face and swiping her fingers under her eyes.

I bit back the retort that hovered on the tip of my tongue. Reminding her that I'd tried yesterday wouldn't help anything. She was here now, and that was all that mattered.

“I talked to Knox this morning.” Laikyn shifted over, putting some space between her and Jinx. “He explained to me about the trust.”

If she expected me to ask about it, she would be waiting for a while. I didn’t care about the money. Never had. Not for myself, anyway. I’d only ever wanted it for her. So she would have peace of mind and no longer have to be under her mother’s thumb. As I’d learned, Laikyn wasn’t safe with Monica.

“I’ve got a letter from my father,” she said, gesturing into the house. “I haven’t read it. I wanted to wait.”

“Until?”

She lifted her head and looked at me. “Would you please sit down?”

“No.”

Her forehead creased. “Why not?”

“Why’re you waiting to read it?” I asked, unable to answer her question. There was no way I could possibly relax when I didn’t know whether she intended to stay or if this was merely her coming to say goodbye.

Laikyn looked over at Jinx. “I wanted to wait until I was with you both. I ... um ... I wanted to be somewhere I felt safe before I did.”

My chest squeezed.

“I know my reaction yesterday was a bit over the top, and I’m—”

“Don’t apologize,” I said, cutting her off. “You had every right.”

Her eyebrows slammed down. “No, I didn’t. I mean, sure. I had a right to get upset. But I didn’t have the right to say the things I did. They weren’t true.”

As for which words she was referring to, I wasn’t sure.

“I was mad. I felt blindsided, and yes, I reacted too quickly without listening, as Creed kindly pointed out.” She exhaled,

and her shoulders relaxed some. “You never said you married me so *you* could get your hands on the trust. You said you married me *for* the trust. I didn’t give you time to tell me it was so *I* could have the money.”

Well, at least someone was able to explain it to her.

Her eyes implored me. “Do you at least understand why I was upset?”

“Of course.”

“Do you get that there was a better way to do this?”

“At the time, there wasn’t,” I told her honestly. “But yes,”—I glanced at Jinx—“I was made aware that I needed to come clean.”

Laikyn looked at Jinx. “You’re not completely blameless.”

“I’m not,” he admitted. “It’s as much my fault as Rule’s. I get that.”

I stared at him in awe and wondered when I would stop doing that. I loved hearing him speak. I loved hearing him say my name.

Evidently, Laikyn’s reaction wasn’t much different than mine because she had tears in her eyes and a sweet smile on her face.

“I want to figure this out,” she finally said as she sniffled and wiped her cheek.

“What do you want, Laikyn?” I asked because, ultimately, that was all that mattered.

She frowned as she looked up at me. She hadn’t expected the question, but now that it was out there, I needed her to answer it.

“For starters, I don’t want a divorce.”

Something powerful inflated in my chest.

She said *for starters*. “And...?”

It took her a moment, but finally, she sat up straight, tucking her hair behind her ears. “Remember that first night

when you caught me in your shower.”

Jinx chuckled.

“I’ll never forget it,” I admitted. Like literally. It was forever etched in my brain.

“You asked me a question right before you joined me. Do you remember?”

That was a conversation I definitely wouldn’t forget. I’d felt guilty about it, worried I hadn’t given her a choice.

*Both of us.*

*That doesn’t sound like a question.*

*It wasn’t. Both or neither. It’s your only option.*

“I’m pretty sure he didn’t phrase it as a question,” Jinx supplied.

Laikyn giggled. “No. He didn’t.”

“What about it?” I prompted, wanting to see where she was going with this.

“You gave me a choice between both of you or neither.”

I nodded.

“I chose both.”

“And…”

“I *choose* both,” she said firmly, glancing between us again. “If you’ll still have me, that is.”

I was almost convinced a blood vessel had ruptured in my head because there was a roaring in my ears. It took a moment to realize it was merely my blood pumping hot, elation flooding my system and effectively drowning the fear that had consumed me since I walked out of that hotel room yesterday. Fear that I’d fucked up the best thing to have ever happened to me. Because intentional or not, Laikyn gave me and Jinx the happiness we’d never had. She completed us in ways nothing else ever would.

“Will you?” She sounded concerned. “Still have me?”

“Depends,” I told her, moving closer until I was only a foot away.

She stared up at me. “On?”

I looked at Jinx, hoping he could see the apology in my eyes. I’d intended to talk to him about this before I did it, but that was when I thought I would have to plan for the right time. This felt like it, and I didn’t want to wait any longer.

“What are you doing?” Laikyn asked as I lowered myself to one knee before her, pulling the small box from my pocket as I did.

I took a deep breath. “Will you marry me?” I flipped open the box. “Both of you.”

Laikyn gasped.

Jinx smirked and shook his head in disbelief.

Yeah, I think it was safe to say he accepted my apology.

“I’ll never be perfect,” I told them both. “I won’t even pretend I’ll change because we all know that ship has sailed.” I exhaled heavily. “But I promise I will never take either of you for granted. You’re all I’ve ever wanted and everything I never thought I’d have.”

Laikyn was crying, and Jinx ... well, the big, muscled, tattooed bald guy was, too.

“So, is that a yes?” I asked when neither responded.

“Technically, I’ve already said yes,” Laikyn said, her sassy tone back. “But I won’t say no to the ring.”

She snatched it from the box and put it on her finger before turning so we were both looking at Jinx.

“Now it’s your turn,” she said with a grin. “Marry us, Jinx. Let us promise to be a pain in your ass for as long as we all shall live.”

I held the ring box toward him, where two bands remained. “I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

“You two say the sweetest things,” he answered, taking one of the rings and placing it on his finger.

Two hours later, I found Laikyn in her studio. She was staring at one of her paintings.

“Reminiscing?” I asked, leaning against the doorjamb as I watched her.

She glanced back at me, her tone registering surprise. “You know what this is?”

“Sure.” I stood tall and walked inside. “It’s the sunset the first time I took you to the beach.”

Her smile was shy. “Yeah.”

“The first night I kissed you.”

This time, her smile amped up a few watts. “That’s what inspired it. That kiss.”

“I’m not a sentimental romantic,” I admitted. “But I’m not completely oblivious, either.”

She turned to face me. “No. Jinx is the romantic in this relationship.”

“He is.” I nodded toward the room. “This was his idea. All of it.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.” I noticed the envelope sitting on the small table beside her. “Did you read it yet?”

Laikyn looked down at it. “No. But I opened it. Does that count?”

“What are you scared of?”

She shrugged. “Nothing. Everything.”

I chuckled.

“What’s so funny?”

“I remember thinking the same thing that day I came home to find you in my bed, wearing my shirt. You asked me what I

was afraid of.” I brushed her hair back from her face. “Not much scares me, Laikyn. But you did. Hell, you still do.”

“How so?”

“You’re so vibrant and full of life. I’m not.”

She put her hand on my chest. “That’s not true.”

“Sure it is. From the first time I saw you, I was taken by you. I can’t explain it. You were a kid at the time. But I’d never felt terror like I did when I learned you’d been kidnapped. I didn’t even know you, and it shredded me to think you were in danger. I hunted for you for fourteen days. Ask Rhyan or Jinx. I was not fun to be around.”

“But you found me.”

“Yeah. Thank God.” I looked away. “And I kept watch over you after that, unable to take a chance that something might happen to you.” I met her gaze. “You were supposed to be a job. No, I wasn’t getting paid for it, but you were still a job. That’s what I convinced myself, anyway. And then I met you and...” I shook my head. “My life hasn’t been the same since.”

“A good thing, I hope.”

“Damn good thing.”

Her smile lit her eyes.

“I want you to know you don’t have to be afraid. Of anything. If I do nothing else, I will spend the rest of my life ensuring no one ever hurts you again.”

She patted my chest. “If you make me cry again...” She giggled softly. “I’m tired of crying.”

“Then don’t. It’s time to move forward.”

“And I do that by reading that letter?” Laikyn glanced down at it.

“I think that’s a good start, don’t you?”

She sighed and stepped back. “Yeah. I guess it is.”



“I’ll leave you to it. When you’re done, we’ll figure out dinner.”

Laikyn nodded. As I was walking out the door, I heard her sigh.

I wouldn’t hover, but I would be close. In case she needed me.

And I could honestly say I hoped she did. I’d never wanted anyone to need me because I wasn’t reliable. Or so I’d thought. Jinx had proven I was wrong about that. About pretty much everything. I’d needed him from the beginning, and we’d come to rely on each other.

Now we had Laikyn, and for the first time in my life, I finally felt complete.

\* \* \*

## Laikyn

WHEN RULE LEFT, I USED HIS ENCOURAGEMENT as strength and grabbed the letter off the table. I carried it over to my desk and hopped up on it, curious and terrified about what awaited me from beyond the grave.

Inside were two sheets of paper, folded and tucked in separately. One had MY DEAREST DAUGHTER written in bold, black letters on it, so I set the other one aside.

I unfolded the paper. It was only one page, hand-printed and signed at the bottom.

“Here goes nothing,” I whispered before looking at the first line.

My dearest Laikyn,

As I sit here writing this, I’m not sure whether I address it to the adorable two-year-old I’ve gotten glimpses of on the television or the beautiful young woman I know you’ll turn out to be. I figure both deserve to know how much I love you. One of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do was not fight to

have you in my life. I want to. God knows I want to. But your mother has asked me to stay away. She says it's best for both of you, and I have to trust she knows better than me.

Your mother ... although she's not the most affectionate person I've ever met, she has a good heart. She's young and ambitious, and I respect that. More so because she has her entire life in front of her, and I don't have the heart to force her to share that life or the spotlight she's seeking with anyone else. And she would have to. I wasn't exactly forthcoming with Monica when I met her. She didn't realize I was not single or available—at least not in the way she needed—and I didn't correct the misunderstanding. I was captivated by her beauty and charm and more than a little flattered that she could look at me the way she did.

Our love affair was brief. For a short time after, I thought about her with a smile. Then came the phone call that changed my life. She was pregnant and wanted me to know, but she was adamantly refusing support for herself or you. Not unless I was willing to walk away from the life I'd built for myself. She wanted to present a perfect image to the world, and she insisted the only way to do that would be for me to forsake my family. I couldn't. I could never do that to Knox. He's my whole world, and I know if I had just a little time with you, I would feel the same about you.

So I've done what your mother asked of me. I've kept my distance. I've watched you from the sidelines, thankful for every slight glance I've had. My health is deteriorating, so I know that by the time you read this, I'll no longer be here, but I want you to know that you'll forever be in my heart.

I hope one day you'll be united with your brother, and you can have the family I fear neither of you has now. I won't pretend I'm the best judge of character when it comes to the ladies I've shared my bed with. Too much information, I'm sure.

Unfortunately for me, I usually learn my lesson the hard way, and in this case, my penance is that I don't get to see you grow up. But please know I love you with all that I am, and the regrets are all mine.

Love,

Your father, Jeremiah

P.S. I've set up a trust for you so you can have the life I wished I could've given you. Do me a favor, Laikyn. Remember that money buys material things. It doesn't buy what's important. If it were possible to put a price tag on love, it would be worth far more than any amount of money.

## Jinx

I UNDERSTOOD THAT RULE WANTED TO GIVE Laikyn space while she read the letter Knox had given her, but I couldn't be as accommodating.

As soon as he told me what she was doing, I headed for her studio and stood outside the door. I wanted to be there for her if she needed me. She wouldn't. Laikyn was a strong, independent woman who would deal with whatever was in that letter as she'd dealt with every hand life had dealt her. With fierce determination and an abundance of courage.

I heard a couple of snuffles, but I resisted the urge to go in there, respecting her privacy as much as possible. I paced. Back and forth, wondering if I should go back to the house. I didn't want her to think I was hovering, but I was definitely hovering.

There was a heavy sigh from inside, and I stopped moving.

A second later, "Oh. My. *Gawd!*"

I hurried to the door. "What's wrong?"

Her eyes were enormous in her face as she glanced in my direction.

"This." Laikyn waved the paper toward me. "Holy shit, Jinx. That's ... *not* three million dollars."

"Did you think it would be?"

Her forehead creased. "Yeah. Kinda. It's the number I had in my head this whole time. Look." She waved the paper again.

"It's not my business."

“Just. Freaking. Look!” She all but shoved the page in my face. “I want to make sure I’m not seeing things.”

I glanced at what looked to be a printout from an account, and yes, I’d admit, I was momentarily stunned by the numbers. That was a lot of money.

“That’s more than three million, right?” she asked, her voice still high-pitched.

I nodded. It was significantly more than three million. Hell, she wasn’t even a millionaire. She was a billionaire. More than enough for her to never have to worry about it again.

“He left my mom money, too,” she said. “It’s at the bottom.”

I skimmed the last couple of paragraphs, and sure enough, Jeremiah Montgomery had left Monica the sum of eighteen years worth of child support. Thirty thousand dollars a month. The footnote stated that Laikyn was the beneficiary on the account, and if she chose to give it to her mother, it was at her discretion how it was distributed.

I handed the page back to her.

“This is crazy, Jinx,” she said, her voice husky. “I would’ve been content with the letter.”

Suddenly, a few tears began to fall, so I walked over and pulled her into my arms.

“I would’ve preferred to have met him.”

I didn’t respond. There was nothing to be said. They’d both missed out. I was sure if her father were alive today, he would’ve been proud of her. I only hoped she had the opportunity to get to know her brother.

“Rule mentioned something about dinner,” she said as she pulled back and wiped her eyes.

I grinned. “After all that, you want food?”

“Well, yeah. Don’t you?”

“I could eat,” I admitted.

She stood up and pressed her palms flat on my chest, leaning in so her mouth was close to mine.

“You really do have a sexy voice,” she whispered. “I can’t wait to hear all the dirty things you’ve got to say when you’re \_\_\_”

I crushed my mouth to hers, silencing her with a kiss. If I let her finish that sentence, there was a good chance we wouldn’t make it back to the house. For a few hours.

“I see what you’re doing,” she said when I pulled back.

“Do you?”

Laikyn giggled and took my hand. “Come on. Let’s figure out dinner. But first, I get to drop the B bomb on Rule.”

“B bomb?”

She turned and walked backward, pulling me with her. “Yeah. You know they call Knox the filthy hot billionaire, right?” She giggled. “I googled him. Couldn’t help myself.”

“I heard something about that.”

Her eyes glittered with mischief. “I think I’ll be known as the sassy hot billionaire.”

I laughed. “Yeah?”

“Suits me, right?”

Yes, I guess it did.

She spun back around, still dragging me behind her. “Come on. First food, then sex. Lots and lots of sex. We’ve got to make up for all those hours we were apart.”

Why did I get the feeling she wasn’t kidding?

# EPILOGUE

*One year later...*

## Rule

“YOU KNOW WHAT TODAY IS, RIGHT?”

That was the question Laikyn pelted at me when I walked into the bathroom.

I’d been home all of ten minutes, searching this monstrosity of a house for my wife, only to find her in the one place she shouldn’t be.

“It’s Monday,” I answered.

“Yep. What else?”

The bathroom was as big as a standard house, so I had to bypass three sinks, the sauna, the bathtub, her makeup station, and an awkwardly placed seating area—I mean, seriously? Who needed seating in the bathroom?—just to get to the shower. The only reason I didn’t complain about the weird chaise in the middle of the bathroom was because it happened to be one of the places Laikyn liked to fuck. Then again, that pretty much described every horizontal surface in this house. In the past four months, ever since we moved in, we’d been working to christen every one of them. Twice.

Finally, I reached the shower. Although, I wouldn’t call it a shower as much as a rainforest. She’d had it designed herself. It was big enough to hold a couple dozen people with enough shower heads to accommodate them all. It was made entirely of glass—the ceiling, the floor, and the three walls. It jutted out from the house and overlooked the ocean beyond. The only thing that made it private was the strategically placed plants that kept anyone on the beach from looking up here and seeing my wife...

Ah, hell.

“It’s our anniversary,” Laikyn said, grinning from where she reclined on the large teakwood bench that sat in the very center of the rectangular space.

“And you thought you’d celebrate by molesting the showerhead?”

“I thought I’d *start* celebrating that way, yes.” Her smile grew. “I also invited some people over.”

“Yeah?”

She nodded, cupping her breast with one hand while aiming a pulsating stream of water between her legs.

“Where’s Jinx?”

“Downstairs.”

Her lower lip puffed out in a pout. “I was hoping I could convince you both to join me.”

“Looks like you’ve got it all taken care of.”

It wasn’t an accident that she tilted her leg outward, giving me a perfect glimpse of her glistening pink folds.

“I really think you should join me,” she rasped, her eyes closing as she focused the water on her clit. “Oh, God.”

I was good at many things, but resisting her wasn’t one of them. And when she did shit like that ... putting herself on display simply to get a rise out of me, I *really* couldn’t resist her.

Rather than waste time stripping, I toed off my boots and left them on the floor before walking into the shower with her. I stirred the steam as I moved closer, the water raining from above, soaking my clothes.

“Please,” she whimpered, her eyes tracking me as I came to stand between her spread legs.

“You want my cock or my tongue?”

“Both.”

“You know what that means, right?”

Her eyes flashed with heat. “It means you make me come with your tongue and then fuck my ass with your cock.”

God, I fucking loved this woman.

I dropped to my knees and shoved the shower sprayer out of the way. Gripping her legs, I buried my face between them, diving into her sweet pussy.

Her back bowed, and she curled her fingers in my hair, holding my head as I feasted. It took only a minute to make her come because she was primed for detonation.

“One more,” I told her.

She whimpered and moaned, enduring the sensual assault because she loved every second of it.

I coaxed her through two more orgasms using my tongue and my fingers before I helped her to her feet.

I smacked her sexy little ass. “Get some lube.”

While she traipsed across the bathroom, dripping water everywhere, I turned off the water, stripped off my clothes, and left them in the corner of the shower. She returned with a small bottle of her favorite lubricating oil. She had a stash of them. In fact, Laikyn had an entire closet dedicated to sex toys. To say she was open to new things was an understatement.

I pointed to the taller end of the tantric chair—a fancy word for a chaise that accommodated every sexual position you could think of.

“Bend over.”

She wagged her cute little ass at me before draping herself over the rounded cushion.

“I thought we were—” Jinx’s sentence was cut off when he saw what we were doing.

“She was molesting the shower head again,” I informed him as I poured oil into my hands and rubbed them together.

“Want to join or watch?” Laikyn asked from her head down ass up position.



Jinx groaned.

“Tough question?” I asked as I lubed my cock.

I wasn't waiting for him to decide. If she had invited people over—which I had no doubt she did—there was a good chance they would be arriving soon. I didn't want to be rude and leave them unattended, but I damn sure wasn't leaving this room without taking what my sassy wife offered.

Laikyn moaned when I pressed the head of my cock to her tight little rosebud. I pushed in slowly, admiring her sexy back and the way she rocked her hips to urge me deeper. My wife loved to get fucked. What she'd once used as a distraction had become an obsession, and rarely a day went by when she wasn't luring one or both of us into her web.

Not that I was complaining.

“Did you know Creed's here,” Jinx asked.

“He's early,” Laikyn said with a moan.

“Early or not, he's downstairs. Right now.”

“It's an anniversary party,” Laikyn said, whimpering as she rocked back against me.

*Our* anniversary party.

I pulled out slowly, pushed in again.

“Fuck,” Jinx rasped.

His eyes were glazed as he watched as I slowly fucked Laikyn's ass.

“Rule...” Laikyn moaned. “Oh, fuck yes. More.”

I smacked her ass and buried myself inside her, holding still for a moment as her ass clenched my dick. I wasn't going to last long. Probably a blessing since there were people downstairs. Quite a few if Creed brought his crew with him. All here to celebrate our anniversary. One year ago, I married this woman with only two people present to witness it. Apparently, this year, I would be celebrating the day that had changed my existence with everyone we knew.

“Harder,” Laikyn hissed. “Or I’ll start screaming.”

I laughed, my cock pulsing inside her. “If you want an audience...”

“No,” she blurted. “I’m kidding, but ... oh, God, Rule ... yes.”

I began fucking her harder, deeper, faster. The fact Jinx remained nearby, observing, made it that much hotter.

When Laikyn started mumbling my name, begging me to make her come, I reached under her and found her clit, circling the sensitive nub as I pounded myself into her body.

I grunted, holding back as long as I could. When she finally cried out my name, her ass clenching around me, I drove into her one final time and came so hard I saw stars.

Twenty minutes later, after an actual shower that involved soap, the three of us were downstairs with the rest of our guests. More had arrived since Jinx had come upstairs. Creed and his crew, Knox and his, as well as Rhyan, Red Wally, and Willy, were all there to celebrate with us. It wasn’t an enormous affair, although, for us, it was big enough.

Or at least, I thought it was. Then the doorbell rang.

“Are you expecting someone else?” I asked Laikyn as Waldo ran toward the door in an effort to get there first.

She shook her head.

“Did you invite Monica?” I asked.

She laughed. “Not a chance.”

Although Laikyn and her mother were on speaking terms again, it hadn’t been an easy year for them. It got a little better when Monica finally admitted she’d only been engaged to the sneaky lawyer because she thought she was protecting Laikyn. No one bought her story, but it was the closest to an admission of guilt they would ever get from Monica. After that, Laikyn had decided to give her mother the child support that Jeremiah had left her, but she was doling out in monthly installments,

exactly as Monica would've received if she'd gotten it when Laikyn was born. Needless to say, Monica wasn't thrilled with that. She was even more upset that Laikyn had taken a chunk of it to pay off Monica's debt, not trusting her mother to do so. A debt that didn't involve my fee. I waived that one for her, a fact Monica didn't even pretend to be grateful for.

I approved of Laikyn's decision because it ensured I didn't receive any late-night phone calls asking for my assistance since she owed money to some unsavory people. Provided Monica didn't have any sexcapades that went horribly wrong again, our business relationship was officially over.

"I apologize," Kieran said, appearing near the front door. "I know this is a family affair, but that's a friend of mine."

I frowned at Knox as he approached behind Kieran.

"Who is it?" Laikyn asked.

"Someone in need of your services," Kieran said.

"You know he's not for hire anymore, right?" Laikyn asked, sliding her arm in mine.

What Laikyn said was mostly true. I was no longer the Hollywood Fixer. Considering the number of sins I'd committed in my life, I didn't balk when Laikyn asked that we stop committing crimes to protect rich idiots. Our services were more of the investigative kind, and we only took new clients, not any I'd done business with in the past. We still worked for rich people, and we still charged outrageous amounts of money when it behooved us to do so, but there was no longer a risk of us spending the rest of our lives in prison for our efforts.

"He knows," Knox stated. "But we thought maybe you'd consider using your powers for good."

"Goodish," Kieran corrected.

Knox grinned.

Jinx opened the front door.

Kieran greeted the new arrival, shaking his hand and welcoming him inside. He looked familiar, but I couldn't place

where I could possibly know him from.

“Rule, I’d like to introduce you to Ronan Kavanagh.”

“Kavanagh? As in Kavanagh Holdings?” Laikyn asked, her eyes darting between Ronan and me.

I wasn’t sure why she was looking at me. I wasn’t the one who had invited him.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Ronan said in a thick Irish brogue.

“Ronan, this is Rule’s wife, Laikyn, and their husband, Jinx,” Kieran supplied, ever the considerate host.

Ronan grinned, shaking Jinx’s hand. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to the multiple spouse thing.”

“Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it,” Kieran told him.

“Come in,” Laikyn said, gesturing for us to go somewhere other than the foyer.

I led the way toward the back patio, where everyone was congregating.

Ronan stopped in the living room and took in the artwork on the walls. He frowned as he moved from one image to the next before looking at Laikyn. “These are yours.”

It wasn’t a question.

“You’re the famous LM.”

“I am,” Laikyn said with a grin.

I grinned. The fact that Laikyn had opted to use only her initials as her official artist name amused me. She said she was trying to do something different. That started when she took Montgomery as her last name at Knox’s request. I guess, in theory, it had been more of an emotional plea than a request. To say Knox had grown close to his sister was an understatement. They’d spent a lot of time over the past year getting to know each other.

I knew Laikyn’s decision to take her father’s last name partly had to do with the fact she wanted to distance herself

from her mother, insistent that she was capable of making a name for herself without Monica's help. And she had. It didn't matter that she had billions in the bank or that her artwork was selling impressively well, Laikyn spent her days managing Delta June's Los Angeles location, working directly for her sister-in-law. She spent her spare time teaching an art class for underprivileged kids, working alongside Journey and Primal Instincts to raise money for various charities. And when she wasn't busy with those things, Jinx and I were monopolizing every second. She didn't seem to mind.

"My sister has a couple in her apartment in New York." Ronan turned to face me and then shook his head as though he hadn't meant to get off track. "I apologize for crashing the party, Rule, but I'm in a bit of a time crunch. I'm needed back in New York."

"What can I do for you?" I asked. It wasn't so much an offer as it was my curiosity speaking.

"Let's just say I need something fixed, and it's my understanding you're the best there is."

"He is," Laikyn told him. "But it's going to cost you."

Ronan smirked. "Money's not an issue."

Laikyn grinned. "Don't I know it."

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For those of you who are familiar with my other books and series, you might notice that my universes are colliding. It was bound to happen one day. After all, you were first introduced to the Walkers in my Club Destiny series. From there, I've had numerous crossover novels that have outlined the six degrees of separation between many of my characters. This has always been intentional on my part. It wasn't an accident that Knox Montgomery turned out to be Laikyn Quinn's half-brother. If you're curious about Knox, I suggest you read *Filthy Hot Billionaire*. And if you're interested in learning how Creed Granger came to be in a relationship with five people, you should check out the *Primal Instincts Trilogy*.

With that said, there's a larger plot at play. Something big. Something that will shine a light on a connection no one could see coming.

So stay tuned because there will be some new characters—yes, Ronan Kavanagh, who you were first introduced to in the *Brantley Walker: Off the Books* series, is one of them—and some old favorites who will come front and center once again. I truly hope you enjoy this journey because I certainly am.

Now for my *thank you's*:

I must thank the family and friends who put up with my craziness. From my sudden outbursts when I think of something that needs to be added or when I question why one of the characters did what they did, to the strange hours that I keep and the days on end when I'm MIA because I'm under deadline or just engrossed in a story... Y'all are incredibly tolerant of me, and for that, I am forever grateful.

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# ABOUT NICOLE EDWARDS

*New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author Nicole Edwards lives in the suburbs of Austin, Texas, with her husband, their three fur babies, and the youngest of their three children, who has threatened never to leave home. When Nicole is not writing about sexy alpha males and sassy, independent women, she can often be found with a book in hand or attempting to keep the dogs happy. You can find her hanging out on social media and interacting with her readers - even when she's supposed to be writing.



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I hope you're as eager to get the information as I am to give it. Any of these things is worth signing up for, or feel free to sign up for all. I do my best to keep each one unique and interesting.

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