



SILENCED



H A R P E R S E C U R I T Y O P S

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Harper Security Ops: Kit & Maxie

A.K. Evans



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A. K. EVANS

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PROLOGUE



Maxie

I took one step outside and felt the stifling air smack me in the face.

It was the middle of August, and the weather could best be described as unbearable.

Hot, humid, and sticky—essentially, uncomfortable.

Summer was officially my least favorite season. I hated the weather, despised being hot, and there weren't nearly enough holidays to encourage excessive decorating.

Of course, I was also one of those people who didn't exactly partake in traditional summer activities, which made my disdain for the season even more pronounced. I wasn't heading off to a community pool or sunbathing in my backyard. I didn't mind going for a hike on my own, but I refused to do it in this heat. If I dared to spend an extended time outside, it was only after the sun had gone down, when I'd be able to enjoy sitting out on my deck.

And as a homebody, the truth was that I lived for the changes I'd make inside my home as the weather turned and the holiday season approached. I couldn't wait for fall, arguably the best—and my favorite—season. I was looking forward to the colors of the changing leaves, the starts of the holidays, pumpkins, and the cooler weather.

For now, I had no choice but to suffer through the sweat-inducing walks from the air-conditioned building where I

worked to the stifling heat of my car that had been parked in the sun all day long.

I lived relatively close to work, so I was usually nearly halfway home before the air conditioner even started to offer any relief.

“Hey, Maxie! Wait up!”

I stopped walking and sighed. The only silver lining I’d managed to find in my day today was that it was Friday. I had the next two days off, and I wouldn’t need to think about work, which had been slightly hectic over the last seven months. The last thing I wanted was to be stopped when I was mere feet away from my car at the back of the lot where I’d parked it under the shade of a tree.

I turned around and immediately tensed.

“Ana. What’s going on?” I returned, noting she looked a little frazzled.

My coworker finished walking the remaining distance to me and attempted to catch her breath. “I was hoping to catch you before you left,” she said.

Confused, my brows instantly pulled together. While Ana and I worked in different departments—I was in accounts payable and receivable, while she was in purchasing—we were still occupying office space that put us in close proximity to each other.

In other words, it made no sense that she wouldn’t have been able to catch me long before I left the building.

“Sure. Is everything alright?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Not exactly.”

I couldn’t say that was completely unexpected. “Well, considering all we’ve been doing to prepare for this merger, I can’t say I’m surprised. Did you need my help with something?”

“Do you have any plans this weekend?”

That question caught me off guard completely. “Pardon?”

Ana sucked in a deep breath and let it out before she revealed, “There’s something I need to talk to you about, but I really don’t think it’s a wise idea to discuss it here. I was hoping you might be free to meet up with me at some point this weekend.”

In any other situation, I would have balked at getting together with just about anyone from work. It really wasn’t my thing on a good day. I didn’t necessarily hate my coworkers or anything like that—I just preferred to keep my personal life separate from my professional one.

But this was even worse, because it was Ana.

She wasn’t a bad woman, and we were always friendly enough. But I’d have been lying if I said I didn’t take notice of the change in her over the last several months. She’d recently gone through a divorce, and ever since, she’d been different at work.

Then again, considering her decision to get a divorce had been made just a few weeks before we got the news of the company merger, it wasn’t like I couldn’t understand why there’d been such a change in her.

She was dealing with work-related stress on top of trying to grieve for the loss of her marriage. I didn’t think that would be easy.

Even still, I wasn’t thrilled with the idea of getting together, regardless of the reason for it.

“Well, I already have some things planned for this weekend, but I’d be happy to talk over the phone,” I offered. “You’re more than welcome to give me a call.”

“Would tonight be alright with you?” she asked.

I nodded. “Sure. Any time after seven should be fine.”

Relief washed over her. “Thank you, Maxie.”

“No problem,” I returned, curious as to what she needed to talk to me about. “Do you want to take down my number?”

She showed me her empty hands and said, “I actually ran out of the office so fast to catch up with you that I forgot to

grab my phone. I have to go back in to get my things and tie up a few loose ends before I leave for the weekend, so I'll just get your number out of the company directory, if that's okay with you."

"Of course."

"Great. Thanks."

With that, Ana and I said goodbye to one another, and I folded inside my sweltering hot car. For the remainder of the drive back to my house, I kept thinking about my conversation with Ana. I couldn't imagine what she wanted to discuss with me. A couple of scenarios popped into my head, but by the time I made it home, I completely forgot about my conversation with her.

In fact, I didn't think about it again for the rest of the night, not even when Ana never called like she had said she would.

It wasn't until I left the gym late Saturday morning that I realized I'd missed a call from her.

Fortunately, she left a voicemail message.

"Hi, Maxie. It's Ana. I'm sorry for not calling you yesterday, but I ran into a slight dilemma. I'm in a bit of a desperate situation now, and out of everyone at work, you're the only one I trust. Anyway, I wound up becoming involved in what I can only describe as a scandal at work. It wasn't intended for me to be involved, but it happened all because of a stupid email I got about six months ago and this merger. The problem is that there's a lot at stake, and I don't know what to do. I was hoping for your advice, because if what's happening continues to happen, there are a lot of people who stand to get hurt. Worse, the whole merger could crumble, and the new tech that's supposed to save lives as a result might not come to fruition. Please call me when you have a chance, and I hope you'll wait to say anything to anyone about this until after we speak. Okay. That's all. You can call me back at this number. I'll talk to you later. Bye."

The message ended, and I spent the next few seconds just staring at my phone.

There was a scandal at work, and Ana seemed to have been pulled in unwittingly.

I immediately called her back, but she didn't answer, so I left her a voicemail before I made my way home.

And because I'd been busy at home for the rest of the weekend, it wasn't until I went into work on Monday morning and Ana wasn't there that I realized she never returned my call.

ONE



Maxie

“You aren’t at work yet, are you?”

I smiled as I put my car in gear and pulled out of my driveway. “No, Mom. I’m leaving my house now. What are you up to?”

“I know this is a bit last minute, but I was hoping you might be able to help me out,” she replied.

After coming to a stop at the end of my street and making sure nobody was coming from the opposite direction, I started driving again. “I guess that depends on how last minute this request is and what you need,” I countered.

I wouldn’t mind helping my mom out with whatever she needed, but there would be no way possible for me to help her in the middle of the day today. With the way things were going at work, calling out just wouldn’t be an option.

“One of the younger girls I work with is getting married,” she started. “I was invited to her bridal shower, and I was hoping I’d be able to not only grab something off her registry but also take one of your wreaths. Do you have one that would be nice for a newlywed couple in their brand-new home?”

I loved my mom.

I loved how much she supported me in my passion.

As it turned out, working in the accounts receivable and payable department of a pharmaceutical company just didn’t thrill me. I did it because it paid the bills.

My true passion was arts and crafts.

And while I never seemed to have a tough time finding some unique project to do, nothing had brought me the joy that making my wreaths brought me.

I'd always had a creative side, but it wasn't until I'd purchased and moved into my own home four years ago that I wound up discovering my love and talent for homemade wreaths. It was during the first holiday season in my new house that I'd gone out looking for a wreath for my front door. I knew exactly what I wanted, but I couldn't seem to find it.

So, I made my own.

I loved it so much, I made one for the next holiday.

I continued to do that all year long, switching out my wreaths whenever another holiday rolled around, or whenever the seasons changed.

My mom loved my wreaths almost as much as I did, so I wound up making her ones for her home, too.

But whenever the chance arose, my mom tried to get others to see my wreaths. It came as no surprise to me that she wanted to include one in her gift to her engaged coworker.

"When I get back home tonight, I can check to see what I have made already. I'll send you a few pictures of what I've got available, but if I don't have any that you like or that I think will be good for a new bride, I can make one for you. When would you need it by?" I asked.

"The shower isn't for another two weeks," she answered. "But I'm happy to give her whatever you think is nice. And I'll pay you for it."

Plenty of time.

"I don't want your money, Mom. You can just reimburse me for the materials," I said, my tone indicating that I was sick of having to tell her the same thing all the time.

There was a long stretch of silence, which I knew meant that she was frustrated. "I wish you would take some money. You should really start believing in yourself, Maxie."

I couldn't stop myself from rolling my eyes as I smiled. Nobody loved me like this woman did. "I do believe in myself."

"Well, then you should be making wreaths and other crafts full time," she noted.

Nothing would have made me happier than to be able to follow my passion. Unfortunately, there were too many things stacked against me for that to happen.

First, I needed to be able to pay my bills and support myself. Quitting my job that provided me with a steady income and benefits just seemed foolish, even if living my dreams would have made me so incredibly happy.

Beyond that, I wasn't the kind of woman who liked change. I didn't respond well to it, which was also very likely the reason why this merger at work was taking such a toll on me. Too much was changing too quickly, and I hated everything about it.

As much as I might have despised that, I'd remain where I was, because I just couldn't bring myself to leave the place I'd been working for so many years. I was happy with the reliability and familiarity of my current job.

The bottom line was, I wasn't daring.

Even if I loved the wreaths I made and had received the compliments on them that I had over the years, I still couldn't bring myself to make that leap and go all in with it.

"Work is really busy right now, Mom," I argued in a futile attempt to defend myself. "This merger is resulting in a lot of changes, and there's a whole lot for me to get used to again. I feel like I've spent more time learning this new system they implemented than I have actually working."

"Only more of a reason for you to make a change," she suggested.

Letting out a laugh, I replied, "It's like you don't even remember who you're talking to."

“Oh, I know exactly who is on the other end of the line. I just want the best for you, so I’ll never stop reminding you.”

I pulled into the lot at work and said, “Okay. Well, I just got to work, so you’re going to have to try to convince me some other time.”

“Fair enough,” she acquiesced. “And if you have a wreath ready to go by then, feel free to bring it when you come to the party on Sunday.”

“I planned on it,” I assured her.

“Okay, Maxie. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Bye, Mom.”

“Love you.”

“I love you, too.”

With that, my mom and I disconnected our call, and I made my way to the back of the parking lot, so I could park under the tree.

It was Friday again, so I had only one more day of work to get through before I could enjoy having a nice two-day break. And I was definitely looking forward to the break. Of course, I’d have a quiet night in tonight, and tomorrow, I’d head into the gym in the morning to get my workout in. Sunday was what I was most looking forward to, though.

Even if I generally preferred to be at home, I was excited to go to my parents’ house on Sunday to celebrate my dad’s birthday. My mom was cooking him some of his favorites, and a few members of our extended family were going to be visiting. It was bound to be a good time for everyone.

I just needed to get through the next eight hours. The problem was that it was going to be no easy feat.

Although everything seemed to be going well in my personal life, which mostly meant that nothing bad was happening, work was an entirely different story.

It had been one week since Ana stopped me on my way out and asked me to meet up with her. It had been one week

since I'd gotten that voicemail message from her indicating that something bad was happening here at Young Pharm, the place we both worked. And it had been one week since I last saw my coworker.

Ana never showed up to work on Monday.

While I was slightly worried about it, nobody else seemed concerned. But when she never showed up on Tuesday, and she'd never called in to request time off, the rumors started swirling.

Rumors.

A woman was missing, and people immediately resorted to rumors.

Granted, Ana's behavior over the last few months had made that easy for people to do, but since I knew she'd had something else on her mind, I wondered how much of her behavior had to do with that and not the divorce she'd been going through.

As far as I knew, human resources had reached out to her several times, with no success. Also, it seemed Ana had forgotten to update her emergency contact, since her ex-husband was still listed.

I didn't know whether or not the company had called the police or if they'd heard anything about or from her. All I knew was that she never called me back, and she had stopped showing up to work.

I wondered who else she'd spoken to since she left me that voicemail.

Was I the last person she attempted to contact?

After asking myself that question, I felt my belly start to tremble with nerves. Would the police attempt to contact me? Would they want to know what Ana had wanted to speak to me about?

I didn't know why, but as I made my way toward my cubicle, I decided to walk a different way. It was likely just

wishful thinking, but I desperately wanted to pass by Ana's desk and see her there.

Ever since I stepped foot back into this office at the beginning of the week and Ana never showed up for work, I regretted my decision not to meet up with her on Friday. I couldn't say with absolute certainty that anything would be different, but at least I might have had a clue about what happened to her, or why she sounded so distressed on that voicemail.

Hell, maybe she never would have left the voicemail to begin with.

Sadly, I wound up passing an empty desk, which only fueled my curiosity. Ana had made it clear that she hadn't spoken to anyone else about what was going on. Did that mean that it fell on my shoulders to figure it out now?

By the time I got to my desk, I didn't have any answers. Worse, I'd barely sat down and had enough time to fire up my computer when I checked my email and saw one from Marcia.

Marcia worked in human resources, and she wanted me to come to her office as soon as I got in this morning. With the exception of routine yearly meetings with human resources, I hadn't ever been summoned to meet with anyone in the department since I'd started working for this company.

I couldn't take Marcia's request to be anything but bad news. There wasn't a question in my mind that this had something to do with Ana. I just wondered if they somehow figured out that she'd shared bits and pieces of information with me.

And if they had, what was I supposed to do?

She'd pleaded with me not to mention what she'd revealed to me until we had a chance to talk. Was that the best course of action now that she seemed to have disappeared?

I took a deep breath, rose from my chair, and made my way to Marcia's office.

As soon as I knocked on her door, she called out, "Come in."

I pushed the door open and was surprised to see her smiling brightly at me. “Hi, Marcia. I just got in and saw your email.”

“Yes. Thank you for coming to meet with me so quickly,” she replied. “Please have a seat.”

I crossed the room toward her desk and sat down in the chair opposite of hers, but I did it feeling an overwhelming sense of foreboding. Because I didn’t want to draw any attention to myself over this situation, I did my best to try to appear unaffected. “It’s no problem at all. Is everything alright?”

She offered me a sympathetic look. “Not exactly. While I wish this would be coming as a surprise to you, I’m sure you are aware that Ana hasn’t been in to work all week.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed and heard people talking,” I confessed.

Marcia let out a groan. “I really wish people would stop talking about things they have no information on. I’m thinking I might need to send out a companywide email to remind them about the dangers of gossiping.”

I wanted to roll my eyes. Instead, I replied, “That sounds like a good idea.”

She smiled at me. “I hate to do this to you now when we’re all so caught up in learning new systems and preparing for this merger, but we’re in a bit of a desperate situation right now.”

Tipping my head to the side, recognizing that Ana had said those very same words to me and feeling curious, I asked, “What’s going on?”

“We can’t hire anyone new until after everything had been finalized with the merger,” she revealed. “As such, we need to find a way to work with what we have to continue to fulfill all of the roles in this business. I spoke at great length with Ethan, and we both believe that you’d be the best choice for this role.”

Ethan Young was the CEO of Young Pharm.

I didn't know why, but it blew my mind that he had discussed anything with Marcia and ultimately believed I'd be the best choice for any role, considering I didn't think he even knew my name.

"What role?" I pressed.

More sympathy moved through her. "We need someone to cover Ana's job duties until we are able to officially hire someone for the position, which we hope might just mean having someone from the Mystic Labs purchasing team stepping in and taking over."

Mystic Labs was the company that Young Pharm was merging with.

I didn't want to dwell on the fact that Marcia had said someone from the other company could just step in and take over. At the onset of this whole merger, we had been told that everyone's jobs were secure. Was that truly the case? Was that part of what Ana had discovered?

"You want me to work on purchasing now?" I countered.

She nodded. "We're hoping you'll be able to handle your current tasks, as well as Ana's."

I took in another deep breath and blew it out. "I'm... well, there's just a lot going on right now," I started. "I want to do what I can to help, but I don't want to leave anyone disappointed, either."

"We understand this isn't going to be easy for you, but we truly believe you are the best option for this role," Marcia assured me. "Obviously, we recognize this is far more responsibility on your shoulders, so Ethan has approved a temporary increase in your pay until we can find a permanent solution."

I certainly didn't want to turn down the increased salary, but I wondered how much either of them truly understood the pressure all of the staff was under from the moment we learned about the merger, and had been taking steps toward preparing for it. Taking on any additional responsibilities, particularly when I knew that something shady had been going

on that left Ana feeling stressed, just seemed like a recipe for disaster.

But then a thought hit me.

Maybe this was happening for a reason. Ana had said she'd received an email six months ago, which was right around the time she started acting a bit stranger than usual. She'd held on to whatever this was for all that time. Perhaps the timing of this all meant something.

Based on what she said, I was the only one who knew the very little that she'd shared. If I fulfilled her role, maybe I'd learn more and would be able to figure out what happened to her.

That was why I looked Marcia square in the eyes and said, "I don't want to make promises I can't keep and tell you that I'll have no problem fulfilling Ana's role here in addition to my own, but I'll do my best."

Marcia seemed relieved by my response. "That's all we can ask of you, considering the circumstances. I'll go ahead and have the request for the increase in salary submitted today, and I'll draw up a few documents for you to sign this afternoon. Other than that, just do what you can, and we'll figure out a way to make it all work."

"Okay."

"Thank you, Maxie. We really appreciate you stepping up to the plate for us in this situation," she declared.

I returned the smile. "You're welcome. Should I start on purchasing this morning?"

"Considering how backed up things are there, it would probably be a wise idea," she suggested. "And though I realize it's not ideal to work at a desk that's not your own, it'd be a huge help if you could just work at Ana's former desk when you're working on purchasing for the time being."

I nodded my understanding. "That's not a problem."

With that, I stood and walked out of Marcia's office. After grabbing my things from my desk, I made my way to Ana's. I

immediately dove in and started the work of getting caught up on pressing tasks that hadn't been handled over the course of the last week.

By the time my lunch break rolled around, I was relieved to finally have some time to back away from the work and clear my head.

Only, I couldn't seem to stop a million thoughts from running through my mind. As I ate my food, I was plagued by questions surrounding Ana's sudden disappearance.

None of this made any sense, and it didn't seem as though anyone here was genuinely upset that a member of our staff had just vanished.

So, even if I knew I was going to be opening a can of worms I probably shouldn't have, I decided to take some action after lunch.

I returned to Ana's desk, and after reminding myself that this was likely going to be a bad idea, I searched Ana's emails. I went back about six months ago and added in a buffer in case she got the timing wrong. Nothing immediately stood out to me.

Then I remembered that Ana had said the whole merger could be at stake with what she learned.

When I asked myself how that would be possible, one name came to mind.

As the CEO, he had the power to ruin what was happening, didn't he? So, I searched Ethan's name in Ana's emails.

I never anticipated I'd find what I did, and I knew Ana was right.

If what she'd learned hadn't been stopped, this whole thing had the potential to blow up in everyone's faces.

What worried me most was if that had already happened to Ana.

TWO



Maxie

“I need your advice.”

Staring into my best friend’s eyes, I hoped she could see the desperation written all over my face.

She cocked an eyebrow and asked, “Does this require a lengthy discussion?”

I nodded.

“Will you be able to tell me whatever it is you need help with in between your remaining sets?” she questioned me.

“Probably not,” I confessed. “It’s rather lengthy and complicated.”

My best friend broke out into a smile and said, “Let’s finish up your sets, and then we’ll go for a walk around the track. You can tell me everything then.”

“The track is outside,” I noted.

“And?”

I groaned. “You know how much I hate the heat.”

“And you know how much I love to push you to your limits,” she retorted.

I took in a deep breath and sighed. “Fine.”

As I got started on my next set, I had to admit to myself that I expected nothing less than Brynn’s response.

Brynn and I had been best friends for years. She was the person I was closest to, and I knew I could tell her anything. But when it came to our personalities, I often wondered how the two of us could have ever gotten along with one another.

We were so much the opposite of each other.

Brynn had always been a highly motivated individual in every aspect of her life. She went after everything she wanted, and she refused to believe that anything was unachievable.

I wouldn't have said that I was lazy or unmotivated. I just didn't have the same drive for everything I did in my life that Brynn did about everything in hers.

Then again, that might have had something to do with Brynn having built the life for herself that she wanted to have and wasn't stuck working at a job she didn't exactly love.

Health and fitness had always been a huge part of her life, which is why I took her up on her offer to train me. I wasn't interested in competing in any fitness or bikini competitions any time soon, but I wanted to keep myself fit and healthy. Sometimes, I wondered if I was a glutton for punishment, though, because Brynn did not mess around.

It didn't matter that I was her best friend. She rarely cut me any slack when it came to my workouts. And apparently, even if I was having a crisis, she was still going to make sure that the work got done before we dove into anything else.

Considering that I often felt much less stressed after a workout, I probably should have thanked her.

I took the next twenty minutes to finish my workout, doing my best to focus on the work I was doing in the gym. Before I knew it, I was walking around the track in the heat with Brynn.

She didn't hesitate to dive in. "So, I've got to admit that I'm genuinely curious. Is this advice you need related to a guy?"

I rolled my eyes at her and muttered, "Yeah, right. I wish."

Brynn cocked an eyebrow. "Really?"

Shooting her a look that I hoped communicated I wasn't joking around, I confessed, "Yes. There isn't much I wouldn't give right now to be talking to you about some hot guy who was making me feel all warm inside."

And that was the truth.

My love life had been pretty much nonexistent for the last two years. Granted, I wasn't exactly doing anything to help myself in that area. I went to work, came home, and visited with my family. Brynn and I got together on occasion, but we rarely frequented places that would be conducive to meeting a guy I could be interested in. The reality was that if I was bound to find a guy that I could get along with, he wasn't going to be found in a bar. The guy for me was probably sitting at home in his air conditioning, figuring out how he was going to find the woman of his dreams if he couldn't get over his disdain for the heat and humidity.

Maybe we'd both have to wait until the weather turned to have any hope of running into one another.

"Then what's going on?" Brynn asked, interrupting my thoughts of what my future husband was doing right now. "You seemed particularly distracted during your workout today."

Nodding, I mumbled, "That's putting it mildly."

"Is it something with your family?"

"It's work," I blurted.

"The merger?" she guessed.

I shook my head. "Not exactly. Though, I'd be lying if I said that hasn't been an absolute nightmare to deal with. I mean, this is kind of related to that, but it's much bigger."

I glanced over at her and saw her brows pull together. "I'm so confused."

"Well, it started last Friday," I began. I went on to tell Brynn all about the conversation I'd had with Ana a week ago as I was leaving work. I explained how she never called me that night like I'd urged her to do, but that she had called when

Brynn and I were working out together on Saturday morning. I shared the specifics of the voicemail Ana left for me last Saturday and that I'd returned the call but hadn't managed to get through. And finally, I revealed that Ana never showed up for work on Monday, hadn't called out sick, and didn't come in all week.

When I finished, Brynn didn't hesitate to ask, "What do you think she wanted to talk to you about?"

"I found out yesterday," I answered.

Her head snapped in my direction, curiosity littering her features. "You did? What was it? Did she call you?"

"No. Nobody still seems to know where she is, and what's really strange about it to me is that they don't seem concerned," I said. "Unless there has been contact from her and they haven't told the rest of the staff, I can't help from feeling like something is terribly wrong."

"Maybe you should go to the police," she suggested. "That's always an option."

"Yeah, I've been thinking I might have to do that, but I'm a little concerned about doing that, too," I told her.

"Why? You said you figured out what she had to talk to you about? If you haven't spoken to her, how do you know?" Brynn queried, looking for the answers I'd been wracking my brain for all week long.

We'd finished another lap on the track and continued on to the next one. Even if I hated being out in this heat, I was at least grateful for the companionship and conversation I was having with Brynn. It worked wonders in keeping me distracted from how my body was feeling.

"I got called into human resources yesterday morning," I shared.

"What? Did they already know what was going on? Did they tell you?"

Brynn was firing one question after another at me, and I couldn't seem to stop myself from laughing. Had the roles

been reversed, I'd probably have been asking just as many questions.

"If they know, they aren't telling me," I replied. "Essentially, they wanted me to step up and fulfill Ana's job responsibilities until they can find a permanent solution. Since we're going through this merger, they can't hire anyone, so they need someone who knows how to do Ana's job."

"So, now you're one person doing the job of two people," Brynn pointed out, her tone indicating she was less than amused. "This is all the more reason why I'm so glad I work for myself."

A smile broke out on my face. I loved that she could see how unfair it was for them to ask me to fulfill two roles at work. "On the bright side, they did offer an increase in my pay until this all gets sorted."

"At least there's that," she muttered. "So, I'm guessing you agreed, considering you figured something out. What was it?"

This was where I was struggling. I didn't know if I could repeat what I'd learned. It was so unexpected, and I still hadn't fully wrapped my brain around all of it.

I squared my shoulders, continued my steady pace around the track, and revealed, "I recalled that Ana told me she'd gotten pulled into something roughly six months ago when she received an email. She had also mentioned that it could jeopardize the merger. So, when I was told to work at her desk when I was handling anything related to purchasing, I decided to search her emails."

"And?" The excitement and anticipation were bubbling out of Brynn.

"And I wished I hadn't looked," I told her.

Her eyes widened. "What did you find?"

"Ethan, the CEO of our company, is having an affair with Anna, the CEO of the company we're merging with," I answered.

Confusion washed over her face again. She opened and closed her mouth several times as she struggled to find the words to ask whatever was going through her mind. Finally, she said, “I mean, I get that there’re policies against fraternization in the workplace, but how is this a scandal? Why is it so detrimental to the company, and how did Ana find out about it?”

I huffed. “I’ve been going through all of the same questions ever since I learned the truth myself,” I remarked. “Here’s what I’ve come up with so far. Ana found out, because Ethan accidentally sent an email to her that was meant for Anna. It was rather racy, and he didn’t leave anything up for misinterpretation. I’m guessing that Anna must have gotten a Young Pharm email address, and when he entered it, he forgot to add the extra ‘n’ in Anna’s name, which is why Ana, spelled with only one ‘n’, got the email instead.”

Brynn and I seemed to have both picked up our pace. I didn’t know if she had done it purposely, hoping she’d get that little extra workout from me, or if her mind was racing with so many thoughts over what I was sharing. Either way, I couldn’t be bothered to stop the walk when the most important thing for me right now was getting her advice on how to proceed.

“Well, that’s a reasonable explanation. What’s the problem with these two people having some sort of relationship?” Brynn asked.

“They’re both married,” I explained. “I don’t know much about Anna beyond that she’s married, but Ethan is married with three kids.”

“What a dirtbag.”

“Tell me about it. The bigger problem is that Ethan’s wife is also a shareholder in the company. I think if she found out, she could do some real damage.”

Brynn took that information in, sat with it a moment as we continued to walk, and finally said, “I still think she deserves to know that her husband is cheating on her. And if Anna is married, her husband should know the truth as well.”

I didn't disagree with that.

There was no question in my mind that if this was just a matter of people cheating on their spouses, I wouldn't have to think too much about how to proceed. I'd march right into human resources and do what needed to be done.

But this wasn't just any ordinary situation. "I agree with you, but here's my dilemma. First, if this news is revealed and it tanks the merger in any way, the technology that was supposed to come to fruition shortly after everything was finalized would be obsolete. That technology could save thousands of lives, so I'm not real keen on being the person who brings it all down."

"You make a valid point. If the worst happened and that technology fell by the wayside, you'd feel massive guilt for your role in this," Brynn declared, expressing precisely how I felt about this whole situation.

This was my job. I worked in accounts payable and receivable. For the time being, I also worked in purchasing. Those job responsibilities were the kinds of things that meant I should have been able to go to work, do my job, and go home. I wasn't supposed to have to think about work once I left there. Now, it was the only thing on my mind.

"That's bad enough, Brynn, but there's more," I warned her.

"This is already bad enough, Maxie. What else could there be?" she retorted, the horror becoming more and more evident in her tone.

"Ana knew about this, and she's now missing. Her voicemail was very panicked last weekend, so I'm left here wondering if something happened to her on purpose," I explained.

It was at that declaration that Brynn came to a stop. I had gotten two steps ahead of her before I realized, stopped, and turned back to look at her. "Do you honestly think that's possible?"

I shrugged, feeling more confused than ever. “I really don’t know. I’d hate to think that was the case, but nothing else seems to make any sense.”

For several long moments, my best friend didn’t say a word. I could see just how concerned she was by all that she’d just learned, and I think it was hitting her the same as it had just hit me just how horrible this whole situation was.

If someone realized that Ana knew what was going on and was worried she might reveal the truth, would they have really gone so far as to harm her? Or, at the very least, would they have done something to make her fear for her safety?

I might not have thought the world of Ethan, especially now that I knew he was cheating on his wife, but I certainly hadn’t ever thought he was that ruthless of a man. Perhaps that was where I was wrong, though. Didn’t it sometimes require people to be merciless to climb the corporate ladders? And wasn’t it always the people you least expected who did things like that?

I felt like I was going crazy for even thinking that any of this was a possibility when there was no confirmation that anyone had actually been harmed.

“Okay, listen to me,” Brynn demanded.

I instantly felt a wave of relief wash over me. This was precisely the reason why I’d decided to share everything with her and seek her advice. Brynn was not only a driven woman, but she was highly logical, too. I knew she’d find a way to step back, take a look at the bigger picture, and give me sound advice. Even though she hadn’t shared it yet, I knew it was going to be priceless.

So, I nodded to let her know that I was paying attention.

“I think the first thing you need to do is make sure you don’t act any differently than you normally do at work, just so you don’t tip them off in any way,” she declared.

“Oh, I’m already doing that,” I assured her. “I’m just really worried about Ana, and I don’t know what to do.”

“Have you considered going to the police?” she asked.

“Of course, I have, but I’m concerned if I do, it might tip Ethan and Anna off,” I reasoned. “If they did something to her, I don’t want to be their next target.”

I glanced over at Brynn and saw her nodding. “You make a good point. Plus, are you even certain there’s an affair still happening? I’m not saying it’s not, but you also mentioned that Ana has been acting strange. Who’s to say that she didn’t have something else going on?”

That was the other thing.

It was entirely possible Ana had something else going on in her life that nobody else at work knew about. There was no concrete proof either way, but the way nobody seemed concerned about her had me wondering if perhaps I was the one overreacting.

“So, assuming I don’t go to the police, because I’m not sure that’s the route I want to take, what would you recommend?” I asked, my focus on the track in front of me once again.

“Well, that’s my number one recommendation, and I do think you should seriously consider it. I also think it’s worth trying to figure out if there’s still an affair happening. Granted, if it happened once, it’s still not good, considering they’re both married, but if it happened and is over, maybe it’s worth letting it go. The biggest problem, though, is that you’ve got a coworker who’s missing without any explanation after she came to you in distress. So, if you’re not going to go to the police, then maybe you could try locating Ana on your own.”

My brows pulled together. “How would I do that? I wouldn’t know the first place to start looking for her,” I said.

“Funny you should ask,” Brynn replied through a bit of laughter. “As you know, I’m never one to sit around doing nothing, so I’ve been looking into something else besides work to occupy my time.”

“And? Are you going to tell me that you’re looking to take classes to become a private investigator?” I asked.

“No. I’ve been doing some research about places to get some self-defense training,” she revealed.

My head snapped to the side. “Really?”

Brynn looked particularly proud as she beamed at me. “Yeah. You know how much I like to learn new things and stay active, so I thought this would be a great way to accomplish that. Anyway, through my research, I’ve located a company right here in Steel Ridge that I think will be the perfect place to learn.”

I could certainly appreciate Brynn’s enthusiasm, and I knew that something like this was right up her alley. It was just another thing that made the two of us so vastly different.

But there was something about all of this that made no sense.

“I think it’s great that you’re looking to learn something new, and I can’t wait to hear all about it once you start, but I’m not sure I understand what any of this has to do with me looking for Ana,” I explained.

She shook her head and waved her hand in the air. “I’m sorry, I got distracted. Yeah, so, Harper Security Ops is the place. And I’m not suggesting that you personally go and look for her. The guys there might be able to help. From what I’ve read and learned, they are exceptional at what they do.”

“I don’t know. This is just taking everything to a whole other level,” I returned. “I mean, do you really think I should get other people involved? I’m concerned about her, but I don’t want to seem like a crazy person, either.”

Brynn took in a deep breath and considered my question. “This isn’t an easy decision to make, Maxie. Not when you have so many factors to consider. I know what I’d do if I were you, and I’d really recommend the police, but if you don’t want to do that, you have other options. You just need to take the time to weigh all of them and figure out what’s best for you.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” I murmured, when we finally made it back to where we started.

As Brynn and I moved off the track, she offered a few additional words of encouragement, much like she did whenever I was working out with her. I appreciated them, but I'd have been lying if I said I wasn't still struggling a bit.

Brynn's advice was solid. But like she said, there were a lot of factors to consider in this whole scenario.

This really was a disaster.

I hadn't been looking for trouble, but somehow, it found me.

THREE



Maxie

I didn't listen to Brynn.

I didn't take her advice.

I didn't go to the police.

Part of me had managed to justify my inaction successfully. All I had to do was focus on Brynn's initial reaction to the news I'd revealed about the email. Even if it was questionable behavior in the professional setting, Ethan and Anna were two consenting adults. The nature of their business relationship and the fact that they were both already married to other people might have made what they were doing a bit sleazy, but it really wasn't any of my business.

Of course, just as I managed to convince myself of that, Ana's face flashed in my mind. Her sudden disappearance without a word was something I struggled to simply overlook. It was the one thing that was keeping me invested in this whole situation. Even if there had been a discussion between her and Marcia—or someone else at the company—regarding her employment, I still found it strange that she never returned my call, especially when she'd been so adamant about getting in touch with me.

I felt like I was stuck between a rock and a hard place. I was in a position I never wanted to be in. I wasn't the kind of girl who went around looking for trouble, and now I was caught up in this mess.

After I left the gym, I found myself desperately wanting to do anything I could to forget about what was happening.

I wanted to forget my conversation with Brynn. I wanted to forget about the email I saw yesterday. I wanted to forget that Ana was missing. And I wanted to forget the voicemail message she'd left for me.

And while I didn't think it was going to be possible to really ignore all that was happening, there was one thing I knew I could do to at least offer me a pleasant distraction from it all for at least a little while.

Crafting.

So, I went home, took a shower, and got to work on the wreath my mom had asked me to make for her coworker. I didn't know if it was about my need for avoidance of other things going on in my life or it simply requiring as much time as it did to be perfect, but that wreath occupied my time for the rest of the day. I only stopped for food and bathroom breaks.

By some miracle, I managed to find sleep rather easily Saturday night, and when Sunday morning rolled around, I was looking forward to visiting with my family during my dad's birthday party celebration.

Since I had no other plans, I decided to head to my parents' house earlier than the start time for the party. My parents always enjoyed my visits, and I figured I could help my mom with any last-minute preparations.

It was the best decision I could have made.

Spending time with my parents, my brother, my sister-in-law, and some of the members of my extended family, including my aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents, had left me feeling the most carefree I'd felt in days.

Considering how I usually felt being around such a large crowd of people, even when it was my family, I thought it was saying something about my mental state over the last week.

Further proving just how much turmoil I'd been in for days now, I wasn't even bothered when the discussion of my

nonexistent love life came up somewhere in the middle of the day.

Normally, the conversation would have left me feeling irritated and grouchy, but this time, I didn't mind. Hell, at this point, I was starting to side with my family. Maybe I did need a boyfriend. At least then I'd have someone else besides Brynn to whom I could unload and vent all of my frustrations.

Sadly, my avoidance tactics had to come to an end.

Before I knew it, and well before I was ready for it to happen, it was Monday, and I was back at work. I was back to performing two different jobs and hating the overwhelming workload, despite the increased salary.

Although I was doing my best to trudge along and power through it all, I was really beginning to feel the pressure of the increased responsibilities and duties at work. And no matter how hard I worked, I not only felt like I was never caught up, but also that I was getting less and less done each day. It was quickly getting to the point that I was really beginning to dread going into work at all.

Feeling like I was carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders, it was no surprise that I wound up reaching my breaking point when I did.

In all the instances of regret that I'd experienced in my life, what happened on Wednesday was at the top of it.

I might have had a fighting chance of remaining calmer had there not been a 'meeting' mid-afternoon on Wednesday regarding the merger. The meeting didn't include all the important members of the team that would be affected by the merger.

Nope.

This so-called meeting was between Ethan and Anna.

It took place in his private office.

And I couldn't stop myself from thinking that I knew precisely what was going to get accomplished in that meeting.

While I was shuffling between two desks and attempting to juggle the responsibilities of two different job positions, the people at the top of the company were too busy cheating on their spouses to notice what was really happening in the office. I wondered if the staff at Mystic Labs felt just as bad as we did here.

I was disgusted.

I was angry.

I was beyond irritated.

For some foolish reason, I'd convinced myself that if I stayed just a little bit later than usual, I might be able to get caught up. But being consumed by bitterness made it difficult to be as productive as I would have liked.

While the rest of my coworkers—the ones who actually came in and did their jobs—took off at the end of the workday, I stayed put. I trudged through the paperwork, emails, and invoices.

Instead of making me feel better about the work I was accomplishing, I only grew more and more aggravated. The worst part about all of it was knowing that the more and more I focused on my annoyance over the whole situation, the less and less productive I was becoming.

I had nearly reached my breaking point when I decided that staying any longer was going to be counterproductive to what I was attempting to accomplish.

So, an hour and a half after I'd normally leave work, I gathered up my things and made my way to the exit.

And that's when it happened.

That's when it all came bubbling to the surface.

I'd just stepped on the elevator when I heard a female's voice. "Hey, hold the elevator, please."

I was tempted to push the button to close the door, because I knew who was heading my way without even looking up. Unfortunately, she could see me, and I knew if I didn't hold the elevator, I'd only be in a worse position than I already was.

So, I held the door and gave Anna the time she needed to walk the remaining distance to the elevator.

“Thank you,” she said as she stepped on.

Not trusting myself to speak, I offered her a nod of acknowledgment in return.

“I’m Anna,” she declared, extending her hand to me.

It seemed I wasn’t going to be able to get out of this without having a conversation. I lifted my hand to hers, shook it, and returned, “Maxie.”

“It’s lovely to meet you,” she replied. “This is rather late for you to be working, don’t you think?”

I shrugged. “The merger is making things a bit busier around here than I think we all had anticipated.”

Anna nodded her head, a sympathetic look washing over her face. “You don’t have to say that twice. I know it’s been particularly difficult for so many employees on both sides of this merger, but it’ll soon be finalized, and everything should start to settle.”

Before I had the chance to stop it, I huffed. “Let’s hope so.”

There was a brief moment of silence as Anna tipped her head to the side and assessed me. “Is everything okay?”

I shook my head. “I’m just a little overwhelmed right now, because I’m not only doing my normal job, but I’ve also taken over the role of filling in for the woman who formerly worked in purchasing.”

Something strange washed over her face, and I couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was. Anna quickly shook it off and asked, “You’re working two positions right now?”

“Why else would I be here this late? It’s not like I have a boyfriend who also works in the office, making me want to be here after hours,” I retorted, the sarcasm dripping from my words without me being able to stop it.

Shit.

Shit, I shouldn't have said that.

Not only should I have not said that, but I shouldn't have said it with the attitude that I did.

There was no way Anna didn't know that I knew what she'd been doing here so late on a Wednesday evening.

My heart pounded wildly in my chest as Anna's eyes narrowed briefly on mine and assessed me. The elevator felt as though it was moving at a snail's pace.

I swallowed hard, feeling myself grow extremely uncomfortable under the intense scrutiny of her gaze.

She knew.

She knew that I knew, and I was willing to bet that if I managed to walk out of here without it happening, I'd end up walking in here tomorrow and being fired.

If it weren't that I needed a regular paycheck to pay my bills, I might have actually hoped that they'd fire me. I could be out from underneath this mess and not have to deal with the stress. I had some money in savings to support myself for some time, but not enough to sustain me indefinitely.

Either I was doing a great job of hiding the panic I was feeling, or Anna wasn't totally convinced that I knew what was going on between her and Ethan, because she quickly recovered, cleared her throat, and said, "I think if you're taking on more responsibilities here, you should be compensated."

I couldn't miss the fact that she'd ignored my comment about a boyfriend and being here after normal business hours.

"I am," I assured her. "Ethan and human resources approved a temporary increase in my salary until someone is able to permanently fill the purchasing position after the merger is complete."

Anna sent a forced smile my way. "Ethan is a very fair and generous boss, so I'm not surprised."

I'll bet you think he's generous, I thought.

The elevator dinged, and the doors slid open. I moved to step out, noticed Anna wasn't moving, and asked, "Aren't you coming?"

"Oh, um, no. I actually just realized I forgot one of my reports upstairs. It was lovely to meet you, Maxie."

She didn't forget any reports.

She was going to go up and tell Ethan all about what just happened on this elevator ride.

There was no question I was going to walk in here tomorrow and get fired.

I forced my very own smile and replied, "You too, Anna."

With that, I turned around and walked toward the doors that would lead me out of the building.

I only wished I knew that my inability to control what I'd been feeling wasn't simply going to result in me losing my job.

I might not have known it then, but my outburst had sealed a different kind of fate.

FOUR



Maxie

It was not being able to breathe that startled me awake.

I didn't sit up gasping for breath because I'd had a bad dream, though. It was the large, masculine hand, smelling of sweat and filth, that was clamped down over my mouth and nose, which prevented me from getting any air inside my lungs.

And that's when the panic set in.

Because I was home, sleeping in my bed. Or, I had been.

My mind might have been a bit out of sorts yesterday after my encounter with Anna on the elevator, but I wasn't so distraught about what happened that I would have forgotten someone else being inside my house.

I'd gone to bed alone.

Now, somebody was here, and they hadn't been invited in.

Fear consumed me, and the only thing I could think to do was flail. My arms and legs went in any direction they could as I struggled to free myself from this man's hold.

I didn't know what time it was, but it was still the middle of the night, because I couldn't see a thing.

Through my efforts, I managed to hit something hard, and for a brief moment, his hand was gone. I refused to waste the opportunity. Knowing I needed to get away, I made a dash for the bathroom.

I hoped to get myself inside, lock the door, and come up with a plan.

It wasn't a great option, but it was the closest thing to safety that I had. My eyes still hadn't adjusted, so I couldn't see a thing, but I knew my house. I knew my bedroom. And not more than two or three seconds later, I'd found my way into my bathroom.

I slammed the door shut, flipped on the light, and realized I still couldn't see. This man, whoever he was, had covered my head with something. I ripped off the hood just in time for my body to go flying backward.

He'd barreled through the door, splintering the wood, and sending me down to the ground on my ass. The pain that shot up my back from my tailbone was secondary to the terror I felt. That dread forced me to ignore the pain in my body, so I could attempt to scramble to my feet.

I hadn't managed to get myself completely upright when I was yanked backward by my hair and thrown to the side with enough force to shatter the glass door of my shower. By some miracle, I wasn't impaled by any large chunks of glass, but I did feel some shards cut into the skin on my hands and bare legs. The thought of being cut up worse than that had me slowing my pace a bit.

And that was precisely what he needed to regain control over the situation. Just as I was about to get up again, I felt the cold metal press firmly against my head and froze.

I knew exactly what it was, and there wasn't a chance I could risk getting physical with him now. Not unless I wanted him to pull the trigger and shoot me dead.

My throat had closed up, making it impossible to swallow. The thought of my parents having to come here because they hadn't heard from me and finding me dead in my bathroom from a bullet to the brain forced me to reevaluate my determination to cause this guy any additional harm than I already had.

“Wise choice,” he declared, his voice filling the silence in the room.

I wanted to know what he looked like, so that if and when I came out of this alive, I’d be able to go to the police and offer an accurate description. But panic consumed me, keeping me still, and I couldn’t bring myself to lift my head up.

As tears welled in my eyes, the hood was thrown over my head again. Fingers curled around my bicep, and I was roughly yanked up to a standing position, the glass cutting into the bottoms of my feet.

“Let’s go,” he barked at me, pulling on my arm and leading me out of the bathroom.

Though I couldn’t see anything through the lightweight fabric covering my face, I knew my house. It quickly became clear to me that I was being led down the stairs and outside.

“Where are we going?” I rasped.

“You’ll see when we get there,” he answered. As his grip tightened on my arm, he ordered, “Stop here.”

I stopped.

Then I heard a car door open seconds before I was shoved inside. The man slid in beside me, and that’s when I realized there had to be someone else.

“That took you long enough,” a new man’s voice said from the front seat.

“This one decided to put up a fight,” the man beside me explained. “Let’s get out of here.”

The car started moving, and there was no use for me to try to do anything to settle my nerves. I’d just been kidnapped out of my home in what I could only guess was the wee hours of the morning based on the very dim light that had filtered in through the material covering my face, and I was wearing nothing but my cotton pajamas. A pair of short shorts and a lightweight T-shirt.

Though I was grateful I hadn’t gone to bed naked last night like I sometimes did, what I had on now didn’t offer me much

protection, either.

My mind was racing with a million thoughts, and the only way I could think to calm things down was to talk. I didn't know if I'd get anywhere, but it was worth a shot.

“Can you tell me who you are?” I asked.

“That's none of your business,” the guy sitting beside me said.

Right.

That made sense.

I should have realized that most criminals really weren't keen on sharing details about who they were. Considering I had something thrown over my head to keep me from seeing—and ultimately identifying—these guys should have been my first clue.

But it wasn't every day that I got kidnapped, so I wasn't exactly thinking straight.

“Okay. Well, can you tell me what this is about?” I pressed, wondering if I was pushing my luck.

There was a long pause before he replied, “You'll get that answer once we get to where we're going.”

Not that I'd had many thoughts about this being a completely random attack, but if there had been any lingering questions about whether this was unplanned or premeditated, the answer I'd just been given told me everything I needed to know. Someone had specifically targeted me.

Since talking and seeking answers wasn't getting me anywhere, I spent the next little while trying to place the voices I'd heard. Neither sounded familiar. I didn't recognize either one of them.

The adrenaline I'd had moving through my body when I was still inside my house and fighting back was beginning to subside, and the pain was kicking in. The cuts on my hands and feet were burning, and while I believed most of them were small, I could feel my warm blood running down my arm. I

must have sliced opened the skin somewhere on my forearm when I fell into the glass.

Needing to distract my mind from the pain, I decided to focus on something else. While it was possible that these men were the ones who sought to kidnap me for some reason, I had this gut feeling that they were just doing someone else's dirty work. There really wasn't anything that was familiar about them, and I was convinced I hadn't ever met them, which is what led me to that conclusion.

And if that was the truth, I had to go through all the names of everyone I knew to try to figure out who was responsible for this.

No matter how hard I tried, there was only one explanation I could come up with for this.

Anna.

Anna and Ethan.

A shiver crawled down my spine at the thought of my employer being behind this hideous attack.

Whether it was actually that long or it simply felt that way, given the circumstances, the ride in the car seemed to take hours. Realistically, we'd probably been driving for only an hour when the car came to a stop and was turned off.

Fingers wrapped around my arm once more as the man beside me said, "We're here. It's time for you to get a lesson."

My body tensed up, even as I was pulled roughly out of the car. In the time it had taken to make the drive, the sun was now out and shining.

I winced in pain as the bottoms of my bare feet made contact with the hot pavement. Despite all the light now filtering through the fabric covering my face, and without a clue where I was and no way to see where I was going, I stumbled as I was dragged along.

Though I didn't think it meant good things for what was in store for me, I felt a smidgeon of relief when my feet were suddenly no longer on the pavement. The grass felt better, and

I was grateful for the reprieve, even if only brief. Because within a few steps, we'd started walking over some very rough terrain, complete with rocks and dirt. The pain in my feet was unbearable, and yet, I had no choice but to continue moving forward.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, we came to a stop.

The gun was pressed firmly into my head once again.

“Are you going to kill me?” I cried.

I didn't want to seem so weak, but this wasn't exactly the kind of thing that was easily controlled. The thought of my sudden and impending death took over.

“No. Not unless you decide you don't want to cooperate,” the guy who'd been driving replied.

Okay.

Well, that was a relief.

Though, considering I didn't have a clue what it was they intended to have me do, maybe I shouldn't have been celebrating.

“You made it apparent yesterday that you believe there's something unethical happening at your place of employment,” the guy with the gun said.

I knew it.

I knew this had to be about Ethan and Anna.

I nervously bit my lip and waited to hear where this was going.

“This right here is the only warning you're going to get,” he continued. “If you even breathe one word about your suspicions to a single soul, we'll bring you back here and you won't ever leave.”

I could barely swallow past the lump that had formed in my throat.

“Confirm you hear what you're being told,” the driver demanded.

My voice came out as a rasp, though I was quick to respond. "I understand."

"Good. Now, you're going to stand here and keep this hood on your head. You will not take a single step, nor will you remove this hood until you've heard our car doors close and us pull away. If you make an attempt to do either of those things before we've left, we will come back here, and we'll shoot you."

"I won't move," I assured them, grateful I was going to be getting out of this with my life.

I didn't care that they were going to leave me stranded. I would have rather been alone, lost, and reasonably safe than with them and at risk of being killed.

"Do yourself a favor. Remember what'll happen if you do even one thing that makes either Ethan or Anna questions your motives. You'll wish you had listened to us, because what will happen to you won't be pretty," the driver added.

"I understand. They have nothing to worry about."

"Stay put," the one holding the gun ordered. "We're leaving, and if I think that you're going to try to remove this hood before we're gone, I won't hesitate to pull the trigger."

Nodding, I insisted, "I know."

The next thing I knew, I heard the sound of their footsteps moving away from me. I remained frozen to the spot. Even after I heard the car doors open and close before the car took off, I still didn't move.

Maybe it was fear.

Maybe it was relief.

I didn't know.

But I had to have stood there for at least a solid three or four minutes after they left before I finally lifted my hands and removed the hood. Then I collapsed on the ground in the middle of the woods and cried.

I don't know how long I sat there, but it was quite some time later when I finally realized that I had to move. If I'd been in that car for as long as I thought I had, there was no question that I was going to be walking for a while. I just hoped I'd find someone who could help me, sooner rather than later.

My feet screamed at me with each step I took back toward the road. When I made it there, I looked around and didn't recognize anything. I truly was in the middle of nowhere. So, I took my best guess and started walking.

I kept my feet in the grass for as long as I could, but I eventually stumbled upon an area where I had no option but to walk along the pavement. They were in agony already from the open cuts. Now I was going to be able to add burns to the mix.

With the sun directly overhead and the hollow feeling in my stomach, I had a feeling it was approaching lunchtime. The road had been quiet. Not a single car had driven down it, and I wondered if I should have gone in the opposite direction.

There wasn't a chance I was going to turn back around now.

I'd been walking for too long in the blazing heat, and turning around now would be foolish.

My feet were aching, I was sweating, and I was desperate for water.

By some miracle, I finally heard a car approaching from behind. I twisted my neck, looked back, and watched as it began to slow down. My only hope at that point was that whoever was in that car wouldn't be a bigger threat to me than the men who'd just kidnapped me and left me stranded here.

“Are you okay?”

I let out the biggest sigh of relief and nearly burst into tears all over again when my eyes landed on the elderly couple inside the vehicle. I shook my head. “No. No, I could really use some help.”

“My goodness, dear,” the woman gasped. “What happened to you?”

I tore my gaze away from the couple, looked up and down the empty road, and decided it was best not to give them the truth. I needed their help, and I didn’t want to scare them off by telling them I’d just been kidnapped and held at gunpoint.

Returning my attention to them, I lied. “I... I got lost, and then I had some car trouble quite a few miles back, and I really need to get back home.”

“Where are you heading?” the man asked.

“I need to get to Steel Ridge. I don’t even know if I’m close,” I confessed.

“We’d be happy to take you wherever you need to go,” he declared. “Why don’t you get in?”

“Are you sure?” I replied.

His eyes dropped to my feet. They lingered there for a bit before they returned to my face. Then he answered, “The only thing I’ve been surer about in my life was marrying the woman sitting in this car with me.”

More relief.

This guy was not only a living, breathing angel, but he was romantic, too. Believing I’d be unsafe if I got in the car just wasn’t possible.

“Get her some water,” his wife said as I made my approach.

The man put the car in park, exited the vehicle, and opened the back door for me. Once I was safely inside, he moved to the back of the car, opened his trunk, and eventually closed it. The next thing I knew, he was holding a bottle of water out to me.

“Thank you,” I said, practically snatching it from his hands.

I drank greedily from the bottle, downing it all in a matter of a minute. And once the door was shut, and the man had

gotten himself back behind the wheel, I dropped my head back against the seat and relished the feel of the air conditioning.

“Steel Ridge, you said?” he asked me.

“Yes. Please. If you don’t mind,” I begged.

“Not at all. You just hang tight,” he urged gently. “I’ll have you there in thirty minutes.”

I didn’t care if he took an hour. For the first time in hours, I felt safe. I was off my feet, I wasn’t sweating, and nobody had a gun pointed to the side of my head.

With that, the car started moving, and we made our way back to Steel Ridge.

The thing was, I had no intention of going home.

FIVE



Kit

There was nothing quite like putting in a couple of hours of hard work first thing in the morning and completing a job.

That was what I'd done today.

And after finishing up the installation of a security system for a client just before lunch, I decided to head to Grant's Deli to grab something to eat. I'd just picked up a sandwich, and had finally pulled back into the Harper Security Ops parking lot.

For the last several weeks, I had been doing my best to enjoy having a much lighter workload. It had been weeks since anything really intense had been happening, and it was always nice when there was a bit of a reprieve. And since one of our biggest clients, the industrial rock band, My Violent Heart, wasn't touring right now, I was also enjoying having a lot of time to be at home.

It was nice to be able to get out and do things without having to worry about something awful happening in a major case we were working on.

My plan for the rest of the day today was to head inside, see if there was anything else that was pressing I was needed for, and if not, I was going to eat my lunch and head up to spend some time in the shooting range. Even if I didn't typically work in the self-defense and tactical training unit, I still liked keeping my skills sharp.

Wanting to get right to it, I parked, grabbed my sandwich, and got out of the car. No sooner had I done that when I noticed there was a car parked right outside the front door of the building. As I made my way in that direction, I watched as an elderly man exited the vehicle, rounded it to the other side, and opened the rear door to help someone out.

The closer I got, the more I saw how particularly distressed he was. He had been bent down, his focus on the person in the back seat, but he quickly grew concerned and started looking around.

It wasn't hard to see that he needed help, and the minute his eyes connected with mine, I saw the relief sweep through them.

"Can I help you?" I asked, my attention focused on him.

He turned his body at an awkward angle, blocking my line of sight to the back seat of his car. "Do you work here?"

"I do."

"Then, yes, I could really use your help," he admitted.

I nodded. "Sure. What do you need?"

He stepped to the side, revealing what he'd been trying to hide from me only seconds ago.

A much younger woman was sitting in the back seat of his car.

To get a better view of her and understand what was actually going on, I took a few steps closer and moved around to the opposite side of the door.

"There's been some pretty serious damage done to her feet," the elderly man explained. "I can't lift her on my own."

It was the middle of the afternoon, and this woman was wearing a pair of pajamas. Her face had been sunburned along with her legs, she had cuts and what looked to be like dried blood on her hands and arms, and I'd just been informed that her feet had also been injured.

She looked like she needed to be seen by a doctor, and yet, she came here. I didn't take that to mean very good things.

Despite all that I saw and what I believed about where she'd be better off receiving treatment, it was the look of utter helplessness and desperation on her face that had me immediately springing into action.

"I've got her," I insisted, urging the man to step back.

Crouching down beside the open door, I brought myself down to eye-level with her. "Hi," I said gently.

"Hi," she rasped.

"Would it be alright if I picked you up and carried you inside, since your feet are injured?" I asked.

If I had known this woman or anything about what she'd been through, I might have just gone right ahead and done what I knew needed to be done. But given the state of her, that she didn't know me, and the uncertainty about what she might have been through, I didn't want to do something that might traumatize her.

Her eyes had dropped away from my face to my shoulders, chest, and arms. "If... if you—" She stopped to clear her throat. "If you think you can."

Wanting to relieve any tension she might have been feeling, I did the same as she had. I looked down at my chest and arms before returning my attention to her face. My lips twitched. "Do I look like I might not be able to?"

Her eyes widened in shock. "Oh, um, no, I wasn't suggesting that you—"

"I was just joking with you," I assured her, cutting her off.

"Oh," she murmured.

Deciding it was best to get inside out of the heat and tend to this woman, I suggested, "How about you lean forward slightly so I can get my arm behind your back?"

She hesitated only briefly before she leaned forward.

A moment later, I had her out of the car and securely in my arms, one wrapped around her back and the other under her knees.

“Are you okay?” I asked, wanting to be certain.

“Yes.”

Tearing my attention away from her beautiful face, I looked up and said, “Sir?”

“Vernon,” he returned.

I dipped my chin. “Right. Would you mind grabbing the door for me, Vernon?”

“Sure.”

We moved toward the door, but the moment I was about to step inside, the woman in my arms called out, “Vernon?”

“Yes, dear?” he replied.

“Thank you for stopping,” she said. “I’d really like the opportunity to thank both you and Agnes properly, but I don’t have anything on me right now.”

Vernon shook his head. “We don’t need anything. We’re just glad you’re going to be okay.”

“But I... I don’t have any way to contact you,” she noted, her voice hoarse. “I’d like to send you something. Just a small gift of thanks. I promise.”

“Vernon?” I interrupted. When he looked at me, I urged, “How about you come inside and give your contact information to Avalon at the front desk, so I can start tending to these wounds?”

Clearly understanding my need to speed things up, Vernon returned, “That’s a good idea. I’ll do that.”

Almost instantly, I felt the woman relax in my arms.

With that, we moved inside. I stopped for a moment at the reception desk, jerked my head to the side, and said, “Avalon, this is Vernon. He needs to give you his contact information

before he leaves. Can you take that down and hold it here for me for the time being?”

“Of course,” she replied, standing up to greet Vernon.

I didn't wait around for their exchange. Instead, I moved through the office and back into another room in the building. Doing what we did for a living, it wasn't uncommon to have the need for some first-aid treatment.

It was a room we often used to handle injuries that happened inside the building, or in the event one of the guys received an injury that didn't require a medical professional.

While I wasn't a hundred percent certain just yet that there wasn't a need for more care than I could provide here, I was reassured by the fact that this woman was awake and alert. I'd get her settled, assess the situation, and make an informed decision after I had the chance to talk to her.

After setting her down on the couch, I tossed the bag carrying my sandwich onto the table in front of it and moved to grab a first-aid kit. Once I had that, some cool cloths, and a couple of dry ones, I returned to her, sat down on the cushion beside her, and said, “I'm Kit Sexton.”

“Kit?” she repeated.

“Yeah.”

“Maxie Oliver,” she replied. “Technically, it's Maxwell, but everyone calls me Maxie.”

I smiled. “It's nice to meet you, Maxie. Can you tell me what happened? Vernon said you injured your feet, but I can't help noticing that your hands have some cuts on them.”

She swallowed hard. “I'm sorry. Would you happen to have any water? I feel like I'm dying of thirst.”

I nodded. “Sure. Hang on.”

Without delay, I retrieved a bottle of water, loosened the cap, and brought it over to her. She took it and drank nearly the whole bottle in a matter of seconds. Suddenly, I was feeling a bit more concerned about the state of her condition. She was clearly dehydrated. Before she had the chance to

speak, I got up from my seat again, grabbed two more bottles of water, loosened the caps on both, and set them on the table beside her.

For the next few seconds, Maxie remained silent as she assessed me. I didn't mind. I was happy to give her whatever time she needed to feel comfortable, giving her that while taking her in at the same time.

Despite the heated look of her skin, Maxie was pretty.

Her hazel eyes were the utter definition of almond-shaped, and I was immediately drawn to them. She had a perfect mouth and bright white teeth that I assumed would look even more stunning when she smiled.

Though she'd clearly been sweating, her hair was long and fell in loose waves around her face. It was mostly light brown, but the ends were much lighter, seeming to have been kissed by the sun.

Her body was significantly smaller than mine and easily fit into my arms. I hadn't seen her standing, but with the little clothing she had on her body, it wasn't hard to miss that she was in great shape.

"I was talking with my friend over the weekend, and she told me that Harper Security Ops was where I could go to get help with my security needs," she revealed.

"I'm happy to confirm that your friend is not wrong," I declared.

"I desperately need some help," she confessed.

I offered a sympathetic smile, reached for one of the cool cloths, and held it out to her. "You've got some sunburn," I noted. "Take this, lay back, and cool yourself down."

Maxie took the cloth, brought it up to her neck, and closed her eyes with relief as she pressed it against her skin.

Sunburned, dehydrated, and overheated.

I grabbed another cloth. "Lay back," I repeated as I stood. She did as I requested, and once her head was resting on the arm of the couch, I placed the cloth on top of her head.

“That feels heavenly,” she said softly.

I didn’t doubt that was the case for one second.

Wanting to provide her with more relief, I explained, “I’m going to tend to your hands next. Is that okay with you?”

“Yes, Kit. That would be wonderful. Thank you.”

I ignored how much I liked the way she said my name and sat down on the edge of the couch beside her. Taking one of her hands in mine, I snatched up another cloth to clean the blood from her hands and arms, doing it as gently as I could, so I didn’t cause her any additional pain or aggravate any lacerations.

For a few beats, my focus was entirely on her hand and arm, but once I had it all cleaned up and could see the cuts, I glanced up at her. She had been watching me, but as soon as I looked in her direction, she turned her head away.

Wanting to ease any tension she felt, I decided to get back to our conversation. “So, you said you desperately need some help. I’d be happy to give that to you. Can you tell me what kind of help you need and why?”

“I would have felt like a fool coming here when Brynn told me I should,” she admitted.

I’d just finished putting some ointment on the smaller cut near her wrist and the two on the palm of her hand. As I started wrapping the gauze around them, I asked, “So, what made you decide to come now instead?”

She returned her attention to me. After taking in a deep breath and wincing at whatever memory flashed in her mind, she revealed, “Someone broke into my house this morning, dragged me out of bed, kidnapped me, and drove me at least an hour away, so they could hold me at gunpoint and threaten me.”

My body went rigid as my hands froze on the gauze that was now covering most of hers.

Someone broke into her house and dragged her out of bed this morning.

She was still wearing her pajamas. There was blood on her arms; she was dehydrated and exhausted. I didn't want to make assumptions, but I also knew I needed to tread cautiously in case she'd been sexually assaulted.

Sending a look her way that I hoped indicated she could trust me to do right by her, I said, "I have to believe on some level that you trust you're in a safe place right now, Maxie. And because that's the case, I need to make sure that you get whatever physical care it is that you need. I can handle scrapes and bruises, but there are things that other people are far more equipped to handle, so that you get the best possible care and treatment. For that reason, I hope you understand that I'm not trying to be insensitive when I ask if you've been violated?"

Maxie's eyes roamed over my face, confusion briefly marring her features. But I could see the moment it dawned on her precisely what I'd been asking her, and she immediately answered, "Oh. Oh, God. No, Kit. I... nobody did... I wasn't raped."

I hadn't realized I'd been holding on to any tension still, but after receiving her confirmation that she hadn't experienced that kind of assault, I felt my body relax. "Good. That's good. So, you were held at gunpoint somewhere and threatened?" I asked.

She nodded.

As I took her other hand into mine and started working on that one—it was not nearly as bad as the first one, thankfully—I asked, "What did they want?"

Maxie parted her lips to speak, but quickly stopped herself and pressed them together again.

I watched as something moved through her expression before she countered, "My friend is the one who researched your company, and while I can appreciate the reassurances you just gave me about my safety, I have to ask about confidentiality. Are you going to share what I tell you with anyone else?"

“I won’t lie to you and say that I won’t mention whatever is happening with someone else who works here simply because it may be required to help you or keep you safe, but it won’t go beyond telling anyone who’s absolutely essential,” I promised.

Nodding her understanding, Maxie shared, “It was my boss.”

“What?”

“My boss and his mistress must have hired these two men to do this to me, because I was told to essentially forget what I knew about the affair they were having,” she began. “The company I work for is going through a merger, and my married boss, who has kids and a wife with a stake in the company, is having an affair with the married CEO for the company we’re merging with. I was frustrated yesterday when I left work, and I let it slip to her in a roundabout sort of way that I knew she hadn’t shown up to have an actual meeting while the rest of the staff was struggling to stay on top of tasks. Anyway, I guess she realized that I knew what she’d really been doing there, and they wanted to make sure I didn’t open my mouth to anyone else about it. I’ve been warned that if I do, I’ll be kidnapped again and taken somewhere where I won’t be found.”

It was no surprise to me that some people were absolute scum of the Earth. Affairs happened all the time, and while I didn’t agree with them, I certainly wasn’t going to go around telling people what they could or should do. But to think that these two individuals would do what they were doing not only to their spouses and children, but also possibly at the risk of both of their companies and thought it was okay to threaten someone else’s life because of it was simply unbelievable.

I’d come into contact with a lot of people over the years, and I’d seen some of the worst, but it was always the ones worried about lining their pockets that seemed to have no moral code. That knowledge only made me feel even more concerned for Maxie’s safety. I could only hope she’d be receptive to the type of help I wanted to give her.

“Okay, so the good news is that you couldn’t have come to a better place to help you with this situation,” I started as I began shifting my body down the couch, so I could assess her feet. “Since you’re only going off the word of your friend on our reliability, let me tell you a little bit about us.”

“Okay.”

“We currently have four different units within Harper Security Ops, and each of those units is responsible for something different. There’s private investigation, kidnap and ransom, self-defense and tactical training, and private security and bodyguard services. Each team we have here has a dedicated group of men that excels in that particular area of expertise. We’re all really good at what we do.”

I’d just made it to her feet and curled my fingers around her ankle as she asked, “What team do you work on?”

Grinning at her, I revealed, “I’m in the unit that handles private security and bodyguard services.”

For the first time since I’d met her, I saw a small smile form on her face. It took her from beautiful to stunning.

If she had any thoughts about it all or wanted to ask any questions, she didn’t. So, I lifted her foot, settled it in my lap, and looked at the bottom of it.

Once again, my body went completely rigid as my eyes shot to her. She wasn’t looking at me, so I called, “Maxie?”

“Yeah?” she replied, focusing her attention on me again.

Not that I had been trying, but there wouldn’t have been any way possible to keep the concern out of my tone. “I get the distinct feeling that I don’t know the whole story of what happened here,” I started. “How did you get the cuts on your feet and your hands?”

“They’re from the glass,” she returned.

My brows shot up, silently questioning her, as I repeated, “Glass?”

“From the shower in my bathroom,” she clarified. “I didn’t willingly go with the men who kidnapped me this morning.

Only one of them came into my house, and I fought against him, trying to get myself free. I made it into the bathroom, but he barreled inside. I wound up being thrown against the glass wall of the shower, and the glass shattered.”

Okay.

So, that explained that.

“Why do your feet have burns on them?” I questioned her.

“I had to walk.”

“You had to walk?”

She nodded. “Yes. Those men drove me out to the middle of nowhere, made me walk pretty deep into the woods on my feet with the cuts all over them, and then they left me there. I had no idea where I was, but after they were gone, I made my way back to the road and started walking. I tried to stick to the grass where I could, but there were places where I had no choice but to walk on the pavement. This is just one more reason for me to hate the summer. I’m just glad that Vernon and Agnes drove down that road and stopped to help me.”

My eyes dropped to the bottom of her foot in my lap, shifted to the one still on the couch, and returned to her face. “How are you not in tears right now?”

She shrugged her shoulders and murmured, “I think I used up my quota for the day.”

I shot her a sympathetic look and said, “I’m going to do my best to get your feet cleaned up, because you really don’t want an infection, but we might need to take you to have these burns looked at.”

“I feel awful,” she rasped.

“Sick?”

Maxie shook her head. “No. I mean, I feel awful that you don’t even know me, and you’ve not only gone out of your way to help me, but you’re prepared to clean my feet up for me.”

Not wanting her to feel bad about anything, I gave her ankle a gentle squeeze and said, “This is nothing, Maxie. Give it some time, and you’ll see just how nice of a guy I can be.”

I hadn’t meant to insinuate anything, but it was clear that Maxie had taken my words in a way I hadn’t intended.

I knew that was the case because, no sooner had I said them, I saw something heat in her eyes as a chill ran across her skin.

If I hadn’t been thinking of it before, I was thinking about it now. I didn’t know where this whole thing was going to lead, but that look in her eyes had me more than prepared for the journey.

SIX



Maxie

There had been several times in my life when I regretted a decision I'd made. I wouldn't have said that I'd experienced more than my fair share of it, but I had certainly felt the effects of those bad decisions for quite some time.

My most recent display of foolishness had been yesterday evening when I decided to let loose on Anna, spewing far too many words about what I knew she and Ethan were up to during their supposed meeting that afternoon.

Considering the kidnapping this morning, the cuts on my body, the threat delivered at gunpoint, and the burns my feet had suffered, it was safe to say that I understood what it was to feel regret.

But in all that had happened to me today, there was a bright spot. A glimmer of hope that perhaps I'd made one really excellent choice.

Kit Sexton.

Technically, Kit was simply a byproduct of my choice to listen to my best friend's advice from days ago and have Vernon and Agnes bring me to Harper Security Ops, but I figured it was okay to celebrate that reward. After what I'd been through, I thought I deserved at least that much.

To say I was slightly captivated by the man would have been an understatement. And again, considering I'd been kidnapped and threatened at gunpoint just hours earlier, to

have the capacity to feel mesmerized by a guy had to be proof that he was something particularly special.

Coming here had been the right decision.

As I'd walked along that road until Vernon and Agnes stopped to pick me up, I had considered what I was going to do and where I was going to go. There were quite a few options—the police, the hospital, home, or Harper Security Ops.

Now that I was here, I couldn't have been more relieved to have found what, or more specifically, who, I found here.

Kit was tending to my second foot, the last of my injuries he'd been caring for, and he'd made it clear that he was going to have to take me to have the burns checked out to be on the safe side.

I didn't argue.

It wasn't as though I could.

Not when he was talking to me with that gentle voice and being so sweet to me. Plus, it was hard to really focus on much when he was touching me so tenderly as he cared for my wounds.

I'd honestly never believed that men like him actually existed in the real world. He was a living, breathing miracle of a man.

And he was downright breathtaking, too.

Strong.

God, he was strong.

He'd lifted me out of Vernon's car like I weighed no more than a feather. Then he stood there, continuing to hold me while he spoke with the woman named Avalon at the front desk, before he carried me back here to this room.

So, yeah.

He was strong and had a beautifully built body.

But he also had shiny black hair, a clean-shaven face, eyes so dark they reminded me of a decadent dessert, and a pair of lips that were unbelievably full and kissable.

Yes, kissable.

Kidnapping trauma and threats at gunpoint flashbacks be damned. There was a hot guy with kissable lips and tender touches sitting in front of me.

Maybe it was avoidance. Maybe I was going to pay for this later when I tried to go to sleep tonight. I couldn't say.

For now, I was happy to be thinking about anything other than nearly dying mere hours ago.

When he finished wrapping the gauze around my foot, which was merely there as a means to hold the ABD pad in place and prevent any dirt from getting in there, I felt compelled to speak.

"Thank you for taking care of me like this," I said.

He smiled at me, the look on his face incredibly sweet. "You're welcome, Maxie."

"Do you... should I wait for you to finish work before we go to have my feet checked out?" I asked, unsure what was going to happen next.

Kit shook his head. "No. But I'm thinking that before we leave here, you should probably have something to eat. I'm guessing you haven't had anything all day, have you?"

Food.

Until he'd mentioned it, I hadn't thought about it. I'd been in so much pain at first and was mostly feeling thirsty that I hadn't considered food. Of course, then I was too distracted by filling him in on what happened in between hiding that I was ogling him, and food was the last thing on my mind.

"I haven't," I told him.

His grin grew as he stood up. "Your luck just keeps getting better, because just before I got back here this afternoon, I

stopped and grabbed myself some lunch. You can share it with me.”

“Oh, Kit. That’s really sweet of you, but you’ve already done so much. I can’t take your lunch, too,” I argued.

With a paper bag in his hand, he sat down again and said, “Nonsense. You can absolutely share it with me. I’ve got a huge chicken cheesesteak hoagie. It’s got chicken and cheese, plus some lettuce, tomato, onion, and mayo. Is there anything there you don’t like?”

My mouth watered at the thought of having even a single bite of his hoagie. “It sounds delicious.”

Kit pulled the wrapped hoagie out of the bag, unrolled it, and placed the sandwich with the wrapping beneath it in my lap. He took one half for himself and used the bag as his makeshift plate.

“Are you sure?” I questioned him.

“Absolutely.”

I could have sworn I could feel my heart melting right there on the spot at his kind gesture.

As best I could with the bandages on my hands, I lifted the sandwich to my mouth and sunk my teeth in. If the cool cloths he’d given me earlier felt like heaven on earth, I didn’t know how to describe what tasting this food was like. To say it was delicious didn’t feel like I was doing it justice.

“This is so good,” I mumbled. “Thank you.”

Kit let out a laugh. “You’re welcome.”

“Where is this from?” I asked.

He finished chewing a bite of his sandwich and answered, “Have you ever heard of Grant’s Deli?”

My eyes widened in surprise. “I love that place, but I’ve never had this sandwich, though.”

“I think I’ve had everything on the menu at least twice,” he confessed.

“Really?”

He nodded and shrugged. “Yep. To be honest, I was surprised when I walked in there today, because I expected Mallory would have been a bit frazzled.”

“Mallory?” I repeated, my tone questioning.

“Mallory Grant. She’s the owner,” he clarified. “If I hadn’t known any better, I wouldn’t have guessed just walking in there that her wedding is in two weeks.”

I tipped my head to the side, studied him, and wondered, “So, do you know when her wedding is because you spend so much time getting food there, or are you friends with her?”

Kit started laughing, which only served to make me stop eating my food to watch him. He looked so handsome when he laughed. “I guess both of those statements are true, but it’s more because of Nixon.”

“Nixon? You mean, the former president?” I asked, thinking I was about to hear the world’s most unexpected and strangest story.

He laughed again and said, “No, not the former president. I’m talking about Nixon Scott. He works here as a member of the kidnap and ransom unit, and Mallory is his fiancée.”

Realization dawned. “Ah, he’s a coworker.”

Kit dipped his chin and asked, “So, considering you’ve been to Grant’s Deli, is it safe to assume you live here in Steel Ridge?”

“I do.”

For the next few minutes, Kit and I finished eating our sandwiches. I didn’t know if he realized I had been trying to be polite by talking to him when all I really wanted to do was shove the food down my throat, but I was grateful he gave us both the time to just focus on eating. Oddly enough, nothing about those few minutes of silence was awkward, either.

When we finished eating, he gathered up the garbage, threw it out, and handed me another water bottle. “Feel better?” he asked.

“Much. Thank you, again.”

“You’re welcome. Now, before we head out of here, I just want to find out what you’re looking for,” he said.

“What?”

“You said you were interested in private security,” he reminded me. “What specifically did you want to have happen?”

I sank back against the couch and felt the heat hit my cheeks. Embarrassed, I admitted, “I honestly don’t know. I don’t even know what the options are. All I know is that someone had the chance to point a gun at my head today while giving me a verbal warning. Those guys told me that if Ethan or Anna so much as *thought* I’d betrayed their confidence, they’d see to it that I was... dealt with. If I’m going to share it all, I should tell you that I came here, because I’m terrified to go home.”

“Do you have a security system in your house? An alarm?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No.”

The silence stretched for a bit between us. I could see Kit’s mind working behind his eyes, so I remained quiet and gave him the time he needed to figure out whatever it was that he needed to figure out. He was the professional, and since he did this for a living, I decided it was best to wait until he’d come up with some kind of plan.

But when he finally spoke, I had to admit that I hadn’t anticipated a single word that came out of his mouth.

“The very first thing we’re going to do when we leave here is get your foot checked out,” he started. “After we do that, we’ve got a few options. I don’t care what we do, and I’ll leave it up to you to decide. You just have to tell me what you prefer. That said, since you don’t know much about what we can do here, I should probably fill you in on that.”

Wise.

Obviously, Kit knew how to remain focused and professional. He wasn't the least bit distracted by me the way that I was distracted by him.

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea," I returned. "I'm a pretty decisive person, but I kind of need to know what my options are."

"We have security and surveillance," he began again. "I can install a security system in your house that comes equipped with cameras, motion sensors... the works. It'd be a strong deterrent if someone came and tried to break in again, and depending on what options you choose, you could have a warning that someone has even approached the house before they've breached the home."

I wasn't completely oblivious. I knew stuff like this existed, but it really wasn't my line of expertise. It wasn't something that I'd ever be able to set up on my own, but I had a feeling I'd be much more reassured knowing there was going to be a heads up in the event someone was approaching with the intent to break in.

"Okay. That sounds great," I remarked.

"It is. It's a smart choice for anyone," he assured me. "And while I think it's a great idea for you to have something installed as an added layer of protection, I really think this is the kind of thing I'd recommend before you have an active threat against your life."

"So, it's not a good choice?" I asked.

He chuckled. "It's not that it's a bad choice, but I don't think it's the best one in this particular scenario."

If I hadn't implicitly trusted Brynn the way that I did, I might have needed something to indicate to me that Kit—or anyone else at Harper Security Ops—had my best interests at heart. The fact that he'd taken the time to consider multiple options for me and wouldn't let me agree to the first one he shared only strengthened the confidence I had about my decision to come here.

“There’s something that can provide me with even more security than a system like that?” I questioned him.

He nodded. “Yes.”

“What is it?”

There was a brief moment of hesitation before Kit revealed, “A bodyguard.”

I’d heard him when he said that he worked in the private security and bodyguard unit, but until he said the word, using it as an option I had available to me, I hadn’t considered it. Having a bodyguard seemed extreme to me.

“Aren’t bodyguards meant for celebrities and certain political figures?” I asked.

His lips twitched. “They can be, but that’s not the only time they’re needed.”

I swallowed hard.

A bodyguard.

“How would that work?” I wondered.

“That’s up to you,” he replied. “I’m prepared to provide you with round-the-clock coverage while we attempt to sort this issue out for you, but if that’s not something you want or are prepared for, we can tweak it as you’d like.”

Surprise and a bit of shock moved through me. “Round-the-clock coverage?”

“Yes.”

I stared at him.

Did that mean what I thought it meant? Would Kit be with me constantly? Would he be living in my house and sleeping in my guest bedroom? Would we eat every meal together?

As question after question moved through my mind, I must have been wearing the concerns I had on my face, because Kit decided to elaborate a bit on things.

“It doesn’t have to be that way, Maxie,” he insisted. “I want you to understand all that you have available to you.

There's the hands-off approach of me installing a security system with or without all the bells and whistles and hoping for the best. Then there's the option I just gave you of you having someone with you all the time. I would be that someone. If that's too much for you, we can certainly work out a middle ground. I can accompany you when you are out in public and see to it that you make it home safely, and then you can arm your house with the security system that I can install if you'd prefer to do that instead."

I hadn't made a decision one way or another, but I appreciated that Kit could recognize I was unsure how to best handle this. It also meant a lot that he was willing to be patient and explain everything, so I could make an informed decision.

That said, I still didn't know what to do.

So, I tried a different approach. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

He didn't hesitate to respond. "Sure."

"If instead of it being me who was sitting here telling you all that had happened to me today and needing your help, it was your mom or your sister or your girlfriend, what would you tell her to do?"

If I thought he'd answered quickly before, it didn't compare to how he responded to this question.

"Round-the-clock coverage, without a doubt."

"Really?"

He nodded slowly. "Someone came into your house uninvited while you were sleeping, dragged you out of bed, fought with you enough to break the glass of your shower, kidnapped you, and held you at gunpoint to deliver a very real threat to your life. That's not something I'd ever want someone I love and care about to mess around with or not take seriously."

I took in his words.

I stared at his handsome face for one, two, three beats before I declared, "That settles it."

He smiled at me. “Really?”

“Yes. Plus, like I said before, I’m terrified about going home, and that’s mostly because I know I’ll be alone.”

Kit reached his hand out, curled his fingers around mine, and gave me a gentle squeeze. “Then I’ll be there with you. And if being there is too much for you to handle right now, I’m more than happy to take you to my place for a few nights.”

I hadn’t expected that, but I guess in his line of work, Kit probably had to try to be as flexible as possible.

“If it’s okay with you, I think I’d like to try my house first,” I told him.

“That’s okay with me,” he assured me.

The two of us sat there for a few seconds staring at one another, and I felt something warm move through me. It was comforting, and I liked that I felt that way around him this quickly.

Eventually, Kit broke the silence. “Are you ready to get these feet checked out?”

I shrugged. “I guess so.”

With that, he stood and lifted me in his arms. Our faces were inches apart, and I couldn’t stop myself from smiling at him. He gave one right back to me. Whatever that exchange meant to him, I didn’t know, but one thing was for sure.

For a girl who’d just been kidnapped and threatened at gunpoint earlier that morning, I was feeling particularly lucky to be right where I was then, inside his strong and protective arms.

SEVEN



Maxie

“How does it feel?”

With one arm still wrapped firmly around my back and his other hand holding on to mine, Kit had set me down on my feet. It was the first time I’d been back inside my house since I’d been dragged out early this morning, so Kit’s question was a bit ambiguous.

My initial thought was that he’d been asking about how my feet felt, since it was the first time he’d seen me standing on them. But then I thought about the kind of guy Kit was and recognized that it wouldn’t be an unreasonable assumption to think he might have been concerned with how I was handling being back in my own home.

I decided to go with my gut instinct. “My feet feel okay. It’s not pleasant, but it’s not unbearable. I think the pain meds I was given and that I haven’t been allowed to stand on them for hours now have both helped tremendously.”

Kit smiled at me, squeezed my hand, and suggested, “We should probably make sure you don’t get too confident and spend more time than necessary on them, though.”

“Are you one of those patients who always follows the doctor’s orders?” I questioned him.

He shrugged. “I guess it depends on the situation. I take it all under advisement, but I generally listen to my body.”

“In that case, my body desperately wants a shower,” I told him.

Kit chuckled. “Do you have a spare?”

“A spare?”

“Bathroom,” he clarified. “Didn’t you say that the glass in your shower was broken?”

I smacked my hand against my forehead and groaned, “I completely forgot.”

This had been an exceptionally long day for me. Given all that had happened—being woken up before the sun was up, the disaster of the early morning hours, the time spent at Harper Security Ops, and the hours in the emergency room—it was safe to say my mind was a bit out of sorts.

Realizing that Kit was looking at me expectantly, I said, “I have a spare bathroom.”

“Does it have a tub?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He must have noticed the confused look on my face, because he didn’t hesitate to explain, “The doctor said you needed to keep your dressings dry, and the warm water isn’t going to help the burns at all. I’m guessing you’ll need to keep your feet out of the tub.”

He was right.

I didn’t know what the heck was wrong with me, but I seemed to have lost all sense of awareness over the last few hours. Maybe it was because I was with someone who was looking out for me the way Kit was that I found it easy to not pay attention and still know that I’d be okay.

Gosh, how strange was that?

“You make a valid point,” I noted.

“Good. Is the bathroom upstairs?”

I nodded.

“Do you want to walk on your own, or would you like me to carry you?” he pressed.

I was tempted to ask him to carry me, because I just liked the way it felt to be in his arms, but I couldn't continue to live in a fantasy world. I'd been doing enough of that over the last few hours, and it was time to come back to reality.

“I think I should try on my own,” I replied.

And that was the truth.

When Kit and I left Harper Security Ops after he shared his lunch with me, he immediately took me to the emergency room to have my feet checked out. He'd been particularly concerned, and I trusted his judgment, even if I hated that we needed to wait so long to be seen while we were there.

We'd been at the hospital longer than I had hoped we would, but on the bright side, my feet didn't require any major attention. I was treated, and my feet were wrapped. The doctor had prescribed a special gauze that he said “works like magic,” and would help promote the healing of my burns. I was told to keep the current dressing on for the next twenty-four hours, but then I could take it off and replace it. Assuming I followed the doctor's orders, the hope was that I'd be mostly back to normal within five or six days.

After I was discharged with the script I needed for my foot having been sent over to my usual pharmacy, I asked Kit to bring me home. I had nothing on me to pay for my prescription, and I was still in my pajamas.

He waved his hand in the air, told me not to worry about it, and drove to the pharmacy instead. Kit took me to the drive-through window, and he paid for the prescription for me as I promised to pay him back when we got back here.

“Alright. I'll stick by your side just until you get up the stairs,” Kit announced.

“Thank you,” I replied quietly.

With that, I slowly made my way to the stairs and climbed them. Kit was behind me, giving me that sense of security in more ways than one. Not only did I know he'd be there to help

if my feet couldn't handle it, but I also knew that he'd be the man he said he would and would make sure nobody could come back into this house to harm me.

With a little more effort than usual, I made it to the top of the stairs.

“Good job,” Kit praised me.

I let out a laugh. “Who knew that such a small task could make me feel like I accomplished something tremendous?”

“Because this is tremendous,” he confirmed.

I had a feeling if the roles had been reversed, Kit would be brushing off any accomplishment he'd made. And he certainly wouldn't have had anyone carrying him around all afternoon the way he'd done the same for me.

“I think I'll be alright from here,” I told him, not wanting to have an awkward encounter at the bathroom.

“Okay. If you need my help, just yell,” he urged.

It hit me then that he knew nothing about the house, and I hadn't given him a tour. “Oh, God. I'm so rude. I should have shown you around the place before coming up here.”

Kit reached out, gave my forearm a squeeze, and promised, “It's really okay. I'm a big boy. I think I can find my way back down the stairs.”

“Well, if you want to check things out, feel free,” I urged him. Lifting my hand up and pointing, I said, “The spare bedroom is that one, and my bedroom is that one. You can have a look around up here, so you know the lay of the land. And don't hesitate to make yourself at home when you head downstairs, either.”

Nodding with a smile on his face, he said, “I'll be fine, Maxie. I'll do a quick run through the house, go out and grab my bag from my car, and then I'm going to order some dinner for us. Is there anything you don't like?”

“Oh, you can't do that,” I declared.

“Why?”

“Because you already shared your lunch with me,” I noted. “I should cook something for you as a way to say thanks.”

Kit shook his head. “You’re not standing on your feet any longer than absolutely necessary.”

At least one of us was thinking straight. “Alright, but then you have to let me pay for dinner,” I demanded.

“We’ll talk about it later,” he declared. “You need to get in the tub and get off your feet.”

“Okay.”

I made my way to the spare bathroom, leaving Kit standing there. Just before I went inside and closed the door, I said, “I’m not a very picky eater, but I’d really love some Italian food tonight.”

Kit’s face lit up with a gorgeous smile. “I can do that for you.”

I took in the look on his face for a few more seconds before I stepped inside the bathroom and closed the door. A couple of minutes later, I had stripped out of my pajamas and sank down into the warm bathwater, being careful to keep my legs up on the side of the tub.

For a while, I just sat there, allowing my body to rest and relax. It felt glorious.

And with the thoughts swirling around in my head at that moment, it wasn’t a bad place to be.

The thing was, I realized how crazy it might have seemed to be in this position right now. I was naked in the bathtub in my spare bathroom while a guy I’d just met only hours ago was roaming around somewhere in my house. I couldn’t have put myself in a more vulnerable position if I tried.

And yet, I wasn’t afraid.

I wasn’t worried.

If anything, I felt safer having him here with me.

Granted, I knew where he worked, and given what I knew about Brynn’s ability to be thorough in her research, I trusted

she wouldn't have made the recommendation of Harper Security Ops if she didn't believe they were the best.

So, I was confident they didn't hire creeps or mass murderers.

But it was more than that.

There was something about Kit that set me at ease. I first felt it when he lifted me out of Vernon's car, but at the time, I had assumed that was more about the relief I felt knowing I was going to get the help I needed. As the day progressed, I realized that wasn't it.

There was something about Kit's demeanor, his ability to read a situation, and the tenderness he'd shown me that told me everything I needed to know.

It was in the way he touched my hands and feet as he tended to them.

It was in the way he insisted on taking me to the hospital to be certain I was okay.

It was in the way he didn't think twice about paying for the prescription gauze the doctor had ordered for me.

It was in the way he avoided going back to his house to get himself anything additional he might need for the night because he wanted me to be able to come home and rest after the day I'd had.

And it was in the way he'd continued to focus on doing what was best for me now that we were here.

Maybe it was a bad idea, but I was finding it difficult to stop my heart from skipping a beat when he was being the way he was with me. Then again, I wasn't sure I wanted to stop it from happening anyway.

If nothing else, I was only becoming more and more intrigued by him. And that was the reason why I cut the bath short, cleaned myself up, and got out. I wanted to get back to Kit as soon as I could, because I wanted to learn more about him.

Though it took me a little longer to get there, I finally met Kit downstairs in the living room.

“Thank you so much for being patient and giving me the time to do that,” I said as I moved toward the couch.

“It’s really not a problem, Maxie. Do you feel better?” he asked.

God, I loved the way he said my name. “I do. Much better, actually.”

“Good. I ordered dinner, and it—”

Kit was cut off by the sound of the doorbell ringing.

I grinned at him. “Sounds like it’s here.”

He got up from the couch and declared, “I’ll get it. You need to sit down and get off those feet.”

He was bossy, but not in a way that was unkind. The tone of his voice revealed his intention, and it was all coming from a good place. So, I honored his wishes and made my way to the couch.

Kit returned a moment later carrying a pizza box and a bag.

My eyes widened. “That seems like a lot of food.”

He shrugged. “I figured it was best to have a variety. Plus, who can resist leftovers, anyway?”

Fair point.

“So, what did you order?” I asked.

As he removed each item from the bag in their respective takeout containers, he revealed their contents. “I ordered bruschetta pomodoro for an appetizer to share, and for the entrees, I selected the penne alla vodka with chicken and the lasagna Bolognese. Of course, there’s also the pizza if you’d prefer that. I went with traditional cheese on that.”

My mouth watered.

“Which one is yours?” I asked.

Shaking his head, he said, “It doesn’t matter. I’ll eat any of this, so you can pick whichever one you want, and I’ll be more than fine with the other dish.”

With the exception of the half a sandwich I’d shared with Kit earlier, I hadn’t eaten anything else all day. It had been hours since I’d had that, and at the smell of the food, I couldn’t wait to dig in.

But Kit had made some wonderful choices. I couldn’t decide on one.

“Tell me I chose all the things you wouldn’t want to eat,” he declared after I hadn’t made a decision.

“No. No, it’s just that it all looks and smells really good, and I can’t decide,” I explained.

Sitting down beside me, he wondered, “Do you want to just share all of it?”

I perked up and smiled. “You wouldn’t mind?”

His eyes roamed over my face as his lips twitched. “Not at all.”

We dove in.

For the next little while, the two of us put all of our energy and focus into the food in front of us, enjoying every last bite until we couldn’t eat another.

Eventually, my brain caught up with things, recognized I’d overeaten, and forced me to stop.

I sat back on the couch and let out a groan. “I’m stuffed.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“It was so good. And I promise I’ll give you the money for the food and my prescription when we go upstairs to bed. I think my purse is in my bedroom,” I told him.

A strange look washed over his face. “You’re not paying me for dinner.”

“What? Yes, I am. I told you I was going to when we were upstairs,” I reminded him.

“And I never agreed to that,” he countered.

“But that’s not fair. You can’t do that,” I argued.

His brows knit together, his face amused. “Who says I can’t?”

Throwing my hands out in front of me, I replied, “I say. You can’t do all that you’ve done for me today and not allow me to thank you.”

“You already said the words,” he pointed out.

My shoulders fell. “That’s not enough.”

He leaned close to me, placed his hand on my arm, and squeezed. “Again, I’ll ask, who says it’s not, Maxie?”

Kit was close. Too close. And the soft touch of his hand on my arm mixed with the sound of his deep voice caused my belly to dip. But it was the scent of him that had me feeling things I hadn’t felt in a long time.

It made no sense to me, but the best way to describe his scent was dark and erotic. It was a mix of a sweet and woody aroma. Sandalwood, perhaps?

Whatever it was, I didn’t think I’d be powerless to resist it if he continued to do things like he was doing now.

I swallowed hard. “I just want you to know how much I appreciate what you’ve done for me today, and what you’re going to continue to do moving forward,” I explained, my voice quiet.

After giving me another squeeze, he promised, “I understand how you feel. Trust me.”

I offered a slight nod in return.

“Are you up for a movie, or did you want to call it a night here?” he asked.

I had wanted to learn more about him, but after he’d asked that question, I figured that maybe he wasn’t interested in talking any longer.

Since I didn't want to leave his side, I replied, "I could go for a movie."

His perfect lips formed into a smile as his eyes lingered on me for just a moment longer. Then he leaned forward, snatched up the remote, and flipped on the television.

Kit put on a movie, and we settled in for the night.

I was doing one of my favorite things to do with a selfless man by my side after I'd experienced a hideous morning.

I only wished I could have managed to stay awake until the end of the movie to enjoy how good it felt.

EIGHT



Maxie

The smell of coffee wafted into the room and forced my eyes open.

Much to my surprise, the sun was up, and I had slept soundly all night long. No doubt it was all thanks to Kit.

Though I'd fallen asleep on the couch last night during the movie, he'd woken me up at the end of it. And what happened afterward melted my heart even more.

"I know I told you to go exploring earlier, but I'm not sure if you did," I started. "I'll show you to the guest bedroom, where you can sleep."

Kit shook his head. "No. No, I think I'll just stay down here. You should take the guest bedroom."

Tipping my head to the side, I asked, "Why would I do that when I can just sleep in my bedroom?"

His eyes were filled with concern as they roamed over my face. Following a beat of tension-filled silence, he shared, "I did go exploring when you were taking your bath earlier. I saw your bathroom, and I know that what you went through wasn't easy. Not only am I concerned about how your mind is going to handle what happened, but I'm also worried about your feet. There's still glass all over the floor in your bathroom."

"Yeah, but that's why I used the other one," I reminded him.

“And if you’re in the guest bedroom and wake up needing to use the restroom in the middle of the night, you’ll be closer to that spare bathroom,” he reasoned.

He was so sweet.

So charming.

I smiled at him and waved my hand in the air. “That’s not going to be a problem. I won’t need to use the bathroom.”

Knitting his brows together, he asked, “What do you mean?”

“I don’t get up to use the bathroom in the middle of the night,” I informed him.

The disbelief was written all over his face. “You’ve never woken up in the middle of the night and needed to use the bathroom?”

“Of course, I have.”

His expression went from disbelief to confusion. “You’ve lost me.”

Even though I felt so exhausted from the day I’d had that I couldn’t manage to watch the movie in its entirety, I found myself feeling alert and even entertained as I talked with Kit. As ridiculous as this conversation was, I was enjoying it completely.

“Just because I wake up feeling the urge to go, it doesn’t mean that I actually get up,” I explained. “I refuse to drag myself out of bed until the morning.”

“Are you serious?”

I lifted my shoulders to my ears. “I know it’s probably not good for my body, but I don’t care. I can’t do it. If I’m cozy in my bed, I’m staying right where I am.”

His lips twitched.

Kit had gone from shocked to confused to downright amused by me.

Maybe he thought I was crazy. I didn't know if I'd say that he was wrong if he did, but I couldn't change that. I was who I was, and getting out of bed before it was time to get up just wasn't going to happen.

With my promise in hand that I wouldn't need to use the bathroom in the middle of the night, Kit agreed to sleep in the guest bedroom. And though I eventually fell back to sleep last night, I had spent some time lying awake thinking about him not being far away from me.

Now that I was smelling the coffee brewing, I could only assume that Kit had gotten up and was getting ready to start his day.

Since I had some questions about that, I figured there was no time like the present to join him.

So, I tossed the blanket back, climbed out of bed, and winced as my feet hit the ground. After giving myself a minute to adjust to the pain in my feet, I made my way to the guest bathroom to relieve myself. Then I descended the stairs in search of Kit.

The minute I walked into the kitchen, he said, "Good morning. I hope I didn't wake you."

"I smelled the coffee."

"Sorry," he mumbled.

Shaking my head, I insisted, "Don't be. At least I didn't have to make it."

He chuckled and asked, "How are the feet feeling today?"

The way this man cared was something I'd never seen in my whole life, something I'd never experienced.

"Sore," I answered honestly. "Along with a lot of the muscles in my body."

Kit offered a sympathetic look. "You should probably take something for the pain after we have breakfast. And later today, I'll help you change the dressings."

So unbelievably caring.

After grabbing myself a cup of coffee, I asked, “What would you like for breakfast? I’d really like to cook this morning.”

I was convinced Kit was going to turn me down and insist I take a load off my feet, but he surprised me when he replied, “Surprise me.”

And that’s what I did.

While I worked on making breakfast, Kit and I had conversation about nothing particularly pressing. He’d asked if I slept okay, and I confirmed that he’d had a good night’s rest in the guest bedroom.

With those pleasantries out of the way, I decided to do what I’d wanted to do last night. “So, can you answer some questions for me?” I asked.

“Sure. What do you need to know?”

I was moving the eggs around the pan when I said, “Well, I guess I was just wondering about your line of work. Obviously, I know where you work and your specific role at your job, but I guess I was curious what made you decide to work where you do.”

“There was no question about it for me,” he started. “I’d already started working there on a part-time and as-needed basis when I was in, but the minute I got out, I went full-time.”

“Got out?” I repeated.

“Of the military,” he clarified. “With the exception of a few individuals, like Avalon and Liv, all of the people who work at Harper Security Ops are members of the military. Most of us are no longer actively serving, but we all did at some point. Avalon found us because her brother, Magnus, served and works in the kidnap and ransom unit. Of course, she wound up falling in love with his best friend, Damon, who also works in the same unit. Liv works as our data security analyst, and while she’s now with her brother’s best friend, her brother, Ryan Harper, is the reason Harper Security Ops exists. He’d spoken to a couple of the guys about what he’d wanted to do when they got back from serving what was supposed to

be their last deployment, but where they all came back, he didn't."

"Oh my God. That's... well, it's so sad that he didn't get to see his dream come to fruition, but I think it's wonderful that his buddies made it happen," I replied.

"Yeah, it is," he agreed. "As for me, I just knew I wanted to do something that felt meaningful and would also allow me to utilize the skills I'd developed while I was enlisted."

Suddenly, everything was starting to make so much more sense. Kit's job wasn't just a job for him. He didn't go in to do what he did simply because it offered him a way to pay his bills.

Kit was a man with a strong sense of duty.

It was the reason he'd jumped right into action, lifting me out of Vernon's car and immediately tending to my injuries. It was precisely the reason he was here now, looking out for me.

Sure, I was going to pay for the services I was receiving, but Kit was the one who was here, because he didn't know how to not be useful, observant, meticulous, and compassionate.

He had a clear purpose in his life, and he was exceptionally good at what he did. Granted, I hadn't yet needed to see him executing any sort of force against someone who was a threat, but I had no doubt about his ability to rise to the occasion if one called for it.

"It's admirable, Kit," I said, my eyes pinned on his. I wanted him to know just how much I meant those words. "I don't think there are a lot of people who could do what you've done in your life, and do it believing that it's what they've been called to do."

Shrugging his shoulders, he replied, "I don't know. All the guys I work with probably feel similarly."

"You guys are a rare bunch then, if you ask me," I declared.

I'd finished up the eggs just as the toast popped up. After pulling it out of the toaster and dropping two slices on each plate, I carried the plates to the table, where Kit joined me.

"What about you?" he asked.

"Me?"

He nodded. "Obviously, you've got a problem with the people you're working for, but what is your job anyway? Do you like what you're doing?"

I stared at him for several long seconds before I confessed, "I hate it. I work for a company called Young Pharm that deals with pharmaceutical equipment, and I worked in the accounts receivable and payable department."

"So, it was numbers all day long for you then?" he pressed.

"Yeah, it was. But now that I'm thinking about it, I don't know what I'm supposed to do," I revealed.

"About what?"

"Work," I clarified.

Kit had been lifting a piece of toast to his mouth, but the second I said that word, he stopped moving. It was his turn to stare at me in silence. Time passed, and I was convinced he wasn't going to say anything. But then he lowered his hand, having not taken a bite of his toast, and insisted, "You can't go back there, Maxie. It's too risky."

I didn't necessarily disagree with him. I'd have to have been out of my mind to go in to work when the CEO of the company had actively threatened my life. "I understand that, but... I don't know. Is that it? I just stop going without a word?"

"Do you think they're going to be surprised?" he countered.

I considered his question before I answered honestly, "I don't think Ethan and Anna will, but I imagine it's going to be a bit of a shock to everyone else that I work with. It's going to be just like what happened with Ana."

Kit had resumed eating, but at the mention of Ana, he paused. “Who’s Ana?”

I went on to tell Kit the full story. I explained everything from the start, when Ana approached me as I was leaving work two weeks ago. I shared the details of the voicemail she left, that I’d returned her call, and that I hadn’t heard back from her since. I told him how she stopped coming into work altogether, and while most of the office had started gossiping about her sudden disappearance, nobody really seemed to know for certain where she was, nor did they really care. Of course, I also shared that I was particularly concerned for her, and that worry only grew when they asked me to take on her job responsibilities until the merger was over.

By the time I finished telling him everything, Kit sat back in his chair and looked at me like I’d grown three heads and had to have been making it all up. But when it became clear that I wasn’t joking, I watched as his mind started working. I didn’t want to interrupt his thought process, so I kept quiet and continued to eat.

Eventually, he asked, “What did you have planned for today?”

“I didn’t make a plan, because I had originally intended on being at work,” I answered.

“If it’s alright with you, I think we need to go into the office. We’ll see if Jax is available to help out. If not, I’ll talk to Blaze. They both work in the private investigation unit, and I think it’s worth having them look into what’s happened to this woman.”

“Really?”

Kit continued to look at me like he thought I was crazy. “Maxie, a woman is missing, and as far as you know, her disappearance hasn’t been reported to the police. You know what those men said to you yesterday morning. What if Ethan and Anna figured out that she knew, and what if they didn’t give her a warning like they gave you?”

Suddenly, I couldn't stomach another bite of my food, feeling sick. I swallowed hard, tears instantly filling my eyes. "Oh, my God. Do you really think they killed her?"

His head moved slowly from side to side. "I don't know. But I know we can't just sit back and hope she pops up. Investigating her disappearance might lead us to a place where we can ultimately ensure your safety."

There hadn't been any doubts lingering in my mind about the kind of man Kit was, but if there had been, this conversation would have removed any worries I had.

He really was a man with a strong sense of duty.

"Okay. Yeah. I think we should go back to the office today and talk to your coworkers about Ana," I agreed.

Kit had long since finished his breakfast, but he still was finishing up his coffee. After he'd taken another sip and placed the mug back down on the counter, he said, "Good. I'll give the guys a call in a few minutes and let them know we'll be coming in, just so they can be prepared."

I offered a small smile in return, feeling immensely grateful I'd met Kit. The more I was around him, the more I was beginning to find attractive, too.

Oddly enough, that attraction had nothing to do with his physical appearance, even if there was no question just how handsome he was. What I was finding myself drawn to was the kind of man Kit really was.

Granted, it would have been foolish for me to think that a guy who worked at a place like Harper Security Ops, especially considering the way Brynn had researched and described the company, would be anything less than thorough with the job he was doing.

But it wasn't easy to ignore how attractive it was to me to see him going above and beyond the call of duty to, not only act as my bodyguard, but also to want to look out for Ana. Maybe he wouldn't be the guy who'd be the one looking for her, but he believed her disappearance was important enough to look into.

Of course, recognizing that only led me to feeling a bit of guilt.

“I was so stupid,” I murmured.

“What? Why would you say that?” he questioned me.

Shaking my head, feeling disappointed with myself, I answered, “My best friend urged me to go to the police days before I was attacked. When I explained why I didn’t want to do that, she told me to at least consider going to Harper Security Ops to get some help with this whole situation. I can’t help but feel like I might have saved myself from what happened to me if I did. And beyond that, if I had come to Harper Security, would someone have been able to locate Ana by now?”

Kit’s eyes roamed over my face in the sweetest way. Following a few moments of silence, he shook his head, leaned forward, and placed his hand on my arm. His touch bathed me in warmth before he spoke words that sealed that warmth in.

“Don’t beat yourself up about this, Maxie. You had your reasons for doing what you did, and I wholeheartedly believe that everything works out the way it does for a reason. Maybe we don’t know yet what that reason is, but if you start second guessing yourself now, you might not be able to appreciate whatever good comes out of this when it does.”

Tipping my head to the side, I quietly assessed him and processed what he’d just shared. “Do you really believe something good will come out of this?”

There wasn’t an ounce of hesitation as Kit’s kissable lips formed into a gorgeous smile before he insisted, “Absolutely.”

I couldn’t miss the promise in his tone, or the way it made me feel things I probably shouldn’t have been feeling, considering he was just here doing his job.

And as I drew that conclusion, I wondered how many other women had been made to feel not only safe and secure by this man’s presence, but powerless to resist his confidence and charm.

NINE



Maxie

“Now what?”

I looked over at Kit from where I was sitting beside him in his car and felt my nose scrunch up. I thought it was rather strange that he was asking me that question, since he was the one who should have had an answer.

The two of us had just gotten back in Kit’s car after walking out of the Harper Security Ops building. I’d gone in with him and done precisely what he’d told me we needed to do. I was introduced to both Jax and Blaze—two of the men who worked in the private investigation unit within the company.

Kit had urged me to share everything with them that I’d revealed to him earlier in the morning when we were having breakfast together. I’d told them all that I could about Ana, and I had to admit that even if I wasn’t sure what the outcome of this was going to be, I was glad somebody was doing something to figure out what happened to her.

Considering her ex-husband likely didn’t care or perhaps didn’t even know that she was missing, and she’d moved to this area to be with him, which meant her family wasn’t around, there probably wasn’t a soul looking for her.

I didn’t want to get my hopes up about any of it, because I realized that what Kit had said was the truth. It was entirely possible that Ethan and Anna could have been responsible for

doing something horrific to her, something far worse than they'd done to me.

So, I merely tried to find comfort in the knowledge that there was somebody doing something to try to locate her.

But now that we'd left, I couldn't figure out why Kit had asked me what he did. "Now what?" I repeated. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, now what? I want to know what you would normally do on a day off?" He clarified his question.

My brows shot up. "With or without injured feet?"

Clearly amused by my question, Kit replied, "Well, I had just been asking in general terms, but I guess I'm curious what you'd do in both scenarios now."

"Hmm. Well, I'm assuming this would have to be a weekend if I have the day off," I started.

"Why is that?" he asked.

"Because unless it's the weekend or a holiday, I normally don't just have the day off," I noted.

"Right. Okay. So, what would you normally be doing if today was Saturday?" he questioned me.

Now it was my turn to be amused. "On Saturday mornings, I typically go to meet Brynn at the gym for a workout. After that, I'd generally come home and find something to do indoors, especially in the summer."

I could see the moment a lightbulb switched on in his head. "I remember you saying something about hating summer. I just thought you were being sarcastic because of what you'd gone through, but you weren't joking, were you?"

I shook my head. "Not for one second."

"You don't like summer?"

"Despise it."

Disappointment washed over him. "That's a shame."

I cocked an eyebrow. I couldn't think of a single reason to like it. "Listen, I've felt this way for a long time, and I've yet to find one good thing I like about the season. That said, I'm not an unreasonable woman. I might not think it's possible, but you're certainly welcome to try convincing me why I should like the heat, humidity, and burning hot sun."

Kit was no longer disappointed. The smile on his face and the laughter that came out of him indicated he was back to being amused. Through his laughter, he held up his hands in surrender and declared, "I'm not going to attempt to change your mind just yet. I think I need to learn one or two more things about you before I can do that. Where do you like to go for fun with your friends?"

I shot him a look of disbelief. Kit hadn't ever made me feel like he wasn't paying attention to me, but his question had me wondering if I was giving him too much credit. "Um, I just told you that Brynn and I go to the gym. We do it every Saturday, and I try to find two other times during the week to meet her there."

"Right. But outside of that, what do you do?"

Struggling not to burst out laughing and feeling something warm move through me, I revealed, "I'm not a very exciting person, Kit. I prefer to be at home, and I really only go outside when the weather changes. Brynn is my best friend, and she's the only person I tend to hang out with next to my family, but Brynn and I don't do things that take me much outside of my comfort zone. I like what I like, and I don't see any reason to step outside of that. I hate to tell you this, but I'm rather boring."

Kit tore his attention away from me, looked through the windshield, and shared, "You are so far from being boring, it's not even funny."

I wondered how he could make an assessment like that when he'd only met me not even twenty-four hours ago. "What makes you say that?" I asked, too curious to ignore his statement.

Twisting his neck and looking in my direction again, Kit shot me a look of disbelief. “Have you looked around your house?”

Obviously, I had. “What about it?”

“There’s so much personality inside that house; I don’t know how you keep it contained,” he replied.

I didn’t respond.

I couldn’t.

Because I wasn’t quite sure based on the words and his tone if I was supposed to take what he’d just said as a compliment or an insult. I knew my style wasn’t for everyone, but that didn’t mean it wouldn’t have hurt for Kit to say that he found it obnoxious.

Granted, I put my personal touch on my décor, but I didn’t think it was too overstated or unbearable.

“What does that look mean?” Kit asked when I remained quiet.

“I’m trying to figure out if you’re finding it to be a chore to be inside my house,” I answered honestly.

“Not at all. In fact, I couldn’t be happier about being there if I tried,” he returned.

Until he said those words, I hadn’t realized I’d been holding on to tension. It left my body, relief replacing it, and I took a moment to consider why I cared.

What did it matter to me if Kit liked the way my house looked?

“Do you really mean that?” I asked him.

“I do.”

The sincerity in his tone was genuine, and there was no denying how good it made me feel to know he liked it.

“I’m a homebody, so I wanted my house to feel like a home. I love decorating, which is another reason I love the cooler months. I do what I can over the summer, but there

really aren't any good holidays to decorate for. I get to put up some red, white, and blue at the beginning of July, and after that, it's back to summer colors until fall rolls around," I shared.

"Well, we're almost out of summer," he reasoned. "You've got to be at least a little bit excited about that."

"You would not be wrong about that," I mumbled.

Kit smiled at me. I let out a soft laugh.

"So, should I expect to see those inflatable lawn ornaments outside your house as soon as October hits?" he asked.

My lips were twitching, and I couldn't miss the fact that he believed he'd still be around when October hit. "No. No, I don't do inflatables. Nearly everything is handcrafted."

"Really?" he countered.

Grinning, a glint in my eyes, I teased, "If you take me home, I'd be happy to show you."

Kit held my gaze, something dark and passionate moving through his expression. The tension building up inside the car was intense, and I was convinced that if he continued to look at me like he was, I wouldn't be able to hold myself back from leaning across the center console to kiss him.

Much to my disappointment, Kit broke the connection between us, looked away, and asked, "Would you mind if we stopped at my place on the way to yours? I need to pack a bag to get me through the next couple of days."

I couldn't wait to see his house. "Sure. I'd love to see where you live."

Though he didn't look over at me, I saw his lips twitch. "Don't get your hopes up, darling. I don't have nearly the same personality or style that you do."

My lips parted as my belly flipped at the endearment. While I was sure he'd just thrown it out like nothing, hearing him call me darling did things to me it probably shouldn't have. There was no doubt it'd be stupid for me to dwell on it or wonder why he said it.

But I couldn't help myself.

I didn't care if he lived in a dungeon.

He was sweet, caring, gentle, and he'd just called me darling.

"I'm sure it's fine," I rasped.

Then I watched as he cocked his eyebrow and twitched his lips.

Maybe he hadn't tossed that word out like it was no big deal. Perhaps Kit knew precisely what he was doing to me.

And a moment later, when he pulled out of the parking lot to head to his house, I realized it was the first time in a long time that I felt genuinely happy.



"This is not bad at all, Kit."

"Coming from you, that means a lot."

We'd gotten to his house just a few minutes ago, and though his place did not have the same level of personal touches that mine did, it wasn't as bad as he made it seem. "With the way you were talking, I thought I was going to walk into a dark cave or something."

He let out a laugh. "No, it's just not as interesting as your place. I live here, Maxie, but it definitely isn't as inviting as yours is."

I shrugged and insisted, "It doesn't have to be. It just needs to get the job done for you, and from what I can tell, your house is clean and has everything you need."

Nodding, he replied, “And I thought I was going to leave you feeling disappointed.”

As if that would ever be possible. With the way this man had been looking out for me and how he was making me feel, I wasn't sure there was much of anything he could do that would have left me feeling disappointed with him.

“Hardly,” I said softly.

Kit smiled at me and held my gaze briefly before he announced, “If you want to grab a seat on the couch, so you can get off of your feet for a few minutes, feel free. I'm just going to run upstairs and pack a bag quickly.”

“Okay.”

“Do you need anything before I go up?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Nope. I think I'm good.”

With that, Kit took off and made his way toward the stairs while I moved to the couch in the living room. With the exception of when I was in bed sleeping last night, this was the first time I'd been alone since Vernon and Agnes picked me up alongside the road.

It was strange.

For so long, I'd craved having time to myself. I couldn't get home from work fast enough on most occasions, just so I could be alone for a few hours.

But ever since I'd met Kit, I didn't find myself needing that. Of course, there was probably a small part of me that simply wanted him around because it felt safer to have him there. But deep down, I knew it was more than that.

There was something about the way he made me feel that had me wanting more time with him.

As I sat there waiting for him, though, my mind started to wander.

Kit seemed to be handling this whole situation with such ease. Granted, I understood he did this for a living, and it

probably came easily to him. But I couldn't ignore some of the questions that started to pop up in my mind.

How many other women had he brought back to his home with him, so they could sit on his couch while he packed a bag to hold him over for a few days while he stayed in their homes?

I couldn't have been the only one, and I didn't know why it had taken me until this moment to figure that out.

Knowing what to do, and how to handle this situation, had been like second nature to him. It seemed to be as simple as breathing was for him.

Drawing that conclusion, I recognized that I was allowing myself to feel vulnerable in a way that had nothing to do with having been kidnapped or threatened at gunpoint.

While I was feeling warmth move through me or attempting to ignore the way my belly flipped when he said or did certain things, the reality was that Kit had probably done this dozens of times, probably hundreds.

He'd said he worked in the private security and bodyguard unit at Harper Security Ops, and I wondered if that was intentional for reasons that had nothing to do with his ability to protect someone from a threat. Was it possible he was just really good at making someone, namely a woman, feel so reassured and comforted?

Thinking back on how terrified I'd been yesterday morning, shouldn't I have been feeling nervous and on edge? Taking a step outside, I should have been looking over my shoulder at every moment.

I wasn't.

And I knew it was because I was with him.

How did he do it? How did he make me feel that secure in almost no time at all?

The only explanation I could come up with was that he had experience, which meant that all of the other things he made

me feel in addition to making me feel safe were part of how he did his job.

Everything that felt special to me was just another day on the job for him.

Before I knew it, I could hear Kit's footsteps descending the stairs. He entered the room with a duffle bag in one hand. "I'm good to go. There's enough here for a few days," he shared.

I dipped my chin with understanding and stood up. "Where to now?" I asked.

Surprise and a bit of delight washed over his face. "Did you forget already?"

"Forget what?" I asked.

"You told me that if I took you home, you'd show me everything you made with your hands," he reminded me.

I had done that.

I'd done that not even an hour ago when I was feeling so good about the way Kit treated me, when I had gotten caught up in how he was looking out for me the way that he was.

"Oh, you're right. I did forget," I replied as I started to move toward him. "You must really hate this."

"This?" he questioned me.

I threw my hand out, gesturing to the duffle bag, and clarified, "Not being able to be home. I mean, if you're constantly having to play bodyguard and stay with people, you're probably rarely home."

Understanding dawned. "You'd be surprised, actually. I mean, we've had a couple of high-profile clients who require the typical bodyguard protection that's sort of similar to what I'm doing with you, but it's not very common. Oftentimes, my job might require me to look out for someone from a distance, where they might not even notice me there."

Feeling surprised, I tipped my head to the side. "Really? You mean, you haven't had to pack an overnight bag to stay

with someone else that you were acting as a bodyguard for before now?"

"Rarely, if ever."

I don't know why, but I hadn't expected that answer. "Wow. Now I feel bad for making things so difficult for you."

The silence stretched between us as Kit's eyes roamed over my face. I could see his mind working behind his eyes, but I had no clue what he was thinking. Fortunately, he eventually spoke.

"Maxie?" he said softly.

"Yeah?"

"Nothing about anything I've done with or for you has been difficult. Nothing at all," he assured me.

There was so much conviction and promise in his words that I didn't dare to question him on it. Instead, I squeaked, "That's good to know."

He smiled at me, jerked his head to the side, and urged, "Come on. Let's get out of here, so you can show me your talent."

The next thing I knew, Kit and I were back in his car on the way to my place. And though I'd spent that time on his couch getting myself all worked up about not necessarily being special, it didn't take Kit long to turn things right back around for me.



Maxie

“I still can’t believe you’re interested in this.”

Kit’s expression turned curious. “Do I just seem like the kind of guy who doesn’t have a creative bone in his body?”

Shaking my head, I insisted, “No, not at all. It’s just that nobody in all the years I’ve been doing this has actually attempted to make one with me.”

He seemed to be in a state of total disbelief. “Are you serious?”

I nodded. “Don’t get me wrong. Everyone loves them when they are finished, and I’ve had a few instances where Brynn, my mom, or another relative will sit and watch while I make one, but they’re all just not interested in learning how to make them.”

There was an extended pause before Kit, who was focused on the materials in front of him, said, “I can’t tell you how honored I am that I get to be your first, then.”

Though the conversation was centered around what we were doing right now, there was no way I could miss the innuendo in his words or his tone. Every time I thought I had recovered from something sweet he did that melted my heart, he’d do something like this that would send a shot of desire through my body.

I returned my attention to what he was doing and said, “Well, you’re clearly a fast learner, because you’re doing an

incredible job with this.”

“You really think so?” he asked.

My eyes went to his, and I smiled. “I do.”

And that was the truth.

Kit and I had made it back to my place, and after showing him some of the handcrafted décor I’d made over the years, he asked if it was difficult to do. I told him I’d show him how to make a wreath—my favorite things to make—and that’s what we were doing now.

After pulling out a metal wreath frame, dark brown burlap ribbon, some floral wire, and a pair of scissors, I secured one end of the burlap ribbon to the frame and demonstrated how to pull the rest of the ribbon through the frame to create the desired look.

From that point forward, Kit had taken over. He had been doing an excellent job, and even though he was concentrating hard and talking to me the entire time, I found myself focusing a lot on the way his hands worked the ribbon through and around the frame.

I’d felt those hands on my hands and feet yesterday, and I knew just how tender his touch was. Suffice it to say, I started wishing I was made out of burlap.

Once he’d woven the ribbon through the entire frame, I showed Kit how to securely fasten it.

He held it up in front of him with a proud look on his face. “What do you think?” he asked.

“It looks fantastic,” I praised him. “You just need to add the two final touches.”

“Like what?” he wondered, his eyes darting back and forth between the wreath and my face.

Grinning at him, I held up a finger and said, “Give me one second.”

Before he had the chance to respond, I took off to where I kept my supplies, found what I was looking for, and made my

way back to where he was sitting.

Holding one item up in each of my hands, I declared, “I think these are just what we need to finish this one off.”

Kit inspected the items I was holding, and it suddenly hit him. “Maxie, what made you choose that letter?”

A smile formed on my face. “It’s for you.”

“Me?”

I nodded, moved closer, and urged, “Look.”

Then I affixed the top and bottom of a cream-colored wooden ‘S’ to the wreath, so it covered most of the empty center. Once that was in place, I fastened a brown and white chevron bow to the top left side of the wreath.

“There,” I declared. “Now you can take it home and hang it on your door.”

Kit’s eyes shifted between the finished wreath and me. I couldn’t quite read the look on his face, and I started to think that perhaps he didn’t want a wreath for his front door. I’d purposely chosen colors that were more masculine and would also pair well with the exterior of his home, but maybe Kit wasn’t interested in decorating.

Not wanting him to feel obligated, I stammered, “It’s... I mean... you don’t have to hang it if you don’t want to. I just wanted you to have a little something extra as a token of my appreciation for all that you’ve already done and are continuing to do for me.”

The moment the words were out of my mouth, Kit reached his hand out, curled his fingers around my forearm, and offered a reassuring squeeze before he returned, “I’m going to hang it.”

His hands.

His hands were on me again, and this time, he wasn’t doing it out of necessity to care for my hands or to make it so I didn’t have to walk on my injured feet. I tried my best to ignore the way his touch and the sound of his voice made my belly flip and rasped, “It’s okay if you don’t want to.”

His voice dipped low when he replied, “I want to. It means a lot to me that you’d offer one to me. Nobody I’ve ever worked with has given me a gift of thanks like this, so I want you to know this is special.”

Warmth spread through my body at his declaration, and my pulse pounded in my ears. God, this man was exceptional at his job.

Job.

I had to remember this was just a job for him, and he was likely still doing what he’d been training himself to do for years. This was all probably just his way of making sure my mind stayed preoccupied, so I wouldn’t be thinking about what I’d gone through yesterday.

Knowing I needed to kill the moment, even if I hated every second of it, I stood up straighter and turned my body slightly, which caused him to lose purchase on my arm. “Well, your job is one that should not be thankless,” I insisted.

“It’s not,” he assured me. “But the thanks I receive are generally just verbal.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I merely offered a smile in response. Desperately needing a change in topic, I moved to grab the box for Kit’s wreath and said, “Speaking of jobs, I really need to figure out what the heck I’m going to do now.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

As I filled the box with tissue paper, I explained, “I don’t exactly have a job anymore, and even though I have some money saved up to hold me over for a bit, I can’t remain permanently unemployed.”

“Right. Well, what kind of job are you looking for? Did you still want something similar to what you were doing?” he questioned me.

Letting out a laugh, I huffed, “I wouldn’t say that’s the job I *want*, but it’s a job I know how to do.”

“Well, you told me you’d hated it,” he reminded me when I reached for the wreath and placed it in the box.

Only after I placed the lid on it and tied a ribbon around the box did I look up and respond.

“The original job I was hired to do wasn’t necessarily the problem. I mean, I wasn’t in love with the work I did, but I wasn’t exactly stressed about it, either. Things sort of went south about six months ago, when the merger was announced. More work had been piled on top of so many of us in preparation, which brought me to the point where I went from tolerating it to hating it.”

Kit stood and moved closer to me. His eyes studied me, and his features softened in an unexpected way. “You should feel fulfilled by what you do every day, Maxie. Don’t you think?”

God, I loved that look on his face. It took him from handsome to impossibly gorgeous.

In an effort not to start drooling all over myself, I replied, “In theory, yes. But the reality is that it’s more important to be able to provide for myself.”

Tipping his head to the side, he challenged me. “And you don’t think you could find a way to provide for yourself while feeling excited about what you’re doing every day?”

I shrugged. “I think it’s a nice thought, but that’s not how life works.”

Kit’s brows shot up as he tossed his hand out to the side in the direction of the table where the box holding his wreath was sitting. “Look at what you just did,” he declared.

“I showed you how to make a wreath?” I guessed.

“And you did it effortlessly,” he pointed out. When my lips parted, he added, “You just showed me more handcrafted items than I’ve seen in my entire life, and they’re all amazing. While I can understand not wanting to turn a hobby into a career for fear that you might grow to hate it, I think you’d be wasting your talent if you didn’t pursue a career that involved doing something you’re so exceptionally good at.”

My breathing had stopped.

For years, I'd had my family, Brynn, and even an ex-boyfriend indicate that they loved the things I made and believed I was incredibly talented. But nobody had said it in the way that Kit just had. Nobody had left me feeling the way Kit did, and that was likely because his voice had almost been pleading with mine to listen and understand what he was saying.

I believed him.

I believed he thought I was exceptionally good at my craft.

"You think I should start a business with such an uncertain future?" I asked. "Wouldn't it make more sense to get a job that'll pay me a steady income while I go through the growing pains of opening my own business?"

He shook his head. "It's not for me to say what you should do, but if it were me, I'd take this opportunity in my life to do something that was going to make me happy. You've got one life, Maxie. Why would you want to live it doing anything that didn't make you feel good?"

I hadn't thought about it like that.

Of course, my biggest concern had been providing for myself for years. I wasn't thinking about life being short or if I'd ever be able to live a life feeling fulfilled in my career.

But maybe Kit was right.

Maybe now was the time.

I'd been held at gunpoint and had my life threatened. If that wasn't enough to remind me that life was short and shouldn't be wasted, I didn't think anything else would.

"Maybe you're right," I said.

He grinned at me. "For what it's worth, I don't think there's a chance in hell you'll fail at this."

I was so happy to hear him say that, I could have cried.

But I didn't.

Instead, I smiled back. "Thank you, Kit."

He lifted his hand to the side of my arm and squeezed the cap of my shoulder. “You’re welcome, Maxie.”

As crazy as it was, feeling his hand on me again and staring into his handsome face, I started to wonder if there really could be a bright side to having been kidnapped yesterday morning.



“I have to cancel with you tomorrow.”

My body was tense as I waited for Brynn’s reply. “Really? What’s going on?”

I had been dreading doing this, but I knew it had to be done. She was my best friend, and I wouldn’t lie to her, even if I knew this was going to upset her.

“It’s kind of a long story, but I burned my feet,” I explained.

“You burned your feet?” she asked. “Like, you spilled boiling water on them, or—”

“I burned them while walking barefoot outside,” I said, interrupting her.

There was a brief pause, undoubtedly the result of her confusion and shock. “Maxie, you don’t like walking outside with your shoes on,” Brynn noted. “Why the hell were you walking barefoot outside?”

“Again, it’s a long story, and I’m happy to tell it to you now, but I think you first need to know that I’m okay, and I took your advice about going to Harper Security Ops,” I revealed.

Another bout of silence came through the line. Obviously, my best friend was entirely too shell-shocked by what I was sharing.

“Tell me what’s going on,” she eventually urged.

So, that’s what I did.

I told Brynn about everything that had happened from the moment I was dragged out of my bed on Thursday morning, up until now. I told her about the struggle in my bedroom and bathroom, the gun, the drive out to the woods, Vernon and Agnes, the drive to Harper Security Ops, Kit, the trip to the hospital, and the fact that I now had a bodyguard.

Brynn listened intently, interrupting a few times when I’d said something that had been a bit extreme—she freaked out when she’d heard about me having had a gun pointed at my head.

When I finished telling her the full story, I said, “So, that’s why I can’t really go to the gym tomorrow. My feet are much better than they were yesterday, but they’re still very tender and sore.”

“Of course. My God, Maxie. I can’t believe this happened to you,” Brynn replied, the concern laced through her tone.

“Tell me about it,” I murmured.

“So, what’s going to happen now? This guy is just staying with you until when?” she questioned me.

At the mention of him, I felt the corners of my mouth tip up into a smile. “His name is Kit,” I reminded her. “And I don’t really know the answer to that question. For now, he’s staying with me, and he’s got some guys at Harper Security Ops looking for Ana. Beyond that, I really don’t know much, because I don’t know what the outcome of this is going to be.”

“What do you mean?” she pressed me for more information.

After taking a deep breath and letting it out, I shared, “Well, I’m going to try to do something different with myself from a work standpoint. Kit saw some of my handcrafted

items, and we made a wreath together, so he's encouraged me to pursue something by following that path. But when—"

"Wait. What?"

"What?"

"You're making wreaths with this guy?"

There was a twinge of excitement in her voice, and hearing it instantly lifted my mood.

"Just one," I clarified.

She paused once more, the silence speaking volumes, before she declared, "I thought he was supposed to be your bodyguard."

"He is, but we can't just sit around staring at each other all the time while doing nothing else," I reasoned. "Though, if I'm being honest, I wouldn't necessarily mind it if I had to do that. He is so gorgeous."

Brynn didn't hesitate to respond. "I've got to meet him, but I'll give you some time alone with him before I barge in on whatever's happening between the two of you."

"Nothing's happening," I insisted.

"Mmm," she replied, making it obvious she didn't believe a word I'd said. "So, what are you doing about this whole situation with Ethan and Anna?"

Now it was my turn to remain silent.

That was just the problem. I had no idea what was going to happen with all of this, which was the very reason why I couldn't answer the question Brynn had asked about how long Kit would be staying with me.

There didn't seem to be any answers.

"I don't really know what to say," I confessed. "Kit is hoping the guys he works with will be able to locate Ana, and if they do, the hope is that she'll be able to tell us something that we can use to possibly form a united front on this whole thing. It's such a disaster, and as much as I want to just go to the police or put this out there for the sake of Ethan's and

Anna's spouses, I don't care enough to do that. I just want to do whatever I've got to do to keep myself safe."

"Gosh, I'm so worried about you, Maxie. I honestly cannot believe you're going through this," she replied.

Even though she couldn't see me through the phone, I shrugged my shoulders. Indifference moved through me.

This was a nightmare of a situation, but I had met Kit as a result.

"It's not all been bad," I said.

"Right. Because you've met a guy," she noted. Brynn sounded so upbeat; she was practically singing.

"He's really nice, Brynn. Wait until you meet him," I replied.

"Oh, shoot. I've got another call coming in," she shared. "Let me go and take this, but please keep me updated on what's happening."

"I will."

"Talk to you later, Maxie."

"You, too."

I said goodbye to my best friend and disconnected the call.

For the next few minutes, I simply sat there in my bedroom, thinking about my conversation with her. It was nice to be able to share what was happening in my life with her, but in doing so, there was no doubt I was feeling a bit of uncertainty surrounding my future.

At this point, the only thing that felt like it was on steady ground was my safety. And as strange as that sounded, I thought it said something about just the kind of guy Kit was. My life was technically in danger, yet I hadn't ever felt safer.

For that reason, I chose not to dwell on the things I couldn't change for the time being. So, I got up, walked out of my room, and went in search of Kit.

ELEVEN



Kit

“Thank you for your help with this. I really appreciate it.”

“It’s not a problem at all, Kit. You know that,” Forrest replied.

Before I could say anything, Jake added, “Yeah, I didn’t have anything going on this morning, so I was actually relieved when you called. Since there are a couple of back-to-back classes this morning, there wasn’t really anybody available or any time to spar, so I needed something to do.”

I nodded. “I’m glad I could help, then.”

“How’s Maxie doing?” Forrest asked.

Forrest and Jake were two of my coworkers. While Jake typically worked in the self-defense and tactical training unit at Harper Security Ops, Forrest worked in the private security and bodyguard unit with me.

Though, I guess Forrest and I didn’t generally work together. In most cases, we were with our clients and not working with one another, unless it was a case where we were providing bodyguard services to the members of the local band, My Violent Heart, whenever they went on tour.

Jake was often working closely with the rest of the guys in the self-defense and tactical training unit, since it was usually necessary to have more than one of them teaching the group classes we held.

I'd called both guys up yesterday and asked if they'd mind helping me with getting Maxie's shower fixed. While she'd been able to order the replacement glass for the shower, nailing down a contractor to install it had been nearly impossible. When I realized just how much of a hard time she was having, I immediately told her I could handle it for her.

Fortunately, Jake and Forrest were both available to help. Since I didn't want to leave Maxie alone, and I knew the glass was going to need to go in a truck, I was grateful the guys were willing to pick it up before they brought it over to be installed.

With the three of us working, it didn't take us long at all to get it installed. Maxie would finally have her shower back, and I knew that was going to make her day.

But since these guys were my coworkers and there was generally a good sense around the office about who was working on what cases, it came as no surprise they were interested in whatever progress had been made.

"Maxie is doing surprisingly well," I answered. "Her hands have healed up nicely, and the burns on her feet are getting there. We've been diligent about changing her bandages every day."

"That's good news. How is she handling all of this?" he pressed.

Truth be told, the woman had amazed me. After what she'd gone through, I expected her to have a rough couple of nights. If I hadn't seen the way she was the day she showed up at Harper Security, I would have found it difficult to believe she'd been through anything traumatic.

That was the reason why I revealed, "Maxie's tough. Probably the toughest woman I've ever met. She's taking everything as it comes, listens to my advice, and she doesn't seem to be experiencing any post-traumatic stress from her whole ordeal."

"That's excellent. So, what's going on with all of that anyway? Any news yet?" Jake asked.

“I wish I had good news,” I told them. “I mean, there’s not exactly been any bad news, either. Right now, I’ve got Jax and Blaze working on trying to locate her other coworker who knew about the situation and suddenly went missing. But as far as I know, they haven’t found anything. You know how these things go, though.”

They both nodded, but it was Forrest who spoke. “Hey, look on the bright side. At least you can continue enjoying playing house with her.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head.

“Oh, what’s that for? Are you telling me you aren’t having a good time?” he pressed.

Forrest knew.

He knew the kind of work we typically did, and it wasn’t often that any of us wound up spending the night at the home of someone who needed our protection. If it was necessary for personal protection, we generally staked ourselves outside their home and would alternate nights to give the next guy a night off.

That didn’t happen here, and Forrest was making assumptions about why that was.

The thing was, he wasn’t exactly wrong in his assumptions, even if I wasn’t going to admit to it.

I’d been with Maxie nearly every minute of every day for almost a week now. It was Tuesday, and in just the last couple of days, I found myself feeling extremely grateful that it was me who walked up and saw her in Vernon and Agnes’s car last Thursday.

Of course, I wasn’t thrilled learning about what she’d been through or that she had been injured and threatened, but given that it had happened, I was glad it was me who got to take care of her.

For days now, I’d been doing my best to remain professional while keeping her mind occupied. No matter that she seemed to be doing so well, the truth was that she could have had a flashback at any moment.

I figured it was best to stay with her, reassure her, and do things that would keep her mind preoccupied with things unrelated to what she'd experienced.

It seemed to be working.

The downside, if I could actually call it that, was that I now had first-hand knowledge of just who Maxie Oliver was. And there wasn't a single thing I didn't like about the woman.

She was obviously gorgeous, but there was so much more to her than her looks. She was sweet, a little timid, very generous, and beyond compassionate.

And talented. I'd never met anyone who had as much creative talent as Maxie did.

Finally, there were the things she did that she didn't even know she was doing. Whenever she'd fall asleep during a movie, her head and body would start to drift to the side. Her head would ultimately land on my shoulder and remain there for the rest of the movie.

When it happened, I didn't dare move from the position I was in. Because I didn't want her to wake up and move away from me.

She smelled entirely too good. If I didn't think it'd be a problem for her, I'd have stayed awake all night, allowing her to sleep on my shoulder, just so I could be close to her and have the scent of her surrounding me. It was a light floral scent mixed with vanilla, but there was a hint of cinnamon in there, which felt mysterious and spicy.

Simply put, Maxie smelled divine, and that alone would have been enough to draw me to her. It had been for days now.

But no matter how many things I was finding myself attracted to about her, I wasn't about to reveal any of it to Jake or Forrest.

"I'm not going to lie and say it isn't nicer to be inside, sleeping in a bed, instead of spending the night awake in my car to keep someone safe, but that's all this is," I insisted. "You're making this out to be more than it is."

Forrest's lips twitched as Jake cocked an eyebrow and asked, "Is he, though?"

I dipped my chin. "Yes."

Jake threw his hands up in surrender and replied, "Okay. If you say so."

"We should get out of here," Forrest said, his attention on Jake.

"Yeah, I'm good to go," Jake returned.

"Before you go, do you mind if I introduce you to Maxie? I'm sure she'd like to meet you both," I told them.

"Sure."

With that, I led the guys out of the room and down toward Maxie's craft room. She'd told me earlier that she was going to be in there working on a project while I got the shower fixed for her.

When we made it to the room, I knocked on the partially opened door.

"Yeah?" she called from inside. "Come in."

I pushed the door open, saw her sitting there with her work in front of her, and felt something constrict in my chest.

God, she was beautiful.

"Hey, Maxie. The guys and I just finished up with the shower, and I wanted to introduce you to them," I told her.

Her eyes widened. "You finished it already?"

I nodded.

"Wow. That was fast," she marveled as she stood and moved in my direction.

Watching her move toward me, I started thinking there wasn't much I wouldn't do to always be able to see this woman approaching me with a smile on her face and for a completely different reason than she was right now.

"It really wasn't difficult, especially with the three of us working," I explained. "Anyway, these are the guys I work

with, Jake and Forrest. Guys, this is Maxie.”

She beamed a gorgeous smile at them and said, “It’s wonderful to meet the both of you. Thank you so much for coming over to help Kit with my shower. I really appreciate it.”

The guys both said hello and reassured her that helping me out wasn’t at all an inconvenience.

Following their brief exchange, Maxie’s eyes came to mine. The way she’d done it, I couldn’t help feeling really good. It was as though she was looking to me for guidance on what was happening next, and I liked that she felt that level of comfort and trust with me.

I offered her a reassuring smile and jerked my head toward the door. “The guys are heading out, so I’m going to follow them down and see them out. I’ll be right back.”

Her head shifted a touch with a slight nod. “Okay.”

With that, the guys and I walked out of the room and made our way down the stairs. We got to the bottom of them and were standing just inside the front door when Forrest said, “It’s a good thing you’re the one here with her, Kit.”

Confused, my brows drew together. “Why do you say that?”

He let out a laugh. “She’s cute. And if a woman who looked like her pinned her eyes on me the way Maxie did to you, I’m not sure how much self-control I’d have.”

That felt good to hear.

I was glad Forrest had noticed the way Maxie looked at me, because at least I now knew I wasn’t making it all up in my head.

“Yeah, well, some of us are professionals,” I said as I opened the door, still refusing to tell him the truth.

Jake let out a laugh as Forrest muttered, “Sure. Keep telling yourself that. I’m giving it two weeks, maximum, before you cave.”

I was already on the cusp of caving. Two weeks would be an eternity. “I guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

A moment later, after I’d thanked them again, the guys were gone, and I was climbing the stairs to return to Maxie.

The door to the room was still open, so I walked inside and found her working diligently on a new wreath. I made my way over to her and took in the work she was doing. I wasn’t exactly the kind of guy who was interested in wreaths or any other fancy decorations for my house, but I couldn’t deny just how impressed I was with Maxie’s ability to create what she did.

“This looks great,” I praised her.

She tipped her chin up, smiled at me, and asked, “Do you really think so? I was going to give this one to Vernon and Agnes as my way of saying thank you to them for stopping to help me last week.”

Nodding, I answered, “I’m sure they’re going to love it.”

She bit her bottom lip in an attempt to contain her excitement as she stood from her chair. “I’m so glad you think so. I’ll finish it up later.”

“You have something else planned?” I asked.

Shaking her head, she replied, “No. I was just thinking I’d like to talk to you about something if you have some time, though.”

I grew curious, because while Maxie and I had had plenty of conversations with one another, they had all been very off the cuff. Our conversations generally just flowed, so it was a bit out of character for her to have something specific to want to discuss with me.

“All I have is time for you,” I said, wishing I could tell her how happy that made me right now.

She frowned and murmured, “That’s kind of what I wanted to talk to you about.”

My body tensed.

The change in her body, her voice, and her expression made me realize that this wasn't necessarily going to be a good conversation.

Worried and beyond curious, I kept my voice gentle as I asked, "What's going on?"

"I know you have Jax and Blaze trying to locate Ana right now, but I was wondering what you think will happen if they don't locate her," she shared.

"It's still early," I told her. "Obviously, we'd all want a quick resolution and for her to be found within hours, but sometimes, these things take longer. I promise you they aren't going to give up just because it's been a few days."

She shook her head. "It's not that, Kit. I mean, obviously, I'm worried about Ana, but I was asking more for myself. I guess I'm curious how long you think you'll have to be here, essentially living with me."

If I thought my body had been tense before she started this conversation, it didn't compare to how I felt now that she was speaking. Maxie's words were starting to make things very clear, and I was realizing that perhaps she wasn't okay with me staying in her home. Maybe she wanted some privacy and time away.

If that was what she needed, I'd have no choice but to give it to her. But that wouldn't mean that I'd leave her unprotected.

"Well, I haven't really considered it too much yet," I started. "I wanted to give the guys a bit more time before we try to come up with another plan of attack. Your safety is what's most important."

Her shoulders fell as her gaze dropped to the ground. "Right. Okay."

Maxie's response indicated that she'd accepted my answer, but her mood said the very opposite was the actual truth.

So, even though it was going to kill me to do it, I had no other choice.

“If the current arrangement isn’t working for you, Maxie, you just need to tell me,” I said. “I can do my job just as well from outside your home, and if you want or need the privacy and space to yourself, I’m happy to do that for you.”

Her head snapped up, her eyes horrified. “What?”

“I can make sure you stay safe from outside, in my car,” I clarified.

Maxie’s eyebrows pulled together, and her lips parted. For several beats, she simply stared at me with a look of disbelief on her face. But eventually, she asked, “Why would you do that?”

I shrugged. “Isn’t that why you’re asking me how long I’ll need to be here?”

Her hand flew up to cover her mouth just as it fell open. “Oh, God. No. No, not at all,” she declared. Maxie dropped her hand from in front of her mouth and reached for my arm. Her soft fingers curled around my wrist in an absentminded gesture as she continued, “I was worried about you. I mean, your life is basically being consumed by my whole ordeal, and even though I know this is your job, I just kind of feel bad. Asking about an endpoint for this was merely about my concern for your personal and private life.”

It was a wonder I could think straight with her hand on me. There wasn’t a question in my mind that Maxie had not a single clue about the effect she was having on me.

I couldn’t seem to pull myself together before she started speaking again. “I think I’d be okay with modifying the arrangement if it’ll work better for you. Besides, would it be safe to assume that everything is all good now since it’s been so many days since the attack without any other activity? Maybe I don’t have anything to worry about anymore.”

No way could I continue to let her think she was an inconvenience in my life.

Swallowing down the real reaction I was having to her and her touch, I said, “I have to disagree with you, Maxie. First of all, as grateful as I am that there hasn’t been any activity for

the last few days, it does not mean that you are out of the woods yet. It would be foolish for me to leave you unprotected.”

“Okay. I trust your judgment, so if you say it’s not safe, then I believe you,” she replied.

“Good. Now about the other thing...” I trailed off.

“Your personal life,” she stated.

I nodded. “I am very happy to be here with you. I can’t remember ever enjoying work as much as I have these last few days.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Please don’t worry that you’re somehow a burden to me,” I pleaded with her. “It takes as long as it takes, and to be honest, I’m actually getting a pretty good deal here. I get to hang out with a cool chick while I do my job to keep her safe. It doesn’t get any better than that.”

Maxie’s features softened, and it wasn’t until that moment that I realized how much this had been weighing on her mind. “Thank you for easing my mind about this.”

“You’re welcome.”

For the next few seconds, the two of us simply exchanged relieved looks with one another. They might have been for different reasons, but it was clear to me we were both feeling reassured about things.

I was the first one to break the silence. “Do you want to get out of here for a little bit?” I asked.

“What?”

After taking in a deep breath and blowing it out, I said, “I know you’re not really big on being out of the house, but I’d really like to take you out for a bit. We can go grab some lunch together.”

Something moved through her features, and her eyes searched my face.

Thinking she might have been feeling a little nervous, I added, “I promise you that you’ll be safe. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Maxie smiled at me. “I know that, Kit. If there’s one thing I’m absolutely sure of, it’s your ability to do what you do and do it well. I trust you to keep me safe.”

If I hadn’t already been feeling so many good things about her, from the way she looked at me when Forrest and Jake were still here to how it felt to have her fingers curled around my wrist, I would have probably been shocked by how wonderful it felt to hear her say she trusted me.

“I’m happy to hear that. So, what do you say? Can I take you out for lunch today?” I asked.

She thought for just a few seconds before she smiled at me and replied, “Yeah. I think I’d really like that.”

I grinned back at her.

Then, I jerked my head toward the door and said, “Come on.”

A few minutes later, we were in my vehicle and on our way to lunch. I had to keep telling myself that this wasn’t an official date.

But if I had my way, that was going to change very soon.

TWELVE



Kit

“So, is there anything you can’t do?”

This was perfect.

Our lunch date this afternoon was unplanned and casual, and it was the perfect scenario for us.

Though Maxie and I seemed to be getting along great, I had a feeling that if I’d formally asked her out on a date instead of suggesting it spontaneously like I had, she might have been a bit more reserved, if she even accepted the invitation at all.

Now that we were here, I wasn’t the least bit disappointed with how things were going. Because Maxie was making an effort to open up in a way she hadn’t before this point. Even though she’d been the one who had just asked the question, it was the look on her face and the way she was leaning on her forearms that indicated to me how eager she was for an answer that would give her more information about me.

The only problem was that I wasn’t quite sure what she meant. “Is there anything I can’t do about what?”

“In general,” she clarified. “I mean, I have yet to see you struggle with anything. You have the basics of first aid down, you know how to keep people safe, and apparently, you can install glass shower walls. I’m feeling especially inferior in comparison.”

She was crazy if she thought she lacked talent. Maybe I could do the things she'd just mentioned, but she wasn't what I'd consider inferior in comparison.

Not at all.

"There's plenty I can't do," I said.

She cocked an eyebrow. "I don't believe you."

Her words might have seemed harsh, but the look on her face was anything but. She was being particularly playful, and I gobbled it up. In fact, I did my best to match her energy.

My lips twitched. "Why would I make that up?"

Maxie shrugged and suggested, "Because you're a nice guy, and you don't want me to feel bad about myself?"

"You think I'm a nice guy?"

For a few seconds, Maxie stared at me with an intensity in her eyes I'd never seen before. Her gaze then moved to the rest of my face, lingering momentarily on my mouth. It took everything in me not to lick my lips or smile, because I knew if I did that, she'd stop looking at me the way that she was.

When she finally parted her lips and spoke, she shocked me. "You're the nicest guy I've ever met, Kit."

It was a good thing I'd been sitting down, because I hadn't expected her to say that. Maxie had rendered me momentarily speechless. I wasn't quite sure how to respond to her.

Because with the way she'd held my gaze and looked at my mouth before she'd spoken, it was hard not to think there was an attraction between us that wasn't one-sided.

Not knowing if it was wise just yet to push that boundary, I decided it was best to go for some humor. "If that's the case, I'm guessing it's because you said you don't get out much."

"You make a valid point, but I think it's just you," she replied. "Anyway, if you really expect me to believe you aren't good at *everything* you do, then you should tell me something you struggle with."

Since I didn't think I should tell her how much I was struggling not to walk into her bedroom every night or kiss her every time she looked at me like she just had, I said, "Bowling and baking."

Horror marred Maxie's features. "What?"

I nodded slowly and confirmed, "I'm awful at both."

For several seconds, Maxie just stared at me. I wondered what was going through her mind when she finally reached her hand out, placed it on my forearm, and offered a gentle squeeze. My mind was so distracted by the softness of her touch and the way her thumb was stroking gently over my skin that it took superhuman effort to focus on the words she said next.

Her lips formed a gorgeous smile—another thing that had me struggling to pay attention—as she revealed, "I'm excellent at both of those things."

Maybe it was wishful thinking, but I could have sworn there was a hint of seduction in her tone. I never would have thought it'd be possible to talk about bowling and feel aroused, but leave it to Maxie to shatter any preconceived notions I had.

Fuck, I wanted to throw her on the table, rip her clothes right off her body, and eat her instead of the meal I'd ordered.

"How are your teaching skills, though?" I countered.

She shot me a questioning look. "Unless you were hiding something from me a few days ago, I do believe I taught you how to make a wreath."

I placed my free hand on top of hers. "You did do that. See? Another thing I didn't know how to do."

Maxie's fingers pressed in on my arm, and I saw the change in her breathing. The relaxed and steady nature had led the way to quick, shallow breaths.

I wondered if I could convince her to sit beside me instead of across from me.

Unfortunately, before either of us could speak, our server arrived with our food, ruining the moment.

“Okay, here are your lunches. I’ve got the chicken Caesar wrap,” the server said as she placed Maxie’s plate down in front of her. “And I’ve got the buffalo chicken wrap, with a side of fries for you.” After my lunch was set on the table, she asked, “Is there anything else I can get for the two of you?”

I glanced at Maxie, who shook her head, returned my attention to the waitress, and answered, “We’re all set for now. Thank you.”

“Enjoy.”

A moment later, Maxie and I were digging into our meals. We’d both taken several bites before I noticed a strange look had washed over her face. “Is everything okay?”

“What? Yeah. Why do you ask?” she retorted.

Shrugging, I explained, “You seem like you’ve got something on your mind.”

She shook her head. “No. No, how’s your lunch?”

“It’s excellent, actually. Yours?”

“It’s good.”

Good?

No way. That response was not a response I’d have expected from Maxie. Taking a guess as to what she might have had going through her mind, I asked, “Do you like buffalo chicken?”

“I love it,” she answered.

“Well, then you’ve got to try this,” I urged her, holding my sandwich out in her direction.

Her face lit up. “Are you... you don’t mind if I have a bite?”

I’d give her the whole goddamn sandwich if she’d continue to look at me like that. “Why would I mind?”

“You could have an aversion to eating after people,” she suggested playfully.

I was half tempted to tell her that considering I wanted my mouth between her legs, her having a bite of my sandwich wasn't going to faze me.

I didn't do that.

Instead, I lifted the sandwich closer to her mouth. "Try it."

Maxie didn't attempt to use her hands. Or, she didn't attempt to use them on the sandwich. She lifted them to my wrists and held them steady as she parted her lips and took a bite.

My eyes remained focused on her mouth the entire time she chewed. Only after she swallowed and licked the corner of her mouth did I lift my gaze. "Well?"

"It's so good."

I lifted the other half of the wrap and held it out to her. "Here. We can trade."

"Really?"

"Sure."

Cautiously, Maxie took the wrap from me and held half of her chicken Caesar one out for me to take. After we made the switch, she said, "I don't care if you don't know how to bake or to bowl. You know how to mindread."

I let out a laugh. "What are you talking about?"

"I was having the worst case of buyer's remorse when I saw your food come out," she explained. "Though I'm sure you were just being nice by offering me a bite of your food, I'm telling myself it's because you're good at reading minds and knew how I was feeling."

If only I knew for sure how she felt about me and the tension I felt building between us over the last few days, then I'd be golden.

"You could make things easy on me, though," I noted.

"How so?"

"If you wanted a bite, you could have just asked."

She offered a sheepish look and bit the corner of her lip. “I didn’t want to be rude.”

Maxie could have taken my entire plate and switched it with hers, and I wouldn’t have cared. I might have said as much if only I hadn’t been so captivated by the change in her demeanor. I found myself enjoying the way she’d gone from eager and interested to seductive and sultry to shy and reserved.

“I never would have thought that, Maxie,” I assured her. “We’re merely having a casual lunch out. The last thing I want is for you to be worried about something like that.”

Any of the caution that had been lingering in her gaze was gone as she lifted her wrap in her hands and declared, “I’m finding that the more I’m around you, the less I worry about anything. Truthfully, I don’t know what’s gotten into me. I can’t remember the last time I was out in public and didn’t feel stressed about it. I don’t think I’ve had this much fun in a very long time.”

My brows shot up in surprise. “You think this is fun?”

She nodded. “Yeah. You’re not having fun?”

I could think of a dozen other things that I’d find far more fun than this. That didn’t mean I wasn’t having a good time. I was. It was just that this wasn’t what I’d consider to be thrilling.

Of course, what I wanted didn’t matter.

If Maxie was thoroughly enjoying herself, I wanted those good vibes to continue.

“Do you trust me?” I asked her.

She’d clearly been caught off guard by my response to her question. “Yeah, I think so.”

“Okay. Well, if you think this is fun, let me take you bowling afterward. You’ll never stop laughing.”

Excitement washed over her. Leaning forward, she asked, “Are you serious? I’d love to go.”

I grinned at her and jerked my chin toward her food. “Eat up, and I’ll show you the time of your life.”

There was a lot of meaning behind my words, but I didn’t know if Maxie picked up on them. She had agreed to allow me to take her bowling, making this feel more and more like a real date, and while I intended to have a fantastic time with her, I had to wonder if she’d agreed because she didn’t believe I was bad at bowling, or if she was feeling the same, wishing this was more than just a friendly afternoon together.



I was in love.

Maybe it wasn’t the real deal just yet, but I was certainly in love with the way I felt right now.

Maxie and I were at the bowling alley, just as I’d promised. Completely unashamed, I’d just given her a taste of my skills.

Her mouth dropped open when I’d taken my first turn. “Wow, you really weren’t kidding,” she declared, noting how I’d only managed to knock down a single pin.

“I tried to warn you.”

“Yeah, but you’re so strong,” she replied.

I let out a laugh. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Maxie walked toward me, closing the distance between us. She brought both hands up and wrapped them around my bicep. “My hands don’t even fit around your arm.”

I cocked an eyebrow, silently questioning her because I didn't trust myself to speak with her hands on me like that.

"If I had arms like this, I'd get a strike every single time."

"If you had arms like this, I'd probably want to hire your personal trainer, too," I teased her.

Maxie burst out laughing, doing it while continuing to hold on to my arm. That was the first instance of me feeling like I was falling in love.

Seeing her so carefree, laughing like that at something I'd said, all while she held on to me, was better than I could have ever envisioned.

Then, she pulled herself together, focused her gorgeous eyes on mine, and offered, "Do you want me to teach you how?"

"Teach me?"

Her eyes were sparkling as her mouth formed into a beautiful smile. She gave my arm a slight shake and replied, "Yeah, I can teach you how to do it, so you have a fighting chance and can make this a little challenging for me."

"You're going to teach me how to do it?" I asked.

If I thought she'd looked horrified when she saw me roll the first ball down the bowling alley, it was nothing compared to the look on her face now.

She loosened her hold on me, her lips parted slightly, and took a step back. I immediately regretted my decision to push things into that territory. As comfortable as I thought she was becoming with me, apparently, she hadn't gotten that comfortable.

"Oh, um, I didn't mean—"

I took a step toward her and said, "I know you didn't, Maxie. I was just joking with you."

"I was talking about bowling," she said. "I swear, that's all I meant by it. I would never have said something like that. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

“Darling, you didn’t make me uncomfortable,” I assured her.

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. Then, because I didn’t want things to take an awkward turn, I stated, “I’d love to learn how to bowl, if you want to take the time to teach me.”

For a few seconds, I held my breath.

I was worried that I’d ruined our afternoon, but I had been worried for nothing. Just as I’d attempted to match her energy throughout lunch, it seemed two could play that game.

Maxie must have realized she could be playful on a different level with me, because the look on her face turned seductive just before she ordered, “Go grab your ball, Kit. You’re going to need that if I’m going to teach you how to use it.”

I stared at her in disbelief, feeling the overwhelming desire to drag her out of there and back to her place.

But a moment later, seeing the shock in my face, Maxie burst out laughing. “Oh my God, I can’t believe I just said that.”

I started laughing as well, relieved.

Eventually, I moved to grab a ball. And then I spent the rest of the afternoon attempting to ignore the scent of Maxie as she stood beside me and gave me tips to become a better bowler.

It wasn’t easy.

Not when she leaned in close to whisper an instruction in my ear.

Not when she demonstrated techniques with her own beautiful body.

And certainly not when I’d managed to get my first spare, and she celebrated by leaping into my arms.

It was a lot more than I had been prepared for, but I wanted it all the same.

But by the time I crawled into the spare bedroom that night, there was no question I needed the distance.

Because I still had doubts about where she stood.

I'd loved everything about what we'd had from the moment the guys left after they'd helped me fix her shower earlier in the day, and I wanted to believe she was struggling to navigate through similar emotions.

But I knew that could have just been me hoping for an outcome that might not ever be.

And that was a tough pill to swallow.

Because if there was a chance that Maxie just knew how to flirt and wasn't exactly interested in anything more serious than that with me, I was in so much trouble.

THIRTEEN



Maxie

“Did you pick something out?”

I’d glanced up from the television and saw Kit making his approach.

It was Sunday evening, and we’d both just taken our showers. I’d made it down to the living room before he had since he’d received a phone call just as I’d started climbing the stairs earlier.

While he took his call, I went upstairs and did my thing. And by the time I started descending the stairs, he was on his way up.

We had fallen into a comfortable routine over the last few days, something that hadn’t exactly been an easy feat for me. Maybe Kit hadn’t noticed, but I struggled a bit.

Our impromptu lunch, followed by an afternoon of bowling, had been a pleasant and enjoyable, albeit unexpected, surprise. I hadn’t anticipated not only having such a great time being out and about with him, but the way in which I’d behaved was quite a shock.

Part of me had wanted to really immerse myself in that experience with him. I didn’t want to hold back, and while I think it started off innocently enough, there was no question I’d stumbled into dangerous territory.

I knew it from the moment I first reached my hand out and placed it on his forearm. I’d been telling myself I was doing it

as a means to comfort him, so he wouldn't feel bad about admitting there was something he was bad at doing.

But deep down, I knew the truth.

I wanted to touch him. I craved that connection with him, and I loved the reward I got when he covered my hand with his.

Of course, then he not only knew I wanted to taste his food, but he watched me chew the bite he'd fed to me, too.

I wanted so badly to believe he wanted more, that he wanted us to be out to lunch together not because he was my bodyguard but because we were something else to one another.

Sadly, it seemed every time I managed to gain some confidence about where his thoughts were with everything, I started to feel him pull back a bit from me.

And that was precisely what continued to happen ever since we had that date. Kit and I weren't exactly in an awkward place, but it was one that didn't lead me to having the same confidence I'd had during our date.

I pulled back, returned to my typical self around him, and fell into the routine.

Now, I had predictability. That's why Kit entering the living room and asking if I'd picked something out did not come as a shock.

We'd been watching movies every night before bed since the very first night he'd been here. For someone who hadn't been accustomed to having anyone in her space, it surprised me that I not only was enjoying having Kit around, but also that I was looking forward to this time with one another each night.

But instead of me doing what he'd just asked me, which was to have picked out a movie for tonight, I spent my time on the couch contemplating everything.

This was going to be Kit's eleventh night here with me. Eleventh. I'd spent more time with him than I had with the last two guys I dated.

Though I knew he was here, doing his job, I couldn't say it was easy to not find myself feeling eager for moments like this. Even when he gave me time throughout the day to do my own thing and work on projects, it seemed all I could think about was us getting to this part of the day.

As a homebody long before I met Kit, I had already spent a fair deal of time on the couch catching up on a television series or consuming the latest blockbuster. But now that he was around, it was safe to say my evenings had been elevated.

They had become my favorite part of the day.

There was nothing about our movie nights that was anything but innocent. We sat, we watched, we laughed, and we occasionally chatted about whatever we were watching. It was a stark contrast to the sex-laced undertones in our conversation a few days ago.

It was nice.

It was fun.

But I'd have been lying if I said they didn't leave me feeling an overwhelming sense of longing and despair.

Because without any additional action on his part to kick things up a notch, or to indicate he was interested in something more, I knew this was eventually going to come to an end. And I wondered how I was going to adjust to no longer having it once this whole bodyguard situation was unnecessary and Kit had moved on to watch over someone else, leaving me to live my solitary life.

He provided me with a level of comfort and safety I hadn't ever felt before in my life. Of course, I knew Kit wouldn't just up and leave if there was still a threat to me—he'd made that much very clear.

But this was different.

This was about a different kind of safety. This was about what I stood to lose when the time came for him to move on to his next assignment.

The thought of having to watch Kit walk away when this was over filled me with dread.

I'd gotten used to having him around. I woke up every morning eager to get out of bed, just so I could see him.

We'd had every meal together ever since he shared half of his sandwich with me the day I arrived at Harper Security Ops.

And Kit so frequently praised me for the work I did whenever I was crafting. Most times, he left me to do it on my own, but there were many instances when he'd offer to help.

I loved it.

I loved having him around, and I was going to miss him tremendously when this was over.

Maybe that was why I shouldn't have continued to do all that I was doing with him. Wasn't the whole point of having a bodyguard supposed to be for them to watch out for your physical safety while you carried on with your life as usual?

Of course, it was.

But there wasn't anything about this situation that was ordinary, because I didn't even have my normal job to go to anymore. I was attempting to rebuild a new life while I was in the midst of this chaos.

Maybe somewhere, in the deepest parts of my heart and mind, I wanted Kit to be a part of my new life.

And seeing him walking toward me with that sweet smile on his face after we were both fresh out of the shower, the desire for that to be the case only intensified.

Unsure if I'd truly be successful in doing it, I attempted to stuff all of my feelings about Kit eventually having to leave into the darkest recesses of my mind. If I didn't bring them to the forefront, if I didn't bring them out into the light, maybe I could pretend they didn't exist.

As soon as he sat down on the couch beside me, I apologized, "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

“I didn’t even try to figure out what movie we should watch,” I confessed.

His brows pulled together, but it wasn’t so much a questioning look he shot my way, as it was one of concern. “Is everything alright? You’ve been down here for a while now. I was worried I wouldn’t make it down before you started something.”

A small smile formed on my face. “I wouldn’t have started anything without you,” I assured him. “And yes, I guess everything is okay. I just have some things on my mind.”

“Do you want to talk about it? I’m happy to listen,” he offered.

There was a part of me that wanted to throw myself on the ground, telling him about all of my fears about him no longer being here and us never having this again once things were settled for me, and there was another part of me, a much bigger part, that wouldn’t dare consider doing something so radical.

That part was the one that won out.

So, instead of completely shutting him down or lying to him about it, I decided it was best to mention something else that had been weighing heavily on my shoulders. But I didn’t want to come right out with the problem I was facing.

“Would you tell me about your family?” I asked, deciding this was the best way to bring up the topic.

“My family?” he countered.

I nodded.

“What do you want to know about them?” he questioned me.

I shrugged and shook my head. “Anything. Whatever you want to share, really. Are you close with them? Do they live nearby?”

He studied me for a moment, and I was convinced I’d overstepped. For the most part, Kit had been relatively forthcoming when it came to having conversations with me, so

I didn't think this would have been a problem. But maybe there was some bad blood between him and them, and if I'd just opened up some old wounds for him, I was going to be mortified.

"They do live here in Steel Ridge," he eventually started. I let out a sigh of relief just as he added, "I'm one of three kids. I've got two sisters. Hailey is my older sister, and Heidi is the youngest. My parents divorced when I was sixteen. They're both remarried now and are much better off as friends."

"Wow. The holidays must be crazy for you, traveling all over to visit everyone," I said.

Kit shook his head. "Not really. Everyone gets along, so we actually just alternate where we go each year. Last year, everyone went to my dad's house for Thanksgiving and my mom's place for Christmas. This year, we'll do the opposite."

My eyes widened. "So, you mean your mom and her husband went, along with you and your sisters, to your dad's house on Thanksgiving, and the opposite happened with your dad and his wife going to your mom's place on Christmas?"

He nodded and let out a laugh. "Yeah. I know it probably sounds strange, but even if my parents didn't work out as a couple, things never really got ugly between them. My sisters and I were very fortunate."

Bits and pieces of everything were starting to come together in my mind. From the very first time I'd met him, Kit had been so gentle with me. Ever since, he'd been exceptionally kind and caring. And he was very uplifting.

Maybe his parents hadn't worked as a married couple. There was no question they'd succeeded in raising an incredible son.

"That's wonderful, Kit. There aren't a lot of families that can manage that type of relationship following a divorce, so you've got to be grateful for how things are for you and yours," I reasoned.

"I am," he confirmed. "What about you?"

Thinking about my own family, warmth spread through me. “My parents are still married, but I’ve only got one sibling. A brother, Jeremiah. He’s married, and I adore his wife, Krista. And in the most exciting bit of news, on the Sunday before I met you, my mom had thrown a birthday party for my dad. In addition to the gift they gave him, Jerry and Krista revealed that my dad was going to become a grandfather for the first time, because they’re expecting their first baby.”

Kit’s face lit up with a handsome smile before he pointed out, “That means you’re going to be an aunt.”

Nodding my head furiously, I confirmed, “I am. I’m so excited about it, too.”

“So, you’re all really close then?” he questioned me.

“We are, which is kind of the reason I’m struggling right now,” I revealed.

Genuine curiosity and concern washed over him. “What’s going on?”

I looked away briefly, feeling a mix of emotions move through me. Frustration, fear, and a twinge of guilt were at the forefront of it all. “They don’t know what happened to me.”

“Do you want to tell them?”

Returning my attention to him, I rasped, “Not when things are like this. If it had happened, and everything was settled, I’d probably feel differently. But there’s all of this good stuff happening right now, and I don’t want to give them any reason to live in fear. They worry enough for me already as it is.”

Kit didn’t hesitate to reach his hand out, place it on my arm, and offer a reassuring squeeze. “I think it’s normal for most families to worry just a bit more about the girls. I know it’s like that in my family. Of course, everyone loves me, but we look out for my sisters differently. Is that what you mean when you say they worry about you?”

Pressing my lips together, I moved my head from one side to the other. “Yes and no. Where I think my family differs is that they’re concerned about my personal life in a way that’s a

bit unexpected. While they wouldn't want me out there dating someone who wasn't right for me, they're mostly worried I'm not really dating at all."

Something passed through his expression. "Really?"

I couldn't work out whether his response was in regard to my family's concerns, or that I had just confessed I wasn't dating. The worst part about it was that I wasn't sure which I preferred was the case.

Because I wondered whether it mattered to him at all that I wasn't dating. Were the looks he occasionally gave me an indication of something more? Did he ask to take me out for lunch a few days ago simply because he had wanted a change of scenery, or was there something lingering beneath the surface of that request?

I felt so conflicted, because we'd had such a great time. I thoroughly enjoyed being out with him, and I loved the way we got along with one another. He made it easy to let my guard down.

There was no question about it. Kit being the way he was with me only served to make me fall that much deeper into this with him.

I just couldn't be sure if the feelings were reciprocated. If we'd had that time together with one another when he wasn't acting as my bodyguard, I wouldn't have second guessed any of it.

I would have been confident in believing I understood what his intentions were.

But there was another factor at play here, and I wondered if he was only going as far as he did, simply because he was that good at his job.

Perhaps he'd only been attempting to keep me distracted from the danger I had swirling around me. My thoughts had been a mess ever since that day, and it was safer for me, for my heart, to ignore the budding emotions and feelings I had for him.

Because although I knew what I wanted this to be, I wasn't going to be able to bring myself to go after it. Given that he was here with me because he was working, I didn't think it was wise to risk making things awkward. He might wind up excusing himself from the job and have someone else he worked with to fill in. Then, I'd have to face one of his coworkers who would know the reason why they were there instead of Kit.

Unwilling to ask for clarification, I kept things where I knew I could manage them and replied, "Yep. It's always a topic of conversation every time I visit with them. It even happened at my dad's birthday party."

"Do they think you're unhappy, or is it something else?" he asked.

"Maybe a little bit of both," I admitted. "I stay inside a lot, so I'm not out meeting new people. They want me to be happy, and they want to see that I'm taken care of down the road. Not in the financial sense, though. I think it's more about knowing I'm not going to be alone for the rest of my life."

Understanding dawned in his expression, and Kit slowly nodded as his eyes roamed over my face. "How long has it been?"

"What do you mean?"

"Since you last went on a date," he clarified.

"Two years," I confessed.

A look I hadn't ever seen on his face before appeared. "Are you serious?"

I nodded, feeling humiliated, and couldn't manage to stop myself from spewing out more things. "Anyway, my bigger issue now is that I've got this whole problem I'm dealing with that they know nothing about, and I was supposed to be going to my parents' house on Friday evening for dinner. They wanted to have a little celebration for Jerry and Krista."

"Do you want to go?" Kit asked.

“I did before, but it’s not exactly possible now,” I explained.

Kit twisted his body on the couch, so that he was facing me with one leg bent on the seat, his elbow resting on the back cushion, and his fist pressing into the side of his head. “Why not?” he questioned me. “If you want to go, I’m happy to take you. I can do my job from outside.”

That thought hadn’t crossed my mind.

“That’s not an option, Kit,” I remarked.

“Why not?”

I shot him a look of disbelief. “I could never have you take me somewhere and go inside while you waited in the car for me. I’d feel horrible. And while I know they’d have absolutely no problem with you joining me there, I’d never subject you to that or expect you to do that, especially when I wouldn’t be able to tell them who you really are to me.”

“Would it help if you could tell them we’re dating?”

My lips parted as I cocked an eyebrow. “Help who?”

“Them? You?”

I let out a laugh and huffed, “My family would be over the moon if I brought someone like you home and told them we were dating.”

Something intensified in his eyes. “And you?”

I’d like to bring you home and tell them we were doing more than just dating, I thought.

Instead of admitting that, I answered, “I’d never ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t. I offered.”

I blinked my eyes rapidly at him. “Yeah, but you’re not being serious about it.”

“Yes, I am.”

My breath was stuck in my lungs.

Kit was offering me a way to visit with my family without having to tell them the truth about what had happened to me and what I was currently dealing with. Of course, I could see the ridiculousness of the whole situation. I would have rather pretended I was dating a guy than to admit my life had been threatened at gunpoint after I'd been assaulted and kidnapped and that I was now unemployed.

“You’d... you’d do that for me?” I stammered.

His eyes were still pinned on mine. “Without hesitation.”

There was such confidence in that response.

It was him saying something like that which gave me mixed signals. Was it coming from somewhere inside him that was yearning for something real? Or was he just doing this to be a nice guy?

I hated to think I'd just be setting myself up for heartbreak when I got a taste of something I'd never truly be able to have.

“I... I don't know if I can—”

“There's a way for you to pay me back,” he said, cutting me off.

“What?”

He grinned at me. “I'm willing to go with you to your parents' house for dinner as your date if you'll agree to go with me as my plus one to Nixon and Mallory's wedding.”

Nixon and Mallory.

Mallory Grant, the owner of Grant's Deli.

As soon as I realized who he was talking about, I recalled him mentioning the day we split that sandwich, the day he met me, that they were going to be getting married in two weeks.

“Oh, Kit. I... I can't go. I don't even know them.”

“I don't know your family,” he noted.

“Right, but this is different,” I suggested.

He nodded. “Yeah, exactly. I think it's a much bigger deal to be meeting someone's parents than it is to accompany

someone to a wedding. I think this is fair. I'll be your date, and you can be mine."

I nervously bit my lip and considered it.

For someone who didn't really like the idea of being around crowds, I wasn't even remotely concerned about that when it came to deliberating over what to do.

My biggest worry was that I was going to like it. I was going to enjoy fake dating Kit so much that I was going to be upset when it never amounted to anything.

Because him wanting me to pay him back by going to the wedding with him meant that this was just transactional, right?

"I'm not sure this is a smart idea," I murmured.

"But it'll be a great time," he reasoned. "Plus, if you don't want to go with me to the wedding, I won't be able to go and see one of my closest friends get married."

"What do you mean?"

He shot me an incredulous look. "I'm not leaving you alone, Maxie."

Crap.

I had no choice in the matter now. I was already the reason Kit had no personal life. Granted, he had said he wasn't upset about it at all, but I couldn't very well be the reason he missed his friend's wedding, too.

"Okay," I said softly.

"Okay?" he repeated. "You'll go with me?"

I took in a deep breath and dipped my chin. "Yes. Yes, I'll go with you to the wedding if you go with me to my parents' house."

There was a twinkle in his eyes when he teased, "Two dates in one week. Look at you go."

I rolled my eyes at him and lifted the remote in my hand. "What are we watching tonight?"

Kit let out a laugh and turned his attention toward the television. I struggled to take my eyes off of him, even after he'd picked out a movie and had started playing it, praying I hadn't just made a mistake.

FOURTEEN



Maxie

Acting would have never been a viable career choice for me.

As I studied my face in my bathroom mirror, I had convinced myself that I was going to screw this all up. My family was going to take one look at me and know it was all a sham.

It was Friday evening, and Kit and I were going to be heading to my parents' house as soon as I worked up the nerve to walk downstairs, so we could leave.

But I was struggling a bit, wondering if I should just call the whole thing off. I could pick up the phone, tell my parents I was feeling sick and couldn't make it, and I technically wouldn't have been lying.

Because the truth was that I didn't exactly feel the best right now. My stomach was a bundle of nerves.

I didn't have the slightest clue how to pull this off. How was I supposed to pretend that Kit and I were dating one another? Nobody was going to buy it.

If it hadn't been for the fact that there was a legitimate reason to go tonight—to celebrate Jerry and Krista's pregnancy announcement—I definitely would have made the call.

I couldn't do that now.

Not when I was expected to be there in twenty minutes with the guy I'd told my parents I'd started seeing.

Yes.

I was such a fool about all of this, and the day after Kit and I discussed our plan for me to be able to still attend this celebration, I decided to call my mom and let her know that I had started seeing someone and wanted to bring him along.

To say she was thrilled to know I wanted to bring a guy was an understatement. I didn't doubt it was going to be even worse when we arrived, too.

Realizing I was delaying the inevitable, I gave myself one last glance in the mirror, took a deep breath, and sighed as I exited the bathroom and made my way toward the stairs.

By the time I made it downstairs, I wasn't surprised to see Kit ready to go. We took each other in, neither of us saying a word.

The attire was casual, so our stares had nothing to do with seeing one another looking differently. I couldn't say what it was that he'd been feeling in that moment, but I certainly wondered if the way he was looking at me was an indication that he was feeling similarly.

Maybe that was just wishful thinking on my part.

Because for me, I took one look at him, and for that very brief moment, I stood there wishing this was real. I couldn't have imagined a better man to take into my childhood home and introduce to my family.

No matter how much I wanted that to be the truth, it wasn't. So, I had to brush off those thoughts and get a move on.

"Are you ready?" I asked.

"Whenever you are," Kit replied, not an ounce of concern or anxiety in his tone.

I moved to the kitchen, grabbed the brownies I'd baked, and we left. After giving him some directions about where to go, I prepared myself to help ease any of the concerns he might have had about this whole thing. But after we'd been

driving for a few minutes without him asking a single question, I decided to ask one of my own.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?” he wondered.

I looked over at him, and though he was staring straight ahead and focusing on the road, it was clear to me that he wasn’t feeling stressed at all.

How was that possible? I was frantic, and he was the picture-perfect definition of calm and collected.

That’s when it hit me.

Kit had nothing to be nervous about. He was doing this to help me out in this situation, but he knew it was all just a front we were going to put on so that I wouldn’t have to tell my family what had happened to me and the potential danger that was still surrounding me.

When it all boiled down, the things that might normally make a guy nervous about meeting a girl’s parents didn’t apply here. Kit was relaxed because he was not genuinely concerned about whether or not my family would like him.

The likelihood was that this was the only time he’d ever have to see them.

On the other hand, I was going to have to get through this and then be able to explain the next time I visited with them why things didn’t work out between Kit and me. I wasn’t sure if telling them the truth at that point would be easier or more embarrassing.

“No reason,” I returned. “I just wanted to make sure you weren’t having any second thoughts about us doing this.”

He shook his head. “Not at all. I’m actually looking forward to it. I think it’ll be fun.”

Fun?

I was panicking, and Kit was prepared to be entertained and amused.

This was going to be a disaster.

“That’s good,” I said, trying to sound convincing.

I watched as his brows pulled together before he quickly glanced over at me. In an attempt to practice my skills at deceiving people, I smiled brightly at him.

Fortunately, that worked.

Before I knew it, we had pulled into the driveway. It was a wonder I hadn’t started visibly shaking, because my insides were trembling uncontrollably.

Kit looked over at me. “Ready?” he asked.

I nodded.

With that, he got out of the car, and I did the same. Then, he met me on my side and took the brownies from my hands before we started making our way to the path that would lead to the front door.

Kit then did something unexpected. He reached for my hand with his free one, and I came to an abrupt halt.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

He narrowed his eyes in a playful way. “I am pretending to be dating you, aren’t I?” he questioned me in a knowing tone. “If that’s the case, I think I’d hold your hand, wouldn’t I?”

Right.

Right. That made sense.

Gosh, I needed to get a grip.

I jerked my chin down slightly and rasped, “Yes. Good thinking.”

With that, we started moving toward the door again, and I couldn’t stop thinking about anything other than the way it felt to have my small hand captured in Kit’s large one. I loved it.

We made it to the door, where I lifted my free hand and rang the bell.

Just as I suspected, Kit and I weren’t left waiting very long. If I didn’t know any better, I probably would have assumed my mom had been looking out the window from the

time she woke up this morning, hoping to catch a glimpse of us before we walked inside.

“Hello,” she practically sang when she pulled open the door.

Using my free arm, I wrapped it around her in a hug and said, “Hi, Mom.”

She loosened her hold on me, stepped back, and allowed us to come inside. That’s when I said, “Mom, this is Kit Sexton. Kit, this is my mom, Mabel.”

For the first time since he’d taken hold of it outside, Kit released my hand to greet my mother. “It’s really nice to meet you, Mrs. Oliver.”

“Please, call me Mabel.”

Holding the container out to her, Kit said, “These are some of Maxie’s delicious brownies. Let me apologize in advance. I stole one from the container while I was waiting for her to finish getting ready. I’m sure you already know how good they are. Not quite as irresistible as your daughter, but they’re definitely a close second.”

My mouth dropped open. I had to have been hearing things. There was no way he just said that to my mother.

For her part, my mom wasn’t the least bit embarrassed by what Kit had said. She gobbled it up and said, “Yes, they are delicious. Oh, look, here’s my husband. James, this is Maxie’s boyfriend, Kit.”

It was at that moment I was grateful I hadn’t been eating or drinking anything, because it would have gone flying out of my mouth when I started coughing uncontrollably.

I’d told my mother that Kit and I were dating. Never once did I tell her that he was my boyfriend.

Talk about humiliation.

“You okay, baby?” Kit asked, putting his hand to the small of my back.

Heat hit my cheeks as I stared up at him and tried to ignore the feel of the intimate touch.

Of course, that wasn't exactly difficult to do when I started focusing on the fact that he'd just called me baby like it was no big deal.

God, what I would have given for all of this to be the real thing.

Somehow, I remembered my parents were standing there and rasped, "Yeah. Yeah, I'm okay."

He offered a sweet smile before removing his hand and extending it toward my father. "Sorry about that. It's nice to meet you, sir."

My dad looked as excited about meeting Kit as he had been about learning he was going to become a grandfather for the first time. Wiping the smile off his face would have been impossible.

"Mom, I just... well, you should know that... I mean, Kit and I are only dating," I told her. "He's not my boyfriend."

"Are you dating anyone else, Maxie?" she asked.

I shook my head. "No."

Her eyes slid to Kit. "Are you?"

Kit seemed to be utterly amused. "Absolutely not, Mabel."

Tipping her chin up and wearing a proud smile, my mom looked at me and declared, "So, he's your boyfriend."

"We haven't—"

"Come on in," my mom urged, cutting me off. "Jerry and Krista are already here."

As my parents turned and started to move farther into the house, I looked up at Kit and mouthed an "I'm sorry" to him.

He shot me a questioning look, but before he could say anything, my mom asked, "Are you coming?"

Kit and I didn't delay. We followed behind my parents, entered the family room, and saw Jerry and Krista there. They

both got to their feet and moved toward us.

“Kit, this is my brother, Jeremiah. We all call him Jerry, though. And this is my sister-in-law, Krista. Guys, this is Kit.”

After a round of greetings between them, Kit didn't hesitate to fall right back into the role he'd assumed, and he did it effortlessly. Without a second thought, he curled an arm around my back until his hand settled on my opposite shoulder. Then, he gave me a gentle squeeze, curling me into his body slightly.

I had no choice but to follow his lead.

So, I slid one arm around the back of his waist while my other palm went to his abdomen.

Rock solid.

I should have known.

“Congratulations on the pregnancy news,” Kit said to Jerry and Krista. “That's got to be really exciting.”

“Thanks, man. We appreciate that,” Jerry replied.

“Yes, and we are so excited about adding a new member to the family,” Krista added.

As excited as I was about becoming an aunt for the first time and wanted to join in the conversation, I couldn't. I was still caught up in the fact that I was not just standing beside Kit, but wrapped up inside of him. I didn't know how I was supposed to just adjust to it in an instant, like it wasn't throwing me off balance completely.

Between the feel of his body, the scent he was wearing, and the words he'd been saying, I didn't stand a chance. Not when I was getting that after all he'd done for me over the last two weeks.

The attraction I felt to him had grown by the day, and at this point, I was powerless to stop it.

“Dinner's ready, so why don't we all go and grab a seat,” my mom declared, interrupting the conversation.

The six of us made our way into the dining room, where my mother had already set the table.

After we'd all gotten our plates loaded up with food and dove in, the conversation turned to Jerry and Krista and the new baby. Krista told us all about how she'd been feeling for the last few weeks, and Jerry filled us in on the most recent doctor's appointment.

I was grateful for the shift in focus to them and that we were all sitting down to eat, because I needed some time to pull myself together. If I didn't manage to accomplish that, I was certainly going to raise some red flags.

Of course, the reprieve was short-lived, and eventually the conversation turned to us. Or, more specifically, to Kit.

"So, Kit, what is it that you do?" my dad asked him.

"I work at Harper Security Ops here in Steel Ridge. I'm a member of the private security and bodyguard unit we have there," he answered.

"I've heard of Harper Security Ops," my dad declared. "I don't know much about it, but I remember seeing the name pop up a couple of times on the local news."

My brother decided to chime in. "Isn't everyone who works there a former military member?"

"Mostly," Kit confirmed. "We have some guys who are currently still active in the reserves, and truthfully, most of us don't really like to think of ourselves as *former* military members. Our official service might have ended, but we'll always be military. That said, you're correct. With the exception of our receptionist and data security analyst, everyone has previously served or is currently still serving."

"Thank you for your service, Kit," Krista said. "My grandfather is a veteran, so we have a whole lot of respect and appreciation for servicemembers."

Kit jerked his chin down as a gesture of acknowledgment.

"No offense to you or your career, Kit, but what I want to know is how you met my daughter?" my mom asked.

I completely froze.

Shit. *Shit!*

Kit and I hadn't even discussed this. There was no story. How stupid could I have been not to come up with a backstory for our so-called relationship?

This was it.

My family was going to figure it out, and I was going to have no choice but to tell them the truth.

I twisted my neck and pinned my horrified eyes on Kit. He was cool as a cucumber, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as he looked adoringly at me.

Why was he looking at me like that?

“Well, as you already know, Maxie isn't exactly a social butterfly,” Kit started. “Of course, I didn't know that when I first met her. But now that I know she prefers to stay in over going out, I really like to think about our initial meeting as a chance encounter. It was merely me being in the right place at the right time.”

“How so?” my mom pressed.

My leg was bouncing uncontrollably beneath the table, convinced there was no chance of pulling this off. Kit must have noticed just how distressed I was, because he leaned forward, placed his hand on my bouncing thigh, and stroked his thumb along the skin there, instantly soothing me.

Or maybe it wasn't so much that he was soothing me as it was that he had forced my body to freeze. He'd touched my hands and feet before. He'd given my arm a reassuring squeeze on occasion, but he'd never touched my thigh like he was now. As much as I knew it was a way for him to help settle me down, something about it felt so intimate.

“We actually had lunch together from Grant's Deli the day we met,” Kit shared.

“I love that place,” my mom declared. “James and I try to grab lunch at least twice a month from there. That's one of the few places I know Maxie will venture out to.”

“Well, you might be surprised to know that she’s going to be going out again tomorrow,” Kit revealed.

Everyone around the table perked up. “Where are you guys going?” my dad asked.

There was a bit of a pause before Kit said, “It’s kind of a full circle moment for us, if you ask me. Mallory, the owner of Grant’s Deli, is getting married to one of my coworkers tomorrow, and Maxie is going as my plus one.”

“This feels like a fictional love story,” Krista said, hearts in her eyes. “How sweet is this whole thing? Isn’t it sweet, Jerry? Don’t tell me it’s my hormones.”

Jerry looked at his wife, smiled, and nodded. “It’s very sweet, Krista.”

Relief swept through me, and my eyes went to Kit. I couldn’t very well say what I needed to say to thank him for how he handled all of that, but I hoped he could see the gratitude in my expression.

I got my confirmation of that when, after we’d finished dinner and my dad had gotten up to help my mom clean up the dishes, Kit lifted his hand, settled it at the back of my head, and leaned over to kiss my temple.

His lips lingered there a moment before moving toward my ear, where he whispered, “Relax, darling. I’ve got this.”

Then, he pulled his face back, returned his hand to my thigh, and winked at me.

It was at that moment two things happened.

The first was that I realized all of the worrying I’d done before I left my house had been pointless. Because, to anyone else watching us, there’d be no question about the authenticity of the relationship between Kit and me.

The second, and arguably the most important, was that I fell in love. And I did it with a man who had just spent the night pretending to be my boyfriend.

FIFTEEN



Kit

Two weeks ago, I would have laughed in the face of anyone who said I'd wind up in a situation like this.

Now that I was here, I couldn't have been more grateful for or excited about it. Because when Maxie showed up at Harper Security Ops two weeks ago and I learned the truth about what she was facing, I knew that if this case wasn't resolved before now, I was going to have to miss Nixon and Mallory's wedding.

Not only would I not consider leaving her unprotected, but I just hadn't believed that I could ask her to accompany me. Never had I ever crossed that line with another client. I did my job, oftentimes from a distance, and there wasn't usually an opportunity for something like this to happen.

But it had happened with her.

And for more than a week now, I'd been doing my best to ignore the growing attraction I felt to Maxie.

I couldn't ignore it any longer. Not when I was living each day craving more and more time with her. Not when I struggled to fall asleep each night as I recalled all of the things she'd done throughout the day to keep me captivated.

Somewhere along the line, it started to become about something else for me. I needed to figure out a way to continue to do my job while also opening her heart up to me in a different way. Pursuing her had become my number one

priority next to keeping her safe, so unless she told me she wasn't interested in me in that way, I wasn't going to give up.

And in an effort to have things work out the way I wanted them to, I had to be smart. I wanted to make it happen in a memorable way for her.

So, when she brought up needing to visit with her family and thinking she was going to have to cancel, I realized it was my chance to seize an opportunity. I could give her what she needed while cementing myself a little deeper into her life.

I was so glad that I did, too.

Because now I was standing here, waiting for Maxie downstairs, eager to see where the night would lead us.

After last night, I thought I had good reason to be excited.

Maybe I wouldn't have normally considered doing what I was planning to do tonight, but walking away now and ignoring my feelings for her was no longer an option.

Seeing how she reacted to the multiple intimate gestures I'd made when we went to her parents' house, meeting her family and liking them almost as much as I liked her, I'd be a fool to keep quiet about how much my attraction to her had grown.

And while I was well aware that sharing my feelings could be considered unprofessional, I had to take that risk or live a lifetime of regret.

Fortunately, I believed I had relatively good odds in this situation. She'd had moments here at her place that indicated she might have felt some level of attraction to me. Plus, even my coworkers had noticed the way she looked at me.

That had to mean something.

But more than that, more than anything else, it was the way she fit with me. Curling my arm around her back last night and hugging her into my chest not long after we arrived at her parents' house, I couldn't miss just how perfectly she fit there.

I suddenly heard her footsteps descending the stairs, and I turned around to watch as she entered the room.

There wasn't a chance I could miss the way my heart started racing the second she appeared in front of me. She came to a stop a couple of feet away, and it was all I could do not to react as I took her in.

She was utterly gorgeous, with a beautiful figure enhanced by a spectacular dress.

It was a dusty pink dress that fit snug in all the best places, delicate straps over her shoulders, and a low cut draped neckline that only served to accentuate the top swells of her breasts.

God, her tits looked inviting.

My eyes moved down her waist, where the dress pulled in close to her sides, the material seeming to gather on one hip. It was the same side that, when I allowed my eyes to drift a little lower, was showing off substantially more leg than the other.

While the overall length of the dress landed right at her knees, the skirt of the dress seemed to be wrapped around her thighs in such a way that it left a large portion of her left thigh exposed. When she walked, there was no question I'd see even more of that leg.

From her knee down, Maxie's legs were completely bare, save for the two straps from her shoes. She had on a pair of silver heels, which had one thin strap around her ankle and another across the base of her pretty, pink toes.

My eyes roamed back up her body until they finally landed on her face again.

She was exquisite.

Unable to keep my distance, desperate to touch her, I crossed the room, doing it purposefully, and did what felt natural.

I bent slightly and pressed a kiss to her cheek. "Isn't this frowned upon?" I asked.

"What?" she asked, following a slight hesitation.

“I don’t think anyone is supposed to arrive looking better than the bride,” I exclaimed. “You look absolutely stunning, Maxie.”

Heat hit her cheeks, which only made her look adorable. “Thank you, Kit. You look really good, too.”

“Thanks. Are you ready to go?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

With that, I guided her out of the house and to my car. Before I knew it, we were sitting in our seats at the ceremony, and I felt on top of the world. Arriving at this wedding with a woman like Maxie on my arm, there wasn’t anything that could bring me down.

Maybe she thought last night was all pretend and that today was simply her way of repaying me for it, but before the night was over, she was going to learn the truth. I didn’t do any of what I did last night simply to help her out of a sticky situation. I did it because I wanted what we were pretending to be to be the real thing.

In a move I hadn’t expected, Maxie placed her hand gently on my thigh and leaned in toward me. “What am I missing here?” she whispered.

Twisting my head to look at her, our faces just inches apart, I replied quietly, “What do you mean?”

“Is that guy standing up there next to the groom, the lead guitarist from My Violent Heart?” she asked, her voice still hushed.

I nodded. “Yeah. That’s Killian Scott. He’s Nixon’s brother. And the woman standing beside Mallory is her best friend, Magnolia. She’s Killian’s wife.”

Maxie’s eyes widened in surprise as she marveled, “Wow. What a small world.”

Enjoying having her hand right where it was and not wanting her to pull it away now that she’d gotten the answer to her question, I covered her hand with mine, pinning it to the spot, and jerked my chin out in the direction I wanted her to

look. “Two rows up, you’ll see the rest of the band and their significant others,” I told her.

Her eyes went to where I’d indicated and lit up with surprise when she made the connection. “What are the chances we’re going to get a concert tonight?”

“High,” I told her.

“Are you joking?” she asked.

I shook my head as I chuckled.

It was then Maxie settled herself back against the seat. Her hand was still on my thigh, with mine protectively covering it. At some point during the vow recital, though I wasn’t sure if she even realized she was doing it, Maxie’s thumb began stroking back and forth along my thigh.

I glanced over at her, initially thinking she was attempting to get my attention, but when I saw her eyes fixed on the happy couple at the front of the aisle, I realized it was all just an absentminded gesture.

Even if what this woman was doing did little to help me not want to rip her dress right off of her, I didn’t stop her thumb from making its movements.

Every little thing Maxie did turned me on, and right now, all I could think about was the other places on my body I wanted to feel her hands touching me.

Well before I wanted it to happen, the ceremony had ended, and everyone stood and clapped as the happy couple kissed and made their way back down the aisle. The only thing that made the loss of Maxie’s hand on my thigh just a touch better was knowing that we were heading to the reception where I planned to show her a good time before I took her home for what I hoped would be an even better night.

And while I wasn’t necessarily concerned about how everyone at the wedding would treat Maxie, I knew she wasn’t one for getting out and being around large crowds. The last thing I wanted was for her to go from being as relaxed as she had been at the ceremony to feeling nervous and uptight at the

reception. It would be the exact opposite of what I was hoping for, given what I had planned for us for the rest of the evening.

Fortunately, Maxie and I were seated with Leo, Hanna, Kane, Ellery, Jake, and Jax at dinner, and they all helped tremendously with making her feel included and comfortable. In fact, Hanna and Ellery were the best at it.

“So, what do you do, Maxie?” Hanna asked.

Maxie tensed briefly as her eyes cut to mine. I offered a slight nod, encouraging her to share the truth.

“I’m sort of out of a job right now, because of a... situation I’m dealing with,” she replied.

“Oh, I know how that goes,” Ellery muttered.

“You had a time when you lost your job?” Maxie asked.

Ellery shook her head. “No. But I did have an awful situation that forced me to give up on my dream job for a very long time. Until I got out from under that situation with the help of Kane, I was always wishing things could be different.”

Maxie started to relax slightly beside me, but she didn’t get to respond before Hanna added, “And I spent the better part of my teenage years doing a whole lot of things I wasn’t proud of. Years later, I turned things around, and some stuff from my past came back to bite me in the ass. If it hadn’t been for Leo and him risking his life for me, I’m not sure I’d be sitting here right now.”

Surprise washed over Maxie’s expression. “Are you serious?”

Both women nodded.

“I assume everything is great for the both of you now?” she pressed.

“It is,” Ellery confirmed.

“And it will be for you, too,” Hanna interjected.

For the first time since she’d been introduced to him, Jake added, “You’re in good hands with Kit, Maxie. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

She smiled at him and replied, “Thank you. I can confirm I trust in Kit’s capabilities.”

“That’s good,” Jax chimed in. “That means you’ve got the right guy looking out for you.”

Maxie turned her attention to me, smiling brightly. I took in the sight of that look on her face, tucked it somewhere in the deep recesses of my mind, and listened as the conversation took a turn.

“Now we just need you and Jake to find the right girl,” Leo said, his comment clearly meant for Jax.

Since they both worked in the private investigation unit together, I wasn’t surprised to hear Leo’s comment. It wasn’t uncommon for us to get on each other’s case from time to time.

But more than that, I really liked what Leo’s words suggested. He’d gotten Hanna, Kane had Ellery, and he was assuming that Maxie was going to be mine.

I could only hope he was right.

“It’s not for lack of trying,” Jake fired back. “I just haven’t found anyone who can keep up with me.”

“I’ve already explained this to you before, Jake. Most people need to build up their endurance,” Kane interjected.

Jake shook his head. “Maybe. I just can’t believe I haven’t found anyone who’s already there. But I don’t know why you’re giving me any grief. Look at Jax. He shouldn’t be having any problem finding someone. He’s the complete opposite of me. I’ve never met anyone as laidback as him. Not even you, Kane.”

“Hey, why am I being dragged into this?” Jax asked.

As everyone around the table laughed, an idea popped into my head. Wanting to steer the conversation in that direction, I reached my hand out to Maxie’s, which was resting on the table, and shared, “So, as you know, the guys here all work with me at Harper Security Ops, but Ellery and Hanna do not.”

Maxie smiled at me before turning her attention to the other women at the table. “So, what do you two do?” she asked them.

“I’m a romance novel editor right now, but I’m also working on writing my own books again,” Ellery revealed.

“Oh, how cool,” Maxie returned. “Are you writing a romance novel, or something else?”

“I’m actually writing fantasy, but there’s going to be a healthy dose of romance in it, because who can resist a good love story,” Ellery answered.

“I’d love to read it when you’re finished, if you’d be okay with that.”

Surprise washed over Ellery’s face. “Are you kidding? I’d love to have you read it. Hopefully, it’ll be ready within the next few months.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it,” Maxie said. Then she slid her eyes to the side, pinned them on Hanna, and asked, “What do you do?”

“I own Short and Sweet.”

Maxie’s brows drew together. “Short and Sweet?”

Nodding, Hanna explained, “It’s kind of like a hotel, but instead of one big building with tons of rooms, I offer people the opportunity to stay in a tiny home.”

“They are so gorgeous, too,” Ellery announced.

“Tiny homes? I’ve seen shows on television about them, but I’ve never heard of them being used in the way you are. That’s really interesting. Is your place here in Steel Ridge?”

“It is. You’re more than welcome to stop by to check them out, if you want,” Hanna offered. “I’m usually always there.”

This was precisely where I had hoped the conversation would go, so I seized the opportunity. “Why don’t you tell them about your wreaths?”

Maxie’s head snapped in my direction before she shook it slightly.

“Why not?” I pressed.

“I can’t. It feels awkward,” she whispered.

“It shouldn’t, especially when you’re as good as you are at it,” I reasoned. “I’ll tell them.”

Maxie’s eyes widened in horror as her fingers tightened around mine, but before either one of us could say anything, Hanna asked, “What wreaths?”

There was no missing the curiosity in her tone.

I grinned, gave Maxie’s hand a squeeze, and explained, “Maxie makes a lot of handcrafted home décor, and one of the most impressive things I’ve seen her do is make wreaths.”

“Are you serious?” Hanna pressed.

“It’s just something I do for fun,” Maxie insisted, attempting to downplay it.

Shaking my head, I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone. Then I brought up the photo I’d taken of the wreath on my front door and held it out to Hanna. “This is one of them at my house.”

Since they were sitting next to each other, Hanna and Ellery leaned in together to look at the picture.

Ellery gasped. “This is beautiful, Maxie. You made that?”

“Technically, I taught Kit how to do it, and he handled most of it. I just put the finishing touches on it.”

“It’s gorgeous. Do you sell these?” Hanna asked.

“Not officially.”

“Not yet, anyway,” I added.

Hanna refused to be deterred. “I’d love to buy some for the tiny homes. Do you have other colors and styles?”

Maxie loosened her hold on my fingers, and the tension I’d felt radiating off her body eased. “I do. I’d be happy to show them to you sometime.”

“That sounds great. We’ll set something up soon then.”

“Did you take classes to learn how to do them, or are you self-taught?” Ellery asked Maxie. “And what other things do you make?”

Maxie went on to share how she’d taught herself and what other items she’d made. I saw her face light up as she talked with the girls, and I was grateful to see that maybe she was forging friendships with some good women outside of her tight-knit circle. My only hope was that as time went on, she’d see that circle grow and she’d do it with me by her side.

Eventually, Maxie and I wound up alone at the table. The rest of the couples we’d been sitting with had gone off to either help themselves to the additional desserts, the bar, or the dance floor.

“This was such a beautiful wedding,” Maxie declared.

“Yeah. I’m happy for both Nixon and Mallory,” I replied. “But if I’m being honest, this is probably a little too much party for my taste.”

Smiling at me, Maxie asked, “Are you planning a wedding?”

I shook my head and laughed. “Not yet. I’ve got to get the girl first.”

She pressed her lips together and cocked an eyebrow, the look beyond seductive. “Okay. And what if you find her and she wants a big, loud wedding?”

I didn’t want to come right out with it and say what I wanted to say, which is that I believed the girl for me wouldn’t be interested in a big, loud wedding. Instead, I replied, “I’m going to give the woman I love everything she wants, so if it’s her dream to have a big wedding, I guess I’m having a big wedding.”

Though she clearly had some thoughts about what I’d just said, Maxie didn’t share them.

She looked away, redirecting her attention to the dance floor. I glanced out there for a moment, listened to the music, and quickly returned my focus to her.

“Do you like to dance?” I asked.

Maxie’s horrified eyes met mine. “You’re lucky I made it through this dinner with all of your friends I’ve never met. I am not a dancer.”

Disappointment moved through me, and it must have registered on my face.

“What is that look for?” she asked.

“Nothing. It’s just that I’ve been looking forward to sharing a dance with you tonight ever since you agreed to accompany me to this wedding,” I explained.

Her brows shot up in surprise. “Really? You don’t seem like the dancing type.”

If she only knew...

I returned my attention to the dance floor, waiting, hoping she’d say something. The last thing I wanted to do was beg her or force her to dance with me. I wanted her to want to be in my arms with our bodies pressed close together.

“Kit?” she called, curling her fingers around my forearm.

I looked back at her. “Yeah?”

“I might not be very good at it, but if you want to dance with me, I’ll do it,” she said.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

She shook her head, a small smile on her face. “No.”

I returned the smile, stood, held my hand out to her, and promised, “It’ll be okay.”

Maxie placed her hand in mine, stood from her chair, and allowed me to lead her to the dance floor. The music was slow, so once we made it there, I turned her in my arms and pulled her close. One of her hands went to my chest while the other gripped my bicep.

We swayed back and forth to the music, neither of us saying a word as we looked into each other’s eyes. Though her

body was at ease, and she seemed to be physically comfortable with where she was, I couldn't miss the look on her face.

It wasn't one of discomfort or embarrassment. This was something else. She had questions lingering in her eyes. Curiosity was ablaze in her gorgeous features.

As much as I wanted to focus on the way it felt to be in that moment with her, so I could share what I needed to share, I wanted to make sure she was okay first.

So, I asked, "Is everything okay?"

"Yes. I guess I was just wondering how you did it?" she returned.

"Did what?"

She took in a deep breath, looked around to see who was nearby, and finally settled her gaze on me again. "You're so good at this pretending bit. I probably look like a fool out here dancing, and I could barely speak enough words yesterday when my family was drilling us with all the questions. You just knew what to do and how to respond to everything. Even now, this is so effortless for you."

"Why do you think you're struggling with it so much?" I asked, instead of giving her an explanation.

Something moved through her expression, a look I'd never seen from her before washing over her face. "I'm not very good at lying," she rasped. "Actually, that's wrong. It's not so much that I'm not good at lying as it is that I don't like it."

"So, are you having second thoughts about me being a good guy because I helped you out yesterday?" I pressed, needing to know how she really felt about me before I risked revealing the truth.

Shaking her head, she insisted, "No. No, not at all. We talked about that, and you were doing me a huge favor. I'm just really surprised at how good you are at faking it."

This was it.

There would be no better time to tell her how I felt.

“Can I fill you in on a little secret?” I asked.

More concern marred her features. “Okay.” She drew the word out, caution lingering in her tone.

“I wasn’t faking it.”

Maxie blinked her eyes at me and jerked her head back. “What?”

Tension started coursing through me, and to say I was a bit nervous would have been an understatement. I was confident about how I felt about her. I wasn’t confident about what her reaction was going to be. And it was very possible that after I shared the truth, she might request someone else to watch out for her. I didn’t know if I could accept that.

“You’re wondering how I managed to do it all so easily, and the truth is that it came naturally to me, because it was the real deal,” I clarified.

Her body had gone from being relaxed in my arms to rigid. “You’re not being serious.”

“I am.”

Maxie’s eyes roamed over my face frantically, her fingers on my bicep beginning to tighten and dig in.

Feeling slightly panicked, I decided it wasn’t the time to remain quiet. “I didn’t intend for this to happen, Maxie. I’ve never gotten myself caught up with any of our clients. But you’re different. These last two weeks with you have been some of the best days of my life.”

Her lips parted, her shock becoming more and more evident. Worse yet, she still made no move to speak.

Keeping one arm wrapped firmly around her waist, I brought my other hand up and covered her hand that was resting on my chest.

“I understand if the feeling isn’t mutual, but I couldn’t let another minute go by without telling you the truth,” I continued. “I really like you, Maxie. I think you’re a fantastic woman. You’ve got an incredible family. And I look forward to every day I get to spend with you.”

I was convinced I'd dug myself into a deep hole. At any minute, Maxie was surely going to pull out of my arms and storm off.

But that didn't happen.

And what she did left me feeling nothing short of surprised.

With her voice just a touch over a whisper, she revealed, "I couldn't fall asleep last night, because I spent so long trying to convince myself not to go and climb into the guest bed with you."

My fingertips pressed in at her waist, pulling her closer to me. "Why didn't you?"

"I thought you'd kick me out," she murmured.

Jesus.

How could she have possibly thought I would have turned her down?

"We should get out of here," I told her.

Her brows shot up. "You want to leave?"

"Are you telling me you want to stay?" I countered. "We were here for all of the important stuff."

Several long moments of silence passed between us, our eyes connected and burning with desire. There was no question where this was going to go if we left this wedding reception, so I had to assume Maxie was trying to work out whether that was a place she wanted to be.

"I was never really one for large crowds," she finally rasped.

A smile formed on my face as the relief swept through me. Without delay, I loosened my hold on her body, took her by the hand, and led her off the dance floor.

SIXTEEN



Maxie

The door slammed shut.

Without taking his eyes off of me, Kit managed to lock it.

Then the two of us stood there just inside my front door, staring at one another. Eyes searching. Pulses pounding. Breaths labored.

Ticking time bombs.

That's what it felt like. As my chest was rising and falling, his fists and jaw were clenching.

We knew what we both wanted, and for some reason, we didn't give in. We didn't take what we needed.

The longing built, the desire burning between us.

He hadn't laid a finger on me since we walked through the door, but I swore I could feel his touch just by the way he was looking at me.

With the tension pulsing between us, all I could feel was disbelief.

He hadn't been faking it. The whole time, everything he'd done last night, had been real. Holding my hand, curling me into his chest with his arm around my back, and kissing the side of my head.

It was all real.

Now, chest heaving with anticipation, I could still feel the lingering burn of his lips on my temple.

I wanted it back. I wanted to feel it again, but this time, I wanted it on my lips. On other parts of my body.

“Kit,” I whispered, unable to stop the single word from escaping past my lips.

Apparently, that was all the encouragement Kit needed. He took two purposeful steps forward, closing the distance between us, and came to a stop only when our bodies were just barely brushing up against one another.

My chin tipped up, I stared into the heated brown irises in front of me.

That look, that stare he was sending my way, pinned me to the spot and trapped my breath in my lungs.

It was too much.

The anticipation, the excitement. It was all too much.

“Please,” I begged.

I’d barely gotten my single word plea out when he lifted his hand to my head, settling it in my hair at the base of my skull, and dropped his lips to mine.

One gentle brush of his lips against mine was all it took. One touch of that softness for everything else to fade into the background.

Everything melted away, leaving just the two of us there for each other. Our mouths, our lips, and ultimately, our tongues.

Need consumed me as our kiss grew deeper, his tongue plundering into my mouth, exploring, seeking, *taking*.

All I could do was succumb to the silent demands and give. Whatever he wanted, however he wanted it, was his. There was no holding back, not when he claimed my mouth the way he had.

Wet, hot, and so very deep, Kit kissed me like he’d been starved of affection for years. Like it was my kiss, and my kiss

only, that could even begin to fulfill the emptiness inside.

It wasn't until he pulled his tongue from my mouth and gently dragged his teeth along my bottom lip that everything around us shifted back into place. Where we were and what we were doing.

And it was in that moment when an overwhelming need to touch him, to have him touch me, consumed me.

He went in for another kiss, and all I could do was give him what he wanted while trying to get what I needed. So, I started moving backward, keeping my lips connected to his, and pushing the jacket of his suit down his arms.

Kit kept after me as we moved toward the stairs, desperate not to break the connection between our mouths. He leaned into me, his hands going to his neck to loosen his tie.

When he pulled apart the knot, and I started moving up the stairs backward, he put his hands on my hips to steady me.

I went after the buttons on his shirt, frantically undoing them, needing to feel his heated skin beneath my fingertips.

Completely caught up, focusing on too many things at one time, I missed a step and fell forward.

Kit caught me with one arm, his other darting out to the railing to steady us. My fall had forced our mouths apart, ruining our moment. As he held me tight against him, my lips just inches from his, I whispered, "Sorry."

His lips twitched. "You're kissing me and eager to get my clothes off as you lead us up to your bedroom, Maxie. An apology isn't necessary."

My chin jerked down slightly. "Okay."

Kit's eyes dropped to my lips as one of my hands slipped beneath the fabric of his shirt. I closed the distance between our mouths and pressed a kiss to his lips. When I pulled back, I rasped, "I still can't believe you want this, too."

Lips twitching again, his voice dropped an octave, and he insisted, "You have no idea."

The next thing I knew, I was up in Kit's arms as he carried me up the remaining stairs and down the hall to my bedroom. It was only when he was standing beside my bed that he set me down on my feet and spun me around, so my back was to him.

I didn't fight against doing what he wanted. Kit had never given me any indication that he had anything less than my best interests at heart. So, I went with it, confident in and trusting of the man I was about to have in my bed with me.

With no ability to see him or what he was doing, all I could do was rely on my senses to enhance the moment. The first thing I noticed, something that had always been difficult to miss anytime I was around him, was his scent.

Sweet and woody, that dark and erotic fragrance captured the very essence of the moment for me. Sweet, just like he'd always been with me, but with a hint of something else lingering there. Something else I suspected I was about to experience in the very near future.

His strong, solid body pressed firmly into the back of mine. His erection nestled perfectly against my ass, Kit's fingers curled around the tops of my arms before sliding onto the tops of my shoulders, where they slipped beneath the delicate straps on my dress.

My throat bobbed as I swallowed hard, a shiver running along my spine, when I felt his soft lips touch the delicate and exposed skin along my neck.

With parted lips, a rush of air left my lungs as his tongue licked up the side of my throat. Kit's hands moved gently outward, taking the straps of my dress with them.

They could only go so far before the material was biting into the flesh of my skin, mimicking the feeling of his teeth on the sensitive skin where my neck met my shoulder.

"Kit," I whimpered.

His lips formed into a smile against the spot he'd just nipped at with his teeth before pressing a kiss there.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice husky.

Okay?

I wasn't sure okay was the word I'd use to describe how I was feeling. Hot? Yes. Bothered? Sure. Feeling like I was about to combust? Definitely.

"Please," I begged him. "I can't take it any longer."

Without delay, Kit's hands went to the side of my dress, unzipped it, and eased it off my body. Then I was there in nothing but a matching bra and thong and a pair of heels.

"Fuck, you're so gorgeous," he growled, his hands cupping my ass.

I let out a moan as a rush of heat and desire pooled between my legs.

"Turn around, Maxie. Let me see you," he urged. His voice was velvety soft, and the sound of it could have convinced me to do anything at that moment.

Wanting nothing more than to honor his request and perhaps get my own chance to experience some visual stimulation, I slowly spun around.

His eyes darkened as they raked over my body. From top to toe and back again, he drank in the sight of me, his eyes lingering in some spots longer than others and more than pleased with what they saw.

I gave him some time, for the first time in my life, thoroughly enjoying the way a man was looking at me. The look on his face was an odd mix of softness and determination, like he was battling in his mind between wanting to make slow, sweet love to me and undeniably ravishing me to the point I might not be able to walk straight for a week.

Seeing that, recognizing it, I wasn't sure which I would have preferred.

What I did know was that I no longer wanted to be the only one wearing next to nothing.

So, I stepped out of my shoes, moved forward, and finished the work on the buttons on his shirt that I'd started on the stairs. I pushed each side open, flattened my palms to his

abdomen, and allowed my hands to drift up his torso. They roamed over the heated skin on the solid surface of his muscular chest and up toward his shoulders.

Slipping my fingers beneath the fabric, my hands ran down the length of strong arms, taking the shirt with them. After tossing it aside, I returned my hands to his torso and watched them ripple over the muscles that made up his perfectly sculpted abs down to the waistband of his pants. I unfastened the belt, opened the button, and dragged the zipper from the top to the bottom of his fly.

Kit inhaled sharply as my knuckles brushed up against his erection. I pushed his pants down his legs, and he shifted back and forth, kicking off his shoes, before bending down to remove his socks.

When he stood up, wearing nothing but a pair of boxer briefs that barely fit over his thick thighs, my mouth grew parched.

“You—” I croaked before stopping to clear my throat. “Your body is unbelievable.”

He smiled and said, “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Nodding, I insisted, “You should.”

That was it.

That was the last thing either of us said before my body was wrapped up in Kit’s arms, with his mouth kissing mine again. It was even better than the first, the feel of his warm, nearly naked body pressed close making it so.

The kiss itself was just as hot, just as passionate, and just as claiming as before. But now that I had the ability to explore with my hands and feel the warmth of him next to me, I was even more lost in him, in us.

Kit urged us onto the bed, the softness beneath me a sharp contrast to the solid strength of his body. Somewhere in the midst of what felt like endless hours of kissing, Kit and I both lost our undergarments.

And seeing him completely naked, I became a woman determined to finally receive what I'd wanted from the moment he kissed me downstairs.

I surged up, going for him, but he wrapped an arm around my waist and took me to my back. Not wasting another moment, he flattened his palm on my abdomen and allowed it to drift down between my legs. At the moment he captured one of my nipples in his mouth, his finger plunged inside.

I moaned, the sound unlike anything I'd ever heard before.

And when he began to finger fuck me, I grew desperate and wild, frantically seeking that release.

The more I moved, the more I moaned, the more I had an effect on Kit. He was groaning as he relished my breasts. The movement of his skillful hand did not relent, driving his finger inside, and building me up to something extraordinary.

I felt it coming, knew it was going to be big, and the only thing I could do to brace for it was to clench my fists. One was gripping the blanket beneath my body, the other was in Kit's hair.

Then, I exploded. I couldn't control the sounds that came out of my mouth or the way my hips continued to ride his fingers.

I wanted all of it, every last bit he had to give.

Only when it left me, and my hips stilled, did Kit pull his finger from between my legs. He brought it up to his mouth and didn't hesitate to taste it.

Eyes glittering, he looked down at me with a smile on his face and said, "I'm going to need more of that soon, but I can't wait another minute to be inside you."

Feeling sated, yet eager for more, I hummed my agreement.

After putting on a condom, Kit's body hovered over mine. And when he finally pushed inside, filling me with his cock, I relished in it. He kept himself planted there for a moment

before he drew his hips back and drove back inside with much more force.

I took it.

I took each unrelenting thrust he delivered and craved more. He'd ignited something inside me, something feral.

Wanting control, I pushed against his shoulder, urged him to his back, and took over. He let me take the reins for a bit, but he ultimately wanted to be in charge again.

So, we did that dance for a bit, our bodies rolling—him on top, me on top, him on top again—as we each sought to deliver pleasure to one another.

In the end, I decided to let him have what he wanted. Because the truth was that I had already gotten far more than I had ever thought I would with him.

In and out. In and out.

He drove inside, doing it hard and tenaciously. I continued to take it. He could do this all night long, and I'd never stop receiving if that's what he wanted.

The weight of him, the movement of his hips, the feel of his large cock inside me, and the sounds of my moans mingling with his groans all served to build me up again.

"You feel so good, baby," Kit grunted.

"Kit, I'm going to come," I whimpered.

He went harder. Not faster, just harder.

Three brutal thrusts later, it happened. As sparks of pleasure splintered throughout my body, I held on to him.

I tightened my legs to his sides, held them there, and drove my fingers into his hair as he dropped his mouth to mine and kissed me while he came, too.

Kit collapsed briefly on top of me before rolling onto his back and taking me with him. I stayed like that with him for a bit, allowing myself to commit all that we'd just shared to memory.

It wasn't difficult to do, considering all I had to do was keep my body draped over Kit's while he kept one hand planted possessively on my ass, his thumb stroking back and forth across the skin there.

Loving all that we'd shared, all that he'd just given to me, I felt compelled to speak. "I still can't believe you weren't faking this whole time."

"Why does that surprise you so much? Have you looked in the mirror?"

I lifted my cheek from his chest and looked at him. "What does that have to do with anything?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "You're unbelievably beautiful, Maxie."

I returned the look, cocking my eyebrow. "So, you only like me for my looks?"

Kit's lips twitched. "I wish it was that simple. I've been attracted to far more than just your looks since the first day I met you."

"I was a mess that day," I reminded him.

His hand squeezed my ass. "You were also sweet, honest, and incredibly strong. I liked knowing that despite all you went through, you still found a way to rescue yourself."

"I felt like I was falling apart until you lifted me out of that car and into your arms," I shared, my throat growing tight. "I don't know why, but I felt safe with you from the very start, and I knew that had to mean you were going to be somebody special."

Keeping one hand planted on my ass, Kit brought the other up to the back of my head. Holding me in place, he lifted his head from the pillow and kissed me. It was one of the most delicious kisses I'd ever experienced.

When he pulled back, I asked, "What was that for?"

"Fair warning, Maxie," he started. "When you say sweet things like that, you're going to get rewarded."

A shiver ran across my skin. “Is that so?”

He nodded.

I tipped my chin up and out to the side, bringing one finger up to tap on it. “I wonder what other kinds of rewards I might get.”

In a flash, I was on my back, Kit’s body hovering over mine. With his lips brushing up against mine, he said, “You loosen this hold on me right now, I’ll go get rid of this condom and come back to show you.”

Wanting to see what he had planned, I immediately loosened my hold on him. Then I allowed my eyes to rake down the back side of his body as he walked away to toss the condom.

As much as I hated losing him in the bed at that moment, the view wasn’t bad.

And when Kit made his way back to me, I found I liked the look from the front even more.

SEVENTEEN



Kit

My head dropped back as I balled my hands into fists.

It was an effort to restrain myself and just enjoy what was happening instead of making the attempt to enhance the pleasure.

Then again, that truly would have been a feat, because this was already beyond incredible, certainly the best I'd ever experienced.

Though, to be fair, from the moment I'd met Maxie, nearly everything I'd experienced had been better than I could have imagined. Witnessing the aftermath of the trauma she went through aside, meeting her was the best thing that had ever happened to me.

It was now Monday morning, and it had been just over a week since we crossed that line, arguably the best week of my entire life.

We'd spent nearly every waking moment together, and I'd spent each night in bed with her, holding her close.

It might have technically started off as such, but nothing I'd been doing for the last several weeks had felt like work. Maxie's case had been the most rewarding *job* of my career.

Of course, there was that lingering in the back of my mind.

I'd kept in contact with Jax and Blaze over the last week, and there hadn't been any developments. They still hadn't

located Ana, and the situation was looking more and more hopeless. I was starting to think that if and when she was found, it would be with the need to have someone identify her body.

Hiding the truth from Maxie about the lack of progress on the search and my valid concerns for Ana wasn't an option. I refused to lie to her, but I also did my best to try to keep her occupied doing a multitude of other things.

We'd spent time together researching options for where was best to sell and market her wreaths and other creations. And on Friday evening, she'd asked me if it'd be okay to go and meet her friend at the gym for a workout the next morning.

That had been the first time I'd been tossed back into work mode in a different way. While I was always looking out for Maxie, my protective instincts were much more heightened when I took her to the gym, because I had to do my job from a distance. Maxie hadn't requested it to be that way, but I knew she deserved to have some time alone to exercise and catch up with her friend. Even if it put me slightly more on edge than normal, it worked out for the best. Because I could see how much it had affected Maxie to have that time alone with Brynn. In the end, it was just one more thing that kept her from focusing on what had happened to her at the hands of the men her boss had hired.

As part of the ongoing effort to keep her in a good mood and mindset, I made sure to indulge her with cuddling. We watched television or movies every evening, my favorite part being when Maxie would lay her head in my lap.

While any man would likely enjoy his girl having her head in his lap, I didn't like it for just the obvious reasons. I liked it because I knew how much she enjoyed it following a conversation we'd had after the first time it happened.

"That's my favorite thing in the whole world," she'd declared in the middle of a movie.

"What is?" I countered, thinking I'd missed an important detail in the film.

Instead of simply responding, she shifted to her back and allowed her head to roll away from the television and toward me. When her eyes were locked with mine, she answered, "Having my head scratched."

Until she'd said something about it, I hadn't realized I'd been doing it. Obviously, I knew I'd had my hands in her hair, but I hadn't thought about what I was doing. It had been all instinctual.

I smiled down at her, loving the look of contentment on her face. "I'll be certain never to forget that."

She closed her eyes as she returned the smile and hummed her approval. "You've been that way from the beginning with me."

A bit confused, considering it had been the first time she'd placed her head in my lap, my brows pulled together. "What are you talking about?"

"Gentle," she replied quietly. "You're this big, strong guy, and from the moment you lifted me out of Vernon's car, you were beyond gentle with me. I'll never forget how I felt inside when you were tending to my wounds that day. Nobody had ever touched me so tenderly."

"You were hurt. I didn't want to cause you any additional pain," I reasoned.

She shook her head slightly and ordered, "Don't minimize it. It wasn't just then. You've been looking out for me from that day in a way nobody else ever has. You didn't even want me to sleep in my bedroom that first night, because you were worried I'd have to walk too far to get to the spare bathroom. As strong and intimidating as you might look to someone else, I love that you're so sweet and gentle and chivalrous and attentive with me."

I couldn't imagine what would ever make her think I could be any other way with her.

As I allowed the words she'd said to penetrate, a mischievous look washed over her. She pulled her bottom lip in

between her teeth and bit down slightly, indicating she had some naughty thoughts running through her mind.

“What’s that look for?” I asked.

Her cheeks turned crimson. “I’m just thinking about the few times you’ve been not so gentle with me.”

I cocked an eyebrow and began slowly threading my fingers through her hair, my nails scratching her scalp. I hadn’t needed a reminder about those instances, considering I’d spent so much time recalling them and thinking about having more of them with her.

“I thought you enjoyed them,” I returned.

“I did.”

“My goal has always been to make you feel good, Maxie, so if it ever feels too rough, you need to let me know,” I demanded.

“I promise I will.”

From that point forward, recognizing how much she liked when I treated her to a dose of tenderness, I always scratched her head whenever we were watching a movie together on the couch.

No matter that I was finding myself consumed with how much deeper I was getting in with her, it had still been my goal to make sure she was focused on all of the good happening in her life.

So, it was the head scratching while we watched television at night and the new business she was hoping to launch in the near future. It was eating every meal together while we had endless conversations about anything other than the danger surrounding her.

But the biggest and best way I’d kept her distracted, particularly for the last week, was through sex. Spending nearly all of our time together in her house, we’d enjoyed copious amounts of it.

The best part about all of it was that Maxie didn’t always leave it to me to initiate. She’d taken charge on several

instances, one of them being right now.

We'd just finished eating breakfast, and I'd stood to gather our plates to take them to the sink. Still seated, Maxie put a hand out to my hip to stop me from the task.

"What's going on?" I asked, completely unaware of her intention.

She offered a seductive smile, turned her body in her seat, and rubbed the palm of her hand over my cock. "I wasn't quite finished with breakfast," she informed me.

"Oh? What else can I get for you?" I countered playfully, feeling myself grow hard beneath her touch.

Maxie licked her lips, moved her hands to my hips, and dragged the sweats I'd pulled on this morning down my legs. Then she curled her petite fingers around my length, parted her soft lips, and took me into the warmth of her mouth.

That's what led me to this moment with my head dropping back and my hands clenching into fists. She'd been going at me, her mouth moving along my shaft with unabashed fervor.

Wet. Hot. Lots of suction. The firm grip of her hand. And the moans.

Fuck, the way she moaned with her mouth full of me, I couldn't stop myself from edging closer and closer to that point of no return.

Maxie kept going, taking me in deep and hollowing her cheeks as she allowed her mouth to glide backward. And when she moaned again as her other hand slid up from my hip and over my abdomen, I dropped my head forward. My eyes met hers, and it was a wonder I didn't come on the spot.

"Fuck, baby," I growled, loving the look in her eyes and the sight of her lips around my cock.

I gave myself just another minute or two to enjoy the look and feel of her before I dragged my hips back and freed myself from the confines of her beautiful mouth. Then I lifted her up and set her down on the table.

Fortunately, she only had one of my T-shirts on, so I whipped it over her head, urged her to her back, and lifted her thighs high and wide. I guess both of us just hadn't had enough to eat for breakfast this morning.

My mouth was on her pussy in a flash. Licking, sucking, *taking*. Feasting on her like I'd not just had my mouth on her last night, but like I'd been deprived of the privilege of tasting the sweetness between her legs for years.

I wanted all of it. All of her.

Her moans had vanished, the sound of her whimpers merging with my groans filling the air instead.

My cock was throbbing with a desperate need to be inside her, so after I'd built her up to an orgasm, I pulled my mouth away and listened to her cry of displeasure.

Standing up over her, I grabbed my cock, positioned myself, and drove inside.

"Yes," she cried out.

"Maxie," I groaned, powering my hips forward. "You're so fucking beautiful."

"Kit," she whimpered.

I took that.

I took that gorgeous sound of her voice, bottled it up, and stored it somewhere safe for when I wouldn't be able to spend all day, every day, with her.

With one hand planted firmly on her hip, the other went to her tit. I squeezed the soft, rounded flesh before moving to the other side and doing the same. When I returned to the first side, I homed in on her nipple, flicking my finger over the hardened peak, my hips unrelenting.

"Don't stop that," she begged.

Feeling triumphant and wanting to give her more, my hand left her hip, reached for the opposite breast, and began teasing her there, too.

"Kit," she called.

I heeded the warning in her tone, drove inside harder, and sent her soaring. Watching her come apart, a flush creeping over her skin as the sounds of her moans filled the air again, I thrust forward again and again.

Only after I knew she'd made it to the other side did I pick up my pace a bit. I drove in faster, harder. And eventually, when I could hold myself back no longer, I pulled out, gripped myself firmly in my hand, and stroked, spilling my release all over her lower belly and her pussy.

When I finished, Maxie propped herself up on her elbows, looked down at what I'd done, and brought her eyes to mine. "You didn't wear a condom," she noted.

I shook my head and confirmed, "No. I lost a bit of control and couldn't wait to be inside you. I didn't know if you were covered with birth control, so that's why I pulled out. Obviously, it's not a hundred percent effective, but I figured it was better than coming inside you."

Her eyes roamed over my face. "I'm on birth control."

I nodded, and following a beat of silence, I added, "You have nothing to be worried about regarding any health issues. I was recently tested, and I haven't had unprotected sex since."

She offered a slight nod in return. "It's been two years since I was last tested, but I haven't been with anyone besides you ever since."

Placing my hands on either side of her body, I leaned forward and touched my mouth to hers. "What prompted that this morning?" I asked.

Maxie licked her lips. "You cooked breakfast for me this morning, and then you made me look at your body while we ate. There's only so much torture a girl can take."

I let out a laugh, burying my face in her neck. Through my laughter, I lifted her up and said, "Let's go grab a shower and get cleaned up."

After we showered—something that ultimately led to another round of sex—Maxie and I were in her craft room.

She had wanted me to take her out to see Vernon and Agnes, so she could deliver the wreath she'd made for them.

As she boxed it up, she felt compelled to talk. And her conversation wasn't one I had been anticipating.

"I don't know how I'm going to do it," she declared.

Confusion washed over me. "Do what?"

She glanced up from the box and looked at me with a warmth I wasn't sure I'd ever experienced before in my life. "It's been really nice having you around all the time. Whenever this whole situation gets resolved, I just wonder how I'll get used to not having you here with me."

The feeling those words gave me was indescribable. My time of spending every day with her was finite. It would end at some point, but the length of time we had left like this remained to be determined.

"I'm not going anywhere anytime soon, Maxie."

Nodding, she insisted, "I know. But eventually it's going to happen. I just... I like having you here."

"So, when this whole situation you're dealing with has been resolved, you know I'm still able to come here, right?"

"Yes. But this morning was nice. And so was last night. There's going to be an adjustment period for me when I don't have that any longer," she revealed.

I stood and moved toward her, stopping only when there were mere inches separating us. Leaning my hips against the table in front of her, I reached my hand up and tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear, my eyes watching the movement of my fingers against her strands.

When my eyes connected with hers again, I promised, "I will do my very best to give you what you need as much as I can."

Relief swept through her, a gorgeous smile forming on her face.

Not wanting her to have unrealistic expectations, I felt it was necessary to be clear about everything. “I don’t want to make promises I can’t keep, so I will tell you that there are times when my job will require late or long hours, and I might not be able to give you the things every day that I give you now.”

“I understand that,” she assured me.

I cupped her jaw in my hand. “Nothing would make me happier than being here with you every evening, so we could eat dinner together before you rest your head in my lap, so I can scratch it for you. I’ll do that at every chance I can. There are just going to be times when work won’t allow it.”

Maxie tipped her head to the side, pressing the side of her face into my palm. “I like the way you make me feel, Kit. And I love the way you look after me.”

My thumb stroked over the apple of her cheek before I leaned forward and kissed her lips. “It’s been my absolute pleasure to be with you these last few weeks,” I whispered against her mouth.

There was a brief pause before she replied, “Sometimes, I think I’m crazy for feeling grateful about what happened to me. But I can’t think of any other way I would have met you. And if I’m honest, I don’t think I would have ever felt this fulfilled if I hadn’t ever had you in my life.”

“The feeling is mutual, darling. Though I would have preferred we met some other way, because I hate the thought of what happened to you.”

“But we’re here now, and I’m the safest I think I’ve ever been.” There was so much pride in her voice with that declaration.

“That’s the way it’s going to stay if I’ve got anything to say about it.”

At that, I released my hold on Maxie, so she could get the wreath for Vernon and Agnes boxed up.

With the wreath in its fancy packaging, Maxie and I made our way to the front door, so we could leave and make the

delivery to the two people who'd played such a huge role in saving her life that day a few weeks ago.

But just as I opened the door to allow her to walk out ahead of me, my phone rang in my pocket. I pulled it out, saw Jax's name on the display, and instantly felt my body freeze.

"Yeah?" I answered.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"At Maxie's place. Just about to head out to run an errand before grabbing some lunch," I told him. "What's going on?"

There was an extended pause before he replied, "You might want to turn on the television before you leave."

My eyes went to Maxie, because there wasn't a question this was about her. The second our eyes locked, it became clear she understood something was happening and stepped right back inside the house.

"What channel?" I asked Jax.

"Any local news channel is going to have what you're looking for," he told me.

I could only imagine what we were going to find when we turned on Maxie's television. Wanting to make sure I could be there to handle whatever reaction she was going to have to what we saw, I replied, "Let me go, so we can check this out. I'll call you back."

"Okay. Later."

With that, I disconnected the call and slid my phone back inside my pocket.

"What's wrong?" Maxie asked.

"That was Jax," I informed her.

"And? Is there news about Ana?" she questioned me.

I shook my head. "I don't know. He told me we needed to put on the local news."

Worry and a bit of fear marred her expression. "That can't be a good thing."

I didn't want to make assumptions, but I couldn't say I disagreed with her assessment, either. There wasn't a chance this was going to be good news. "Probably not. But no matter what it is, I want you to know that you are still going to be my number one priority."

She nodded her understanding. "Okay."

"You ready?" I asked.

"No."

I offered a half-hearted smile, took her by the hand, and promised, "Everything's going to be okay."

Then I led her back into the living room. I just wish I would have waited to make that vow until after I learned what was happening, because once we turned on the news, I wasn't sure if I'd be able to keep my promise.

EIGHTEEN



Maxie

From the moment his entire frame locked solidly into place, I knew Kit was being fed some bad news.

Now, as he reached for the remote and turned on the television after shuffling back away from the front door and into the living room, I began trembling. Of course, that was only after I'd experienced having that cold empty feeling settle somewhere deep in my belly.

It was a massive struggle not to get ahead of myself and freak out completely over what was happening.

Jax and Blaze were supposed to be working on locating Ana. Considering it was late Monday morning and Jax was likely at work, I could only assume upon seeing the reaction Kit had when they were on the phone that Jax had been delivering some devastating information.

Given that he'd instructed Kit to put on the local news station, my best guess was that Ana had been found, and perhaps it hadn't been Jax or Blaze that had located her.

Worse yet, I couldn't manage to shake that awful sneaking suspicion that Ana was dead, and it was actually her body that had been discovered.

The feeling of dread washed over me. Convinced I was going to fall, I eased myself down onto the couch without a word and clasped my hands tightly in my lap, my forearms resting heavily on my thighs.

Waiting for Kit to get the television turned on and the local news channel pulled up felt like an eternity. I was stuck spending that time doing one of two things: considering the worst possible outcomes of this situation and contemplating the end of my oblivion.

Yes.

I had to be honest with myself.

I'd been pretending for quite a while now, and there was little confidence in whatever I was about to find out to allow me to continue living in this bubble.

Why couldn't I have just had a bit more time to ignore the mess and pretend it wasn't even happening?

After getting through the first few days following my attack, particularly after my feet had healed, I found myself preferring to act like it hadn't happened. Somewhere along the line, I had convinced myself if I didn't think about it, it wouldn't affect me.

And it had been wonderful, particularly since the night Kit and I went to my parents' house, when I introduced him to my family as my boyfriend and he stepped up to the plate in ways I hadn't ever expected or anticipated but loved all the same when I looked back at it now.

Ever since, I'd been focusing more of my thoughts on the two of us and what we had developing between us. And if I wasn't thinking about our relationship, I was focused on the inventory I was attempting to build up for the business Kit had encouraged me to start.

Life had been wonderful ever since I met Kit, but nothing compared to how much things had changed for the better when we both stopped fighting our feelings and took things to the next level. What we'd had with one another for little more than a week now had been nothing short of spectacular.

But now it was going to stop.

I was now experiencing an overwhelming sense of dread and was convinced all the good I'd been feeling was going to come to a grinding halt.

Jax must have had impeccable timing with his call, because as soon as Kit got to one of the local news channels, the story Jax had intended to have us see was being shared.

I knew this was the case because of the image being shown in the top corner of the screen beside the reporter inside the news station, as she said, “We’re coming to you this morning with breaking news. One of our correspondents, Blaire Mullins, is standing outside Young Pharm with a developing story. Blaire?”

“Oh, no,” I whispered. My gut clenched painfully, because I knew before she even opened her mouth what this was going to be about.

“Thanks, Madison. That’s right. I’m currently outside the Young Pharm building as we’ve just received exclusive information regarding a possible scandal,” Blaire declared.

The camera cut away from the reporter and slowly zoomed in on the building as she spoke. “Little information has been received thus far on this breaking news, and it’s been made clear we still haven’t been given the full story. Now, just for some background, Young Pharm is a pharmaceutical equipment company that’s currently in the process of going through a merger with another pharmaceutical research company, Mystic Labs. While the specifics of the scandal have not yet been revealed, we have been made aware of a few things. The information, once it is made public, could bring the merger to a halt and would inevitably lead to stock prices falling. But that’s not the most devastating piece of news. As it turns out, we’re told both companies have been working on a new piece of medical technology that would impact the lives of thousands, and it was set to be launched shortly after the merger was finalized, sometime over the course of the next few weeks. Should this scandal prove to be detrimental to the merger, there is no word on whether this life-saving technology will ever be released.”

My insides bubbling with nervous energy, I watched as the camera came back to focus on the reporter. “Following the anonymous tip we received, we are now waiting outside in hopes that we’ll be able to speak to one of the employees at

some point to see what, if anything, they know about what might be happening. We've reached out to both companies, but they have refused to comment. We're standing by and will bring you any updates we have as they are made available."

When the camera cut back to Madison in the news station, she said, "Thank you for that information, Blaire. Let's hope this is all just a big misunderstanding, because it sounds like that medical technology is going to be very important to a lot of people."

The moment she went on to speak about the next news story, Kit turned the television off and looked at me. My eyes were still focused straight ahead, staring at the blank television screen, while I tried to breathe through the growing panic.

Even though I was looking at him, I could feel Kit's gaze on me. There was no doubt in my mind he was studying me, wondering what was going through my mind. I didn't know if he knew for sure what I was thinking, but he was certainly aware I was upset.

As soon as he placed his hand on the small of my back in an attempt to offer me some comfort, I turned my attention to him and searched his eyes for something.

I didn't know what.

Answers? Reassurance, maybe?

"They're going to think it's me," I said.

If it hadn't been Kit sitting beside me, the monotone and steady sound of my voice might have fooled someone into thinking I was okay.

But it was Kit, and he knew better.

I wasn't even remotely close to being okay.

Unable to control the trembling in my belly, I looked at Kit, silently pleading with him to tell me everything was going to be okay.

"We know it's not you, Maxie," he replied quietly, his hand gently stroking my back. "And that's a good thing."

Not feeling any better about it, I asked, “How? How is it good that we know it, Kit? They told me...” I trailed off, a shudder running down my spine. “They told me if Ethan or Anna even *thought* I had opened my mouth, I would be shown no mercy.”

Kit removed his hand from my back, captured my face in his hands, and held me steady. Until he’d done that, I hadn’t realized how much I’d been rocking back and forth as a result of the fear I felt.

My eyes locked on the intensity in his, and it was the strength I saw there mixed with his firm hold on me, which allowed the trembling in my belly to cease.

When he realized I’d settled down a bit, even if I was sure my expression was frantic, he insisted, “Us knowing that you had nothing to do with the press learning about what happened means that we know someone else did.”

As soon as he said it, my body locked. “Ana?”

He shrugged and removed his hands from my face. After curling his fingers around mine, he replied, “Obviously, that would be great news, since we’ve had a tough time locating her, and I was beginning to think that might turn out to be a worst-case scenario if she was found. The other possible explanation if it’s not Ana would be that someone else found out the truth.”

I sat up straighter and swallowed hard. I hadn’t considered the possibility of anyone else learning the truth about Ethan and Anna, but it wasn’t impossible. Considering the amount of work I’d been doing when I was there before Ana stopped showing up and that I’d been the one responsible for taking over her job responsibilities, someone else had to have stepped in to fulfill my position when I stopped coming in.

While I hadn’t left anything out in the open about the discovery I’d made, the information was still there for anyone to see. Even if someone hadn’t found it, there was still a chance that somebody could have put two and two together.

“What are we going to do?” I asked.

Kit's features softened as his fingers tightened around mine. "You're not going to do anything other than what you have been doing. You're going to make your wreaths, set up your website and online store, go to the gym whenever you want, and fall asleep with me beside you every night. And today, we're still going to go and deliver that wreath to Vernon and Agnes before I take you out for lunch. Nothing is going to change for you."

"But don't you think that maybe I should stay in? Why would we do anything that could make it easier to get to me?" I questioned him.

Concern marred his features as he reminded me, "Maxie, the reason you ended up at Harper Security Ops is because you were kidnapped from this house. If anyone wants to come after you, they're going to attempt to do it no matter where you are. The only difference now is that they'd be foolish to try, because I'm not going to let anyone harm you. No matter where you go, I'll be with you, so they won't be able to get to you."

If there was one thing I had no concerns about, it was regarding Kit's determination to keep me safe. And he was right. Staying in my own house hadn't helped me last time, so now that I had him, why should I stop living my life?

"Okay," I said softly, nodding my head.

Kit lifted his hand to the side of my face, stroked his thumb over the apple of my cheek, and declared, "You're the most important thing in my life right now, Maxie. I'm not going to let anyone hurt you or take you away from me. Do you understand me?"

"I do."

His lips formed a smile. "You mean the world to me, and these last couple of weeks have been some of the best of my life. There isn't anything I won't do to protect you."

I closed my eyes, let out a breath, and leaned my cheek into his palm. I relished in the feel of his tender touch I loved

so much before I opened my eyes, allowed them to connect with his, and whispered, “I’m so lucky I found you.”

Kit’s thumb made one more pass along my cheek. Then he leaned in close, brought his lips to brush up against mine, and said, “The feeling is mutual.”

He allowed those words to sink in before he kissed me. And when he pulled away a few moments later, I asked, “Can we really still go out for lunch this afternoon?”

He smiled against my lips. “Look at you all set to get out of the house. I think you were just joking about being a homebody.”

I cocked an eyebrow and reasoned, “Maybe it was because I didn’t have you before.”

His laughter filled the room, and the tension I’d been feeling since he got that call from Jax completely vanished.

Thirty minutes later, we delivered the wreath to Vernon and Agnes. They were thrilled to not only see me, but to learn that Kit and I were together, and he was looking after me.

Following our brief visit with them, Kit did as he promised and took me out for lunch. And because I was with him, I didn’t think twice about my safety.



Kit

Sleep eluded me.

Not even the warmth and softness of Maxie’s body pressed tight to mine following a round of unbelievably great sex was enough to do the trick.

Because I'd struggled all day not to allow her to see how I truly felt.

I didn't like what had happened today. To say I felt uneasy about what this could mean for her would have been an understatement.

Of course, I knew I'd do everything in my power to protect her and keep her safe, but knowing she'd been threatened the way she had, I couldn't say that this news being made public like it was felt good.

I fully believed that unless they knew who had actually leaked the information about the scandal, Maxie's life was in danger.

They'd threatened her at gunpoint to keep her from speaking out, and if what I believed to be the case about Ana's fate was the truth, I recognized they'd stop at nothing to make sure Maxie was permanently silenced.

As that horrific thought rattled my brain, my arm instinctively tightened around her.

This woman was the best thing that had happened to me. She'd lit up my world in a way I hadn't ever expected. I adored the way she found joy in the smallest things, and I loved the connection she had with her family. I knew, once I eventually made it happen, my family would be just as crazy about her as I was.

If they could have picked someone for me, I didn't doubt it'd be her they'd choose from a sea of thousands.

So, there wasn't a chance I was going to let anything bad happen to her.

No matter what it took, if I had to spend every minute of every day watching out for her, then that's what I'd do.

Making that promise to myself, I finally closed my eyes. And only minutes after recalling the evening we'd had together and how spectacular it had been, sleep finally pulled me under.

NINETEEN



Maxie

“This is still the craziest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“You can say that again,” I muttered.

Brynn shook her head in disbelief and replied, “I mean, you know I saw it on the news, which is why I called you yesterday. I never thought it was you, but it’s unbelievable to think there’s someone else caught up in this whole mess.”

Kit was right. I needed to keep living my life, which was the precise reason I was here at the gym for one of my mid-week sessions with Brynn.

It was Wednesday, two days after the news broke about the scandal at Young Pharm, and my best friend was evidently a bit concerned about the whole situation.

In any other case, I might have been feeling grateful for Brynn being distracted by something while I was at the gym with her, working out. It was rare for her to ever lose sight of the task at hand, but I couldn’t say I didn’t understand where her lack of focus was coming from today.

To be fair, we were at the tail end of the workout, and she’d remained relatively engrossed in what we were doing for the first seventy-five percent of our time at the gym.

“Kit has some of the guys he works with trying to do a bit more digging in hopes they’ll be able to figure out who is behind the leak before any additional information comes out,

but as far as I know, they haven't found anything yet," I shared.

And that was the truth.

Not only had Jax and Blaze not uncovered anything else, but there also hadn't been any new developments from a public news standpoint. The reports hadn't changed beyond what the initial one had been two days ago, and though they'd attempted to talk to Young Pharm employees, the local news stations hadn't had much luck.

I was still struggling with how I felt about all of this, feeling conflicted about the lack of news. Deciding if it was a good or bad thing was particularly difficult.

On the one hand, I thought it was good that nothing new had come out. Maybe someone had leaked some news but didn't have a full story to tell. It was possible the whole thing would fizzle out. It would be over, and nothing would ever come of it.

Of course, there was another part of me fully aware that was wishful thinking. That was the part that recognized the bad about the lack of new information surrounding the story.

My mind continued going over and over everything, and I quickly recognized that nobody had attempted to come after me to attempt to silence me. Granted, they would have had a really tough time, considering Kit never let me out of his sight, but I wasn't going to put anything past Ethan, Anna, or the men they'd hired to kidnap me the first time.

But since they'd moved so quickly after I'd made it clear to Anna that I knew what was happening between her and Ethan, I had convinced myself that this wasn't a situation in which they'd take their time.

They'd act quickly.

Drawing that conclusion allowed me to come up with another possible scenario.

Maybe Ethan and Anna already knew I wasn't the one who'd leaked a story. I wondered if the reason nothing new

had come out was because someone else had not only done it but also been found out by Ethan and Anna.

Was it possible that someone else had gone missing, much like Ana had?

If that was the case, it likely meant good things for me, but it still set me on edge. Because without any conclusive evidence to indicate precisely what was happening or who was responsible, it was all speculation on my part.

Brynn's eyes roamed over my face, worry etched in her features. "Given what they did to you the first time, I have to admit that I didn't expect you'd want to come to the gym today. In fact, I didn't think Kit would let you out of his sight."

I offered her a reassuring smile. The last thing I wanted was for Brynn to worry unnecessarily about me. Obviously, I realized there was a valid reason to be concerned, but the truth was that as much as I knew there was the potential for something bad to happen, I fully trusted Kit.

Jerking my head in the opposite direction toward where he was waiting, I noted, "I'm technically not out of his sight. I already don't go many places, but Kit escorts me wherever I do want or need to go. And the truth is, he makes me feel safe. I believe he'll do anything necessary to protect me."

Some of the tension left Brynn's face as she moved on to our last exercise for the day. "I hate what's happening to you right now, but I'm so glad you found such a good man in the process."

There was no stopping the smile from forming on my face. "He's honestly the best thing that's ever happened to me. I know it's only been a short time, but I've really developed some deep feelings for him. There's so much I like about him and the way he is with me. Not only is he protective, but he treats me better than anyone ever has, and he's very supportive and encouraging. I've never had anything like that before."

I moved to do my set as Brynn watched my form. Only after I finished my set and picked up my water bottle to take a sip did she respond. "You deserve someone who makes you

this happy, and I love that Kit's being so good to you. I just wish you could have met him under different circumstances. That's all."

"I know. But I'm honestly just grateful I met him at all, even if this is the way it had to happen," I replied. "Besides, I don't think it would have happened any other way, considering my aversion to going out."

Brynn let out a laugh. "You make a fair point. Alright, let's go. One more set before I send you off to be with your man for the rest of the day."

I rolled my eyes and set my water bottle down as I prepared to do another set. "Not that I don't love seeing you and spending time with you, but I'm particularly excited about spending the rest of the day with my man today."

"Oh yeah? What do you have planned?" she asked.

"After I go home and grab a shower, Kit is going to spend some time helping me iron out some details for my new business," I revealed.

Brynn's brows shot up as she demanded, "Do your set, and then tell me all about this."

Without hesitating, I dove in and completed my set. Of course, when I tried to cut it short, Brynn pushed me to go a little bit harder and get in those extra reps. Once I finished, she gave me an expectant look.

"As it turns out, there's more than one good thing that came out of this nightmare of a situation," I started, picking my bottle of water up again. After taking another sip, I continued, "Not only did I meet Kit, but after talking to him at great length about it and getting so much encouragement from him, I've decided to try opening up my own business to sell my handmade goods. I'll focus mostly on the wreaths to start, but I'm sure in time I'll add more items."

A proud look washed over Brynn's face. "That's such great news, Maxie. I love this guy even more for you now. You're going to be so successful at this."

"You really think so?" I asked.

“Absolutely,” she insisted.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been this excited about something,” I told her.

Brynn glanced over at where Kit was waiting for me, smiled as she stared at him in silence, and eventually returned her attention to me. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so happy. He really does seem like a great guy, and I couldn’t be happier to hear the news about you starting a business. You’re going to love being your own boss.”

I took in a deep breath and blew it out before I confessed, “It’s actually been really nice not needing to wake up early every morning to go to work at a place that was doing nothing but causing me a lot of stress for the last few months. I’m really looking forward to seeing where this all goes for me, and I hope you’re right about it being successful.”

Grinning at me, Brynn insisted, “I am.”

Holding up my bottle of water, I said, “This has gone right through me.”

“Yeah, I’m going to pee before I leave, too,” she replied.

With that, the two of us took off to the locker room. As I opened the door, I nearly ran into another woman who had been walking out at the same time. I stepped back, allowed her to come out, and held the door for Brynn to walk in ahead of me.

We each made our way into our own stalls to relieve ourselves. When I finished, I opened the door, saw another woman standing in front of the sink drying off her hands, and stepped forward to wash mine.

I offered the woman a friendly smile, returned my attention to my hands, and then it happened.

“Time to go back to work.”

That was all I heard before I felt something prick the skin on my neck, and everything went black.



Kit

There were stories about superheroes who could sense impending doom. While I wouldn't have ever considered myself to be any kind of superhero in the traditional sense, years of experience had taught me how to recognize when something wasn't right.

In my line of work, it wasn't uncommon to have those moments that led to me feeling a bit tense and on edge in a particular situation. For the most part, I handled them well.

And while I would have liked to say I wasn't affected at all by the work I did, it just wasn't realistic, especially when I was working as a bodyguard and was responsible for someone's physical safety.

Over the years, I learned how to handle those moments when things got tense, and I'd felt rather confident in my ability to maintain a level of control and professionalism if things took an unexpected turn.

But maybe that wasn't the case at all.

It was entirely possible I'd been fooling myself all along. Either that, or I just hadn't been fully prepared for the toll a situation like that would take on me when it was the woman I cared deeply for who was in harm's way.

As much as I wanted to doubt the skills I'd acquired over the years and ignore what my gut was telling me at the precise moment, I knew it'd be foolish to do that.

Because all the evidence was there.

Only moments ago, I watched as Maxie finished up her last set with Brynn, and both women took off to the ladies'

locker room. They'd done the same before on other occasions, so I didn't think twice about it.

But my eyes pinned in that direction, waiting for the two of them to step out from behind the wall that led to the locker rooms, I felt something cold settle in the pit of my stomach.

Brynn had walked out from behind that wall, and I knew.

I knew because her actions told me the words I hadn't yet gotten from her. She was looking around the gym, and there was no question she was searching for Maxie.

I didn't hesitate to make my approach, something twisting painfully in my gut.

Brynn's eyes came in my direction, locked on mine, and I could see the very second she realized what was happening.

Even if there was somewhere deep inside where she understood what was going on, the moment I was standing just a few feet in front of her, she asked, "Where's Maxie?"

"I was just going to ask you the same thing," I retorted, already knowing she wasn't going to have any response that would help me.

Brynn shook her head. "I don't know. I assumed she came out ahead of me."

Something tightened in my chest, and my throat became parched. "She didn't. I've been watching since the two of you walked back there. What happened?"

"I don't know," Brynn answered. "We walked into the bathroom, and we each went into our own separate stalls. She finished before I did, and I heard her washing her hands. When I came out of the stall, she'd already left the locker room."

"You're sure Maxie's not in there?" I pressed.

"I'm sure, Kit. I called out her name, and all of the other stalls were empty," she assured me.

Before she had the chance to say another word, I insisted, "Go back in and check again. I'm going to see if there's any

way I can gain access to the security footage outside this gym.”

Brynn wasted no time, and immediately spun around to head back into the locker room. I took off toward the front desk.

“Can I help you?”

That question came from the girl standing at the front desk.

“My girlfriend just walked into your locker room with her friend and is now missing,” I started. “Do you have another exit in this building?”

“Are you saying your girlfriend went into the locker room and never came out?” the girl asked. “I’d be happy to go in and check on her.”

I shook my head. “No. Her friend was with her. They went in together, but my girlfriend was already out of the locker room before her friend exited the stall she was using.”

“And you’re sure she’s not here anywhere?” she pressed.

At that moment, Brynn came running up to me, panic written all over her face.

“Anything?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Nothing.”

I returned my attention to the gym employee and said, “I saw you guys have security cameras outside the building here. Is there any way I can view that footage to see if she was taken from the building?”

Confusion washed over the young girl’s face. “Taken? Who would do such a thing?”

I did not have the time to explain this, but I needed to get this girl to understand the seriousness of this issue. “Look, there are some bad people looking to kidnap and kill my girlfriend. If they happened to make it in here somehow and she’s been taken, I need to figure out who they are. Can you please give me access to your security cameras?”

Horror washed over her, and she hesitated for all of a few seconds before she nodded and said, “I don’t have any way to show you anything, but the owner is here and can help you.”

The next few minutes passed in a blur. My mind was racing with what felt like a million awful thoughts about what might have happened to Maxie, about what could be happening as I attempted to figure out where she was. It was all I could do to try to remain focused, so I could get the information I needed and get her back before something worse than what she went through last time happened to her.

Fortunately, the owner of the gym was cooperative and had no problem allowing me to view the footage from the security cameras outside the building. Sadly, by the time he managed to get it pulled up so I could view it, more time than I would have liked had already passed.

And all I’d managed to do was confirm what I already knew when Brynn walked out of the locker room with that look on her face.

Something bad had happened to Maxie.

The only thing that had helped was being able to see the make, model, color, and plate number of the vehicle she’d been tossed into on the back side of the building, which is where a woman and a man exited the building with her.

While the woman didn’t get into the same car, the man got in on the rear passenger side of the vehicle Maxie had been thrown into. Seeing her body lifeless, I nearly lost my mind.

But I tried to remain composed and refused to believe the worst. Not only was Brynn already panicking enough for the both of us, but if I lost my cool, I wouldn’t be able to do what I needed to do to locate Maxie.

With the information I’d gotten from the video, I took off toward the exit.

“I saw that woman,” Brynn declared.

“What?”

“When Maxie and I were walking into the locker room, that woman had been walking out,” Brynn revealed. “She must have come back in.”

Nodding my understanding, I asked, “Do you remember anything else?”

Brynn’s eyes darted back and forth as she shook her head in disbelief. Suddenly, her head snapped up, and she blurted, “Work.”

“Work?”

“I heard someone say it,” she revealed.

“What exactly did you hear them say?” I pressed, feeling my body grow more and more tense.

There was a brief pause before she answered, “I just assumed it was someone who meant they were leaving the locker room to go back out and finish their workout. I don’t think that was it now. It must have been that woman talking to Maxie. I heard someone say that it was time to go back to work.”

I stared at Brynn for not more than two or three seconds when it clicked. Whoever took Maxie was taking her back to where she used to work. I could only hope that meant that she was still alive, so that her former boss could be the one to do whatever he intended to do to her.

“I have to go,” I told Brynn.

“I’m coming with you,” she said.

I shook my head. “Go to Harper Security, and wait there. I’m calling there now, and I’ll let them know you’re coming.”

Brynn nodded. “You’re going to find her, right? You’re going to bring her back?”

My eyes pinned on hers, I promised, “I won’t come back without her.”

Without another word, I turned and ran out the door to my car with my phone to my ear.

TWENTY



Maxie

Foggy.

That was the best way to describe how I felt as my eyes fluttered open.

Or maybe it was heavy.

Yes. *Heavy* was the better word to describe how I felt.

Because the longer my eyes remained open, the clearer things became. The fog was slowly lifting, and I didn't feel so groggy.

But the heaviness remained.

I tried.

I tried so hard, and nothing worked. Despite my best efforts and repeated attempts, I couldn't move my arms or my legs. My neck seemed to be functioning properly, and I could move it slowly from one side to the other, but my extremities were stuck. Even concentrating as hard as I could, I couldn't manage to wiggle a finger or a toe.

And that's when the fear set in more than it already had.

Because everything came rushing back to me. I'd gone into the women's locker room with Brynn, walked out of the bathroom stall to wash my hands, and something was stuck in my neck.

I had no recollection of another thing until now, but it didn't take a genius to quickly draw a conclusion about where

I was and why I was here.

Lying on the ground, I rolled my head from one side to the other and took stock of the space I was in.

Rows upon rows of shelving, filled with boxes. Crappy florescent lights were on overhead, the buzzing sound from them beyond irritating. And the cold floor beneath my body.

I was in the basement of the Young Pharm building. It was a place I'd been to before on a handful of occasions throughout my employment with the company. In the boxes on the shelves there were thousands of old files. It was essentially years and years of paperwork that could not yet be taken to the incinerator.

But the layout of the basement and what was held inside it were the least of my concerns at the moment. For now, I found it impossible to focus on anything but one of two things: the fact that I couldn't move anything from the neck down and that I was at the Young Pharm building.

Evidently, the thought that Ethan and Anna might have hurt someone else, believing a different person had leaked information to the press about their affair, had been all wrong.

They still believed it was me.

There was no reason I'd be here otherwise.

And considering I was currently here alone, I had to believe they knew whatever they'd shot into my neck was going to keep me immobile until they were ready to approach me. Given this was a pharmaceutical company that was merging with another pharmaceutical company, it wasn't completely out of the realm of possibility for Ethan or Anna to have acquired some kind of drug that would cause temporary paralysis of the extremities.

Or, I hoped, it was temporary.

Then again, I'm not sure why that mattered at all. The likelihood was that unless Kit had a crystal ball, I didn't think he'd ever find me here.

I had no concept of time. It could have been hours since I'd been taken; it could have been days.

Just when I felt myself starting to grow even more concerned about the dire situation I was in, I heard the distinct sound of a door closing. While I couldn't say my body tensed, considering my arms and legs were completely numb, I certainly held my breath as I waited to see who was approaching.

I didn't think Ethan or Anna would have allowed anyone to come down here randomly, so I assumed I was seconds away from facing either one of them or one of the two guys who'd kidnapped, assaulted, and threatened me weeks ago.

Of course, I wouldn't know them if they made the approach, since I never saw them that day.

Seconds later, I saw who had entered the basement, and the worst part was that I didn't know if I should have felt relieved or worried.

My throat was hoarse when I croaked, "Ana?"

"Maxie," she whispered.

Was this some kind of joke?

She'd been missing for weeks without a word. Without a trace. On the one hand, I was grateful to see that she was alive and unharmed, but on the other, it didn't make sense. What had happened to her?

That's when it dawned on me that perhaps nothing had ever actually happened. Was it possible that Ethan and Anna had gotten Ana in on some scheme? Was I just a pawn in a sick, twisted game they were playing?

Not wanting to assume the worst, mostly out of a desperate need to believe there was a reason to have hope, I asked, "Where have you been? Are you okay?"

Ana didn't immediately respond. Her feet carried her forward, eating up the distance that separated us, until she was standing beside my body.

I felt a wave of fear move through me and tried once more to move my hands and feet without any luck.

That's when Ana crouched down beside me and said, "We need to get you out of here. Are you hurt?"

She wanted to get me out of here. I took that to mean good things.

"They injected me with something," I told her. "My arms and legs won't move. What's going on? How did you know I was here?"

"I was going to meet the news crew here to deliver the rest of the story. I saw them pull up and bring you in. You were slung over the shoulder of one of the men who'd attempted to kill me," she revealed. "I didn't want to waste any time, so I called the police, explained what I saw, and decided to come inside before they could do something to you that they had already tried to do to me."

"What happened to you?" I pressed.

"They took me out to a spot in the woods about a half hour away from here, and they beat me so badly, it's a wonder I didn't die," she shared. "I think they believed I was going to die, but after they took off, I somehow found the strength to get up and walk to find help. Someone saw me, pulled over, and helped me. I've been recovering, my phone had been destroyed, and I had no way to contact you to let you know you could be in similar danger."

This was horrifying.

If I hadn't experienced something similar myself, I might not have believed a word Ana was telling me. It was the kind of thing that I thought only happened in movies.

"I'm so sorry," I lamented.

She shook her head. "You didn't do anything wrong. I feel bad for not finding a way to get in contact with you. I'm just hoping I can get you out of here now."

That's where we were stuck.

Because while I might have been easily lifted into Kit's arms, Ana was smaller than I was. There wasn't a chance she was going to be able to lift me, especially not when I was going to be dead weight.

"The police are coming?" I asked.

"Yes."

"I don't think you're going to be able to get me out of here before they arrive, but maybe we can just hang here together while we wait for them," I suggested.

She smiled at me. "I'm not going anywhere, Maxie. I'll stay until we're both safely out of here."

No sooner had she gotten those words out, we heard the door open. Since we hadn't heard any sirens, I could only assume the door opening had little to do with a rescue attempt, so I urged, "Go hide."

"I'm not leaving you."

"I know. Stay here, but just hide. Don't let them know you're here," I hissed. "Hurry."

Ana stood quickly and dashed off.

By the time I saw who had entered, I was grateful I'd urged Ana to hide. Because both Ethan and Anna had approached me, along with two other men. I could only assume the men were the same ones that had kidnapped not only me, but attempted to murder Ana.

Suddenly, I was feeling far more nervous than I had been. Though I hadn't had very good expectations about where things were headed for me to begin with, now that I had Ana's version of events about what had happened to her, I wasn't so sure I was going to make it out of this alive.

The worst part about all of it was that I knew if the worst happened to me, Kit would never forgive himself. He'd be devastated about it, and I hated knowing he'd carry the guilt with him for the rest of his life.

Not only that, but I worried he might not know just how much I cared for him. I wondered if he'd know how much he

meant to me and how happy he made me.

When the first tear leaked from my eyes, I convinced myself it was the thoughts of Kit that had me reacting like that and not my fear about what was going to happen to me.

“And here she is,” Anna declared, her voice sounding sinister. “The little girl who couldn’t manage to keep her mouth shut.”

“You know, it didn’t need to be like this, Maxie,” Ethan advised.

“I didn’t do anything,” I rasped. “I swear, I never opened my mouth.”

Anna let out a laugh. “You expect us to believe it wasn’t you who went to the press?”

“I didn’t.”

I wasn’t really thrilled with having to talk to her or Ethan, but I figured the longer I had either of them talking to me, the better my chances of making it out of this alive might be. Ana had said the police had been called. That had to mean they were close by now, right?

She laughed. “After the way you mouthed off to me weeks ago? There’s no way I believe you.”

“What were you hoping to accomplish by going to the press?” Ethan asked. He sounded genuinely curious. “Are you looking to bring the company down? Or did you just want to ruin my marriage?”

Maybe it wasn’t the time for me to be handing out any sass, but I remembered Kit telling me that he admired my strength the very first day he met me. Considering it was impossible at the moment to be physically strong, I decided I’d be strong in a different way.

So, I fired back, “No offense, but if something happens to this company or Mystic Labs as a result of the choices the two of you made, that’s on the both of you. And for what it’s worth, Ethan, your marriage was in trouble the minute you decided to cheat on your wife. Again, that’s on you.”

There was a long stretch of silence before Ethan started moving closer to me. When he crouched down beside me, he narrowed his eyes. “Do you really think this is the time for you to be talking to me like that?”

I didn’t know where my strength came from, because none of what I was feeling was typical. “If your plan is to kill me, I think I have a right to speak the truth. It’s just a shame, though.”

His brows pulled together. “What is?”

Without any hesitation, I revealed, “You’ll kill me, thinking you’ve taken care of your problem.”

Anna stepped forward. “What does that mean?”

“Just what it means,” I snapped back. “I already told you I had nothing to do with what was reported on the news, so when the rest of your story is leaked after you’ve killed me, you’ll not only be responsible for whatever happens to the companies and whatever happens in your marriages, but you’ll also be responsible for my murder. Your problems are going to be so much bigger than needing to hide your affair.”

For a moment, I watched as their resolve faltered.

It wasn’t until one of their henchmen stepped up and asked, “Should we take care of her now?”

Ethan’s eyes came back to mine. “Somebody would have to know it was us that took you and killed you.”

“Somebody does,” I assured him.

Anna let out another laugh. “She’s bluffing.”

“If you think so, take your chances,” I encouraged her.

“We couldn’t be charged with anything unless your body was found, and that’s not going to happen,” Ethan noted.

“We’ll make sure of that, boss,” the other man announced.

It was at that precise moment when it happened.

Someone sneezed, and it wasn’t Ethan, Anna, one of the guys, or me.

It was Ana.

And the moment they heard it, everyone in the room froze and started looking around. “Who’s there?” Ethan boomed.

Struggling once again to move my fingers and toes without any luck, I hoped Ana could remain hidden or that we’d hear the police sirens approaching to distract them. I couldn’t imagine what they’d do if they realized she was here and alive.

No matter what I had wanted, it didn’t stop Ana.

She stepped out from behind the shelves and said, “It’s me.”

Ethan’s neck twisted, his head snapping to the opposite side to look at the men who clearly hadn’t done the job he’d expected them to do.

Before any of them could say anything, Ana declared, “I might have been seriously injured, but your guys didn’t kill me. And now the police are on their way here, and you’re all going to be arrested.”

It felt as though hours of silence passed as the panic settled in for Ethan, Anna, and the other two men, but I knew it was only a matter of seconds before Anna replied, “I guess we’ll have to make sure the both of you are out of here before that happens.”

I heard the sirens.

Relief swept through me, but I worried things were about to get out of control.

“We need to hurry,” Anna told Ethan.

He looked at the men, jerked his head toward Ana, and ordered, “Get her.”

As they took off toward Ana, Ethan moved back toward me and bent down by my head. He reached his hands underneath my body and started to lift me up as I heard the commotion happening with Ana.

I hoped they wouldn’t harm her or do anything worse before the police could get us.

No sooner had I started feeling my body being dragged backward, I heard a grunt and was dropped back down to the ground.

With all the noise of Ana's struggle with the men, I hadn't heard it when the door had opened to the room again, because the next thing I knew, more people had entered the basement, and looking down at me was Kit.

I'd never seen him looking such a mix of distressed and relieved.

"Oh, God," I whimpered, my emotions immediately bubbling to the surface.

Kneeling beside me, Kit gathered me in his arms and pulled me in close to his body. "I've got you, darling."

The relief.

I couldn't begin to describe the relief I heard in his voice.

There was no question this man had been tormented thinking about what might have happened to me.

"Ana," I worried.

"She's okay," he assured me, rocking back and forth, squeezing me tight. "My guys are here with me. She's fine."

She was fine.

Kit brought his guys with him.

And I was safe in his arms again.

It didn't matter that I couldn't move my limbs. I knew nothing would be able to harm me as long as Kit was here.

So, I gave in to all that I'd managed to hold back from the moment I woke up in this basement and cried my eyes out.



Hours later, Kit and I were back at my house.

It was after he and his team, which included Banks, Paxton, Jax, and Forrest, arrived at the Young Pharm building and saved Ana and me from certain doom.

The police had arrived not long afterward, and Ethan, Anna, and the other two men had been taken into custody. Ana and I had given them our statements, but because I was dealing with a medical issue, Kit urged them to have me stop at the station at another time.

Then he took me to the hospital for the second time since I'd met him, where my best friend met up with us.

Fortunately, within twenty minutes of us arriving at the hospital, the effects of the drugs that had been put into my system had started to wear off, and following a thorough evaluation, I was allowed to go home.

Since I was still slightly numb in my legs, Kit helped to guide me inside and into the bath.

I stayed there, urging him to go and take his own shower while I relaxed. He hadn't wanted to leave me, but I insisted.

We had finished up and made our way downstairs to have some dinner. Kit refused to let me do anything, making me sit on the couch while he handled the food preparation. And now that we'd both had something to eat, I knew it was time to talk.

Because I couldn't stand to see the change I had in Kit.

As I always did whenever we were cuddling on the couch, I shifted my body and rested my head in his lap.

Seconds later, his hand was in my hair, scratching my head.

“Talk to me,” I urged him.

“About what?” he asked.

My eyes roamed over his handsome face. There was so much tension there. “I know you’re struggling with something. Tell me what’s on your mind.”

He looked down at me, his features softening just a touch. “I’ve never had something like what happened today ever happen. The most important person I’ve ever had to keep safe wound up in such a dangerous position.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Kit. It’s not like you could have joined me in the locker room,” I reasoned.

“I could have escorted you there.”

I closed my eyes, loving the feel of his fingertips on my scalp. Kit hadn’t once left my side from the moment he knew I was in danger. I hated that he was putting this all on his shoulders.

“You can’t do this. You can’t sit here and think about all that you could have and should have done differently. The bottom line is that you found me before anything really bad could happen, and I’m here now. Isn’t that all that matters?”

“If something had happened to you—”

“Nothing happened,” I said, cutting him off. “I’m here. You’re touching me, Kit. I’m here, and I’m safe.”

For long moments, he stared at me as he continued to scratch my head. I wasn’t sure he was going to let go of what this was doing to him, but he finally parted his lips and spoke.

“I don’t know what I would have done if I lost you, Maxie,” he started. “My worst fear was that I wasn’t going to get to you in time, and I’d never be able to tell you how much you mean to me. I was afraid I wouldn’t have the chance to tell you that I’ve fallen in love with you.”

My entire body tensed. From top to toe, I couldn't move except to part my lips and stare. Time passed, and I didn't speak.

Instead, I looked up at the man who'd spent the last few weeks with me, looking after me, and making me feel better than I could ever remember feeling in my whole life.

He loved me.

Kit Sexton had fallen in love with me.

Was there anything better?

Finally, because I knew he deserved to receive a response, I managed to shake off the shock and surprise. "For quite some time now, I questioned if things were moving a bit fast, or if I was simply latching onto you because of you being here with me every day. But then this happened today. I thought I was going to die. I thought I was going to die, and suddenly, the time I've known you no longer mattered. I was terrified I'd never make it out of there alive today, and you'd never know just how much you've changed my life. You're the best man I've ever known, Kit. I'm madly in love with you."

His fingers stopped moving in my hair. The next thing I knew, I was being hauled up against his chest as his arms came around me, and he buried his face in my neck. "Christ, I could have lost you. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, Maxie."

Feeling like he needed some reassurance, I allowed my fingers to slide up into his hair. Then I twisted my neck and turned my head to face him. With my mouth against his, I whispered, "I'm right here. I'm safe. And I love you."

Hearing those words again, Kit lost control. He captured my mouth in a claiming and possessive kiss. He was taking everything he could get from me, but he was also giving me so much. His tongue dueling with mine, his arms holding me tight to his body, it was almost as though he wanted to be sure I could feel the love he had for me just from his kiss.

If that had been his intention, he didn't need to worry.

I knew.

I could feel it.

And if I had my way, I was never going to let him go.

After some time had passed, he tore his mouth from mine. We were both panting, breathing heavily, and I begged, "Please make love to me."

"Baby, are you sure?"

Of course, he was still concerned about me. It was for that reason alone, I was absolutely sure about what I wanted.

"One hundred percent."

He brushed his lips gently against mine.

Then he shifted our bodies and went about honoring my request. Kit made slow, sweet love to me for what felt like hours. The horror I had gone through that day was already mostly out of my mind, but with Kit worshiping my body the way he was after he'd told me he loved me, anything that had been lingering melted away.

EPILOGUE



Kit

Two months later

“So, what do you think?”

I didn’t know how it would be possible for me to have any reaction that wasn’t a positive one.

Even if I didn’t like any of what I was seeing, which wasn’t the case at all, given the look of excitement on Maxie’s face and the enthusiasm in her tone, it wasn’t possible for me to have a negative response.

Because she was happy. Thrilled.

And as long as she was feeling so overjoyed about something, I was beyond content.

Her happiness was the only thing that mattered to me.

When I saw her sitting in the back of Vernon’s car months ago, I never would have thought she’d ever become what she became to me, but now that I was here, I wondered how I’d ever lived without her.

What had I been doing with myself all this time?

I looked forward to each and every day with her.

Not long after Ethan, Anna, and the two guys who’d kidnapped, assaulted, and threatened her as well as nearly killed Ana had been arrested, my job of being with Maxie twenty-four hours a day came to an end.

None of them had been released, and they were all awaiting trial. From what we'd been told, it was likely they were all going to suffer some rather harsh consequences for their actions. And while it remained to be seen whether or not they'd all receive jail time, it seemed both Anna and Ethan had divorces in their future.

Not much had changed for Maxie when it came to their arrest. Other than the statements she had to give, Maxie hadn't needed to do anything else. And from a psychological standpoint, she was doing exceptionally well.

I hadn't seen any major changes in her, and I realized it was because she was just as she'd been the entire time I'd been staying with her permanently. When she said she fully trusted me to keep her safe back then, she'd meant it.

For the first few days after her whole ordeal, I'd stayed with Maxie just as I always had. She eventually brought it up.

"When do you go back?" she asked me two days after her second kidnapping.

"When do I go back where?" I returned.

"To work."

"I want to make sure you're okay before I leave you alone all day."

Her features melted at my words, and she moved across the room toward me. After she threw her arms over my shoulders and pressed her body tight to mine, she promised, "I'm okay now."

"Are you saying you don't want me around?"

She shook her head. "Not at all. If it were up to me, I'd want you here all the time. But I'm not stupid, Kit. I know you have to go back to work eventually. I love the way you want to look after me, and I appreciate it more than I could ever tell you, but I'm really alright now. Nobody is going to come after me again."

"Are you sure? I don't mind giving you a few more days."

Maxie's face lit up. "Okay. Let's take one more day and do something special. But then you need to go back to doing what you love."

I cocked an eyebrow. "I love being with you."

She touched her mouth to mine. "And I love being with you, too. I also know that you love the work you do and the people you work with."

"What are you going to do every day?" I asked.

"I'm going to build the business that you encouraged me to start," she shared. "I'll spend my days making wreaths, taking photos, and building a website. I'm going to try my hardest to be successful. And I'm going to do all of that with a smile on my face while I wait to hear from my guy or until he stops by to see me."

"I might do that every day," I warned her.

The smile on her face grew. "You won't have any complaints from me."

After that conversation, Maxie and I did just as she'd requested. We'd spent the next day together with one another before I went back to work, and she really dove into working on her business.

I quickly fell back into the usual work routine. Maxie had surpassed all of her wildest expectations. While I'd had faith in her to do well in her business, I don't think she anticipated she'd be at the level I was confident she'd quickly reach.

But she worked hard, and it seemed her store was an overnight success. I couldn't have been prouder of her.

And ever since we'd both gotten back to working, there had only been a handful of days when I hadn't seen Maxie. Sometimes, she came to my place, but most days, I went to hers. On the days we didn't manage to see one another, we still spoke to each other over the phone. It wasn't nearly the same, but it was better than nothing at all. And it certainly made it that much more special when we did manage to get together the next time.

Over the last couple of months, I'd accepted things as they were. But I was more than ready to make a permanent change. Especially when the simplest of questions that she could ask me had me feeling the way I did now.

"I love it," I told her.

Tipping her head to the side, she asked, "Are you just saying that?"

"No."

"Really?"

"Darling, why would I lie to you?"

Maxie moved from the middle of the room and walked over to where I was sitting on the couch. She crawled into my lap, looked up at the Christmas tree, and assessed the bow she'd made for the top of it.

"I guess you're right. It does look good."

"It's almost as beautiful as you."

It was safe to say I had thoroughly enjoyed the start of the holiday season, and I was thrilled to be in the midst of it with Maxie now. From the moment Halloween rolled around, she had been a bundle of joy.

With each holiday that approached, I watched as she transformed her house. From one holiday to the next, I saw the woman of my dreams growing more and more excited. She was her happiest when she could decorate.

And I loved being able to come to her place, especially after a long day at work, and seeing whatever new piece she'd worked on.

I loved it so much, I decided it was time.

When we'd gone out to get the tree yesterday, I'd considered doing it then. But I changed my mind at the last minute. When I finally proposed, I wanted to be able to celebrate it with her in the place she loved being the most.

So, now was the time.

“You always make me feel beautiful, Kit.”

“I’m not doing anything, Maxie. You *are* beautiful.”

“Well, you’re especially good for my self-esteem, so I think I’ll keep you around for a while,” she teased.

“How about forever?” I asked.

It was obvious Maxie wasn’t thinking like I was when she countered, “Do you think you could tolerate me forever? We haven’t even gotten through our first holiday season together. This could become a bit too much for you.”

Knowing I had intended to do this with her tonight, I already had the ring in my pocket. I slipped my hand inside, grabbed it, and pulled it out.

When I held it up between us, I said, “I think I’m willing to take my chances.”

Maxie’s lips parted as her eyes widened. She shifted her attention between the ring and me. After some time passed, she finally settled her eyes on mine.

Keeping a hold on her hand, I slid off the couch and got down on one knee. “I love you, Maxie. More than I ever thought possible. And I don’t care that it’s only been a few months. I hate it when I’m not around you, and I love the way I feel whenever I’m with you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?”

“You want to marry me?”

“Yes.”

The silence stretched between us for just a few seconds before she nodded and whispered, “Yes, Kit. I’ll marry you.”

Relief swept through me, and I immediately slid the ring on her finger.

I joined Maxie on the couch again, pulled her in close, and kissed her for a long time. Just as I was about to take things to the next level to celebrate our engagement, she tore her mouth from mine and said, “Kit?”

“Yeah?”

“Just so you know, I don’t want a big, loud wedding.”

I grinned, recalling the conversation we’d had about me finding the girl I’d marry and the kind of wedding she’d want.

“I already knew that, darling. I knew when I told you at Nixon’s and Mallory’s wedding that you were going to want something small. And I told you I was going to give my bride whatever she wanted.”

“But you didn’t know it was going to be me,” she reasoned.

My arms tightened around her. “Yes, I did.”

“You did?”

I nodded. “You did, too.”

She bit her lip. “Okay. Maybe I knew it then, too. I was just too afraid to say it.”

Shaking my head, I advised, “Never with me, Maxie. No matter what, you always have your voice with me.”

“I know. And since that’s the case, I’m going to ask that you find a way to celebrate this engagement with me now.”

Since that was what I’d already planned to do, I didn’t delay.

Maxie and I had the best night celebrating our engagement.

And the holiday season proved to be even better than I had anticipated.

PREVIEW OF MISTAKEN

Prologue

Sophie

“Hello, ladies.”

I let out a laugh and shook my head in disbelief. I never imagined I’d ever say those words unless I was speaking to a group of women. But life had taken me down this path, and I was doing my best to not only accept it, but to find some joy in it, too.

Admittedly, that was something I had to work for many days of the week, because it didn’t always come naturally to me. There were both good and bad days, but I was grateful those had shifted lately, with the scales favoring the better days more often.

And today, of all days, could have easily been one of the days that dragged me down completely into a pit of darkness and despair.

Because of him.

Because today was one of his favorites, and that always had the power to make me nostalgic and melancholy.

To walk into this building today and feel excited about the day ahead, to not feel strange that I was talking to nobody who could respond, was such a feat. I was proud of myself.

And I understood that was how grief worked.

It didn’t matter that this was the second time I’d be doing this or that it had been just over two years since I lost him. Grief came in waves for me, and I took it as it came.

Sometimes, it left me curled up in bed with a box of tissues by my side and my favorite movies on repeat. Other times, it had me working, finding a way to occupy my mind with something else. And there were the times it ate away at me, leaving me feeling consumed by anger and bitterness. Fortunately, the days of feeling such sorrow were few and far between, and the ones that left me feeling angry were even more infrequent.

The days like today were the ones I lived for, though.

It was a day like today that I believed helped lead me to having more of the same while the number of harrowing days was diminishing. Maybe that meant I was healing.

It certainly didn't mean that I was forgetting him. I could never forget him.

And today I was going to do something I'd started doing last year as a way to honor him.

My dad.

The man who raised me, provided for me, and gave me a life filled with so much love and laughter.

It was the middle of April in Steel Ridge, Pennsylvania, and that meant it was also the beginning of the car show season. For years, my father had always attended local car shows with one of the cars in his collection. I'd start seeing the light dancing in his eyes sometime in March, because he knew the first day of that season was right around the corner, and he simply couldn't wait.

But then he got sick.

And for the last year of his life, he couldn't bring his cars out.

I think that devastated him more than knowing he was dying.

He passed not long after the final car show of the season, and it destroyed me. I spent that holiday season doing nothing and going nowhere. And it took quite some time for me to get to a place where I had any desire to join the land of the living again.

By the time March hit that following year, something happened inside me. Just as the leaves started popping up everywhere, and everything that had been brown, dead, and dormant started showing signs of life again, I felt as though I was experiencing something similar.

And I could think of no better way to mark the new beginning with a new tradition.

For the first time last year, I took one of my father's cars out to the first car show of the season. Though I was sad about him not being there to experience it, there was no question I had enjoyed myself.

I was doing it again this year.

My eyes moved through the garage at my father's impressive collection—a collection that was now mine. These were his girls, and I'd started referring to them as the ladies at some point in the middle of the year last year.

If I was going to get there on time, I needed to stop reminiscing while looking at them and start pulling them out of the garage.

There was one car that my dad always took out to the first show of the year, and I was set on continuing that tradition. I had to pull two other cars out to get that one, then get those back inside, so I could leave.

So, I got to it.

And before I knew it, after enjoying the drive to the car show's location, I was in the thick of it.

Rows upon rows of pristine cars, the sound of the engines as more pulled in, and the people. I'd never really understood it before, but I got it now. As much as my dad loved his collection, he really enjoyed the community he'd been surrounded by. Everyone was so kind, and their enthusiasm was off the charts.

Being here now, much the same as it had been last year, I felt closer to my dad.

“To say I’m beyond impressed by this one would be an understatement.”

I turned my head to look in the direction of the masculine voice that had just broken into my thoughts. A man who looked to be somewhere in his late forties or early fifties had been looking at my car.

“Thank you.”

The man brought his attention to my face. “This is yours?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yes.”

When I’d arrived here last year and this year, I was welcomed with open arms. The organizers for the event must have known my father well, because as soon as they saw me coming, they bent over backward to make me feel welcome. Throughout the course of the event last year, many people had come up to me wondering how I’d convinced Gino Belmonte to sell his car to me. Of course, I’d shared the sad news with them, but it warmed my heart that so many people knew who he was and how much this car meant to him.

Obviously, not everyone knew him, and so it was generally a surprise when people learned I was the owner.

“Do you mind me asking where you found this? These are exceptionally rare.”

Smiling brightly at the man, I said, “It was my father’s car, but he passed two years ago.”

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks.”

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“She’s Sophie Belmonte,” someone declared before I had the chance.

My eyes shifted to the side, where I saw Kevin—a man I’d met at last year’s event. I smiled at him and said, “Hi, Kevin. It’s great to see you again.”

“Likewise, Sophie.” He turned his attention to the man who’d initially walked up to me and said, “It’s gorgeous, isn’t it?”

“Incredible,” the man marveled.

Kevin held out his hand. “Kevin Roberts.”

The man shook Kevin’s hand and replied, “Joel Meyer.”

After they shook hands, Joel looked at me and asked, “So, what are your plans for this, Sophie?”

My brows shot up. “Plans?”

He nodded. “Are you keeping it? Do you have any plans or interest in selling?”

I shook my head. “There are no plans to sell it. It holds a lot of sentimental value for me, so I’ll take it home, put it in the garage, and keep it there until the next time I’m ready to take it out for a drive, which probably won’t be for weeks.”

“That’s a bummer,” he said. “A car like this should be showcased regularly. Are you sure you don’t want to sell it?”

“I’m positive,” I replied.

“She isn’t going to get rid of it,” Kevin chimed in. “Especially because she seems to have the same attachment to it as her father did. I can’t tell you the number of people that tried to get him to sell this car to them over the years. He refused.”

Something moved through Joel’s expression before he reasoned, “Yeah, but everything is for sale at some point. Maybe nobody offered him the right price.”

Shaking my head again, I insisted, “I’m afraid it’s not about the money.”

“Listen to her, man,” Kevin added. “I did tell you she’s Sophie Belmonte. She’s Gino Belmonte’s daughter, and that means, she doesn’t need to sell this at all.”

Confused and perhaps a bit disappointed, Joel declared, “Well, I don’t know who Gino Belmonte is, so that doesn’t tell me anything. But that doesn’t matter.” He reached into his

back pocket, pulled out his wallet, and held out a business card. “When you change your mind and are ready to talk, please don’t hesitate to give me a call.”

I took the card, knowing I’d never need it, and offered a friendly smile. “Will do.”

Joel took one last look at the car and walked off. My eyes drifted to Kevin.

He let out a laugh and said, “This car always did get a lot of attention.”

“It’s a lime green Lamborghini Miura S, Kevin. If it’s not the name that draws the attention, the color certainly does the trick,” I joked.

The two of us laughed, and I spent the next few hours enjoying the rest of the event.

Six Months Later

“How was the trip?”

“We had the best time, Sophie. You have to go there at some point in your life.”

I’d just walked out of my house, locked the door, and started walking down to the detached garage. It was far enough away that I could have ridden the golf cart down there, but since it was nice out, and there wasn’t likely going to be too many more days with bearable temperatures, I decided to take advantage and go for the walk.

“I’m sure Bali is amazing, and maybe one day, I’ll visit, but if I’m leaving the country any time soon, I’m going to Italy, Nadia. But I’m so happy to hear you and Carson had such a good time.”

“It was the best. What have you been up to lately? Meet anyone yet?”

I rolled my eyes.

Nadia was my best friend. I’d met her in middle school, and we’d been close ever since. Sadly, after she got married to

Carson four years ago and his job transferred him to Texas, I didn't see or talk to her nearly as often as I would have liked.

Of course, every time I did talk to her, she always made it a point to ask about my love life. While there was the part of me that understood why she asked, there was another part that hated it.

Because Nadia knew how difficult it had been for me to find anyone.

To say I'd faced my fair share of judgment over the years would have been an understatement. The simple fact was that my father's success had made it so most men who were love interests quickly became uninterested. I didn't know if it was insecurity or them thinking I was accustomed to a certain lifestyle they'd never be able to give me, but it was disappointing either way.

I didn't want someone for their money or lack of it. I merely wanted someone who had similar values as me, who cared about me, who made me laugh, and who would treat me with the love and respect I deserved. It didn't seem like a lot to me, but perhaps I was being naïve.

So, as I was certain she already expected, I sighed and answered, "I've not met anyone yet. I'm actually heading out now to run over to my dad's place before I head to the hospital, and then out to pick up some lunch."

"Maybe you'll meet someone today," she said hopefully.

"I won't hold my breath," I muttered. "So, tell me about this trip."

For the remainder of my walk to the garage, I listened to all of Nadia's details about her romantic getaway with her husband. As happy as I was for her, I had to admit I was a bit jealous. It wasn't the trip itself making me feel that way. It was hearing about all the things she got to do with the man she loved.

I wanted that.

I wanted to do things like that with the man I loved. At this point, I was willing to settle for some cuddling while watching

movies, or even a simple date night. I didn't need anything fancy, and yet, I wasn't sure I'd ever get what I longed for.

“Alright, well, I just got down to the garage, and I need to rearrange these cars, so I can head out,” I started. “I'll give you a call next week to catch up.”

“But if you meet a guy when you're out today, you need to call me sooner than next week,” she demanded.

Laughing, I promised, “You'll be the first person I call.”

Nadia and I disconnected, and I dropped my phone into my purse. After tossing it into the Lamborghini, I pulled out the two cars my dad had always parked behind it.

Dad was very particular about his cars, and he always liked to keep his Lamborghini pulled in first. I could never bring myself to do it any differently.

I didn't normally take my dad's cars out for a drive. But he'd taught me a long time ago about not only keeping them on a battery tender when they weren't being driven regularly, but to also get them out on occasion. Typically, I'd rotate through them and make sure to drive each of them at least once a month.

After getting the car I needed out of the garage, I pulled the others back inside, locked it up, and made my way back up toward the house. I ran inside, filled up the trunk with my donation for the hospital, and took off.

Before I made my way to the hospital, I needed to make a stop at Belmonte Stone.

Belmonte Stone was my father's company. Technically, it was now my company, but I never worked there. My dad's brother, Sal, ran the operation.

Dad and Uncle Sal were first-generation immigrants from Italy. When he was younger and in his early working life still living in Italy, Dad worked as a stonemason. He'd always been fascinated by the work, and he loved architecture. When he moved here years ago, he took a chance on himself and opened his business. He was exceptional at what he did, built a

solid business, and eventually branched out. He worked with all types of stone, and he started getting into high-end projects.

He started to hand sculpt stone pillars. Someone wanted massive marble pillars in their home, and they hired him for the project. That guy had rich friends who wanted the same. From there, Dad's business exploded, and Belmonte Stone was now a multi-million-dollar company.

I made it to Belmonte Stone and wasn't surprised to be greeted with a bunch of smiling faces when I walked in.

My aunt, Ariana, was in the front office with one other front office worker. They handled customer service and administrative needs.

"Hey, Sophie," Aunt Ariana greeted me. "How are you doing?"

"I'm good. How's it going?"

"Things are great. Busier than ever," she replied.

"Hey Ari, we need—"

My uncle stopped speaking the moment he stepped out from behind the wall and saw me. "Sophie," he declared, making his way to me. He gave me a hug and a kiss. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm going to the hospital with another donation, and I needed a box to carry it in," I told him. "I didn't think it'd look really nice walking in with everything stuffed in a garbage bag."

He let out a laugh and said, "We've got plenty out in the warehouse. Come on out, and I'll get Diego or Bruno to dig them out for you."

Diego was Sal's son, and Bruno was Diego's cousin on Aunt Ariana's side of the family.

It might have seemed crazy or confusing to anyone else, but I loved that this was the company Dad built. Considering Nadia had moved away with her husband and Dad was no longer here, it wasn't difficult for me to feel lonely quite often. But then I'd make a trip here, and the family I had at this

business would turn that around for me. They were all I had left nearby, and I didn't know what I'd do without them.

Uncle Sal and I made our way out to the warehouse, and he called out to Diego to grab some boxes for me to take a look at. A moment later, Diego dropped a bunch of boxes in front of my feet.

“How big of a box do you need, Soph?” he asked.

“Nothing too crazy,” I replied as I looked through them. “I have to be able to fit it in the car.”

“Aw, man. You brought the Lambo, Sophie,” Bruno announced as he walked past the open garage door in the warehouse that overlooked the parking lot and toward us.

I smiled and nodded. “It was its turn to get driven. None of the cars will probably be out much longer at this point. It's going to get cold fast here.”

“I'm surprised you brought it out. It's supposed to start raining soon, I think,” Bruno said.

My head snapped in his direction. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah. I saw that this morning, too,” Diego added.

My eyes nearly popped out of my head. “I hate to do this, but I've got to get going. I can't get this car wet.”

Uncle Sal started laughing as Diego picked up the box I chose and carried it outside for me. “You're just like my brother,” he said, as I started moving in the same direction as Diego. “Drive safe, Sophie.”

“See you later, Uncle Sal.”

After I made it outside and opened the trunk, Diego and I took everything I had inside and placed it in the box. Following a very quick goodbye, I took off for the hospital.

The last thing I wanted to do was rush my hospital visit, but I didn't want to risk getting caught out in a storm. Plus, I still had to pick up my lunch order from Grant's Deli on my way back home.

So, I ran in and wasn't in there more than ten minutes before I was back outside and heading to grab my lunch.

"Hey, Sophie. How are you doing today?" Mallory, the owner of Grant's Deli, asked when I stepped inside.

Grant's Deli was one of my favorite places to grab lunch from, which is why she knew my name when she saw me.

"Hi, Mallory. I'm doing well. Just rushing to get back home before this storm hits," I answered. "You look fantastic. Where did you get your tan from?"

"Oh, I just got back from my honeymoon," she replied as she set the bag with my lunch on the counter. "I got married a few weeks ago, and my new husband whisked me away for a bit. It was glorious."

"Congratulations. That's so exciting."

I was genuinely happy for her, even if I felt a pang of jealousy. Why did it seem as though everyone around me was taking trips with their husbands while I couldn't manage to nail down a boyfriend? Heck, I was having a hard time even finding someone who was interested in taking me on a date.

"Yeah, I wish I could go back for at least another week," she said.

"I bet." I pulled out some cash, paid for my lunch, and took the bag from the counter. "I'd love to stick around and hear all about it, but I've got to get back home."

"Next time," she replied as I turned and moved toward the door. "Have a good afternoon."

"Thanks. You, too."

With my lunch in my hand and my head down, I was digging through my purse for the car key as I moved in that direction. I wasn't paying attention to where I was going, and the next thing I knew, I ran into something solid.

"Oh, are you alright?"

"I'm so sorry," I said, looking up at the man. "I wasn't paying attention to where I was going."

He shook his head and smiled. “That’s okay. I wasn’t paying attention, either.”

I offered a friendly smile in return and moved around him. Then I made it to the driver’s side of the car, and that’s when I was halted once more.

“This is yours?” the man asked.

“Yes, it is.”

His eyes shifted between the car and me several times. “No way. Are you serious?”

I held the key up and dangled it in front of me. “Yep. And I’m really sorry, but I’m kind of in a hurry right now.”

“Wait. Wait. Where did you get this thing? I haven’t seen one of these in person in so long,” he declared, moving around the front of the car toward me.

The clouds were rolling in, and I knew the skies were going to open up at any minute. As I opened my door, I answered, “It was actually my dad’s car, but he recently passed, so now it’s mine.”

I attempted to lower myself into the car, but the man came closer. He put his hand on top of the open door and asked, “Was he the original owner? How many miles are on this thing?”

“Sir? I’m really sorry, but I’m in a bit of a rush,” I explained.

Seeming slightly offended, he jerked back and removed his hand from the door. “Right. Yeah. Okay.”

As he walked away, I had to admit I felt bad. But I just couldn’t risk getting this car wet. My dad had never taken it out in the rain, and I wasn’t about to start.

So, I quickly pushed the guilty thoughts from my mind and raced home. I felt like I was racing against the clock to get there, and by some miracle, I managed to turn into the driveway just as I saw the first raindrop hit the windshield.

As quickly as I could, I made it to the garage and decided to just pull the car in. Normally, I would have pulled out the other two, so I could pull this one in first, but I'd have to come back in the morning and switch them around. It could start downpouring at any second.

I pulled the car in, locked up the garage, and ran back to the house with my lunch in my hand. Halfway there, it started raining, and I got drenched.

But at least the car was safe.

Get Mistaken Here.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A.K. Evans is a contemporary romance author of over forty published novels. While she enjoys writing a good romantic suspense novel, Andrea's favorite books to write have been her extreme sports romances. That might have something to do with the fact that she, along with her husband and two sons, can't get enough of extreme sports.

Before becoming a writer, Andrea did a brief stint in the insurance and financial services industry and managed her husband's performance automotive business. That love of extreme sports? She used to drive race cars!

When Andrea isn't writing, she can be found homeschooling her two sons, doing yoga, snowboarding, reading, or traveling with her family. She and her husband are currently taking road trips throughout the country to visit all 50 states with their boys.

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