



Something  
NEW

SHANIEL WATSON

*Something*  
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Published by Shaniel Watson

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Thank You

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# Prologue



What the hell am I doing...putting all of us at risk. But what else am I supposed to do?

When did this become my life...and responsibility...I'm too young for this. But they only have me—we only have each other.

Those are the fucked random thoughts bouncing around my head non-stop as the music pumps through the speakers over me, around the room, as I'm squeezed in a tight, sequined, multi-color mini dress restricting my airflow along with the do-me-right-now, too damn high heels I'm wearing. All I want to do right this fucking minute is go home, but I know I can't. It all depends on me.

Who else is going to save us...

So this is where I suck it up and dance with the guy whose hands are all over my body and pretend for all I'm worth like I'm having the time of my fucking life, and block everything out to get this done. The song on the speakers changes, shaking the club, and the crowded space on the dance floor turns into even more of a mess of sweaty writhing bodies, hands and limbs intertwined, with the smell of sweat and booze wafting off hot sticky bodies, jumping gyrating to the pulsing beat of Rihanna and Calvin Harris's techno-infused *We Found Love*.

I'm right there with the masses, forgetting it all while I smile and laugh like I don't have a care in the world. I knock back the last of my drink, sloshing some over the rim, on my

way to just tipsy enough to get me through the night blotting out the guilt of what I have to do—*what I'm about to do*.

His hand glides through mine and I laugh, turning around in his arms. God, I don't even remember his name and I don't even care. His hot breath against the side of my face, he shouts in my ear. "God, you're sexy. You're going to be fantastic. What do you say, Liz, ready to blow my mind?" he slurs and laughs, slapping my ass, making me feel like the cheapest, trashiest thing around.

I grit my teeth and smile, stifling the urge to pull my fist back, deck this asshole, and shout in this jerk's face, 'My name is Lexi!' Instead, I grudgingly keep playing along. "You have no idea. When I'm done, you won't remember who you are. I'm going to blow every cell in your mind with pure pleasure." I run my hand down the front of his sweat-soaked shirt, pretending I'm not going to be sick.

"Hell yeah, that's what I'm talking about! Good shit isn't cheap; let's go." He laughs too loud with the music grating on my nerves, and my emotions war inside me, for the part of me that goes dark every time I have to do this. But I push those thoughts back once again and push back the need for another drink as he grips my hand, leading me away from the crush of dancing bodies, through the crowd, and up the now familiar stairs leading to the room where I lose a piece of who I am. The door closes and the lock clicks.

"You ready, baby?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," I lie, because really...what's one more lie and dirty deed when I've already done so many to protect my family, the people I love.

*One*





“**W**here is my umbrella?! Hello, is anyone listening to me?” I’ll take that as a no. “What’s new,” I mumble under my breath, slapping the three stooges’, also known as my kid brothers’, legs off the living room table where they’re engrossed in yet another marathon session of video games.

“Get out the way, Lex,” Drew hisses, his head moving to the side of my legs. “You’re going to let goofy kill my best man.”

“Lex, you’re always in the right spot at the right time for me, even better if you shift to your right.” Ryan nudges my leg to block Drew.

“Hey, knock it off or you’re going to be sorry!” Drew slaps Ryan on the back of the head, just missing Axel as he bounces on the couch between them with a controller in his little hands, then pushes me back to the other side.

“That’s it,” I yell over deafening loud music and gunfire, tired of being moved around like a ping-pong ball. I grab the controller out of Drew’s hand and hit pause.

“What the hell, Lexi?” Drew makes a grab for my hand, missing when I hold the controller over my head.

“Yeah, Lexi, what the hell?” Axel repeats as Ryan slumps back against the couch.

“What the hell nothing, Drew. I’m going to be late for work, again. It’s pouring down out there. The last time it rained I gave you my umbrella, like the time before that it

rained and I gave you my raincoat. Stop ignoring me, find something to give me so I can get the hell out of your way.”

“I don’t know where that thing is.” He huffs, running his fingers through dark overgrown curls. “I swear the last time I saw it I threw it down over by the front door. Controller.” He holds his hand out.

“Not good enough, Drew. If I didn’t trip over it, someone must have seen it.”

“Does it matter, you’re getting in the car and driving anyway,” Ryan says.

“Not the damn point. You guys are so irresponsible sometimes. Why do I always have to be the responsible one?”

“Because you like being miserable?” The smallest of the group says, which sets Ryan and Drew off, laughing like hyenas.

If I wasn’t upset about never finding any of my things when I needed them, I’d probably be laughing too. This is my life, with two teenagers and a six-year-old. “Laugh it up.” I point to the three of them. “Retribution will be swift and unseen. Even for you, little cute one.” I lean over and kiss Axel’s forehead. I throw the controller at Drew, and he catches it with ease, which annoys me.

“Don’t be so salty, Lex. I’ll get you a new umbrella.” He hits the controller button restarting the game.

“Yeah, Lex, don’t be salty,” Axel repeats.

“Ax, stop repeating everything your brothers say.” I point to him, giving him my sternest look. “I’m serious.”

“Okay.” He pokes his little bottom lip out.

“I don’t want another call from your teacher. You have a few more weeks of school. The last thing we need is a teacher who wants to speak to Vanessa this time, instead of me.” The last thing any of us wants is to see our mother. A minute with her is too long. I push my feet in my sling-back clogs behind the couch and grab my light coat that’s going to double as an umbrella. “Hey, Drew, whatever you make for dinner, make

sure Axel can eat it and it doesn't burn a hole through the lining of his stomach, please. The spicier it is does not make it better for anyone but you."

"I got it. Kaboom! Man down for you, son," he says to Ryan who flips him off.

"Hey, language." I slap Ryan upside the back of the head and nod my head in Axel's direction.

"There was nothing to hear." Ryan squints at me.

"That finger speaks a universal language, so watch it. Remember it's Sunday, get him to bed before I get home," I yell, closing the door to grumbles and gunfire. I doubt they heard a word I said. With a heavy sigh, I throw my coat over my head and run to the car. I jump in and fling the drenched coat off my damp hair, start the car, and drive.

I park my car in the parking area reserved for store employees while I talk to my friend on speaker. I give a quick look over my frizzed-out appearance in the rearview mirror. This is the last time I lend Drew anything without making sure he returns it. I say this all the time, but I never learn, do I?

"How can he be so careless? How hard is it to remember to give someone back something you borrowed from them when you were in desperate need of it? How hard is it to keep track of an umbrella and a freaking bright yellow raincoat? I mean I could understand the umbrella but come on, the raincoat?! It's like a bright yellow sheet of plastic."

"Girl, you need to calm down, it's not that serious. A little rain never hurt anyone."

"Shauna, if you could see the frizz puff that is my hair." I huff, brush my hair back, grab a scrunchy off the dash, and pull my hair back in a ponytail.

"Stop whining. Your hair always looks great. Even when it's in its natural state, it looks like a rocking wash-and-go. You should ease up on Drew. When I was sixteen, my biggest worry was getting my party on and how to get to the party without my parents finding out."

“Whatever.” I smear some nude shimmer lip gloss over my lips.

“Whatever nothing, I don’t know any other kid his age helping to pay bills, babysitting, cooking, and cleaning—“

“I’ll agree to the first but lately the last three have been like asking him to perform a miracle. Ryan has stepped up more in the past weeks. And next month he starts his first job. I’m so proud of that knucklehead jokester.”

“Seriously, he’s old enough to get a job already? It seems like we just celebrated his tenth birthday. Now he’s old enough for Uncle Sam to get his hooks into him.”

“Yeah, my little brothers are growing up fast.” Without a mother who couldn’t care less if any of us lives or dies and not one of our deadbeat fathers in sight. Thank heaven for small miracles and answered wishes. We don’t have to suffer through the nonexistent care and supervision of those assholes anymore. “Shauna, I gotta go. Talk to you—“

“Wait up, you coming out tonight or what?”

“I told you I’m not doing any more of those.”

“Girl, please, you know you need the money to pay that mortgage and to help your Gramps out. Em says we don’t have to do anything tonight. They’re not regulars. They don’t expect a thing but your beautiful company. A few flattering words here and there, you make them feel good, on the *inside*.”

“I already have a job I’m late for.”

“You might make as much tonight, as you do for a couple of days of work standing on your feet for six hours, dealing with rude ass customers, and a boss watching over you like you stole something.”

“Rachel is cool. She cuts me a lot of slack. She’s a single mother and knows my situation.”

“That’s all you took away from that? How long is her niceness going to last? Everyone’s nice in the beginning. You know as well as I do there is an expiration date on nice and

understanding. Then you're left assed out depending on yourself once again, with the responsibilities of the world on your shoulders and buried under a heap of debt."

"Story of my life." When you really need help, the people you think will be there for you will slam the door in your face and leave you out in the cold.

"Then be prepared. Help yourself out and jump on this. It's easy money tonight, you *need*. Come on..."

It's the worst going in there after a shift but she's not wrong about us needing the money. Dammit. "All right. Easy money."

"Yes, girl. You need something to wear?"

"Nah, I got it."

"All right, catch you later."

The last thing I want to do is entertain some asshole, in a short tight dress, trying to find creative ways to fight off his hands going up my dress while acting coquettish, when what I want to do is slug the creep. If it wasn't for my brothers and my grandpa... "If if if." All the if's in the world are not going to keep our house out of foreclosure, put food on the table, or help Gramps with his assisted living/nursing home situation.

I grab my phone, shift my bag across my shoulder, and fling open the car door.

"You want to watch where you're swinging that," I hear from a familiar smooth deep voice.

"I didn't see you." My voice raises as I stand up and lock the door.

"You assault me and you have an attitude. I expect better from you, Lexi." Holden wags a finger at me. "What would the boss say if she knew how poorly you treated your coworkers? And after the near-fatal shopping cart attack that was supposedly an accident."

"Cut the crap, Holden. I slipped in a puddle of detergent you were supposed to clean up instead of getting that woman's number." My feet had accidentally hit his leg and his knee

buckled, hitting the back of the cart his hand was gripping, and it fell back on him. It was funny after I saw he was fine, just a bruised ego. A guy this good-looking needs one of those once in a while. "I apologized."

"Doesn't mean much when you're laughing your head off, sweetheart."

"Save the sweetheart for whichever low self-estimate, questionable morals chick you're banging this week." I know, calling out anyone's behavior and morals with my after-hours activities is laughable. Hey, it is what it is. I shift right to go around him. He moves with me, blocking my way.

"I take offense to that on their behalf, even if you could be right." One side of his lips curls up in that sexy way only guys like him can do.

I reach up on the tips of my toes and barely manage to ruffle his natural red hair with blue streaks with the tips of my fingers. Yes, Holden is that guy your mother would warn you about. The sexy bad boy who is unattainable. But you would throw caution to the wind, for one hell of a night of memories to last you a lifetime. Even his hair is sexy. If hair could talk it would say, "Do me." He's all sorts of trouble I can't afford to consider.

"Forgive me for insulting the quality of the young ladies you choose to spend your time with. Are we good now?" I cock an eyebrow, tilting my head up at him.

"It takes way more to insult me or those chicks." He chuckles, opening the passenger-side back door of his car.

"Figured as much." I smile, walking away to go inside through the back. I wave to two of my coworkers taking boxes from inside a truck where Holden was probably helping them.

Before I can get through the door one of them says to me, "When you going to give me that date I keep asking for?"

"I told you I don't swing that way, Sam, but if I ever decide to you'll be the first person I hit up." I put one arm around her and press a playful loud smacking kiss on her

cheek before passing by her and the storage room next to the employee break room.

“You see, there you go playing with me again.” She pats her chest with her hand and grins.

Moving fast, I get into the break room, throw my stuff into a locker, put my blue smock and name tag on, and head out toward my register through the front of aisle five where I walk into my boss. “Oh sorry, Rachel. I know I’m late again, I’m sorry. There was so much rain from last night, flooding—traffic from this freaking rain, you know.” There was no traffic, and I didn’t hear of any flooding, but I’m sure there was somewhere. I should feel guilty about lying but hey, I need this job.

“It’s okay, things have been a bit slow in here today, I suspect due to the rain.”

“This rain is something isn’t it?” I shrug, walking backward.

“Is everything all right with you otherwise? Boys doing okay?” She gives me her concerned mother look, the one that does make me feel guilty about my little white lies.

“Sure, yeah, we’re good.” I paste a smile on for her.

She nods, staring at me with a faint smile, then walks down to the middle of the aisle writing something down on the pad in her hand. Probably tallying up how many times I was late this month, plus the day I was an hour into my shift and Axel’s school called to tell me he was sick, and the next day he swore he was fine and three hours into my shift, I had to leave to get him again. If I was my boss, I’d put myself on notice.

Making a sharp turn, I blow out a breath and crash into a solid body of blue, knocking the breath out of me. I’m wrapped in an arm of solid muscle. “What is with me bumping into people today.” I look up to give a quick apology and stop...

The sexiest guy I think I’ve seen in a while smiles down at me, with a dimple and warm brown eyes. “It’s okay. I don’t

mind at all.” He looks down at me, holding on with a firm grip.

“You can let go now,” I say, mildly disoriented, a combination of loss of breath and...him.

“If you’re sure—unless you need me to escort you in the direction you’re headed.”

“Pretty sure I can manage.” I back out of his arms, stepping to the side and smiling, walking to my register. Forget New York’s finest...I’ve just walked into one of Pennsylvania’s, capital everything, period, *FINEST*.



*Two*



**M**y eyes follow the cutie in faded blue jeans and a pale green fitted v-neck cut shirt all the way behind the register. Something new and interesting here. I turn in the direction I was headed with my basket in my hand. I see my aunt fussing with merchandise on the shelf. I walk up to her and give her a one-arm hug from behind. “Mind if I buy you a drink later, beautiful?”

“As long as you’re buying, handsome. But be warned if we hit it off you’ll have to deal with my brother-in-law who’s a cop and my nephew, also a cop. You will be thoroughly investigated and interrogated.” She turns around and squeezes my face between her fingers and thumbs. “They are a big pain in my ass.”

“You can’t fool me, you love us.” I smile, and she nods and smiles back, releasing my face.

“I put up with you lovable goons. What brings you in today, Officer James?”

“I heard you had a big end-of-spring clearance, welcoming summer sale happening. You know I love a good sale and I’m all about supporting a local family businesses.”

“That’s one of the reasons I love you. All about the family support.”

“By the way, do I still get the steep family discount on socks, shampoo, and conditioner if I buy in bulk?”

“That is why you guys are also a pain in my ass. Family discount on top of a sale? I don’t think so. The way you go

through those three things, I'm not going to mention your brother and his stuff. I'd never make a profit if you did actually use the discount." She laughs. "Also, by the way, I think you should kick the sock habit before you go broke."

I shrug. "We all have our vices. If the only addiction I need to worry about is keeping my clean socks habit, shampoo, and conditioner under control, I'll take it." My eyes scan around the store for a familiar redhead.

"I'm in full agreement with you on that." She pats me on the shoulder. "Where's your partner today?"

"Miranda's in the other aisle looking for dog toys. I wanted to talk to Opie. Is he working today?"

"You know he hates that old nickname."

"I know." I smile.

"I expect better from you, *Officer*," she chides.

"I know you do. And you shouldn't," I say, walking away from her

"He was in the back of the store." She smiles at me with a quirk of her lips which reminds me of my mom.

That's the expression that reminds me how much I miss my mom and wish she was still alive. She could see what we grow up to be and hope she would be proud. I followed in my dad's footsteps and always try to do right by him and her memory, which hasn't always been easy, but I had it easier than my brother. Not sure why that is. In any case, he's getting his life together now, that's a really good thing for all of us... progress.

"Hey," I say, spotting him squatting over a big box, slicing it open with a box cutter.

He turns his head to the side, giving me a glance of acknowledgment with a chin up.

Okay, he's in one of those moods. Maybe less will be more today. More agreeing less surliness. "What's up?"

He looks up at me with a blank expression and spreads his hands apart over the box.

“I’m just trying to make small talk here, Holden.”

“I know. You suck at it. That’s why I don’t do it. I know my limitations.”

“Excuse me for wanting to bond with my brother. Find out what’s going on in your life.” I gesture toward him with my free hand.

“Cut the bull, Noah.” He picks up a price gun next to the box, pointing it between us. “*We* hung out last week and had a beer. We hung out for an hour. We had an estimated record thirty minutes of conversation before I had to get on stage and play.”

We did. It was a surprise. By pure coincidence, we were at the same bar. Me with some of the guys from work and he was there to fill in and play guitar for one of his friend’s bandmates who was sick. He and his friends don’t associate with my kind, but I was happy to excuse myself from my friends for a while and join him at the bar with his friends.

It’s been a long time since we hung out like that. I’m a cop and he’s...an ex-juvenile delinquent/con, skirting the lines of what’s acceptable by the law for me to look away. It was nice hanging out with my little brother and being proud as shit watching him on stage bringing the place down. I know he plays regularly at some other bar but I don’t think he wants me to know about that so...yeah.

“And why should the bonding stop there? Let’s keep a good thing going. How about Friday night?”

“Friday?” He swipes a couple of boxes with the gun while I wait for an answer.

“Yeah, we could even swing by Dad’s for a few.” He stops moving, almost freezing, then he swoops the box up.

He places it on a waist-high little table beside him and takes some smaller boxes out before turning to me with his signature sneer, and sarcastic smile. “Nice try, bro.”

“Come on, Holden. When was the last time we had dinner as a family? Dad asks about you.” I put the basket between my legs on the floor and put my hands on my hips.

“Oh yeah?” He plunks a box on the shelf.

“Yes. I told him you were doing good. He said he hasn’t heard from you in a while.”

“If he wanted me there, why didn’t he ask me? My phone works fine.”

“Hard to do if you keep sending him to voicemail.”

“Funny thing about voice mail, if you get sent there you leave a message. If you choose not to, what you want to say doesn’t get heard—if you really wanted to get your message to be heard.”

“Now you’re just being unreasonable. You know Dad doesn’t do messages, he’s short on words like you and set in his ways stubborn. Ever think that’s the reason you don’t get along better?”

“Fuck you, too.” His lips ease into a smile then go back emotionless.

“Mom would want us—“

“Don’t.” He points a box under my nose, his jaw set. “Play the dead mom card.”

“Look.” I place my hand on his shoulder trying to seem more supportive than anything else. “No pressure, it would just be nice to have you there once in a while for Friday night dinner. It’s not every week. Most times when I’m able to make it it’s only me, Dad, and Carla. No aunts, uncles, or cousins.”

I shake his shoulder and with a long-suffering sigh, he says, “Maybe. What night is it this time?”

“Mediterranean.” I press my lips together, holding back a smile. Our stepmother loves to cook. She has this thing about cooking food from all over the world, from countries she has been to, and places she’d like to go if she can drag my dad along with her. God bless her heart for trying to expand his horizons.

“It has to be better than the Indian curry dish she tried to make. That did not go down well with anyone.” He grimaces.

“God, that was an awful night. It was the revenge of the curry. I was running to the bathroom the entire night.” We look at each other and laugh. I bet we’re both thinking about Dad stuck in the bathroom, cursing up a blue streak about curry being banned for life from his house.

“Maybe bring a date.”

“You *really* want me to bring a date?” He quirks a brow. “Think about that.”

“Yep, yep, best to stick with immediate family. You know I don’t care about that, right?”

“The one thing I do know.” He bends back down to pick up more stuff in the open box.

“Good. I gotta go. Miranda hates to wait on anyone but herself.”

“Your partner’s a badass chick. Tell her I’m still open. Tell her sister I said, what’s up.”

“She’s still married.”

“Not fazed. Tell her sister I said, what’s up, I’m here anytime she’s ready for me to take her out.”

I laugh and pick up my basket. “Keep waiting on that, you’ll die before you ever get laid again. You’d only last two days.”

He laughs and gives me the finger. I catch up to my partner in the sixth aisle in front of the store, still looking over dog toys. As I approach her I hear laughter and look over my right. My aunt is at the cashier saying something to the cute cashier who walked into me, her head thrown back laughing. Really cute. How long has she worked here? Can’t have been long. I’ve been here twice this month. I would have noticed her already if she’s worked here long.

“Did you get that one-hundred-millionth moisture wick-away sock you were looking for to add to your never-ending collection?” She grabs the largest chew toy I’ve ever seen.

“I don’t mind being made fun of but remember, I warned you athlete’s foot is no joke. It can take down the best of men.” I reluctantly turn my head away from my aunt and the girl in the well-fitted green shirt, faded blue jeans, and now the great laugh. “Say you’re running down a perp and from out of nowhere a sudden furious hot itch grabs ahold of your foot, not one but both?” I fix her with the most sincere look I can hold.

Her eyes look me up and down, and she laughs in my face. “If that’s all it takes to take you down in a high stake situation I’d say you’ve chosen the wrong profession. It’s time to toughen up, buttercup.”

I look over my shoulder again. I wonder what her name is, if she’s single?

“Hello, earth to Noah.”

“What?” My head turns back to Miranda waving an even bigger chew toy in front of my face. “How many things does Chucky need? You’re going to go broke on that dog.”

“Mind your business. I’m going to spoil him rotten, he’s my baby. What do you keep looking at over there?”

“Have you seen that girl in here before? The one talking to my aunt?” I pull back my shoulder for her to see.

“Nah. Why?”

“She walked into me when we came in.”

“You want me to question her? Get her name, number, and history?”

“Why would you do that?”

“Your head hasn’t stopped swiveling over there like a revolving door. I could get things going for you with a smooth introduction. You have no game when you try to get a woman’s number.”

“What are you talking about? I have no problem talking to women and getting a number.”

“Hmm...when’s the last time you’ve been on a date?”

Shit. It has been a while. But... “Last month—“

“I mean with someone new. Where you actually go out and have a stimulating conversation which makes you want to know more about the person you’re on a date with.” She turns to me and tucks the chew toy under her arm. “Sex with an ex is not a date. It’s an easy lay. Way back when last month doesn’t count.”

“Worry about your dog who you’re more enthusiastic about than your husband. I got this.”

“We’ll see, buttercup.” She smirks. “And as for my husband’s happiness, like my dogs, mind your business.”

“That’s a double standard I’ll ignore, the way you ignore not getting into my personal life, aka my business.” We walk out of the aisle and I tell Miranda I’ll catch up with her as she walks into the ten items or less checkout line.

I follow my aunt walking into the aisle beside me. “Hey, Aunt Rachel.” She stops holding her notepad against her chest. “Who’s the new girl at the register in the green top?”

“That’s Lexi. Why?”

“She accidentally bumped into me. I haven’t seen her in here before. How long did you say she’s been working here?”

“I didn’t.” She stares at me, while I nod my head waiting for an answer and for her to elaborate.

“You could help me out here by making this easier.”

“What do you want me to make easier, Noah?” She smiles broadly.

I smile back at her with a smile just as bright and tip my head behind me. “Who is she?” I point to the shield on my chest. “This is sort of official business.”

“What kind of official business, Noah?”

“Making me work for it, aren’t you?”

“You know.” She shrugs carelessly. “The official business of...?”



“Getting to know who that attractive young lady is.”

“Short or long version?”

“Short please, I gotta get back out there.”

“First thing I’ll say is, I like her.”

“That’s good. Means I will also like her.” I rock on my feet waiting for her to speed this up.

“She’s Vanessa Grayson’s daughter, Lexi Grayson.” She rolls her hand in front of her like I should be aware of who that is. She continues when my bottom lip pushes out, and I shake my head. “Vanessa Grayson, dark skin, belligerent, usually seen with an equally foul mouth white guy? You’ve probably arrested her once or twice in this store out in the parking lot five, six years ago.”

“How could I forget? I was a newbie, first time I had someone curse me to hell and back between propositioning me.” My eyes close tight, lips pressed together. Damn. I look over my shoulder at the cute girl and shake my head. That’s probably not a good idea.

“Don’t worry, she’s nothing like her mother. She seems to take after her grandfather, Theo.”

Him I do remember. “Older well dressed gentleman.” He had kind eyes. Made me wonder what the hell happened to his daughter, he looked tired. I felt bad for him for having to deal with her. “He made it absolutely clear he only came to bail her out, not give me more trouble.”

“She’s helping him take care of her younger siblings. I haven’t seen a hint of her mother in her. You know me: if I did, she’d be out on her ass.” My aunt’s nice but she’s not a total pushover. She only gives you enough chances to hang yourself before she gives it to you. “She gets along great with the other employees in the short time she’s been here.”

I blow out a breath and say, “Okay. Thanks for the info, Aunt Rach.”

“No problem.” She winks at me and leaves.

I walk back to the cashier lines in front. I see Miranda waiting for me by the door, looking at something on her phone with her bag in hand. Five aisles, all with lines except for the first one. Common sense would tell me with what I've found out about the cute cashier at checkout counter three, I should steer clear of her and walk straight through fifteen items or less and be on my way.

My brain and eyes follow in that direction but my feet bring me behind three customers in line three. So much for common sense. While I stand there waiting patiently in line when there is an empty one I could be in and out of already watching her genuinely talk to the customers and offer advice on things on sale and sign one up for a discount card and make a suggestion on a better brand of cleaning product. I patiently wait until they leave the line to get the cheaper, better product then come back to ring it up with a bright smile from her, and a "have a nice day."

When it's my turn I take my things out of the basket, two packs of socks, shampoo, conditioner, and toothpaste. I tip my head to her and smile. "Ma'am."

She looks at me and frowns. "You only have five items. Didn't you notice the fifteen items or less aisle is empty? It's been empty since you joined my line."

"You noticed me. Good to know." I give her a bigger smile, and reach over next to me and pick up a handful of gum and candy bars and place them beside the other items. "I like the candy in this line specifically. I didn't mind the wait to get to *you*."

The corner of her lips turns up as she rings up my items in an even nicer smile than I've seen her give her other customers. I swipe my card and tap my pin in.

She gives me my receipt and holds up my bag to me and says, "Here you go, Officer..." She looks at my chest, then into my eyes. "James. Like Holden James?"

I nod taking my bag, my fingers lightly brush over hers, lingering for a small pause. "Thank you, Lexi." My voice drops lower holding her gaze.

She says, “How did you know my name?”

“Name tag.” I lie easily.

“Is there anything else I can do for you? You’re holding up my line, and my boss is watching.”

“Don’t worry about her. I don’t think you’ll get in trouble for making me smile.”

“Really? How do you know I won’t get in trouble?”

“She’s my aunt. See you around, Lexi.” Her mouth drops open, and I happily walk over to Miranda. “Let’s head out.”

“Did you get a number?”

“No,” I say, walking out into the parking lot. “I got candy.” I see some kids walking by and say, “Here you go. I bought too much.” And hand them the candy, keeping back a gum for myself. They thank me and keep on walking.

“You fumbled the play like I said and got nothing.” She shakes her head. “Should have let me close for you.” She opens the car door.

I open mine and pop a stick of gum in my mouth. “I got something.”

“What?”

“The best and brightest smile out of her. And an admission she was watching me as much as I was watching her. That’s as good as a guarantee I’ll get her number and a date.” I slam my door and start the engine.

*Three*



**A**nother day done. I wish I was going home, getting dressed, calling up my friends, and we are going to go out and hit the clubs and find some cute guys to buy us drinks. Can't wait for that day to happen. Unfortunately for me, that's not my life. I get my bag out of my locker, sling it over my head, and strap it across my chest.

Instead of not giving a fuck, partying all night, hanging with my friends, and finding those cute guys to make out with, I'm dressed in the tightest, cleavage-popping dress, for the little I do have, legs bare and shined. All from the back of my custom-made closet that doubles as my car trunk. In about an hour, I'll be entertaining some rich asshole, who can't keep his hands to himself, while his poor clueless suburban housewife believes he's having a night out with his friends or on a business trip safely tucked away in his hotel room. Nothing worse than a delusional woman in love. Amazing what they can overlook and trick themselves into believing in the name of love or marriage.

I walk out the back door of the store, pulling down my shiny wine-colored tube dress at the hem, not too far below my ass. I smile, walking out to loud hollers and cat calls from my knucklehead coworkers. Four of them, including the head troublemaker Holden, are hanging out on the hood of their cars in the parking lot, puffing away. "Thank you, thank you." I spin, and pat my shoulder-length curly hair.

"Got a hot date tonight, sexy?" Holden says, blowing out a plume of cigarette smoke over to the side away from me as I

stand next to him, reclining on the back of his car next to mine.

“Maybe I do, maybe I don’t.” I pop the trunk of my car, throw the bag with my work clothes and shoes in, and slam it close.

“Mysterious. I like it,” Sam says, taking a puff of a clove cigarette. She thinks they’re a healthier alternative, which is another excuse for her to not feel bad for smoking.

“You look hot, Lexi,” Jasper says, leaning toward our other coworker, taking his cigarette from his fingers and taking a puff.

“You giving me the feels all the way down to the seat of my pants. Got my dick twitching.” Ken chuckles, along with the rest of them.

“This is the right dress if it can bring feeling and life to something less than above average size.” I bring my thumb and forefinger close together and squint. Everyone laughs, except for Ken, who smirks at me and blows smoke in my direction.

“I imagine you going to some seedy club, enticing men into buying you drinks and spending all their money on you for one night of your company,” Holden says.

I laugh. “Nah, just drinks with friends tonight.” He doesn’t know how close to the truth he is. Hopefully, he never will. He jumps down off his car and smashes the cigarette under his boot. He stands up straight, all six feet of his tall muscular tattooed body flexing and stretching. He is a gorgeous man. Complete opposite of his brother. I can’t believe his brother is a cop. And equally as gorgeous.

“I didn’t know your brother was a cop.” I open my car door.

“Yeah, he is.”

“I would have never guessed you were brothers. Is it like having a get-out-of-jail-free card or one of those PBA ones?”

“Not even close. When your dad and brother are as by the book as mine: if you fuck up you do the time.”

“Still it’s something to throw out there. He’s hot.” I smirk, looking over my shoulder at him. “If he hits on me, I might give him a shot.”

“That’s cold, Lexi. You just said that to my face. Sam, see how she treats us.”

“If I had balls, they would be freeze-burned,” Sam says, tapping her cigarette.

“It’s the uniform,” I say getting in my car.

“If that’s what it takes, I’ll put one of my brother’s on for you and we’ll make this happen.”

“You in a uniform is like Dracula stepping out into the sun.” I laugh, start my car, and back out. I drive off waving to them.

Officer James’s uniform was surely fitting him right in all the right places. I wonder what it would be like to date a cop. Instead of always being on the wrong side, for once you would get some respect by association. As little as it might be, it’ll be something to work with when the police are giving you shit. My phone buzzes alerting me to a message. I wait till I get to a red light before looking at it.

Shauna: u almost here? Our guys are waiting on us. I talked you up so much he’s either expecting Halle Berry or Kerry Washington to walk up to him.

Oh, Shauna. I send a text to her.

Me: You are setting them up for disappointment. I’m going to need to work twice as hard to convince them to tip big to compensate for the letdown from great expectations.

Shauna: I’ve seen you work your feminine charms. Your hands have the magic touch. You got this! Hurry up and get your ass here, happy endings don’t happen by themselves.

“They sure don’t.” I sigh, wishing I could just go home. Hang out with my brothers and put Axel to bed.

I park. Get out and give myself a little shake and a pep talk. “You’re beautiful, sensual, and resourceful.” This is not a long-term plan, it’s a temporary must until I get up to date on the mortgage payment and the other bills. “I’m going to go in there, charm the pants off this guy, and leave with my money. You got this! Let’s go get that money, sexy.”

I hold my head high and walk through those club doors with all the confidence in the world. The music hits my ears, and I look over the crowded room to the table in the back where I see Shauna sitting between two men. She’s working her irresistible charm on both of them. I’m sure she’s winding them right around her fingers.

She trails her fingers down one’s tie, leans over into his ear, and whatever she says to him makes him laugh. She laughs, too, then turns to the other guy and says something to him which also makes him laugh and has them slapping their hands together over their heads. Oh boy, that can’t be good. I high-tail it over there before I end up participating in whatever shenanigans she whispered in their ear.

I love the girl but she’s a wild one. Trouble follows her where she goes, but the thing about Shauna and trouble is somehow it doesn’t affect her, but the people surrounding her...forget Typhoid Mary, beware of Typhoid Shauna- the cute little spitfire.

I walk over to her and the men with a broad smile and lean over the table across from Shauna. “Is this a party for three or can I slip in between the two of you and this sexy little kitten?”

“Lex!” she shouts, pushes herself up with her hands on the table so the men have a clear view of her barely covered ass, kisses me on the lip, and winks. “What do you say boys, can my friend slide in between us?”

“Of course,” the one on her left says in a melodic deep voice. He’s handsome and looks nice enough, but we’ll see. Looks can be deceiving in this place.



“Why would we turn a beauty like you away?” the one on Shauna’s right says. He reaches over and kisses my hand with a smile that does nothing for me. I pull my hand away as quickly as possible without offending him.

I know which one I’m dealing with tonight. It’s not the one who reminds me of a cheap sleazy polyester suite-wearing salesman. This guy looks like he’d be offended by the material’s existence. “Thank you.” I sit down next to the guy without the tie. “So, gentlemen, I’m sorry I kept you waiting. I’m sure Shauna was good company though.”

“I’m always good company,” she says before either of them answers, taking a drink from one of the four glasses on the table. “Lexi, this strapping gentleman is Theodore and the equally strapping young buck next to you is Thomas.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say to both of the guys.

“Call me Theo,” he says, eyes roving up and down my body, settling inappropriately too long on my breasts. *Jerk.*

“You can call me Thom,” the one next to me says.

“Here you go.” Shauna happily hands me a drink, then slides over so close to Theo she’s almost sitting in his lap. She knows I most likely won’t drink because I want to be clear about everything I do on nights like these.

“Okay, so what brings you guys out tonight?” I take the drink and swirl it around in the cup.

“We heard this was one of the best places in Pennsylvania to party. We had a friend come here last month and said it was the best time he ever had,” Theo says, hooking a hand around Shauna, whispering something in her ear to make her throw her head back and laugh out loud.

“Honey, he was not lying, we are going to show you such a good time you won’t want to leave,” Shauna says.

“That’s what I’m counting on.” Theo laughs, and we all laugh along.

“We’ll try not to disappoint you,” I say, more to Thom than his friend.

“Well, I’m not hard to please.” He smiles. “Just looking for a little fun before we head back home on Tuesday.”

“You came to the right place. Let’s go show these fine men a real good time.” Shauna stands up, gyrating her hips in a dress so tight I don’t know how she’s moving, let alone breathing.

“Hell yeah.” I laugh. “Come on, handsome.” I hold my hand out for my guy swinging my hips to the beat of the music. “Let me show you how we do it out here.”

For the next hour and a half, we do a double team on these guys. Where we bump, dance, grind, and drink. Bend over, twirl, bring it back up, and act like we don’t have a care in the world. All focus is on these guys because they need to feel like they are the best in the room. Then we break, talk, order more drinks for them. Don’t underestimate the power of a good drink, a stiff dick, and a great tease who can give the illusion of putting out without actually going all the way.

Sure, in between the sweating, almost gyrating this guy’s balls off you give them a little talk to find out what they’re like. Give them all your attention, and make them feel important so that they can impress you out of your panties. Then thirty minutes before that two-hour mark hits and you can see it in their eyes, and they start to get too handsy, you go VIP, straight to the back of the room. Up the stairs, pass the balcony area, around the corner where six doors are lined in a row. No signs on the doors, those are the ones you enter and make the magic happen.

I lead Thom into the room with a leather sectional which seats six comfortably and a little round black table in the corner. I stand in front of the best thing in the room. A plexiglass glass window overlooks the club below.

“Fantastic view,” Thom says.

“It is.”

“Can they see us from down there?” he asks, turning his head to me.

“Only if you want them to.” I smile.

“Ahm...”

I laugh at his hesitation. “I’m joking. Just take a few steps back and they can’t see much of anything, especially if you’re sitting on the couch.”

“Good.” He chuckles and sits down.

I sit down next to him and twist off a cap from a bottle of water on the table and hand it to him. I don’t say anything. I just watch him for a few minutes drinking his water. I notice his broad chest and the way his dark blue dress shirt stretches across his chest. He is good-looking with dark brown wavy hair and light brown eyes. He seems like a nice enough guy. A guy I wouldn’t mind spending time with if I wasn’t being paid for it. He’s about the same build as the cop I bumped into today, the cut one related to Rachel and Holden. The gene pool for the men in that family gets a gold star on them alone. It should be a crime for two men so hot to be related. I shake my head.

“What’s wrong?” Thom says, resting a hand on my thigh, bringing my attention back to him.

“Nothing. I was thinking about something I saw today.”

“What?”

“It’s not important. What’s important is we’ve had a great time and it is almost up. So what do you want to do? How do you want to end the night, Thom?” I lean closer to him and place my hand on his thigh and gently squeeze.

He takes another drink of his water and smiles. It’s cute the way he’s nervous and doesn’t try to attack me like most jerk-offs would. He clears his throat and sighs and I ask again, turning his face completely toward me and placing a soft kiss on his lips. “How would you like the night to end, Thom?”

I can’t do anything until I hear the word I need. And he has one more time before I politely get up and lead him back downstairs with a good night peck on the cheek. I wait patiently and give his leg another encouraging rub, hand inching up as he shifts and my eyes take a glimpse down and see he does indeed have a need.

“Thom...” I say, resting my head against his shoulder, and wait.

He heaves a shuddering breath when my fingers flutter over his groin and says, “Happy ending. I’d like a happy ending tonight.”

No more said. My hands get to work unbuttoning and zipping down his pants as he spreads his legs wider for me as I pull his swollen flesh out. I moan and give his dick a quick pump. I keep my head on his shoulder, eyes firmly closed, and run my tongue along the salty column of his throat as he moans and I pump, applying pressure on each down stroke.

“Oh, yes,” he says, like as I come up twisting then spreading his pre-cum to help ease the slide and glide of my hand. The build-up makes him pant as I continue licking and sucking his neck, making sure not to leave a mark. When I think the time is right I finish him off listening to him groaning and panting heavily into my hair.

I move my thumb over the swollen purple head, then move my hand back down to the base of his dick and milk him with the skills of a pro; hand going up and down as fast as I can, jerking him off while licking at the already wet skin at the base of his neck. A long groan is muffled on the top of my head into my hair as warm wet goo slides down over on my fingers. I raise my head from Thom’s neck and place my cheek on his chest as he tries to level his breathing out.

“That was good. Real good.”

“You’re welcome, Thom.” I take a deep breath, exhale, and stand, holding my hand away from my dress. I pull a bunch of tissue out of the box on the table and hand it to him.

I wipe my hand off and press a button on the side of the couch which opens the armrest. I take a couple of wet wipes and hand one to him, then clean my hand. I toss the used wipe in the little waste can in the corner and turn around to look at him, feeling the way I always do at this point. A little bit dirtier than when I walked through the door. “It’s time for me to go.”

“Already?” He looks at me expectantly which sometimes happens with these guys, usually the nicer ones which Thom has been for the past two hours. “Can’t you stay a little longer?”

“Sorry, once our time is up, it’s up. You can party with someone else if you like but Celeste is going to charge you the same amount with someone new.”

“Too bad. I had a great time with you, Lexi.”

“Likewise, Thom.”

“Maybe I’ll see you around if I pass through again?” He gives me a hopeful smile.

“You never know.” I smile back, give a wave, and close the door.

*Four*



I close the car door as quietly and as quickly as I can, trying not to wake the boys. I hope to god this is not one of those nights for Axel where he gets up. Or one where he decides he doesn't need sleep because Drew and Ryan let him eat a bunch of sugar-filled junk before bed. I'm ready to crash. It's been a long ass day already without trying to reason with a six-year-old in the middle of the night.

I've already had my share of mind games and wrestling with men for the night. I can't wait for the day I can say screw this two job shit, and especially the club. Dammit, I wish I knew when that day was, down to the minute.

I get to the front door and push my key in slow and steady. I have on my flat shoes from today and my coat I threw on and zipped up over my dress. I didn't want to wait to change my clothes in a cramped club bathroom or my car. I just needed to get out of there, put as much distance between what I do in there, and get home.

I close the door and turn the locks as slowly as I can and turn around in the dark, switching on the light. "Home safely, thank you, God," I whisper under my breath. Placing my shoes by the door I take the steps one at a time with my head down as I reach the top of the stairs, ready to collapse on my bed.

"It's after one, do you know where your siblings are?"

"What!" I jump, hand over my heart, turning to the left. "Why are you sneaking up on me?"

“I’m where I’m supposed to be. I don’t need to sneak around.” Drew leans against the wall. His arms folded across his chest in a zip-down hoodie, t-shirt, sweat pants, and sneakers.

“Ok then, why the hell are you sneaking up on *me*?” I walk over to him.

He rolls his eyes and ignores my question again. “Where you been? You were supposed to be home long before now.”

“Was there a problem you couldn’t handle while I was out?” I fold my arms, staring back at him with the same attitude he’s giving me. “If there was a problem, you know you could have called me.”

“If you looked at your phone, you would have seen at least three messages from Axel.”

“Shit, I didn’t see them. I hardly had time to look at my phone.” I pull the phone out of my bag and turn it on, and there they are, along with a missed call from my grandpa. “Sorry, I was busy.”

“Busy doing what in a skirt so short it’s riding up over your ass, and a face full of glittery shit that is not a requirement to work behind a cash register in a hardware store?” He shoves off the wall, coming closer to me.

“I was out. I don’t need to run my whereabouts by you, Drew. I don’t know what crawled up your ass and died, but I said I’m sorry. I missed the calls and that should be enough. I’ve had a long day and I’m going to bed.”

“That’s the way it’s gonna be now?”

“The way what is?”

“You do what you do, no questions asked. We sit at home waiting for you and follow your orders. While you’re free to do what you want to do because you think it’s what’s right, putting us at risk.”

“What risk? I don’t know what you’re talking about. All I’m doing is what I need to do. What I think is right to keep



this family going which includes taking care of you, Ryan, and Axel.”

“Stop treating me like a kid who doesn’t see what’s going on. You’re doing shit none of us agreed to. We’re supposed to make decisions that affect all of us together, things that could end with us thrown into a fucked up foster system, like Mom.”

“I’m not doing that. You think you have an idea, but you don’t.” My voice raises at his accusation that I’m anything like our mother. “And I’m nothing like Vanessa. I don’t know what’s going on. Lately you’ve been questioning everything I do and say, when you just need to trust me when I say we are going to be fine.”

He flips the zipper up on his jacket and looks me up and down, reminding me of one of those jerks at the club, and says, “*Trust* works both ways.” He walks past, barely misses clipping my shoulder, and jogs down the stairs.

“Drew—” I hear the locks on the door and run to the top of the stairs and look down. “It’s late, where the hell are you going?”

“Out. I’ll be fine, trust me.” He smiles and closes the door firmly behind him.

So frustrating. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” I run both hands over my face.

“He’ll be all right.” I turn, facing Ryan rubbing his eye with the heel of his hand. “He’ll probably go sit in the car and smoke a blunt and come back in.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better, a minor sitting in the open smoking a blunt?”

“You can go out there and risk round two of what’s become the usual between you two.”

Not even considering that as an option, I say, “Good point. Good night.” I just can’t with him tonight. “I’ve done enough adulating for the day.”

“Yeah, I’ll lock up and sleep on the couch so I can hear him if he doesn’t have his keys.”

“Thanks, Ryan. Sometimes I think you’re the only one that has your shit together in this family.”

He smiles, “Yeah, that’s accurate.”

“Get out of here.” I laugh and give a light shove to his shoulder. Then I remember and ask, “Was Axel upset I missed his call?”

“He woke up from a nightmare. He was scared but after a while, we got him to calm down. He fell asleep in Drew’s bed. He’s fine. Don’t worry about it, we handled it.”

“Shit. I’m sorry I should have been here for him, with you guys.”

“Axel’s safe. Drew is just being Drew more than I’ve ever seen, but yeah, it’s Drew.” He shrugs like it’s no big deal. “He’s going to be angry, blow it off some way—he’ll be fine tomorrow...or...Tuesday of next year?”

“Don’t even joke like that.” I give him a reassuring squeeze on the arm as he goes downstairs.

I change my mind and go in the direction of the boys’ rooms. I get to Drew and Ryan’s door, walk in, and look down on Axel sleeping soundly tangled in Drew’s sheet. I brush my hand over his hair. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here for you tonight,” I say low enough not to wake him.

I know Drew has been frustrated, but I can count on him and Ryan to take care of stuff when I’m not here when it counts. But damn, it’s not their responsibility and it shouldn’t be mine either. It should be Vanessa’s. Damn her and those so-called men who are supposed to be our fathers. Fuck the three of them. We’ll find a way. We always do, don’t we?

Heaving a long sigh, I straighten up. “Goodnight, Ax, I’m going to try to do better. And try to keep our house from being taken away from us. That’s one of at least ten reasons I’m still doing this sucky club thing.” I kiss his forehead and drag my tired ass into bed, throwing my clothes on the floor, and crawl into bed without the bath I’m too drained to take.



“WHAT THE HELL!” I yell, rolling over on my back, and lurching straight up in bed with loud bagging assaulting my ear drums.

“Wake up, sleepy head! Wake up!” Axel screams at the top of his lungs, banging his hand against a pot.

“Axel, stop it!!” I yell over his nonstop stream of noise. I snatch the pot out of his hands and flop back on the bed. “Go get dressed. I’ll make breakfast.”

“You’re late. I’m already dressed, Lex. You need to get your ass up.”

“Axel, watch your mouth,” I growl. Clutching the offending pot I jump out of bed and get a good look at him. “Shit—you better not repeat that,” I say, heading to the bathroom with him behind me. “Go change your shoes. You can’t wear those today, you have gym today.”

“All right, but I’m wearing them tomorrow.”

“Fine, your choice.” I put the pot on the closed toilet seat and turn on the faucet. “Are your brothers up?” I bend over the sink, splash some cold water over my closed eyelids and wash my face with my foaming soap wash.

“Yeah. They’re downstairs playing *Call of Duty*.”

What the fuck. I forget about the soap on my face and open my eyes to scream downstairs at those assholes and remember too late as my eyes burn and sting. “Axel,” I growl trying to wash the soap out. “Go—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I’m going, sneakers.”

“Thank you.” This does not bode well for the rest of the day if this is how it starts. Late and two eyes full of burning soap. I grab a towel off the rack and dry my face. I squeeze an excessive amount of toothpaste on my brush, brush my teeth, grab my hairbrush, and put my hair up into a high ponytail.

Spin around, pull down my underwear, and plop down on the toilet

“Damn it!”

Nothing confirms it’s going to be one of those days, like sticking your ass in a cold metal pot to take a piss. I shake my head and knock it on the floor, raise the seat, and take the piss with a relieved sigh. The best thing that’s happened to me since I was ripped out of my sleep. Sometimes it’s the joys of the littlest things that keep me sane. Look on the bright side... no piss running down my leg.

After rushing to my room, pulling a pair of jeans on, shoving my feet in a pair of sneakers, and throwing on a purple t-shirt, I rush downstairs to make breakfast. I walk past the living room glad to see it’s empty, walk into the kitchen, and pull up short when I see Drew behind the stove, Ryan eating a waffle, and Axel with an almost empty plate of eggs and toast.

“Waiting...what’s going on here? Am I sleepwalking and dreaming?”

“No dream,” Drew says, taking a big bite of toast with an egg on it. “I made Axel breakfast.”

“Wow. I didn’t have to ask you to do it. What’s going on, what did you do?” I look around the room for something—anything out of place.

“Just say thank you,” he says, looking my way. “It’s a peace offering.”

“Thank you.” I walk up beside him and give him a one-arm hug. “This mean we’re good?”

“For now.”

“I’ll take that.” I smile, bumping his hip with mine and he bumps me back. Anything’s better than getting into yet another argument with him. Besides, I felt bad for the one last night, seeing as he made some good points. I’m skating too close to shit you shouldn’t do that will get you locked up and have your siblings ripped away from you and put into foster care.

“We’re late, let’s go,” I say. They all get up and I grab my keys while they grab bags, and head to the car.

“Shotgun.” Axel runs in front of Drew before he touches the door.

“Nice try.” He smiles, grabs the back of his jacket, and ushers him into the back seat next to Ryan.

“Not fair!” Axel pouts.

“When your feet can touch the floor you’ll be up here. Now buckle up in your booster seat.”

I try not to smile. I start the car and drive. “We’re all going to see Grandpa this weekend. No ifs and or buts. Drew, Ryan—it’s been a while. Almost a month is too long. We gotta do better. At least one of us a week. I missed his call last night. He sounded like he missed seeing us.”

“I doubt it,” Ryan says. “We went to see him once and it was like seniors gone wild in there. Gramps was in the thick of it, the time of his life. I was proud.”

“Grandpa parties? I thought he had no hips?” Axel says.

My lips twitch at the shock in his voice. “He had a hip replacement. His hips work fine.”

“I was at the senior’s gone wild party.” Drew smiles. “He gave us a shot of rum he smuggled in.”

“Can I go wild with Grandpa and have a shot too?” Axel asks, fidgeting with his seat belt.

“No,” we all say at once.

He throws his body back, arms folded mumbling, “Everyone gets to party but me.”

I turn my head to Drew. “He did not. I’ve hardly ever seen him take a drink when he lived with us. You expect me to believe he let you two impressionable delinquents drink with him?”

“You don’t know everything about Grandpa,” Ryan says.

Drew scoffs. “He probably knows you’re a Debby downer. Fun only happens on your say so and it’s usually mediocre fun at best.” He smirks at me. “That’s why he does the real fun shit with us. Sometimes he’s chill as fu—“ I clear my throat loudly and he stops himself and looks behind him at Axel. “He’s fun, you know.”

“I called Mom. She’s coming to visit,” Axel says, as natural as ever. As if it’s a normal occurrence for her to do visits.

“What?” The three of us freeze in motion and say in disbelief. His eyes dart around at us, lips pressed together tight.

“What the hell, Axel.” Drew shifts to get a better look at Axel behind him.

I put my hand on Drew’s leg to stop him from saying something that will make Axel shut down and stop talking, but glance back at him. Sometimes it’s hard for him to control his emotions and understand certain things, thanks to dear old mom. Her occasional drinking and smoking habit coupled with the abandonment issue she left him with. “Why would you do that, Axel? When?”

He looks away, out the window. “I was scared when you didn’t answer your phone. I saw it in Drew’s phone.”

“How did you even know which number was hers?” Drew asks him.

“Cunt. That’s your other name for her.”

Ryan turns his head and laughs. And Drew nods. “Yeah... he’s not wrong.”

Christ. I shake my head, trying my hardest not to laugh, and oh shit! I slam on the brakes as I run the red light, and miss the tail light of a car in front of us. The guy rightfully yells out his window, “Watch where you’re fucking going!”

“Hey!” I yell back. “Take it easy, I’m sorry!”

Really sorry when I hear, *Whoop-Whoop*. “Pull over.” Just fucking great. This is all I need. I should have called in a sick

day for everyone and stayed in bed.

“Hoo, are we going to jail!” Axel bounces in his seat excitedly. “That would be cool to tell my friends. We’re going to get to ride in a police car.”

Wish I could see a bright side. No such luck for me. I pull over and look in the rearview mirror at Axel. “No one’s going to jail. At least I hope not today.”

“Speak for yourself.” Drew smirks.

Ryan smirks back at him. “If we’re lucky. Too many minutes left in the day for you, Drew. I’ll give you two minutes after he walks over here when you open your mouth.”

Drew flips him the middle finger while I pull out my information. “Language.” I push his hand down. He just rolls his eyes. “You guys know the drill, keep your mouths shut, Drew.” Which gets me another eye roll. “Hands where he can see them at all times and don’t move. I’ll do all the talking.”

“Why do we have a drill? There isn’t a fire.” Axel scrunches up his face.

“We’re driving while black,” Drew says. “We don’t feel like being shot today because we’re not white.”

“Is he going to shoot us?” Axel’s voice pitches high.

“Drew, shut up,” Ryan yells at him. “No one’s getting shot, Axel.”

“But you and Drew have a white dad. You should tell the cop.”

“Our sperm donor father is white. Doesn’t count with us. A lighter shade, but we are as black as you and Lex.” He turns his head to Axel and gives him a reassuring smile. Like the ones he used to give before all his angsty brooding. “We’ll be fine. No one’s getting hurt. Later I’ll explain it all to you.”

This is the Drew I need every day.

“License and registration please,” the officer says in a deep, clear voice.

“Here you go, Officer. I have it ready for you.” I turn my head away to look up at him. My eyes widen a fraction, staring into the smiling face of none other than Holden’s brother.

“Which is always appreciated, Ms. Brooks.”

“It’s good to see you again...Officer James.” I give him a genuine smile, relieved to see a friendly face and also hoping because of it, he’ll let us off with a warning.

“I’m going to run these and I’ll be right back. I’m sure you’re aware you ran a red light, seeing as you had a rather colorful exchange of words with the other driver.”

“It’s been a crazy morning. I’m late getting my brother to school.”

“Oh yeah, these your brothers?” He smiles even more, showing his pearly whites that make me flash back to my inappropriate thoughts about him last night. He bends down tilting his head more toward the back of the car. “Hey, guys.”

“Do you have a real gun? You kill people? You going to kill us?”

“Axel!” Oh my god. My head whips around giving him a death stare, mumbling under my breath, “Probably going to get that ticket now.”

“Wow, no, you’re safe. Both of you. I’ve never killed anyone, Axel. I only arrest the bad guys who break the law.”

“That’s what they all say after shots are fired. I’m sure you know what I’m talking about,” the pain in my ass on my right doesn’t say low enough to be missed.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” Noah says to Drew, who was glaring at him and doesn’t look in the least bit contrite for his uncalled-for comment.

I turn my head and mouth *shut up* to him.

“I said, we’re already late. Can you hurry this up—Officer whatever your name is.”

“Teenagers.” I shrug with a weak smile.



“Ah-ha.” The corner of his lip turns up to what I try to convince myself is a smile instead of a sneer. “I’ll be right back. Wouldn’t want to keep you any longer than I have to.”

I nod watching him walk to his car. “What the hell, Drew?” I push the side of his leg with my hand. He just shrugs like it’s nothing. God help me...

“Way to go, Drew.” Ryan sits forward and pats him on the shoulder. “You might hit a personal record of pissing the most people off in less than twenty-four hours including people who don’t even know the real ass you can be. Congrats.”

“Shut up.”

“Everyone shut up. He’s coming back. And if we get a ticket you’re paying for it, Mr. Oh So Not Helpful.”

“Whatever,” he mumbles.

Officer James comes back with a paper in his hand and my ID. He doesn’t have to say it. I already know before he says, with a smile, “Unfortunately I do have to give you a ticket.” He hands it to me and puts one hand on the hood of my car.

“A ticket with a smile. Thanks, Officer.” I say with only a slight amount of sarcasm.

“Sorry, cameras. And Lexi, can I call you Lexi?” I don’t know why but I nod my head and smile back at him with his increasingly irresistible smile. “It’s Noah.”

“Well, *Officer Noah*, now I’m way past late. Gotta get the young ones to school.”

“You know I wouldn’t mind escorting you there, make sure nothing else stops you from getting to where you need to go. Young minds need all the educational stimulation they can get.”

“Educational stimulation.” I laugh. “Oh wow. I think we’re good.” I put the car in drive and signal.

“If you’re sure?” He steps back looking better than he did a day before in his blues, and his smile mischievous but less so than his brothers...almost sweet.

“Hey!” Drew calls to Noah, looking through my window. “Is this how you talk to all your roadside pullovers, *Officer Noah*? Skirting the line of inappropriate behavior and the law?” He waves the ticket obnoxiously across my chest at Noah as I drive off.

“My life,” I sigh, not even looking back to see the look on his face at my pain in the ass brother.

*Five*



NOAH

“Then the little punk says, ‘Is this how you talk to all your roadside pullovers, *Officer Noah*? Skirting the line between inappropriate behavior and the law’ and waves the ticket at me.”

“You upset because he was right, or because you’re the worst? You couldn’t get a date on your own if your life depended on it it seems.” Miranda stops at the stop sign to wait for an old man with a walker to cross.

“You really need to stop underestimating me. I have a foolproof plan to get her to go out with me.”

“Are you going to beg? Please don’t.”

“No. I have this.” I show her Lexi’s license I accidentally forgot to hand it back to her.

“You’ve embarrassed yourself enough for one day.” She chuckles, driving off. “Let me hook you up with a date before I laugh you out of town with this sorry attempt at having game.”

“Miranda, Miranda, I got this. By the end of the day, I’m going to make you regret doubting me.”

“I doubt that. And I thought you weren’t that interested after you found out who her family was.”

“Who doesn’t have some unsavory characters in their family? From what my aunt says it seems like her mother is not in their lives much.”

“Hmm, *much*.” A disturbing the peace call comes in and we turn in that direction. “On our way.”

“You said it yourself I don’t have to marry her. All I’m going to do is go out on a date with her.” I tap my hand on the dash. “Her brothers didn’t seem so bad. Nothing I can’t handle.”

“Mhmm.”

“What?”

“You can stop trying to rationalize it. You want to go out with this girl despite your better judgment.”

The downside of a partner who knows you so well. She can see through my excuses. I shouldn’t want to go out with this girl. Seems like a lot of trouble, trouble I’ve tried to stay away from. She could be more excitement than I need in my life but I think she’s cute, and she seems fun. The short encounters I’ve had with her she’s made me smile more than anyone else I’ve dated.

“If you do get that date, I hope it’s a great one-and-done deal.”

“Why?”

“Call it woman’s intuition.”

“Tell your intuition to take the day off. I know what I’m doing.”

“Sure you do.”



### *Lexi*

“Shauna, can you get off my couch and use a napkin? You’re getting sweet and sour sauce all over it.” She is such a mess. I just cleaned this place and she comes in to help mess it back up again as usual.

“I’m allowed a break. I helped you clean.”

“Throwing your empty soda bottle and candy wrapper in the trash can isn’t helping. It’s what you should do when you’re a visitor. It’s what you should do period.”

“You know I might start siding with Drew, Debbi Downer.”

“Sometimes you’re worse than my brothers. Bite me.”

“Mm...don’t tempt me now.” She laughs and bites into her messy sandwich.

“Shut up and don’t get sauce on the ticket!” I pick it up before it’s an unreadable mess. He sure does have nice handwriting. Clean and sharp. Usually, I can hardly make out what these things say. Noah James...cute cop with an even cuter smile.

“Why are you smiling? It’s a ticket, not a check. Your hard-earned money is coming out of your pocket, not going in.”

“I wasn’t smiling. I was admiring his penmanship.”

“Penmanship, you have got to be kidding me.” She laughs. “How good does this guy look?”

“Just eat your sandwich and leave me alone.” I sit down on the couch beside her where a stack of unopened, unpaid bills waits for me.

“No seriously. How fucking good did he look? Was he like G.I. Joe muscles bulging out of his tight blue uniform, mouth-watering pecks of popping steel, soak your panties wet? If that’s what it is then I can maybe see the smile ‘cause you know I don’t do cops and they sure as hell don’t do me.”

“What you’re describing seems unreal and creepy. He looks nothing like that. He is hella fine though.”

“Well tell the rest of the story then cause this seems more than a run-of-the-mill red light ticket from an asshole cop.” She wipes her mouth, turning to me.

I debate telling her about meeting him in the store because it’s Shauna. Sometimes she has a way of making things seem a bit seedy, as innocent as they are she tends to over-exaggerate.

Why not? Nothing wrong with admitting I'm attracted to this guy I probably won't see again anyway.

"This morning was actually the second time I met him."

"Really? Go on, I'm intrigued already."

"I was at the store yesterday. I literally walked right into his chest. The steel is real. So real that it almost knocked me off my feet, if he hadn't been quick enough to catch me. He's Holden's brother."

"Get out! Holden, Holden?"

"Yes. His brother's a cop."

"Wow. He's hot. Haven't gotten around to him yet. I'll probably have to make an appointment."

"I'm sure he can fit you in between lunch and a smoke break. I'll put in a good word for you."

"When we were in high school he was like the hottest thing. And he didn't even go to our school."

"Probably because he spent most of his time in juvie, his reputation precedes him."

"Shit, and now his brother's a hot cop. Best of both worlds. Dirty and nice...one will get you all dirty and the other will clean you up and lick you down, yas."

"No." I shake my head trying to get rid of the sexy image before it plants itself. "No one is going to get dirty or lick anyone down."

"You are no fun. You got to learn to live a little. Let your imagination run wild."

"I don't have time for a fantasy," I whine. "As you can see I have a stack of bills in front of me, which I'm behind on. I'm afraid to open them. The mortgage is two months past due. If I don't work up enough money to pay everything in about two to three months, the bank is going to start foreclosure proceedings. I can't let that happen. This was my grandfather's house. He signed it over to me so they wouldn't take it away from us when he went into assisted living. He wanted this

house to stay in the family. I can't be the one who loses it. If that happens, then he might as well have given it to Vanessa. Before the ink was dried a for sale sign would have been on the little grass we have out front."

"Isn't there anyone you can borrow from? One of those payday loans?"

"Hell no. They're as bad as a loan shark. Vanessa racked up like ten grand with those things, in Grandpa's name. Ten turned into almost twenty thousand with the interest. You know how hard he had to work to pay it back after she disappeared for a whole year? I worked two after-school jobs to help him out. He didn't want me to but I felt bad watching him work so hard for her fuck up, once again."

"Sorry, but your mom is a bitch."

"You're not wrong." It's sad when you don't even feel a tiny bit insulted when your mother is called out of her name. I'm not the least bit offended on her behalf.

"I don't have much but if you need it, I could lend you a thousand from my savings. It's not much judging by that stack of envelopes but getting money always makes me feel better. Especially when it's not coming with someone's hands up my skirt."

"I hear you. But no. I'll try to get more over time at the store and do some more nights at the club, slapping hands from under my skirt." I sigh, pushing the offending stack of envelopes on the floor, and replacing them with my legs.

"Lexi, if I had it, I would give it to you." She places my feet on her legs and rubs the top.

"I know. And you know I wouldn't accept charity. And another big ass bill to pay back."

The bell rings and I groan. "I hope it's not someone coming to collect money I don't have."

"Look on the bright side, it could be something good."

"With my luck this morning—doubt it," I say, opening the door, and seeing the last person I ever expected to lay eyes on.



“Isn’t there a rule about officers harassing law-abiding citizens?”

“Sure, but I don’t see any around.” He tilts his head to the side. “And it’s Noah.”

“All right, Noah, why are you showing up at my door unannounced?”

The sides of his mouth turn up, and he hands me my license. I thought he gave this back to me with the ticket and registration. It was a lot going on with Drew and Axel’s mouths actively working to ensure I got a ticket.

“Seriously, I don’t know how I didn’t notice. Thanks.” Nice of him to come here to give it back in person. “I appreciate it.”

“Instead of thanks, how about you let me take you out?”

Didn’t see that request coming. Okay. Hot cop wants to take me out! Okay...this is the point when I should stop acting like I’m mute and turn him down. Right? Of course, I’m saying no—in a non-offending, don’t give him a reason to look around and give me another ticket way.

From the corner of my eye, Shauna scurries quietly over to the door, out of sight from Noah, making kissing faces, crossing her arms, and running them along the side of her body. I smile and shake my head making sure I keep my eyes on Noah. “I can’t.”

“You can’t. Why? Are you married? Boyfriend? Life-long commitment and pledge to no dating?” He leans in closer from across the threshold, leaning a hand on the door frame, unduly scrutinizing me in a way that has me mentally shifting back. The most important thing you can do dealing with a cop with rapid-fire questions like this is to show unwavering certainty.

“Are you going to slap cuffs on me if I answer wrong? Last I knew, I had the right to turn down a date.” Even if you are very cute leaned up against my door, looking too good and stuff I shouldn’t care about. Real good.

“You have a right to say no. I have a right to inquire why that would be.” He shrugs. “It’s in my nature. Habit and all.”

“Well then, it’s in my nature to say, thank you again, would you please step off my porch? Unless you have another ticket to hand me.”

He smiles. “It’s like that?”

“It’s like that.” I smile back, waving my fingers at him.

“You have a good day, Lexi,” he says, backing off the steps. “I’ll see you around, and tell your friend across from you behind the door, good day to her too.”

I close the door, grinning, and I look at Shauna. “What was that?”

“Girl, you know what that was. He could of at least let you off with a warning instead of a ticket for all the eye fucking he was doing at the door.”

“There was no eye fucking. Just me nicely turning down a date.”

“Well, how could you resist the S.W.A.T style date invite?” She laughs.

“He wasn’t that bad. I was just caught off guard by him asking me out.”

“You looked like Bambi with shotgun barrels between your eyes.” She sits back on her spot on the couch. “Earlier you should have led with he was hot. I’m not into cops...but yeah you should have taken that date, to see how much you could corrupt him. Bring him to the club. Give him a real, real happy ending.” She picks her soda bottle up and takes a drink. “It’s five o’clock somewhere and this needs a hit.”

“Perfect reason a cop is another trouble I don’t need. If he found out what goes on at the club, the only date I’ll get from him is behind bars for my next court appearance. After he clicks shiny silver bracelets around my wrist.” Maybe if I wasn’t doing the things I was doing things would be different and I could say yes to that date.

Who am I kidding; even if I did what the hell was legal, what would a man like that do with a ready-made family of responsibility waiting to weigh him down? From what I

remember with Vanessa and any other man that's ever come across that door, they don't stay for long. Just long enough to make us believe things might be all right before they shattered those illusions with overwhelming reality and more trouble than we had before they came into our life.

*Six*



“R yan,” I say into the phone pressed against my ear and shoulder while breaking down a display near the front of the store. “I need you to tell Drew to meet me in front of the store when I get off. And he needs to get Axel from school today. I’m working later so we can go to Grandpa’s early. Vanessa called and left a message telling me she’s stopping by for a visit soon.”

“Did you tell her don’t? No one wants to see her.”

“I would if she had bothered to answer. She sent me a text. She’s up to something. She said she had a chat with Grandpa and we need to talk family business.”

“What business? The only time she comes around is if she needs a place to crash for a hot second or she wants money or both. And every time she comes around, she only upsets Axel.”

“I know.” The last time she showed up out of the blue, it was with a bunch of promises no one was buying but Axel. She swore up and down how much she was a changed person and she wanted to stick around and be a better mother. Even though I knew better, there was a tiny glimmer of hope she was telling the truth not just for Axel, but for Ryan and Drew.

They act tough, especially Drew. She’s their mother and you always hope you can have that life you see on TV. You can’t help hoping you can be a normal family and not have the responsibility of adult problems weighing you down day in

and day out. “He was worked up for weeks. His insomnia kicked back in and he peed the bed for a week.”

“And we had to get Grandpa to have a parent-teacher conference with his teachers when he started acting out in school. When Drew finds out, he’s going to be pissed.”

“I know. I’ll let you tell him about our darling mother.”

“You’re the oldest, you tell him. Bye.”

“Coward.” I smile and slip my phone into my pocket.

“Who’s a coward?”

“Officer Noah.” I turn around and face him. “You’re eavesdropping on a private citizen’s conversation. How rude.”

“No eavesdropping. A public place you chose to have a conversation in which I happened upon. Now, who’s the coward?”

“None of your business. I broke no laws today. No need for questioning from you. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to work.” I smile, turning my back on him to finish taking down a spring display to replace it with a beach-themed summer one with beach balls and umbrellas.

“You know I can help you with that. That’s what I’m here for.”

“Don’t you have work to do?” I say, looking over my shoulder and noticing he’s not wearing his uniform but in a tight-fitted dark blue t-shirt and dark blue jeans. So much for the uniform doing the work to make him look as good as he does. Dammit.

“My day off. I’m here to serve and assist. I’m here at your disposal for the next two hours.”

“You have got to be kidding?” I stop what I’m doing and look at him skeptically. “You’re going to spend your day off working here today?”

“Why not? You’re here.”

“Because this is my job. You have one! And it’s your day off, you have nothing better to do with your time?” I could

think of a million things I have to do on my days off that I rarely get because I need that overtime money, someone's always sick or something is happening only I can take care of.

He laughs. "So it's a bad thing to help my aunt out. It's a family-owned store. I'm family."

"Your brother doesn't work on his days off even with overtime."

"I don't know if I should be offended, or concerned about the working conditions here. Should I have a talk with my aunt? You sound like a disgruntled employee unhappy with your position."

"I didn't say that! Oh my god, I can't believe you." I put my hands on my hips, frustrated by this conversation already. "Really, why are you here?"

He smiles. "To help and serve. My aunt says I'm taking orders from you today."

"Then go find something to do besides harassing me, Noah."

"I will. Even though I wasn't harassing you. See you next time, Lex."

"My name is short enough. You don't need to remove a letter. And where the hell are you going?" I call to his back as he walks away.

"I have things to do today, it's my day off."

"What the hell? You said you were working here today."

"I changed my mind. You're right. Why should I work on my day off." He grins.

"You jerk. You weren't really going to work here, were you?"

"Nah. But that was fun, wasn't it? You're even cuter when you're all worked up." He waves, sauntering away.

"Uh! Maybe Holden is the better brother after all," I call after him which only makes him laugh. "Men!"



“GUYS, we were supposed to leave an hour ago.” I throw my hands up where I’ve been waiting in front of the store, watching Ryan walking toward me holding Axel’s hand.

“We’re late. Let’s just go,” he grumbles with an attitude like he’s the one that’s been standing out here waiting for them to finally get here.

“Hey, Ax. Open the door for him,” I say, looking at Ryan. “Where’s Drew?”

“I don’t know. He said he’d meet us there.”

“That’s all he said? You didn’t ask why?”

“Am I his keeper, Lexi? He said he had shit to do.” He flings the passenger side door open and drops down in the seat.

“Watch your mouth,” I tell him, putting on my seat belt. I pull out of the spot and glance over at him while Axel talks about his teacher yelling at the class. By the firm set of his lips, I’m guessing he knows more than what he’s saying about Drew. And he’s not going to say. They have this thing about holding each other’s secrets from when they were small. But...we have enough secrets in this family. We don’t need any more to add to our situation, and one’s that involve Drew can go from bad to worse in the blink of an eye. “Can you at least tell me he’s not doing anything he’ll get in serious trouble for?”

“Lexi...” He sighs. “Drew’s smart, he shouldn’t get in any serious trouble.”

“So not letting me feel better, Ry.” He shrugs, the corner of his lips turning up. I just mimic his ‘that’s all I got for you’ expression and hope for the best. I do the only thing I can do these days short of tranquilizing and locking my brothers up, hoping they’re being careful and coming home safe.

“Hi, Caroline,” I say to Grandpa’s nurse, seeing her a few doors away from his room on the second floor.



“Hey, Lexi, Ryan.” She smiles and pinches Alex’s cheek. “And look at you. You’re getting so big.”

“How’s he today?” I ask her.

She looks at Axel and Ryan with a frown, like she’s hesitant to say in front of them. But Drew, me, and Ryan, we don’t have any secrets when it comes to Gramps. He’s the one thing we all have to be on the same page about, especially with my mother lurking around. Not with Axel though. “Ax, here, take this.” I give him three singles. “And go back to the end of the hall down there and get a soda or whatever you want from the vending machine, okay?”

“For real, anything?” He smiles at the money in his hand. “Can I get the giant candy bars?”

“No.”

“But you said anything.” He scowls at me, eyebrows pushed together.

“Anything but that.”

“So you were lying.”

“So you want me to change my mind and take my dollars back?”

“I’ll get a soda.”

“Good choice.” I shake my head, amused by his smart mouth as he skips past us.

Caroline chuckles. “He is too much.”

“You have no idea how much sometimes. Gramps, how’s he today?”

She sobers, schooling her face like nurses do when they’re about to tell you something you might not want to hear. “Today is not a great day for your grandfather.”

“I thought he was getting better? The doctor said with time and physical therapy it was possible to get back close to where he was,” Ryan says, stepping closer to me and Caroline.

“Yes, that’s true for some, as his doctor told you. It doesn’t happen for all patients who have suffered a stroke like Mr. Grayson. And as you know, he’s had a few mini strokes not too long ago.”

“I know but the last time we came to visit he looked like he was doing better. He knew who we were for the entire visit...two hours we talked and he told jokes. The ones only he and Axel think are hilarious.”

“That was a good day for him. As you know they aren’t all that way. And since the last mini-stroke, his memory issues are increasing. His range of mobility hasn’t decreased but is still the same. I’m not telling you anything I’m sure his doctor hasn’t already discussed with you and told you to expect and... if he keeps having the mini-strokes.”

“Yes. We were just hoping.” I look at Ryan whose arms are folded, with his head down. Damn.

“I’m going in. Axel, let’s go,” I call down the hall to him. When he gets to us, Ryan starts walking into Gramps’s room. He puts his hand on Axel’s shoulder, leaving me alone to talk to Caroline.

“I’m sorry I don’t have better news for you all.” She sighs.

“It is what it is, right? Thanks, Caroline.”

“No problem, darling.”

“Oh, yeah, if my mother shows up here will you let me know? She’s...” Gosh, what do I say?

“I’ll make sure to tell the rest of the staff when I’m not on shift to contact you.” She touches my arm and gives me that look. The look I’ve come to expect from people after they meet my mother a few times, and find out what she’s really like.

I shake off the sadness of knowing my grandpa’s health is deteriorating and he won’t be the same again. And god knows how much time we might have left with the only real parent we’ve known. No time for this, I bat back the telltale signs of impending tears at the corner of my eyes and put on the biggest smile I can muster for my brothers and most of all the

man who has always tried to do his best to take care of us when no one else would or even cared to try.

“Hey, Gramps!” I walk into the room with a big smile to fit the laughter in there from the joke he was telling.

“Vanessa, you’re here.” He looks at me, smile faltering.

“Grandpa, don’t be silly, that’s not Mom. You know that’s Lexi,” Axel says.

I step closer and take his hand, still smiling. “Caroline told me you’re the life of the party in here.” I lean in and hug him.

He tenses for a second but soon he relaxes in my arms and I pull back looking into his eyes. Something flashes in them, like a spark of recognition, and his smile is back and brighter than before. “Of course, I know my granddaughter. I’m so happy to see you, Lexi.”

“You don’t know how happy I am to see you, too, Grandpa.” So happy I nod, holding back tears of happiness and sadness mixed together for the strongest, kindest man I know.

“Hey, one of you is missing.” He uses his right hand to push a button on his chair to recline back.

“Drew had to do some stuff at school, Gramps,” Ryan says, leaning back on Gramps’s bed, across from the recliner he’s in.

“Boy, who are you kidding? I may not be as sharp as I used to be but school is the last place Drew is. He’s a smart one but I had to drag him kicking and screaming to school when he was younger. More like he’s probably with a girl or getting into something he shouldn’t.” He laughs. “He’s more like his mother than he’d like to admit.”

“Don’t say that around him.” Ryan smirks.

“Oh please. I told him that myself the last time he was here. He spent the day with me and we went out to the gardens.”

“Drew was here, by himself? When?” I ask, wondering if he’s confused and not remembering right.

“Mmm...damn the mind you know, but it’s on my calendar over there. It’s the same day the doc came to see me.” He points to the calendar and it says two weeks ago Doc and Drew, written in someone else’s neat writing.

Wow, he was here. “Who wrote this for you?”

“Caroline. She writes all my appointments and my visits. In case I forget something important. She’s a good woman.”

“She is a great nurse.” I’m just wondering why Drew didn’t tell us he came to see Grandpa. What’s going on with you, Drew?

We stay until it gets dark out and Grandpa starts to look a bit tired and Axel gets restless and whines for food. Ryan takes Axel down to the car to wait while I say bye to Grandpa and ask him about Vanessa.

“Grandpa, did my mother call you?”

“No? Your mother?”

“Your mother’s been gone a long time, Vanessa.” He smiles up at me from his bed. “I loved your mother. I still do. No one else in the world for me but her.”

“You did. Gr—” I stop myself, and go along so I don’t upset him. “She was great, so kind.”

She was.” He sighs. “I wish you could find someone like that, Vanessa. Leave these men alone. Lexi’s father is no good, listen to me, please.” He squeezes my hand, pleading with the wrong person.

How I wish she had listened to you, Grandpa.

“Let me help you. I have something for you and Lexi. It’ll help you. There, pull out the drawer.”

Okay.” I pull out the drawer next to his bed and look inside. There’s only a piece of scrunched-up paper with what looks like some drawings on it and fifty dollars.

“Take it. You’ll need it.”

“Gr—I’m not taking your money.”

“Take it. You’ll need it. What are you going to do when I’m gone, Vanessa? Live on the streets with my granddaughter and those babies in your belly? Take it!”

“No.” I shake my head.

“Look at me!” He grabs my hand holding on so tight it pinches. “I’m not what I used to be but I’ve always prepared for this day.” More agitated than I’ve ever seen him, he says, “Promise me you’ll take what’s in that drawer and keep it in a safe place, promise, that paper is important!”

“Okay, okay, Grandpa!” I lower my voice and rub the back of his wrinkled hand to calm him down. “Please keep your voice down. It’s late and you’ll wake the others up.”

“Promise you’ll keep that paper in a safe place, it’s worth more than you know. It’s to help you and the kids.”

I nod my head, take the paper and push it into my back pocket. He loosens his hold on my hand. His face goes slack like all his energy is suddenly drained as I ease him back gently onto his pillow.

“Keep it safe. Fix the floorboard in my room, it’ll help,” he says, closing his eyes.

“Sure, Grandpa. I will.” I put my hand on his chest and kiss his cheek. I pull back and watch his breathing even out as he falls off to sleep, staring down at him feeling helpless and overwhelmed by it all, wishing I could turn back time for him, and keep him with us.

*Seven*



“**W**hat are we going to eat? I’m hungry,” Axel says, as I turn the key in the lock and open the door for them.

“I’ll make something for you.”

“Why couldn’t we get McDonald’s like I want?” He whines. “I don’t get the candy I want and no McDonalds. This sucks.”

Ryan laughs. “A lot of things suck, Ax. Get used to it.”

I lightly slap his shoulder with the back of my hand. “Don’t listen to him, Axel, and watch your—“ I hear the high-pitched shriek no one wants to *ever* hear.

“Oh my god! Axel, you’re getting so big.”

“Mommy!” Axel smiles and runs to her as she bends down and opens her arms to him.

I turn around slowly looking at the last person I want to see standing in our kitchen. Big ass smiles on her face like it’s any other normal day for her to be here, jeans so tight it’s like they’re painted on, mustard tube top under a short thin leather jacket, and ankle-high stiletto booties.

“Ax, soon I won’t be able to recognize you. You’re getting so tall and handsome just like your brothers. You’re almost a man.”

“Lexi, Mommy says I’m big and strong like a man.”

“Except he’s not, Vanessa,” Ryan says emotionless, leaning on the door frame in the kitchen, arms folded.

“Lexi, Ryan.” She stands with a hand on Axel’s shoulder. “Aren’t you going to give your mother a hug?”

Ryan shakes his head and snickers. “Naw, I’m good. You, Lex?”

“I’m good.” I’d rather stick my finger in a snake’s mouth. I stand a better chance of not being bitten. After a few go-arounds with Vanessa, you learn your lesson the hard way. Something I wish didn’t have to happen to Axel but is inevitable for him with her as his mother. And by the looks of the mess in the fucking kitchen, it looks like she’s on track to disappoint again. I can clearly see, with all the open cans and open cabinets, and coffee grounds scattered all over the counters, she’s not just here for a friendly visit.

“What are you doing here? Besides making a mess that I’ll have to clean up when you leave.”

“I told you I was coming, Lexi. And I promised Ax.”

“She did! I told you she would come and all of you said she wouldn’t. See.” He smiles brightly, with unsuspecting innocence and excitement.

“Yes, baby, Mommy always keeps her promises.”

“Since when!” Ryan scoffs, his anger slipping from his usual chill and relaxed demeanor. “What the hell are you doing here besides wrecking the place? We don’t have anything to give you. You can leave.”

“I’m your mother, Ryan. No one likes a freaking bratty kid. Drop the attitude.” She jabs a finger in his direction, forgetting her caring mother act for a hot second. “Especially after I came all this way to see you and make sure you were doing okay.” She smooths her hand over Axel’s hair, then walks toward Ryan with outstretched hands. “Come and give me a hug, I missed you.”

“Get real. No one wants a hug from you.” He backs up out of her reach.

“Stop being mean to her.” Axel glares at Ryan. “You’re going to make her leave again!”



Ryan huffs. “Whatever,” and walks away, dropping down on the living room couch. “You’ll figure her out soon enough, Ax.”

Oh god. She makes everything so much worse than it has to be. Thank god these little pop-ups are few and far between. How the hell did she even get in here? The last time she passed through she said she lost her keys. I guess she found them. Add new locks to the growing list of things that need to be fixed in this house. The first thing on the list of things to fix now is Axel. The longer she stays, the harder it’s going to be on him when she disappears and leaves without so much as a see-ya around kid.

“I need to talk to you. Outside.” I nod my head toward the door at her.

“Don’t let her leave, Lexi.” Axel stares at me with laser beams in his eyes.

Like I’m the one who’s going to hurt him, instead of our deadbeat mother. *Great!* “Axel, I’m just going to talk to her about something. Go sit with your brother. We’ll be back.”

I brush past her outside and she follows. “Cut the crap, we both know this isn’t a fucking social call, Vanessa,” I say to her, getting straight to the point. “What’d you want? What’re you looking for? Cash, we don’t have any.”

“Huh, how little you think of me. I wanted to visit my unfairly hostile children. While I was waiting for you to come home I remembered the last time I was here I forgot something. It’s a little disorganized in there.” She points over her shoulder to the door like the mess she made doesn’t matter. “But I will straighten it back up.”

She is unbelievable. Forgot something on her last *visit*... yeah right. More like something she forgot to steal. “You forgot four somethings...your fucking kids!”

“Lexi—“

“No.” I get up close to her and lower my voice so Axel won’t hear, getting a hold of my anger enough so I don’t

smack her. “You listen to me, I don’t know what you’re after and I don’t care. You’re not welcome here.”

“Says you?” She lifts her head, staring at me.

“Says any of us. If that not-in-anyway warm, welcome wasn’t made clear by Ryan and me.”

“Axel wants me here. I’m sure he’d be hurt by the way you’re treating me right now. So mean, Lex.”

I huff and roll my eyes. “That is exactly why you’re going to get your straggly ass out of here.”

“I’m not leaving. I came to visit my kids. I’m not going to disappoint Axel. Unlike you, who is going to break his heart if I leave. Is that what you want? An endless amount of tears?”

“Oh, you’re good. But I’m not that little girl anymore who you can manipulate with your guilt trips. You’re going to leave, but only after you take your stray alley cat ass back inside and spend some time with your youngest son. The only one who gives a damn about you and is still innocent enough to believe anything that snakes out of your lying lips. You’re going to lavish attention and praise on him like he’s the most wonderful boy in the world. You’re going to play games with him and listen to his stories and act like the mother you could *never* be and *never* were. For him, you’re going to give him that today.”

“And what if I don’t want to follow your orders, Lexi? You’re forgetting who’s the mother and who’s the child.”

“If you want to step foot in this house again or continue to receive the government money for the son you don’t even live with or take care of...you know what you’re going to do.”

That catches her attention. She straightens up, lips pressed together. Axel has a few issues and every month she gets a little check deposited into her account. We look the other way and say nothing, as long as she doesn’t bring her troubles our way. Even though we could use that money.

“You wouldn’t do that. It would also put all of us at risk. Well, Ryan, Drew, and Axel. They’re minors.”

“I would love to introduce you to the new guy I’m dating. His name is Noah. Officer Noah James. I believe you’re acquainted with the back of his squad car. I’m sure he’d be more than happy to reacquaint you with it again.” I don’t know where the hell that came from or why the hell I would say it, but she is calling my damn bluff. She knows I wouldn’t make that call and run the risk of the city coming to get the boys. But for some reason, his name is the first that pops into my mind.

“You wouldn’t.”

“I wouldn’t?” I narrow my eyes at her, daring her to challenge me, even though I am lying through my teeth.

Before she can talk, my phone rings again. I silence her with a slash of my hand through the air. “I’m going to get that. Your ass better be out here when I get back.” I open the door with a tight smile looking at Ryan and Axel. I pull my phone out of my bag. I answer and it’s Rachel. Somehow they got locked out of the employee room with everyone else’s keys locked in there and their belongings in the lockers. They need my key. It’s one of those expensive locks she doesn’t want to break and replace. I don’t want to leave with Vanessa here but I have to.

“Ryan, come here.” I sling my bag across my shoulder. “I have to leave, but Vanessa is staying and she is going to pretend to be a halfway decent mother to Axel.”

“Why?”

“Because he needs that right now. If we kick her out it’ll make us the bad guys and her look like a sacrificial lamb. She’s going to take him to McDonald’s. You’re going to go with them. Listen to everything she tells him. You are not to take your eyes off of them for one second.”

“I got it.” He nods.

“Axel,” I call over to him across the room. “I’m going to the store. I’ll be back.”

“Is Mom still here?”

“Yep, and looks like she’s going to take you guys out to eat dinner at McDonald’s.”

“Yeah!”

I smile and go over to him and kiss him on the cheek. “See you later.” I walk outside to Vanessa and take twenty dollars out of my pants and shove it into her chest. “You’re going to take him to McDonald’s, buy him what he wants, come back here, hang out with him, and give him the best fucking afternoon you can before you leave. He better have a smile on his face when I get home.” I leave her standing at the door with the twenty crushed to her chest in her fist and drive to the store.



“THANKS FOR COMING down to open the door. I’m sorry you had to come back down here. I don’t know how they locked their keys inside.” Rachel shakes her head.

“Don’t worry about it.” I pick up two locks and ask, “Which one of these do you think I should get? I’m looking for something strong.”

“I know you were probably annoyed coming down here but that’s no reason to try and lock us in. I think a lesson was learned. I promise to keep the spare in my office.”

“No.” I laugh. “It’s for my house. An unwelcome guest with a key was at my house when I got home.”

“How unwelcome?” Brows furrowed, she takes one of the locks from my hand and looks at it. “Do you think you need to file a report with the precinct?”

“Nothing that serious. Just my mother being her usual self.”

“Oh. Well, I’d go with this one. Can’t go wrong with a bulldog deadbolt.”

“I guess not.” I take the lock and put the other one back with a sigh.

“Are you okay?”

And there’s that sympathetic bordering on pitiful tone from people who have had the misfortune of dealing with Vanessa. “I’m fine, Rachel.” I lie because I hate feeling like that kid again, the one who was ashamed of her mother and the life she was living and trying very unsuccessfully to hide her from her friends. “I just didn’t need to come home to her after visiting my grandfather.”

“He’s not doing any better?”

“No. But you know how that is... anyway.” I shrug. I don’t want to talk about Grandpa’s deteriorating health. “I’m going to go ring this up and figure out a way to get a stack of long wood into the back of my car.”

“Wood?”

“I’m going to replace a few broken planks on my porch before someone falls through it and breaks something.”

“And you know how to do this?” she asks with a touch of skepticism. “Sounds like something you should call a professional to do.”

“Anything with the word professional attached to it is too expensive for me.”

“If you don’t know what you’re doing in the long run it will cost you, even more, to properly fix on top of any mistakes you make.”

“Well, that’s a chance I’ll have to take. Besides, you can learn almost anything with a good YouTube video. I watched one and it didn’t seem too hard to try with the boys.”

“Oh, dear lord.” She puts her hand on her cheeks. “Sounds like a trip to the emergency room is in your future. How about I lend you the money to hire a professional carpenter?”

“Rachel, I can’t take your money. I don’t have the money for that, I don’t know when I’ll be able to pay you back.”

“But—“

“No.” I shake my head at even the idea of taking money from my boss and not being able to pay her back. She’s been too understanding already. Giving me days off when I’m supposed to be working, trading shifts to leave early on days I need to pick up Axel from school, or pretending she doesn’t notice all the times I’ve been late. I would be taking advantage of her kindness more than I already have. “No, but thank you. You’re the best.”

“I am the best. I’m glad we both agree on that.” She smiles, reminding me of Holden with her red hair and teasing playfulness. “So I have to keep up to that. When were you planning on fixing your porch?”

“On my day off.”

“Okay then, I’ll have someone over at your place to help you.”

“Rachel, I can’t afford it.” I groan.

“You already said that. This person won’t charge cash. All you have to do is pay them in food. Lunch, and they’ll supervise your work.”

“Who would do that? People don’t do things like that. They’d basically be working for free.”

“You will be paying them with a hot meal or two, depending on how long they stay to help. This person owes me big time.” She emphasizes, holding her hands up. “I’m cashing in my favor from them.”

“Rachel—“

“Don’t argue with your boss. I’ll have to write you up for being insubordinate. Now, the only thing I want to hear out of your mouth is thank you. Get yourself over there and pay for that lock so you can get home to those brothers you’re helping to raise.”

“I don’t know what to say. I’m going to pay you back some way.”

“I already told you what the payment is. So you make sure you invest some time in a finger-licking good YouTube

cooking video.” She smiles.

Lost for words at her kindness I just say, “Thank you,” in the most sincere way I can and squeeze her hand in gratitude. God knows what kind of disaster we were going to make without some help. A YouTube video can only take you so far, and there was a high chance of someone being rushed to the emergency room. I’m damn lucky she’s my boss for sure.

*Eight*





“Who’s your favorite aunt?”

“The only one I have on my mother’s side?” I say to her question instead of saying hello when I answer my phone.

“Of course I am.”

“Is that an answer to the only aunt on my mother’s side or my favorite?”

“Both. I know you’re getting ready to go on duty so I won’t keep you.”

“Okay.”

“Remember when you came by the store, tripping all over yourself trying to get a date with Lexi?”

“I wasn’t tripping on anything, but go on.”

“Sure you weren’t,” she unconvincingly agrees. “You were just very interested in her. So I guessed you would also be very interested in helping her, right?”

“Sure. What does she need help with?”

“I’m happy to hear you say that. I was counting on it. I secured you a lunch date and possibly a dinner date.”

“How did you do that? I offered to help her the other day and she wasn’t even trying to hear it.” I smile, remembering our last interaction.

“Luck would have it for you, but not for her, she needs a handyman to help her fix her porch steps. Can you believe she was going to watch one of those YouTube videos and attempt to fix it herself with help from her little brothers?”

“That sounds like a disaster waiting to happen and a possible trip to the ER.”

“That’s what I said! So she needs help, and you used to have that summer job at the construction company when you were in college. So I offered up your services.”

“So you want me to work for her? And when would I find time for this?”

“On your days off which just so happen to coincide with her days off. Isn’t that convenient for both of you?”

I chuckle at the amusement in her voice. “Yes, it is.” I do remember her porch needing some work when I went over there to give her back her ID. When she also turned down my invite for a date. “You sure she agreed to this knowing it was me that’s going to help her?”

“Well...sort of...”

“Aunt Rachel,” I mumble. “She doesn’t know you were talking about me, does she?”

“She didn’t ask. I simply told her I was calling in a favor and I’d send someone over to help her. She agreed. Payment will be giving you a meal or two for the time you are there to work. That’s it. She happily agreed.”

“Happily agreed, huh?”

“Yes, sir, Officer James. Now get your ass to work making these Philly streets safe. You can drop by and thank me whenever you want for helping you do what you couldn’t.”

“What’s that?”

“Closing the deal and getting you a date. Bye!”

I laugh, shaking my head at the phone in my hand.

“What was that about?” Miranda asks, next to me, in front of the locker room door in the police department.

“That was my Aunt Rachel. Apparently, she volunteered my services to Lexi. I help her fix a few broken planks on her porch and all it will cost her is one to two shared meals with me.”

“Well, will you look at that?”

“What?”

“Aunt Rachel has skills. Unlike you, Rachel is a playa for real.” She walks ahead of me.

“Hey, I have skills too.”

“Yeah...you keep telling yourself that.” She smiles, throwing a mock sympathetic look over her shoulder. “If it makes you feel better.”

“So annoying.” I huff, catching up with her.



“WHAT THE HELL are you doing here?” is the greeting I get standing in front of the door with a bag of donuts in one hand, and a cup holder with two cups of coffee in the other. Not what I was expecting but it could be worse. He didn’t slam the door in my face.

“Hello to you too, and good morning. I’m here to help fix the porch.”

He looks at me and tilts his head. “Aren’t you the cop who pulled us over the other day?”

“Yes, I am. Noah James.” I smile, hoping it’ll be an indication I’m not here on police business. I place the donut bag on the coffee cups in my other hand and hold out my hand to him. “You’re one of the brothers who were in the back of the car.”

“Is this some kind of trick?” He looks at my hand and then back up at me.

“No. Of course not. I’m really here to help with the porch.”

“Yo, Drew!” he says, without looking away from me. This feels almost like a role reversal. He’s the cop and I’m a suspect. It would almost be funny if I didn’t have doubts about being sent away with my bag of donuts and coffee, and striking out again before I even get the chance to see Lexi this time.

“What!” The other kid from the car walks up to the door, the one with the smart mouth and big attitude, and points to me. “What the hell is he doing here?”

“Same thing I said.” He shrugs. “Couldn’t be here for you, he’s not in uniform, no cuffs out.”

“Shut up, moron,” Drew says, standing by his brother who he closely resembles with their low cut dark curly hair. “Why the hell are you here? Doesn’t look like you’re here to arrest anyone.

“Really?” I say, brows raised. “Doesn’t it look like I’m here on a friendly visit? I brought donuts and coffee.” I hold them both up, feeling a little silly trying to explain and defend my presence to the juvenile interrogation squad.

“Really? The only time a cop shows up at your door without a call is if some shits going down, like did someone die?”

Geez. “I have no ulterior motives, guys.” Except for trying to get your sister to go out with me. “I’m actually expected here. I was invited.”

“Who would invite you here?” Drew scoffs, looking me up and down with obvious disdain.

“Your sister.” I try again for another pleasant smile.

“My sister doesn’t like you.”

Damn, way to be honest kid. But if I really thought that was the truth I wouldn’t be here.

“I thought we went over this at the unlawful traffic stop. When you tried to pick her up with that weak ass line you were trying to get her with.”

“It was not weak—look.” I stop, take a breath and remind myself this is a kid, I don’t need to get into an argument with. “Can you just please tell your sister I’m here?”

“Bro, it was weak, and a little pathetic for a cop,” the one who opened the door says.

“I wasn’t trying to pick her up. She ran the light and almost hit another car.”

“That’s why you stopped us, couldn’t be because we had some color in our skin?” the smart mouth one with all the attitude says.

“No. I was doing—“ Why am I letting this kid jerk me around, he’s so obviously trying to rile me up. “Can you just get your sister for me? I came to do a job.”

“Mmhmm. Yo, Lex! The blue fuzz is here. He’s trying to get into your pants again.”

“Hey!” I point my bag of donuts at him.

“I’m not lying, am I...” He shrugs walking away

His brother snickers. “I’m Ryan, and that’s my brother Drew.”

“Is he always this annoying?” I look after Drew sitting on the couch taking up a game controller.

“He’s my brother, I plead the fifth.” He smiles, a small dimple showing on his cheek.

I smile back and hand him the bag of donuts. Good looking kid, both of them, but suspicious and annoying, especially Drew over there.

“What blue?” Lexi jogs down the stairs, hand on the railing, looking sexy and sweet in mid-thigh high shorts, a black tank top under an open button-down shirt, and construction boots.

“Good morning, almost afternoon.” I smile brightly, as she stops mid-step hearing my voice on the middle of the stairs.

“Why are you here?” she says, genuinely puzzled.

“I was in the neighborhood and I heard you needed help. I bought coffee and donuts.” I hold up the holder with the coffee and motion in the direction of the donut bag.

“You heard?” she says, looking at her brothers scarfing down the bag of donuts. “You guys just let him in?”

“What were we going to do? He’s a cop who brought donuts,” Ryan mumbles, around a mouth full of Bavarian cream.

“What you would usually do if a cop shows up at our door?”

“Shoot him.”

“Drew!” She turns to me with a strained smile. “He’s joking. We don’t have any guns.”

“I sure hope not.” I smile and shake my head at her brother who’s laughing while playing his game.

“Brothers.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“Anyway, what were you doing here again?”

“I’m your helper for the day. Surprise!”

“Yes. The surprise is on me.”

“Ready to get started?” I take one of the cups out of the tray and hand it to her.

“Thank you?” she says like it’s a question while taking it, making me chuckle.

“It’s a hazelnut blend. I heard it’s pretty good. Take a sip.”

“Okay, but you know you didn’t have to bring anything.” She takes a sip from the cup, I’m sure just to be polite, but she nods and says, “Mmm...this is pretty good.”

“Yeah? I took a chance you’d like it.”

“Paid off. I do have a thing for hazelnut.” She takes another sip. “I love Nutella.”

“So do I! Looks like we have some good things in common.” I smile at her

“Great, are you going to kiss now?” Ryan says, eating another donut.

“Or just get down to it in front of our door?” Drew says.

“Shut up, Drew!” She looks over her shoulder. “Ryan, save at least one of those for Axel. I don’t feel like hearing him whine if he sees we had those.” She sighs turning back to me. “I’m...yeah.” She looks at me apologetically. “You don’t have to stick around and help me. I can figure this out by myself.”

“Are you kidding me, there is nothing I’d rather do on my day off than help you and...” I look at her brothers shoving each other. “Your...ah...entertaining, hopefully not quite juvenile delinquent brothers out.”

She laughs, touching the coffee cup to her chest. “They seem a bit much at first. They’re really not *that* bad.”

“Thanks for sticking up for us, sis,” Ryan says.

“Seriously though, if I’d known it was you Rachel was sending over, I would have told her no.”

“Ouch!” Ryan shakes his head. “You brought the good donuts and coffee for no reason. You struck out again.” He walks over and pats his sister on the shoulder. “At least let him start working, pretend to give him a chance, Lexi. Because we seriously don’t know shit about fixing a porch.”

She brushes his hand away and puts a hand on my chest, catching me by surprise, and gently pushing me back through the door. Then removing her hand to close the door behind her. “Now, once again. I’m sorry about them.”

“You don’t have to apologize for that, and anytime you feel like putting your hands on me, you can. I fully consent to it.” I can see the little smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “And he’s right, you should let me help. I’m just here to help. You don’t have to owe me a thing. But if I leave here without helping you, my aunt will wring my neck. Then I might have to arrest her, then it’ll be a whole family drama thing...and do

you want to be responsible for that? Help me by letting me help you.” I give her my most endearing smile.

She sighs. “Since you put it like that, how can I say no? I don’t want to be responsible for destroying someone else’s family.”

“I didn’t think so.” I try to hide a triumphant smile. “And from what I can see you’re going to need the help.” I look around with a critical eye. My aunt was wrong; this is going to need more than a few pieces replaced. “So, ready to get to work? I mean after you’ve had your coffee of course.” I point to the cup in her hand. “I can start by doing some assessments while you finish and let you know what’s what.”

“That’d be great, Noah, thanks.” She holds out her hand all formal and shit. Like it’s some kind of business deal.

Nah, that’s so not how we’re going to start this. I take her offered hand in a firm shake and pull her into me, inches from her face. “You’re more than welcome. Anytime I can do anything for you...let me know.” I bite my lip and slowly let it slip out of my mouth as she watches, and visibly swallows. Yeah, that’s better.

With a nervous smile, she says, “Okay, sure.” She pulls her hand away from mine and places it around her cup with the other one.

“I’ll get started on the locks too, once I’ve had a closer look at things.”

“Almost forgot about that. It’s inside. I’ll go get it.”

“I’ll be here.” I give her a friendly smile as she pulls the door in behind her. I’ll be here all day, and many more days, from what I can see while she’s inside. This porch has seen better days, but it’s not a complete disaster. I’d say I need to spend a few of my days off to fix this, if I wanted to be done as quickly as possible. But if not, if I wanted to woo the pretty girl inside this crumbling tower, I’d say I’d need to have a few of my days off to relax, preferably with her, and do more fixing after working day hours when my shift is over. Solid



plan to me. Now all I need to do is convince her to spend those days off with me.

Shouldn't be too hard. Last time I offered to help her in the store she practically threw me out the door. Flat out refused any help from me. Today I made it into her front door, she smiled at me, felt comfortable enough to touch me without hesitation, and agreed to let me help her while drinking the coffee I brought her. Heck, I might as well call this our first date. I might even get lunch and conversation while eating. Can't think of a better scenario for a work date. Aunt Rachel's going to be at the top of my Christmas list from now on.

I whistle, pulling out my measuring tape and getting the crowbar out of my truck. I lift a few loose rotten wood planks to see what's underneath. Nothing under them looks bad. Only the wood on top, but I won't know for sure until the real work has started. I pull out my pencil and pad to make a list. Before I finish writing the first word, I hear raised voices from inside, from Lexi and her brother Drew.

"Seriously, where were you yesterday? We were all supposed to go visit Grandpa."

"Lexi, do you tell me where you are every minute of your day? No, you don't. So get off my back."

"I'm not sixteen and making questionable choices."

"Questionable choices, ha! Do you want to go there, Lex!"

"Keep your voice down. We have a guest."

"Sure, wouldn't want him to know we all make questionable choices in this house."

"Where were you, Grandpa would have liked to see you. He asked about you. He's not getting any better. We need to spend as much time with him as we can—visit him more."

"I know. Don't worry, I'll go see him this week. I promise."

"Yeah, okay. He said something about you visiting him. Why didn't you say anything?"

“Cause I don’t need to tell you every single thing that goes on in my life. Like you making the questionable choice to let our mother into our house and let her take Axel out when you should have thrown her ass out.”

“You wanted me to rip our little brother’s heart out and be the bad guy? She would have milked it for everything it was worth in front of Axel, and upset him to the point of wetting his bed for god knows how long, again! If *you* were here, you could have done it. And we could have spent a morning trying to console an angry six-year-old, instead of listening to the happy one making all the noise, playing upstairs.”

“Since you have it all under control as usual, you don’t need me here.”

“Drew! Where are you going? You’re supposed to help.”

“I have plans with my friends.”

“The ones who are going to help you end up as a statistic, like the men who contributed to half of our DNA!” I hear her sigh loudly. “Great, just great.” Right before Drew comes storming out the front door past me in a true teenage-filled dramatic way.

That was bad enough to rival one of Holden and my father’s arguments. Almost. I’m so glad he’s not a teenager filled with rage and anger anymore. I feel for Lexi though. Definitely don’t miss getting yelled at by a kid brother who you’re only trying to help stay safe and out of trouble. I’d say she needs more than a helping hand with her porch. She seems like she needs someone to vent to who has been almost where she is but had way less responsibility than she has to deal with.

She walks out with her hand in her back pockets, shoulders slightly hunched. The first words out of my mouth are, “Are you okay?”

She gives me a dull lopsided smile, looking toward the direction her brother went. “There’s no chance you didn’t hear that, huh?”

“I might be a little older than you but my hearing is still good. If you want to talk about it, I’m a good listener. It’s a

part of my job.”

“Your job, right. The cop thing...uhm...maybe—”

I don’t know why but not for the first time—it seems like my job may be a thing for her. Other than her mother, I don’t think it should be. To save this quickly before she finishes her sentence. I try to find common ground with her. “I’m not trying to get into your business or anything. If it’ll make you feel better, when I’m here I’m not bringing my job with me. I’m just Noah James. A guy helping you out. We have more in common than you might think.”

“Like what?”

“Pain in the ass brothers who won’t listen to us.” I give her a big smile. “I have first-hand experience with younger brother problems too, especially at that age.” I shake off an imaginary chill, earning a smile for my effort at humor. “They can be brutal.”

“They are.”

So for the next couple of minutes I listen to her tell me enough about her brother to know she loves him and they’re going through some growing pains and figuring out the changing dynamic between ‘you’re my older sister but not my mother.’ Even though it seems like she’s been both, too soon for too long for her age. My mother died when I was a teenager. Holden was younger but we never had to shoulder the responsibility of taking care of ourselves like it seems Lexi and her brothers are doing. After my mother died, we had my father and later my stepmom to help us along.

I sit down on the step and she sits next to me while I write down a few needed things to begin the repairs. “I wouldn’t worry about Drew too much, unless you know for sure he’s getting into stuff you know he shouldn’t. It’s growing pains. He’ll get into a bit of trouble but hopefully nothing serious. Give him a little room to figure himself out but keep reminding him he has a family in this house who cares about him and has his back.”

“I’ll keep trying, but damn, he makes it hard sometimes. Thanks for listening to me rant.” She looks down at her fingers. “I know you didn’t expect to play a part-time therapist and handyman on your day off.”

“Are you kidding me?” I pull back my head in mock astonishment. “This has been the highlight of my week.” I put my pad and paper down on the porch step beside me and hold my hand out to her to help her up. “Holding hands with a pretty girl, I couldn’t ask for anything better. Actually, I could.” I lean in waggling my brows. “How about that date?” I slot my fingers between hers. The fact she doesn’t pull away, but smiles, is encouraging.

She rolls her eyes and chuckles. “Let’s see how good you are with a hammer and wood first, Noah, before I commit to anything.”

There she goes using my name again. Like music to my ears. “Did you say wood? I think I’ll keep my wood under wraps until we get to know each other a little better. Then I’ll be popping so much wood you’ll think I’m a lumberjack.”

“Oh my god!” She throws her head back and laughs. “You did not just say that. Awful.”

Yeah, it was but it made her laugh. I laugh along with her. And for the rest of the day, we share a few more of those laughs and little touches. The best day I’ve had in a long time.

*Nine*



“Hey Shauna, can you pass me the small brush and that rose blush lipstick.”

“Sure. Here you go.” She hands it to me in front of my bathroom mirror where she’s putting on her mascara.

“God, it’s quiet, hold on a minute. I think we need some music. Something to get us ready to show these gentlemen a good time.” I do a little shimmy out of the bathroom to my bedroom and put something on. I dance back in singing, “I’m coming out, I want the world to know...” I bump my hips against hers to the beat.

“Oh yes! Get it, girl, go ahead. Woo, I can’t remember when you’ve been this happy to head out to the club. Scratch that...never. You’ve never been happy to go to the club.”

“Can’t I be happy, too, let me live without a reason?” I happily hum while applying my foundation.

“Sure you can! I’m all for it. But this is something else. You’ve been doom and gloom for a while. Now you’re getting ready to sing into the job you profess to hate.” She turns to me and waves her finger. “No girl, you had sex, didn’t you?”

I laugh because that’s the first thing that Shauna would come up with. “Nope. Changed the locks.”

“Changed the locks?” She stares at me, her bottom lip turned down. “Can’t see the connection between this giddiness and locks. If this is what new locks do for you, I think it’s time you got out more and stopped working so much. Cause that’s

saaad.” She picks up her mascara wand, genuinely puzzled, mumbling to herself, “Changed the locks.”

I laugh and say, “I had help. Noah.”

“Noah...who?”

“Holden’s brother Noah.”

Her hand freezes over her eye. A slow smile creeps up her face. “Hot cop to the rescue. He came over and tinkered with your lock. I get it now. Sing that song, girl. When’s the next date?” She swivels her hips, and I laugh.

“There is and was no date or sex. We talked. He was doing a favor for his aunt by fixing my lock to keep my mother out, and he’s going to help me fix the porch before someone falls through it and sues us for the money we don’t have. We talked. And he’s not what I thought he would be. Turns out he’s a nice guy who happens to be a cop. He really just came to fix my lock.”

“He’s doing all of this work for free?”

“Yeah.”

“And you said he’s a nice guy you had a good conversation with?”

“Yeah.”

“And he didn’t want any of the goodie goodie? None?”

I laugh at her choice of replacement words for the female anatomy. She’s creative like that. “Nope.”

“You must be sick in the head. You should have scooped that man up and showed him a good time. At least a damn date and a feel-up, you know, to be polite for the work and all. A little thank you.”

“Only in your world would that be considered a polite way to say thank you.” I rinse the foundation off my fingers and wipe my hand on a towel. “I can’t date him.”

“Why not?” She caps her mascara and puts her hand on her hip, eyes on me.

“You know why not.”

“Excuses. He’s clearly into you. You won’t date anyone! Allen, Micheal, Jason, Kevin, Peter, Paul, I can bring Jesus down here and you’d find something wrong with him. You *always* find a fault, with every one of them.

“This time...super valid.”

“What’s the worst that can happen?”

“Um...he finds out what I do, shuts down the club, we all end up in jail, and my brothers are in foster care.”

“Date him!”

I shake my head. Of course, I would like to date Noah but how could I with what I do? Nice guys like him don’t want girls like me. This job is my sacrifice for dating. “The only thing I have a date with is to pay the stack of bills in my drawers. So let’s hurry up and get ready. You can help me decide between these two dresses, black and sexy or green and vibrant?”

“Why bother? You already know black and sexy does it every time. I mean, look at us...”

“On this, I’m going to agree with you. Black and sexy it is.”

“You should always agree with me. It’s the smart thing to do.” She smiles. “I heard that guy Thom was asking about you. Apparently, you turned him out good. Did you take my advice and give a little extra to get a little extra?”

“No, I did not. I have my limits and it stops at the hand. Let me have your mascara, I can’t find mine.”

She hands it to me. “Whatever you did sure left a mark on him. He’s been asking Celeste if there’s any way he can get your number. He even booked a next appointment for you and said he would pay double for more time but only for you.”

“All I did was the usual and we talked. He mostly talked and I listened. He was nice enough. Not like most of the sleazy guys who have their hands all over us all night.”



“If amateur therapy hour is his kink, work it. Maybe he’ll come into town more. Make you his regular girl. You might get a sugar daddy and you won’t need to go back to the club. Solve your money problems.”

“I don’t want to be anyone’s regular. I just want to do what I got to do, get my money, and go home.” And forget I do anything in there until the next time. “That’s not the way I want to leave the club. I want to leave because I made it happen. Not because some man pays me to be his mistress. Besides he’s married. It’s bad enough I’m doing what I’m doing with him. Half the time I’m trying not to think about their regular lives, like if they have a wife or kids, but sometimes it’s unavoidable and those are the times I feel even shittier.”

“Fuck that. You’re not the one screwing their wives and families over. They’re not even getting their dicks wet in any of your good places because you are too classy for that. I, on the other hand...give me a chance at a sugar daddy.”

“Then you can have Thom. How about I talk you up to him and you can crash through his life like a wrecking ball,” I smile teasingly.

“Aw, thanks. But I’m not anyone’s sloppy seconds. At least not for anyone at that club. But I would definitely take hot cop off your hands.”

“You can’t have him,” I say, a bit of a snap in my voice.

“A little edge in your voice for someone who doesn’t want him. If your voice was sharper you’d cut me.”

“I don’t say I didn’t want him. I said I couldn’t date him because of what we do and my chaotic messed up life.”

“Get over that shit. He doesn’t have to know what you do when he’s not with you. He’s not asking for a commitment or marriage. Just have a little fun with him. It’s been a while. You need it. Let him shake the coconuts and drink a little of the milk.”

“You did not say that.” I chuckle.

“I did.” She laughs with me and yells, “Date him!”

*Ten*



“You could have told me no over the phone. Instead, you make me waste my time coming over here to say no to my face. I expect this from Dad but not from you.”

“You wouldn’t have asked Dad,” I say, walking back to my garage to pick up my electric saw and toolbox to put in the back of my truck, where Holden is standing. “And I didn’t say no.”

“I’ve been standing here for fifteen minutes and you haven’t reached back and brushed the dust off your wallet.”

“My wallet sees the light of day plenty.”

“So are you giving me the money or not?”

“Sure, I’ll give it to you. On one condition.”

“Now you’re talking about conditions.” He runs his hand through his red hair, off his forehead. “How about I pay you back when I say I’m going to? That’s a fair condition we can both be happy with.”

“That is not a condition. It’s a given. I already expected you to when you asked.”

“So what’s the problem?”

I smile. “So glad you asked. I’m going over to the lumberyard and I need some help loading up my truck. It’s not a lot.”

“So what do you need my help for if it’s not a lot?”

“The lumberyard is the first stop. After that, I have a job to do and I’m going to need some help. The deal is you help me and I’ll let you earn the money. You won’t even have to pay me back.”

“I’m a grown-ass man with a job already.”

“You’re a grown-ass man asking to borrow money from me. All I’m asking is for a few hours of help. Then money is yours free and clear.”

“It’s not free. I’m being forced to work off a debt I haven’t even incurred yet.” He huffs.

“Don’t think of it that way. It’s you helping me help you. Doesn’t that sound better, brother?” I smile, slapping him on the back.

He rests his hand on his hips, with a long suffering overdone sigh. “What the hell am I helping you with? It better not take all evening. I have places to, be people to do.”

Looking at him my brows pushed together, “You mean things to do?”

“You know me right?” He smirks, getting in on the passenger side as I roll my eyes getting behind the steering wheel. “Where we going anyways?” He adjusts his seat, stretching out his legs which are longer than mine. “Miranda’s or one of your other cop friends? Tell me it’s Miranda’s, I’ve been trying to get her sister’s number for a while. I almost got it but Miranda was hating and blocking hard.”

“I wonder why?” I say with as much sarcasm as I can.

“I don’t know. I’m a good guy.”

“With a bad reputation.”

“Hey, I’m reformed and you know it,” he says with a bit of grit and terseness. A sliver of what he used to be like. Hard to live with and difficult.

“Hey.” I look over at him seriously. “I know how much you’ve changed and turned things around for yourself. I’m proud of that. I’ll be the first to tell anyone who says

otherwise. But you can't deny your record, or lack of one, with relationships sucks."

"There is nothing wrong with sucking. A skill that is underrated but much needed—give and take." The side of his lips turn up, then runs his tongue over his lower lip, and thrusts it in and out making lewd noises.

"Okay, that's gross. I don't need to see that or hear it. It's uncalled for."

He laughs. "Come on, man. You know I'm messing with you."

"I know! Cut that shit out. I don't need to hear about any of the sucking. I feel icky right now."

He chuckles. "What are you, twelve? Icky?"

I look at him. "Leave Miranda's sister alone and let's end this part of the conversation. We're going to Lexi's house. I said I'd help her paint."

"Seriously, how did that happen and why? Not that I really care," he says with his usual unaffected, laid back way.

"Aunt Rachel volunteered my services when she told her she was going to try and fix her porch herself by watching YouTube."

"Like that's not a disaster waiting to happen." He shakes his head.

"I know, right?"

"Lexi's cool. Won't give me or any of the other guys at work the time of day though."

"Not only is she cute, but she's also smart."

"Whatever." He puts his hand on the side of the door, out the window, fingers tapping the outside. "I think she has a thing for you anyway."

"For real? Did she say that?" I jerk my head to him, getting giddy.

“Keep your eyes on the road, Officer James. Please tell me you’re not this obvious in front of her. Chicks don’t like it.”

“We’ve already established what kind of girls gravitate to you. Nothing wrong with good straightforward honesty, not playing it cool all the time.”

“If you say so.”

“I do. Now, what did she say about me?”

“Nothing much. She was going out after work. She looked hot by the way. She had on this sequin mini dress. You know she has great legs, and the body was like—“

“I got it,” I drawl. “I know how she looks. Get to the part I need to confirm before I make the next step to locking it in.”

“I was just giving you the visual, but she said something about not knowing you were my brother. She thinks you’re hot. She’d give you a shot if you asked her out. As long as you don’t fuck it up, you’re in.”

“Don’t paraphrase, be specific.”

“I ain’t. That’s what she said. And you’re welcome.”

“I’m in!” I pump my fist in the air. “Thank you, brother.”

“As excited as your thirsty ass is, you should just give me the money.”

“Nice try, but I really do need you to get this done faster. So I can get some more time alone with Lexi before it gets too late.”



WE PULL up to Lexi’s house and park by the curb. I get my toolbox out to leave at her house so I don’t have to keep bringing it back and forth with me when I’m working on the porch.

“Holden, can you get my work gloves out of the glove compartment?” I say to him as I go up the steps. He nods and

gets them before getting out and leaning on the side of the truck.

I knock on the door and Lexi opens it smiling in her work uniform, shorts, t-shirt, and work boots. “Hey.”

“I brought tools, and as promised, help.” I nod my head back to where Holden is leaning up against my truck.

“Wow, you brought Holden out to work.”

“Of course, he’s selfless as the day is long. When he heard you needed help he was all for it.”

“Riiight.” She laughs. “Hey, Holden!” She waves.

“Hey, Lexi. This is how I get an invite to your house? I’m crushed.”

“Sure you are.”

“When am I getting an invite back?”

“Behave yourself and you might.”

“Now you’re asking too much.” He smirks.

“Your brother...” She shakes her head

“I know.” I step in and put my tools by the side, out of the way. “What’s up, guys? Ready to paint?”

“Whatever,” a very unenthusiastic round of mumbles come from both Drew and Ryan. While Axel runs up to me and says, “You’re back! Where’s your handcuffs? You said you were going to let me see them.”

“I did?” I bend down smiling back at him. “I did, didn’t I? Well next time I’m in my uniform I’ll make a special trip over here just for you and I’ll let you hold them.”

“Oh, man I thought I was going to get to see them for real.” He pouts.

“I know but...wait...” I pat my chest down then my back pockets. “Oh man, where is it, I had something special for you.”

“You do?” he says, eyes opening wide.

“I sure do. Wait a minute, I remember. Why don’t you open that toolbox for me.”

“Okay.” He opens the lock and grabs the first thing he sees on top. “Handcuffs!”

“Yep, and they’re all yours. They’re not the real kind but they’re close enough.”

“For me? Yeah! Lexi, look! Noah got me real cuffs.”

“I see. They’re shiny and everything.”

“Yeah.”

“Tell Noah thank you.”

“Thank you!”

“No problem.” I smile, watching him open and close them around his wrist.

“Guys, go help Noah bring the stuff out of his truck.” Lexi claps her hands together getting their attention when they ignore her. “Hey, hey, come on, get up! He came over here to help us get the painting done by tonight, move it!”

“Damn, Lexi, why you screaming?” Drew shuffles past her.

“We’re not deaf.” Ryan follows behind him. Axel runs in front of them.

“Seems you are. You didn’t hear it the first time I said it, *nicely*.”

“I better go help too before I get screamed at. But I probably wouldn’t mind if it came from you.” I smile, winking at her.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” She smiles back.

I follow behind the boys and abruptly stop, almost walking into them standing on the porch staring at my truck with matching frowns. “What’s wrong?” I look around my truck and around the area to see what has the three of them frozen to the spot they’re standing.



Then I understand when Ryan says, “Who’s the shady-looking dude leaning on your truck?”

I clear my throat to cover my laugh. “That’s my brother, Holden.”

“The guy with the earring, tattoos, and...blue and red hair?” Drew stares, looking uncertain about what he’s seeing.

“Are you sure that’s your brother?” Axel points with awe and wonder in his voice

“Yep, younger brother.”

“This guy, looking like he might have just been released on parole?” Drew quietly asks.

“Come on.” I laugh, ruffling Drew and Ryan’s hair.

“Holden.” I walk with Axel in front of me, my hand on his shoulder, Drew on my right and Ryan on my left, both looking uncertain. “These are Lexi’s brothers: Axel, Ryan, and Drew.”

“You’re big and colorful.” Axel stares up at him.

“I am colorful.” The side of Holden’s lip tip up. “Nice to meet you, Axel.”

He reaches out and touches Holden’s arm. “They’re cool,” he says, touching the colorful peacock on Holden’s arm.

“You can’t go around touching people.” Ryan reaches forward, pulling Axel’s hand away.

“I just wanted to see it.” His little brows draw together.

“Sorry about him,” Drew says.

“It’s fine. I don’t mind.”

“You probably don’t mind people touching you—you know...” Drew shrugs. “Because that’s why you got them, right? I mean—unless you wanted me to. I’m mean—yeah, whatever.”

“Are you okay?” Ryan laughs, staring at his brother like he’s lost his mind. “Dude.”

“Shut up and get his wood—the wood out the back.” Drew shakes his head as if he’s trying to clear his mind.

“I’m not going to make that joke. It’s inappropriate in front of Axel.” Ryan laughs some more.

“Ugh,” Drew grunts, clipping his brother’s shoulder, who’s still laughing.

“What’s that about?” I say more to myself than to Holden who’s smirking in the boy’s direction.

“Don’t worry, bro, you wouldn’t get it. Not yet anyway.”

Besides Drew being caught off guard by the big tattooed guy that looks like he just came off parole, as Axel and Ryan put it, what’s there to get?



“STOP PLAYING AROUND, you ass wipe. You’re ruining my perfect strokes.” Drew playfully pushes Ryan away with his free hand.

“More like a massacre. Your strokes are uneven, how can you mess that up?” Ryan moves away and goes back to the wall in the living room closest to Holden. “Holden, Noah, tell him to put down the brush and order a pizza for the men at work.”

“Nah, it’s not bad.” Holden tilts his head back looking at Drew’s wall. “I’m the master of a good stroke.” He smirks.

“Oh shut up,” Lexi says. “Someone thinks a little too highly of themselves.”

“I don’t think, I know.” He nods, winking at Lexi.

“Shut up for real,” I yell over at Holden, then flick some paint off my brush his way.

“What the hell!” He flicks the paint back, catching my white t-shirt, and across my mouth, his lips twitching. “That’s a nice shade of blue on you. But I think pink is more your shade. I’ll pick a tube up for you the next time I’m in the beauty aisle.”

“You little...” I look down at the paint and dip my brush in to show him how great the shade would look on him.

From across the room, Drew yells, “Paint fight!”

“Yeah,” Axel squeals. “Paint fight!”

All the guys square up in a circle, paint brushes in the air, primed and ready. Axel’s brush drips on the drop cloths as he smiles. Just as my hand reaches back to splash that annoying smirk off my brother’s face, Lexi bounds down the stairs and says, “Did I hear paint and fight?” She looks at me brows up, eyes wide. “Officer James, I expect better from you. You’re supposed to be the responsible one down here. Drop that brush.”

“But he started it first,” I say in a mock whine and huff. “Look at what he did to my lip and shirt.

Shaking her hand she stands in the middle of our circle and points to each of us. “If y’all don’t drop those brushes I’m going to kick your asses! Drew and Ryan, you know I can take you two, don’t try me,” she says with authority and full confidence like she can take us all on at once.

Oh damn, that’s hot. “All right, fellas. Maybe we should cool it. After all, we’re done. We don’t want to ruin all the work we’ve put in.”

“Screw that,” Drew says. “That’s a challenge if I ever heard one.”

“Damn right it is,” Holden agrees. “I like your style, kid. Get your brush up, Lexi, talk the talk, walk the walk.”

“I gotta agree with my brother there, Lex. Brush up or shut up.”

She gasps, mouth dropping open. “Noah, they have corrupted you.” She grabs the paint can and without hesitating dips her hand in and flicks me. Actually flicks me, in the face, with paint.

There’s a minute of shocked silence before everyone dissolves into laughter and paint chaos ensues. Somehow in between all of the laughter, slipping and dogging paint

brushes, and yelling of, ‘Don’t get paint in my hair!’ and ‘I got paint in my mouth!’ teams were formed. Lexi, me, and Axel against Holden, Drew, and Ryan. The James brothers seem to be unofficial team leaders.

“Okay!” Lexi yells from our crouch behind the covered couch.

“We give up!” Axel says at the same time as her.

“You win!” I shout, putting the nearly empty can down. Knowing there is no way we were going to win with only a half can of paint and them stealing the only full can left.

“Yes!” Ryan yells, raising his fist, and Drew gives him and Holden victory fist bumps.

“Ahh, you should have known, man. You can’t win against me.” Holden holds his arms up, flexing his muscles.

“Yeah, whatever.” I shake my head, surveying the room which surprisingly isn’t too bad. The drop clothes served their purpose. The most damage is, a few spots here and there that can be easily fixed with paint thinner and a slash of blue against one of the finished walls which can be painted over with a few brush strokes. “These walls are looking better than we are.”

“We’re a mess.” Axel smiles, brightly.

“We sure are,” Lexi puts her hand on his back. “How about you go upstairs and take a bath and get ready for bed. It’s past your bedtime.”

“But I’m hungry, and you promised pizza.” Axel looks up at her.

“While you’re taking a bath I’ll order pizza. By the time you’re done, it’ll be here.”

“But—“

“Come on, Ax. You know how much you hate to wait. This way you won’t miss anything. Holden and Noah will still be here, right guys?” Drew says, with what I would say is a hopeful hitch in his voice, looking my way and then at Holden.

If I didn't know better I would say he didn't mind us being here. Unlike the first few times I've been over, it seems like he doesn't mind if we stay. "Sure, I like pizza; who doesn't?"

"Can't go wrong with pizza." Holden shrugs.

"Okay, if it's okay with you guys and Lexi, we'll have pizza," I say. "And I'll pay."

"Are you kidding, you guys were a great help. The least I can do is treat you to pizza. I owe you a meal or two. I'm falling short of your aunt's agreement." She presses her fingertips against my chest, smiling at me. "What do you like on your pizza? Let me know, anything." Her voice dips lower, drawing my eyes to her lips.

I press my hand over her warm hand resting on my chest. I love when she touches me. I wish she would do it more often, with the same warmth and smile that makes me feel a way I haven't felt in a long time. "Anything?" I say, not really thinking about pizza.

"He likes pepperoni." Holden irritatingly interrupts our moment. "I like it too if you were also going to get around to asking me if I would like, *anything*," he ends with an almost breathy sigh and his annoying smirk.

"Lexi, get a room. Innocent eyes and ears here." Drew holds Axel's hand, leading him away. "Come on, Ax, I'll help you with the water."

"You guys suck." She moves her hand from my chest, regretfully.

"I—"

"Not one word." I shake my head sternly at my brother, knowing exactly what's coming next. No one needs another replay of the conversation in the truck on the way over here.

Lexi laughs, getting her phone off the kitchen table to order the pizzas. Holden smiles, holding his hands up like he's innocent, which is totally out of place on him. But it feels good being here and laughing, relaxed, like brothers. That hasn't happened in a long time and it probably wouldn't be happening if we weren't here.

After we eat pizza and Axel entertains us with his song and dance act, we say goodnight to the boys. Holden goes out to start the truck and make a call and Lexi walks me to the door. Leaning against the porch railing, both of us still paint splattered, she says, “Thanks for coming and helping with my spur-of-the-moment painting. Someone ordered custom paint but it was in the wrong color so Rachel gave it to me at a dirt cheap discount I couldn’t pass up. Couldn’t have done it without you guys’ help.”

“You could have.” I step closer to her in the dimly lit night. “You’re very capable, Lexi. I can see you’re an understated force. And to be honest, if you didn’t already know, which I’m sure you do...I’m very attracted to you.” My hand reaches up to the side of her face brushing my thumb over a spot of paint close to her mouth. “I’m blabbering, aren’t I? Not cool as Holden would be, as he reminded me to be around you earlier.”

“Cool is overrated. I like blabbering. I think it’s cute.” She pulls me into her space by my wrist.

“You do.” I tilt my head closer, feeling her open mouth breaths on my lips.

“I do.” Her eyes trace over my lips, then flick up to my eyes. She stares at me not moving but breathing and waiting. God, it’s killing me. Because I want to sweep down and steal this kiss and feel her in my mouth all warm and soft. But I refrain, holding on to my self-control to make her make the choice. Will she or won’t she?

Seeming like minutes ticking by, I lick my bottom lip, and her eyes dip back to my mouth following the movement of my tongue, leaving a wet trail. She says “Fuck it,” leans in and presses her lips against mine and the floodgates of release and lust are unleashed in a searing kiss. Her mouth moves against mine, tongue exploring inside of each other’s wet heat. My gravely moan echoes through the walls of her mouth, and she pulls me closer. My chest expands and rises, pressing against her soft breasts, and my arms wrap tightly around her waist. It’s all I imagined our first kiss would be, and more, amazing.

“Ay, yo!” My bastard of a brother yells through the passenger side window of my truck. “Sorry to break this up, love birds, but I got someplace to be and only an hour to get there.”

“Shut the fuck up, Holden. You’re going to wake my neighbors up,” Lexi surprises me and yells back equally as loud.

“You going to kiss my brother with that mouth, Lexi?”

“I just did. He’s not complaining so once again shut the fuck up and have some respect for my neighbors.”

“You sure know how to pick ‘em, bro.”

I chuckle, pressing my head against her temple. “I’m sorry about him. Don’t pay him any attention, he’s just messing with us.”

She smiles. “I know. I deal with your brother most days, remember.”

“Yeah, you do. I really want to see you again tomorrow but I’m working overtime. The next two days before I’m back over here to do the porch again. If I could give the excuse of doing it in the pitch black of night, I would be over here giving up any form of sleep.”

“Lucky for you I have another can of paint left. My room looks kind of dull.”

“Is that so?” I kiss her cheek, rubbing my lip against the soft skin there.

“So dull, but I think with the two of us we can give it the splash of color and excitement it desperately needs. It’s been so long...”

“I think we can fix that and make it come back to life.” I breathe in her scent and paint mixed together, making me harder than I thought I could get from the smell of paint. Turning her head, she connects our lips again, opening her mouth and letting me in. As she sighs into our kiss, my hand roams down her back. I pull her even closer, knowing she can feel me, especially when she doesn’t object, I shift her hips to

press against my hard-on even more. With a slight swivel of her hips, I grunt almost in pain, from how good it feels to have her against me.

Right then she breaks the kiss but pecks me on the lips. “You better go before Holden starts shouting down the neighborhood. He’s honking the horn.”

Damn, I didn’t even notice that he honked. “I thought it was some other impatient ass somewhere. Goodnight.” I kiss her lips and step back.

“Goodnight, Noah.” She smiles and waves as I get off the step and into my truck as happy as can be.

“That went well,” Holden says, texting someone on his phone.

“It went more than well.” I tap my fingers against the steering wheel, feeling free and light as if I’m going to take flight. “I’ll drive by your place tomorrow and drop the money off.”

“Money... for a minute I kind of forgot about that.”

“You must have had a good time if you’re forgetting about the cash.”

“It wasn’t bad. Her brothers are hilarious. If I’m free and you need some more help over there, let me know.”

“All right.” I smile, surprised he would make the offer. “I will.”

I turn the corner of Lexi’s block, humming to myself and thinking about kissing her lips again. Amazing.



*Eleven*



I tap send on the laptop screen, sitting on the couch in the living room. At least the light bill is only going to be two months past due after I make this payment. Thanks to the money I made doing an extra shift at the club. But that meant staying later than I expected, again, and Drew looking at me like I offended him in some horrific way the next morning. When I told him and Ryan I might go out with some friends, he didn't say anything, but his eyes rolling over said enough for him.

He knows I'm keeping something from him. I'm not completely sure he knows what it is but he's pissed at me. And I'm not completely sure it's all about me either but I can't get him to talk. I miss when things were better between us and we could just talk without all the hostility brewing between us. It's hard, sometimes it's like I'm walking on eggshells around him. I don't know when he's going to snap at me for the simplest question. I didn't know asking "where are you going" could be such a heated question, or even "hi".

Whatever this is that's going on with me and *him*, I need to figure it out or things could get really bad, especially if he thinks listening to me these days is the kiss of death. We need to be a team to keep this family together. We can't be fighting each other over little things that are not as important.

I turn my head to the front door when I hear the knob moving back and forth. Any second Drew or Ryan will be bursting through it. Hopefully, telling me about their day to distract me from the rest of the bills I can't pay because it's

June and school ends next week and they need sneakers, new clothes, and more food. Wouldn't it be nice if they could just pause growing and eating for like one summer? The money that could be saved there with three boys would be exciting.

“What's up with that?” I put the laptop on the cushion next to me and go over to the door, watching the knob jiggle some more. Everyone has a new key. Maybe something is wrong with the lock. “Is your key stuck? Take it out so I can see,” I say through the door. I turn the lock back and forth to test it out. “I can have Noah take a look at it since he's the one who changed it.” I open the door to tell one of them to give me their key, but instead of seeing one of my brothers it's the headache in our lives I never need and wish would just...stop.

“Hey, sweetheart,” she says with a smile and wiggles her finger at me.

“What the hell are you doing here again, Vanessa?” I step outside and pull the door in and lean on it, effectively blocking her from getting inside.

“Can't you greet me once with at least a pleasant smile, instead of whatever your face is doing now?” She circles a finger in front of her face. “It's not a cute look on you.”

“Please. I'm not even giving you the real reaction you deserved.” I look over at the car that's parked in front of the house with some guy sitting behind the wheel. I wonder where she picked him up from. He'll be gone by next week, like all the others. My mother has always had a gift for picking men that have no problem whatsoever, walking out of our lives at the drop of a dime like we were a layover on their way to someone and someplace better than us. I couldn't even blame them. I shake my head at her—not caring—but it's the thing to ask when she keeps coming back, *willingly*. “What'd you want?”

“Always so suspicious.” She shoves the key for the old lock into her pocket. “We had such a nice time last week. I thought I'd stop by and do it again. Where are Axel and Ryan? I brought something for them.”

“You don’t even know if they’re here and you show up anyway without calling? You haven’t called once since I threatened you into spending time with your son.” I fold my arms across my chest, getting angrier with each word, stepping closer to her. “You are such a liar.”

“What are you talking about? I really did come to see Axel, and the rest of you.” She lifts her chin.

“Yeah, right. You didn’t think we were home, did you? Stop lying.”

“You know, Lexi, you have some major trust issues for someone your age.”

She is unbelievable! “And who the hell do you think I got them from?”

“I have no idea.” She shrugs. “Can I just come in? I came all the way over here from Queens to visit my kid—kids, just let me in.” She reaches around me to twist the knob.

Pissed off, I slap her hand away and get in her face.

Her hand balls into a fist at her side and the real mother I know makes an appearance. “Who the hell do you think you are, you little bitch! You’re going to start showing me some goddamn respect.”

“Respect is something you earn. You haven’t earned a thing from the moment you gave birth to us. You’ve never given us a thought other than what you can get for us from the government. Don’t talk to me about respect. You’re a shitty mother, and a shitty person, who cares about no one but yourself.”

“That’s a lie! I always did my best for you.”

“Well, your best was never good enough. Leave, no one here needs you. We’re doing fine on our own, as always.”

“I’m not going anywhere. This is not your house, it’s my father’s. When he dies it’s going to be mine. Then what are you going to do, Lexi?”

“Get the hell away from my house!” I shout in her face, angry she could so carelessly talk about Grandpa like that

without any emotion at all. Like he's going to die any minute now, like a distant stranger to her.

“When this house is mine, you're going to be out in your ass!”

“Whoop whoop.” We both turn our heads at the sound of a siren.

“You bitch, you called the cops on your own mother.” She steps back from me seeing Noah stepping out of his police car.

“Is there a problem here, Lexi,” he says, in a clear authoritative voice I haven't heard him use before, like a real cop.

“No, Officer. There is no problem here. This is my father's house, soon to be mine. I'm just trying to get inside to see my son but my daughter won't open the door.”

“Ma'am, I've been here many times and I've never seen you here. You're her mother, right?”

“Yes.”

“As far as I know her grandfather owns this house and she lives here with her brothers, and she takes care of them. And the only time I've heard of you being inside this house, you don't live in or own, is when I had to change the locks after you broke in last week, uninvited and unwelcome.”

“That's a lie! I didn't break in, how could I break in with a key, Officer whatever your name is,” she snarls, pulling the key out of her front pocket.

“She's not welcome here. I don't know where she got the key. So yeah, she did break in. She doesn't live here. Shouldn't I be able to press some charges or something, Noah?”

“You are such a liar.” She points her finger at me. “I see where this is going.” She turns her head back to Noah. “As usual, a crooked cop. You're the new boyfriend, aren't ya?” She shakes her head with disgust, and says to me, “Don't worry, he's going to walk out of here too. It's just a matter of time before he wises up and realizes you're not worth the

headache. Remember, Lexi, they always do. Like Drew and Ryan's father, and yours and Axel's, my repeat mistakes."

For a second I'm tempted to ask which ones? The men who she laid down with or having us? Doesn't even matter. I'm sure she would say both were mistakes if for once she was honest.

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave, ma'am. If you refuse I'll gladly escort you into the back of my squad car." He puts his hand on his handcuffs so she can see.

"I'll be back," she says to me. "This house will be mine soon enough. When it is, you'll be the one out on your ass. Maybe if you're nicer to me next time I might let you visit once in a while."

"Until that time I'll be around here a lot. If I see you I'll consider you a trespasser, you understand me?"

"Save your threats for someone else. You'll be gone soon enough," she snarls at him, leaves the porch, gets into the car, and slams the door.

She's after something and it's not a relationship with any of us. Whatever it is, I'm going to make sure she doesn't get it. I watch as whoever she came with pulls out of the driveway and speeds down the street, the dumb ass.

"Thanks for showing up when you did," I mumble, head down, embarrassed he had to witness that whole scene. "Sorry you had to deal with the undesirable that gave birth to us."

"It's part of my job to escort the unwanted and undesirables away. Much more civilized than my last run-in with her." He smiles.

"I bet."

"A paint job and a few new wood planks and I've made it to boyfriend already, huh, that was easier than I thought."

My head snaps up. "Sorry about that, I wanted her to leave, and letting her think that will possibly keep her away long enough."

“I don’t mind at all. Being called your boyfriend would be an honor, for *anyone*.”

“Right.” I bite the corner of my lip trying to keep the smile off my face. “So...what are you doing here in your squad car?” I thought he’d change and come over with his truck like usual.

“Don’t freak out, it’s nothing serious.”

“From my experience nothing good follows those words.”

He holds up his hand, indicating for me to wait and don’t say anything. He jogs to the car and opens the back door. Not shocking, but still surprising, my brother steps out onto the sidewalk. Just great. Drew stands up, shoulders down, not looking at Noah as he says something to him. Noah’s seeing firsthand how this family works. It’s not a good look. This is what any man willing to be called my boyfriend is in for.

I open the door before he gets close to me for us to go inside so the neighbors don’t hear what I’m sure will be loud. He walks in with Noah close behind him. I stand in front of him and put a hand on his shoulder, more concerned now that I see him close up. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he mumbles, looking away from me.

“What happened?” I ask, my eyes shifting between them for an answer.

“I was getting ready to drive back to the station when I saw him with a group of guys in front of that new building they’re building on Elm and—”

“I didn’t do anything,” Drew interrupts with a scowl. “I was just hanging out with my friends when he rolled up.”

“Like I was saying.” Noah stares at him, his chest rising, hands on his hips. “They were smoking weed and had a plastic bag of spray paint cans. I’m not a detective but I can put one and one together and get two.”

“Drew.” I sigh. “You can’t do stuff like this. Putting all of us at risk, tagging buildings.”

“What, so I’m guilty of just hanging out with my friends now? You just going to believe his word over mine?”

“He’s a cop and a friend.”

“Key word, Lexi, he’s a cop. You remember what they’re like, don’t you? Or all of that is forgotten because you’ve had his tongue down your throat.”

“Hey, don’t talk to your sister like that,” Noah says to him.

“You going to arrest me for talking to my sister in my own house? I didn’t do anything wrong out there and you know it, neither did my friends.”

“One of those friends was shaking a can without a cap. You’re lucky I’m the one who pulled up and let you guys off with a stern warning, considering all the weed and the mouthing off some of them were doing. You could be in a precinct waiting to be picked up.”

“Yeah, whatever,” he grumbles, trying to walk around me to the stairs.

“We’re not finished” I hold his arm, stopping him from walking away. “You owe Noah at least a thank you for saving your ass from getting into trouble we don’t need. Did you see Vanessa out there? She’s headache enough.”

“Now I’m a headache.” He stares at me, eyes squinting. “So you plan on going out again tonight with friends, it’s your habit now? You should take your new *friend*, Officer James, with you. I’m sure he’d have a good time.”

“Drew,” I hiss, stepping in his way as he tries to step around me.

“Do you want me to keep going, Lex?” He leans into me closer and lowers his voice, “I’m not the only one in this house not telling the truth. So don’t talk to me about trusting each other and having each other’s backs.”

Fuck. I step out of his way to let him go to his room. He needs to cool off anyway before we can even have a rational talk. I don’t know what he thinks he knows, but I don’t want to



run the risk of him saying or being remotely close to what he thinks he knows in front of Noah. He's said enough.

"He'll be okay. For all his attitude he seems like a reasonable kid when he's calm. Keep a closer eye on him and the people he's hanging with."

"If it was so easy... these days I can barely get him to acknowledge me without sneering." I run the palm of my hands over my forehead, smoothing back my hair.

"Bright side." He reaches for me pulling me against his chest. "Only what, three—four years until he's not a teenager anymore?"

I smacked my head against his chest. "Do you want to make me cry?" I say, tears really on the verge of spilling over.

"Take it easy." He lowers his voice, rubbing my back. "Things will work out between you. But I notice he seems to be angry at you for holding something back from him? Maybe if you can tell me what it is I can help."

Fuck, fuck, fuck. This is exactly why I didn't want to get too close. And Drew is so unpredictable when he's angry. I don't know what he'll say when he's in one of his moods.

"I don't know." I keep my head on his chest, ashamed to look at him, and lie right to his face. "You said yourself how angry teenagers are at that age. He's upset with me for everything under the sun these days. It's some kind of power struggle, there shouldn't be. I'm not trying to pull authority over him." I'm trying to keep us together, keep them out of the foster system, especially Axel.

"You know it's just us. My mother is in and out of our lives with her nonsense and my grandfather...he's not doing so well—but there's always hope. And hopefully, he won't get any worse."

God, this is not working. I'm rambling with my guilt. Lying to this really nice hot guy who is letting me soak his uniform with tears. I sniff and try to pull back from him, only to have strong arms hold me closer, and say, "Shh. It's okay. It'll all work out."

“No, it won’t. I’m messing it all up. I’m messing them up and all of it gets harder every day. I’m supposed to be stronger than this. I’m the oldest, I’m supposed to hold this all together.”

Rubbing my back gently, he puts his lips to my ear. “You can’t always be the strong one all the time. Holding it in all the time is like a pressure cooker and you know what happens?”

“What?” I say, sniffing.

“When pressure builds up with no release, it explodes. Take three deep breaths.” He rubs my back, while I take a few deep breaths. “You feel any better?” He looks at me, eyes filled with concern.

This is hard. It’s been a long time, if ever—since someone has cared about what I’m going through. Especially a guy I’m involved with. He’s nice, caring, and understanding. He didn’t have to do what he did for Drew tonight, letting his friends go with a warning and bringing him home. Then he went and saved me from physically assaulting my mother. That would have gone over great if the neighbors called the police. He would have probably been the officer to bring me down to the station—I’m sure she would have tried to press charges against me just to spite me.

I can’t be completely honest with him about who I am or what I do after hours at the club, and when he leaves here sometimes, like tonight...the best I can do is give him a warning because he can never find out the real truth why us together is a bad idea.

“You want to be with me but I need to be upfront with you.” I finally look up into his eyes, so kind... I smooth my hand over the tears on his shirt. “I’m not perfect, far from it. What my mother said about you wising up and realizing the things happening in my life are not for you is more than likely going to happen.” I bite my lip, waiting for him to just agree with me now and leave.

For several nerve-racking minutes, he says nothing. He stares at me, then a small smile pulls at his lips, as he runs his thumb over my lower lip pulling it from between my teeth.

And his eyes take on another light, as he gently rubs his thumb back and forth wiping away the moisture. My breath hitches and I tilt my head up, wanting him to press his lips against mine to reassure me he's not ready to walk out just yet.

He leans in closer and says, "I'm not looking for perfect, Lexi. I just want to get to know you better."

"But what if you don't like the person you see?"

"The person I see right now is a person who's trying to keep her family together. Trying to please everyone at the expense of her own needs, maybe? That tells me enough about you. for now."

He leans down, capturing my mouth in a gentle kiss that escalates quickly into wet tongues pressed against each other, caressing and stroking. Our breaths mingle, panting, as we move together, hands roaming over each other, in deep sighs as I'm pressed against the door, trying to catch my breath when he pulls back.

"No." I move forward chasing his lips, not even close to going where I want to take this. I grab his hips giving him permission to rub against me. I rub my thigh between his legs, feeling his hard as-steel bulging erection against the thin fabric of his uniform.

Lexi," he moans, breaking the kiss again and gently biting my neck.

I groan at the warmth of his mouth and his teeth against my skin. I just need to feel more of him. I hook my fingers in the front of his pants and pull at his belt, getting it out of two loops. Before I get further he grabs my hands, trapping them between us. "What?" I say, breathing hard. "Why are you stopping me?"

"You don't know how much I want you right now." He pants. "But we can't—I can't. I'm still on duty." He kisses the side of my mouth. "My partner's outside waiting for me. I have to go. Damn, you don't know how much I want to continue this." His head presses against mine, eyes closed.

“If it’s as bad as the regret I’m feeling, I do.” I put my head back against the door with a small thump to get my head straight and put the smallest amount of distance between his tempting mouth and mine. “I don’t mean for this to sound rude, but Noah, get out. Get out now before I throw you down on the floor and maul you.”

He laughs, linking one of his hands with mine. “I like you a lot. Your mother is wrong.” I smile and kiss him on the cheek. He straightens up, fixes his pants, and I move out of the way as he opens the door. “I’m not going anywhere.” He gives me one last kiss on the mouth, turns, and walks out the door.

I’d like to believe that Noah. I really would.

*Twelve*



“Axel! I told you to stop jumping on the couch. If you break your leg I’m not taking you to the hospital. It’s my day off and for the first time in a long time, there is nothing I *have* to do. Sorry about that, Noah. You were saying something?”

I smile at the fourth interruption within a couple of minutes of our conversation since she answered her phone. “It’s—“

“If I have to say it again, you’re going to get it. You’re going to spend the rest of the day in your room and no ice cream when the ice cream truck comes by. Guys, I need one of you to take him to the park.”

I listen, amused by the chaos in their house through the phone. I hear muffled whining in the background from Ryan and Drew along with music and the sound of a video game. It’s a lot at ten in the morning. I’d need an entire pot of coffee to start the day. “I see your house is already full steam ahead and going for a Sunday morning.”

“You think? Between Axel bouncing off every surface he sees like he’s trying to break something on purpose to give me something to freak out about, and the slob brothers with the controllers glued to their hands, volume up way too high, and the washer acting up and leaking water—uhh, it’s been a hell of a morning already.”

“Seems like you’ve done more than a lot already. I’m stressed just listening to it in the background,” I sympathize

with a chuckle.

“Geez, you don’t want to hear all this. You called to say good morning and you get this. Bet now you’re probably rethinking getting to know more about me.”

“Are you kidding, this is the morning I dream of, waking up next to you in a house that’s in full swing.”

She laughs. “Then you need your head checked, my friend.”

“Now it’s just friend, huh, I’ve been demoted from my boyfriend position?”

“Well, you know, you weren’t promoted in the first place. But I’d say you’re in for consideration. For being helpful.”

Consideration is better than nothing. “So what would cement me into a permanent position?”

“Well—hold on, Noah,” she says with a huff. “Axel, up to your room, right now. But nothing. When you don’t listen repeatedly, this is what happens. I don’t want to see you down here for two hours.” I hear the sound of petulant steps going upstairs. Then more talking. “Guys, I’m going to lose my shit if you don’t help me clean up some of this mess I didn’t make. Not later, now! I made breakfast for everyone and was forced to spend an hour washing select pieces of clothes by hand like an old-world wife. Do something!”

I hear more grumbling in the background but this time the sound of the video games stops. Her patience is amazing. She comes back to the phone with a sigh. “School only ended three weeks ago, and the idea of one more entire day with all of us in here is driving me batshit already.”

“It’s your day off today?”

“What day off? Even my days off are not off duty. Axel is with me on those days to save money from the sitter. Drew and Ryan’s summer job has them off on the weekends. It’s already seventy degrees out and they don’t look like they have plans to go anywhere today. Oh, and did I mention, the AC broke last year so we’re working using two fans, sharing between four

people. Oh, fun times ahead.” She blows out a deep breath, her exasperation coming through loud and clear over the phone.

“I’m off today too, and I can’t imagine being in here with no AC. And there are four people over there, I feel your pain.” I seriously do. I’m supposed to go over there today and finish up her porch. I haven’t been over there in a few days because of work, which slowed down the repairs along with discovering more damage than I first thought there was.

“You don’t but you will later.”

“I’m sure but it’ll be worth it because I get to see your pretty face and spend time with you.”

“Always so sweet. If you’re this sweet on the job you must let a lot of people go—then again you did give me a ticket. Maybe not so sweet.”

“I beg your pardon, I’m not sweet on the job. I’m fair. I stand by the ticket. But look at us now...that ticket was the beginning.”

She huffs. “If you say so. If you ever want a shot at another girl, I’d say look the other way with the ticket.”

“Good thing I don’t want another girl.” She’s silent but I can tell she’s smiling. “I’ll swing by there around twelve. Is that good for you?”

“Yeah, we’ll be here sweating our asses off as the sun gets hotter and it bakes us in here.”

An hour later after thinking about how frazzled she sounded cooped up in a house with three kids, I had a great idea. One that would allow me to spend more time with her and give the kids and us something fun to do. A quick search on the computer and I have a plan for the day. Hopefully, she’ll like it. I’m sure the boys will. Who doesn’t like amusement parks?

As I’m getting the tickets printed out from the printer my phone rings with a call from Holden. “Hey,” I answer.

“Hey, I got your money for you.”

“What money?”



“The money I borrowed.”

“I told you you didn’t have to pay it back. You really did earn it for helping out.”

“All right. You don’t need to tell me twice to keep money in my pockets. Thanks.”

“No prob. So what are you up to today, work?”

“Not much. It’s my day off. I was going to practice on the guitar then maybe go hang with a couple of the guys tonight, play a song or two.”

“So your day is wide open if you want it to be.”

“Mm...sure.”

“How about you come to hang with me, Lexi, and her brothers? It’ll be fun.”

“More painting?” He sort of chuckles. “You know you’re in already with her. You don’t need me to help seal the deal. Although, anything with me in it is better.”

“Whatever, knucklehead. I’m supposed to finish her porch today but I thought I would surprise her and her brothers with tickets and a day at Great Adventures. It’ll be fun, come with us. This way there’ll be two cars and we won’t be smashed together.”

“So you’re only inviting me for a free ride? How impolite and opportunistic of you. But I get it, you’re digging her hard. More and more like me every day, bro,” he says in that sarcastic joking way of his.

“It’s not even like that and you know it. Seriously, though, you had fun last time and you did say you wouldn’t mind going back to help. Well, you’ll be helping, and it’ll be fun. Come on, say yes. Come on, come on...it’s the brotherly thing to do.”

“Fine.” He sighs dramatically. “You twisted my arm. I’ll go help you out once again.”

Yes! “All right, cool,” I say smoothly like I’m not really happy he’s coming. When you go to places like these, the

more the better. “I’ll meet you at Lexi’s in twenty minutes.”



“HEY, GUYS. WHAT’S GOING ON?” I walk into the house after Ryan opens the door and immediately slumps back down on the couch next to his brother, watching whatever is on.

“Can’t you see, not a damn thing but sweating our balls off,” Drew mumbles with his usual charm.

Okay. “As always, it’s nice to see you too, Drew.”

“Whatever. If you’re looking for Lexi, she went on a date. She decided to trade up. I think a firefighter. So you can leave and stop adding to the oppressive heat in here.”

“Funny. I just spoke to her.”

“Good for you.”

“On a hot as balls day like today, I think you should be nicer to me, Drew. I got something I think you’ll be interested in.” Just then Axel comes down the steps with Lexi right behind him.

Seeing me she smiles. “Hey, you.” And comes to stand next to me.

“Hi.” I smile and kiss her on the cheek. “Hey, Axel.”

“Hey, hey,” he says, flopping onto the couch so his head lands in Drew’s lap, and his feet hit Ryan’s lap near his groin. Drew laughs as Ryan winces from the impact and shoves Axel’s feet to the ground. Axel says ouch and kicks at his brother’s thigh. Ryan reaches over to smack him but misses as Axel rolls over Drew’s legs onto the floor by his feet, then sticks his tongue out at his brother.

Yeah, they need to get out of this house before they kill each other in a heat-induced haze. “I was just about to tell your brothers about the surprise I have for you all today.”

“I love surprises,” Axel shouts, reclaiming his former position on the couch—not learning from before—using his

feet to annoyingly push Ryan in the thigh, but stops as soon as Ryan levels a death glare on him.

“I hope all of you do because it’s for everyone. I got all of us tickets to the amusement park. Roller coasters and wave-pool all day if you’re interested, and free food. All on me.”

“Hell yes!” Ryan says. “I’m going to Lazy River it all day.”

“Me too! Yeah! You’re the best, Noah. You’re really nice.” Axel gets off the couch and throws his arms around my waist, almost pushing me back a bit.

“Well, thanks.” I laugh, glad that I could make him this happy.

“Come on, Axel, I’m going to get my swim trunks. I’ll help you find yours.” Ryan leads the way up the stairs.

“I can’t believe you did that,” Lexi says. “I can’t let you pay for all of us, Noah, it’s way too expensive.”

“I got this, Lexi. If I couldn’t afford it, I wouldn’t have offered. Besides, you can’t say no now, babe, already paid for.”

“Do you know how much they can eat? On top of what you’ve already paid for the tickets for all of us? It doesn’t feel right to me to let you do this without me at least contributing something.” She stares up at me, a line formed between her brows like she’s seriously going to flat-out refuse my offer and say no.

“Stop worrying. I got this,” I say before she has a chance to say no. “Let me do something good for you, a day out. With your family and me. It’ll be our first family date. It’s good practice.”

“For what? Being broke and highly annoyed by all the arguing and the ‘stop hitting me’ on the way there, *if* I say yes to this.”

“You remember what I said about the pressure cooker? Come on...” I give her my best smile holding her hands and

shaking them in an attempt to make her smile. “Take—the—lid—off.”

“Yeah, Lex, take the lid off. Let the man do something good for us,” Drew says from his spot on the couch where I’d forgotten for a second he was still there. “We deserve it.”

“Drew.”

“I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but listen to Drew.”

“You should always listen to Drew. Besides, Axel is going to throw a shit storm of tantrums if you tell him no now. Do you want to deal with that all day in this hot ass house?” Drew looks at her.

“Hell no.” She sighs, head hanging down. “Fine! We’ll go. But you’ll let me pay you back for some of it when I get paid. That’s the only way I’m agreeing.”

“Whatever makes you happy.” I try to keep the triumphant smile off my face, knowing full well I won’t be taking any of her money.

“I’m getting my trunks. *And* you’re welcome, Noah,” Drew says, walking past us.

“I guess I don’t have to ask if he’s going.” I pull Lexi to me, smiling, hands on her hips.

“He was a sure bet from when you said free food.” We look at each other and laugh. “I’m going to get some stuff. I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be out front waiting for y’all.” I watch her run up the stairs, happy that was settled as quickly as it was. I want to spend the day with her and do something nice for her and the boys. I think they all need a little time to decompress and have some fun for a day. Doesn’t seem like they get much of those from what I’ve seen. It’s worth the cost to see them be kids for a day and enjoy themselves.

Twenty minutes later, after I looked over my handy work on the almost finished front porch, the Brooks-Sullivan clan comes stumbling out the door pushing each other, voices

raised. I smile, knowing I will never be bored with this bunch. “All ready, have everything you need?”

“I think we’re good,” Lexi says, locking the door with her key, while her brothers shuffle over next to me on the steps.

“Hey, Holden and Shauna are here!” Axel says, running off the steps toward them, throwing his arms around her waist, and fist bumping my brother.

“Oh, shoot,” Lexi looks in their direction and says. “I totally spaced out and forgot she was coming over. She’s going to be pissed she came this way and now I’m bailing on her.”

“What’s he doing here?” Drew says as we walk to where my brother and Shauna are standing in front of his car.

“I figured we wouldn’t all fit in my truck so he’s coming with us. I hope you don’t mind. I didn’t think you would since we all got along so well during paint wars and all?”

“Of course not.” Lexi wraps her arm around mine. “You’re bankrolling most of this trip, which I’m probably going to thank you for for the rest of the day.”

”Like I said, no thank you needed. But if you do feel the need to thank me, all I need is for you to have fun and enjoy yourself.”

“Okay.” She smiles and lifts her head kissing me on my cheek, making me feel ten feet tall.

“Yeah, and Holden’s cool. I call shotgun with him!” Ryan walks ahead of us greeting my brother the same as Axel did before getting into the car.

“Hey, Shauna,” Drew says, then flicks his eyes to my brother with another uncharacteristic, almost hesitant, “Hey.”

To which my brother’s chin lifts with a, “Sup. So you riding with me?”

“I guess.” He gives a brief smile before quickly dropping back into his usual unbothered and doesn’t care much state. “Or whatever.” He turns around in the opposite direction he was headed going to the back of the car and opening the passenger door behind Ryan.

Okay. I don't know what's happening there. Drew is a true enigma to me. One minute he's a self-assured, cocky, smart mouth know it all surly teenager, then he's the helpful brother who seems like he'd do anything to protect his sibling, like inside with getting Lexi on board for this outing, and then like just now with Holden, there's this flicker as if he's almost unsure of himself and his movements. Teenagers. I look at my brother and shrug. He just smiles one of his annoying smiles and winks at me. What the hell for, I don't know.

I tune back into the conversation Lexi and Shauna are having. "Don't worry about it. If I were in your shoes I would ditch my best friend too, to spend the day with Officer looking good and plenty, and he does look like he has plenty." Her eyes boldly trail up my body, taking a brief stop below my waist.

"Okay..." I say, at a loss for words being so boldly assessed, but at the same time strangely admired and approved of.

Holden laughs, hooking an arm around Shauna's shoulder, while Lexi yells, "Shauna, behave. He has cuffs and he knows how to use them."

She looks at Lexi, brows raised. "You know I like a man who knows how to use the tools he's got." Then with a smoldering smile, she rasps, holding out her hands crossed at the wrist. "Arrest me, Officer, I've been a bad girl."

Which does nothing but make my brother laugh louder, which makes me laugh, and Lexi shakes her head. "Pay her no attention. I think she was dropped on her head as a baby," Lexi says with almost the same unimpressed facial reaction Drew usually wears daily.

"You know what would be a fucking great time?" Holden says, "If you came with us, Shauna."

"I don't know...this seems like more of a family-friendly outing thing. I'm not sure if I'm family-friendly enough for Lexi and the fine officer."

“Please call me Noah. We’re going to an amusement park and for me, more is always better when it comes to fun.”

“Yeah, you should come, Shauna. I have an extra bathing suit and a shirt in my bag that you can wear if you want. Come on, say yes. We haven’t done anything like this since we were in high school, it’ll be fun,” Lexi pleads with her.

“You should come with us. If you’re worried about family-friendly shit, come on, I’m driving with two impressionable teenagers.” Holden smirks. “You can help me teach them the right way to live their teen years and corrupt the hell out of them.”

“You had me at corrupted. Heck yes, I’m going with ya.” She and my brother smile at each other.

Lexi groans. “My brothers are corrupt enough. I think you two should be careful, they might teach you a thing or two.

“No corrupting the youth,” I yell back to them as they get into his truck, and Lexi and I get in with Axel, already buckled and excited.

“Can I get corrupted too?” Axel leans forward excitedly and asks.

“No!” we say at the same time, looking back at him, then laughing as he frowns sitting back.

*Thirteen*





“Oh my god, that was hilarious,” Shauna says to Ryan.  
“You should have seen your face when that guy jumped in and did the perfect belly flop, almost on top of you.”

“Laugh it up, but I almost drowned in the deep end of a fucking wave pool. Now I know how a sinking ship feels, and I got water up my damn nose.”

I walk next to them, smiling, as we stop in one of the food lines. My eyes scan around for Drew, Holden, and Noah. They went to get changed and to get hotdogs and french fries with Axel. “I did yell, ‘lookout and hold your breath!’”

“That’s like saying look out when you’re stuck in the middle of an intersection and a car is coming straight at you.” He waves his hand around. “No help at all.”

I shrug and wave ahead of me when I spot the guys coming our way just as the girl behind the counter says, next to Ryan. “You only got fries?” I say to Axel who is walking ahead of the guys, stuffing his ketchup-smearred face. So much so that he can’t talk clearly around all the food in his mouth. “Stop talking before you choke,” I tell him, taking one of his fries.

“We ate the chili dogs on our way back over here,” Noah says to me.

I look down at Axel’s fries and shake my head. “Chili dogs and chili cheese fries.” Oh boy. “I’m going to have to get you some kids Pepto with all the stuff you’ve been eating since we

got here. I'm surprised we're not rolling you around the park like a barrel."

"Hey, still having fun?" Noah asks me, putting his arm around my shoulder with a smile, drawing my attention away from Axel the bottomless pit he has for a stomach.

"Do you need to ask?" I smile back at him, admiring his bright smile and wind-blown hair, and thinking about how sexy he looks when the sun shines on him, bringing out the red highlights sprinkled through his brown hair. Wondering how much more sexy it would look if it was my hands that did that and how long it was going to be before that happened. "Wasn't screaming between your legs on the tube slide with my hands in the air enough of an answer for you?"

He leans close to my ear and lowers his voice, "In a room with a bed, yes. But in this case, I need reassurance and clarification." He waggles his brows at me.

God, he has no idea what the low timber of his voice does to me. "Poor thing, I left you wondering, huh? Let me be clearer." I pull his head down and press my lips against his long enough to part his lips with the tip of my tongue with a kiss, to reassure him of how much fun I'm having and how much more I'm so ready to have with him. "Does that answer your question?" I open my eyes with my lips brushing against his.

"I think we should do it again, so I'm absolutely sure." The side of his lip turns up, and I laugh.

"All right, all right, cut it out. We get it. You two are really into each other. You don't need to rub this kind of sweetness into our faces. This funnel cake is sweet enough," Shauna says, biting into her funnel cake.

I smile and bump her with my shoulder as Noah holds my hand. We walk to a bench we all sit down at. Noah sitting next to me, Holden and Ryan on the tabletop, and Drew standing next to them. I put my hand on his thigh, and he covers my hand with his, brushing his across my skin as we all talk and laugh at the guy in a chocolate costume trying to juggle on a

tricycle. It gets funnier when Holden jumps off the bench to assist him with the comedy routine.

But leave it to Holden to look cool even when he's doing something that would make the rest of us look like fools. A small crowd forms around them. By the time he tosses the balls perfectly back in the air to the chocolate man, we're all clapping as he bows and winks at his audience with his trademark cocky smile.

Today is a good day. It's been a long time since all I've had to do is just go with the flow of things and not have to jump in and course-correct something that's about to take a turn for the worse. I didn't feel like I was alone doing all the things. Watching Axel, keeping him safe, being on the lookout for unexpected sightings of my mother, and Grandpa, mounting unpaid bills, and keeping my eyes alert for trouble Drew and Ryan might be headed for with their smart-ass mouths and attitudes.

Smart ass mouth and attitude mostly being Drew on any given day or hour. Even he seems more relaxed than he's been in months. It's almost like old times. No one's arguing or feelings being stepped on. A brief hiatus away from the everyday shit we all have to deal with.

I can take a breath. Not worry about any of it—just be in the moment. And it's because of Noah. The guy I thought was too nice for me...well the jury is still out on that, but I like what I feel when I'm with him. I like who I am with him right now. I can't help it, I lean over happily and kiss him on the cheek. "Thank you."

He smiles, looks into my eyes, and squeezes my hand under the table. I feel like he's seeing me, because the way he looks at me and touches me makes me feel like we are the only ones here, even in the middle of a crowd of people. Yeah, he might be too good for me but for now, I'm keeping him, cause it's all in the way he makes me feel with just this look in his eyes.

"What do you think, Lexi?" Shauna says, breaking the intensely intimate moment between Noah and me.

“About what?” I say, prying my eyes away from Noah to answer Shauna.

“Those two over there. You think they’re a couple? She’s cute, but the guy could be my next boyfriend, hot.” She tears off a piece of her funnel cake which Axel snatches from her hand and pushes into his mouth. He’s like a squirrel, collecting food from everyone all day, stuffing his face.

Shaking my head at both of them, I look at the couple, and she is right but I can’t tell myself if they’re a couple. “I’m not sure. She is leaning into him while they talk and her hand is on his arm. I can’t tell from that alone.”

“I can.” Holden sits on the edge of the table, legs spread.

Shauna looks at him, pointing her funnel cake. “How can you tell?”

“Because I have a gift for that, and that’s my type.” He plucks a fry from Drew’s hand and tosses it into his mouth.

Drew frowns down at the cup of fries in his hand. “She’s your type.”

“That’s a worthless gift to have,” Ryan says, handing his half-eaten funnel cake to Axel. “A gift would be being able to predict the winner at the horse races every time.”

“Everyone has their talents, kid. We should all play to them.”

“Unless your talent can get me closer to him they’re useless to me,” Shauna says, pointing to the couple.

“Unfortunately for you, Shauna, my talents can’t change orientation.”

“What are you talking about?”

Holden looks at Noah who nods, pressing his lips together, then gives his trademark smirk to Shauna. “She’s my type once in a while, cute girl next door, dark hair and big brown eyes, nice body.”

She rolls her eyes. “And?”

Holden chuckles. “The guy...was across from me in the changing room. Trust me when I say he’s not your type. But he’s mine.” With that he hops off the table with his usual swagger, in the direction of the couple, leaving everyone slack jawed except Axel and Noah.

Axel eats his cake and says he wants to go on the tilt-a-whirl ride, and Noah looks after Holden in awe and says, “He does have a gift. He can pick up almost anyone anywhere. It’s self-serving, but it serves him well.”

“Wow. I did not see that coming,” Shauna says, eyes wide staring at me. “Did you know?”

“Nope,” I say popping the P. “You’re not the only one who didn’t see that coming.” I have to say I’m not that surprised though.

“Huh! He has two types.” Drew brings a fry to his mouth. “Learn something new every day.” His lip turns up at the side, staring at Holden as he leans in close to the hot guy’s ear as the girl with him orders something to eat a few steps away. They both laugh and Holden gives him his phone number. Then jogs back over with his phone and a beaming smile.

“Rides, rides, rides!” Axel chants, spinning around and jumping up on what I know is a sugar high. “Lexi, Noah, come on, I want to go on the ride now. Come on.” He pulls on my hand.

“Fine. Let’s see if we can burn this sugar energy off before we get back in the car.” A kid hopped up on sugar and adrenaline is a headache no one wants in a car for any amount of time.

We go off in two different directions. Me, Axel, and Noah to the kiddie rides, and Shauna and the guys to find the tallest, fast, heart-palpitating coaster in the park. Good luck to them. I deal with enough of that on a regular day. Slow and steady is what I’m into today. I smile, one of my hands holding Axel’s, the other holding onto Noah.



“I DON’T FEEL SO GOOD.”

That’s about the only warning Noah got before Axel threw up on his sneakers on the front porch after carrying him up the steps. “I’m so sorry,” I say, as he hoses down his shoes in the backyard.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Come on, let me have them.” I hold my hand out for his wet sneakers on the ground in our sparse backyard grass. “I’ll put them in the dryer.”

He picks them up and hands them to me and I notice a spot on his shirt. Oh, man I think he caught you, right there.” I point to the spot on his shirt.

“Yeah...” His forehead creases looking at the offending spot of vomit. “I guess I wasn’t quick enough with the pull away after all.”

“No, you were definitely quick enough.” I laugh, thinking about how fast he was able to turn Axel down and away from his body, narrowly avoiding being soaked shoulder to feet in the vomit of everything Axel ate, and it was a lot. “Come with me.” I take his hand and lead him through the back door inside the house and upstairs into my room. “Give me your shirt. I’ll go wash it.”

“You didn’t have to. I can do it,” he protests.

“Are you kidding me, it’s the least I could do. Now come on.” I drop his shoes on the floor and start to pull his short sleeve polo up getting a peek at his abs.

“You sure are aggressive in this bedroom. Is this a sign of things to come? If it is, I’m not complaining.” He grins.

“I’ll show you aggressive. Just give me the damn shirt, and I might give you a sneak peek of things to come.” I lean up and press my lips against his. I step back, and he chases after my lips but I press my fingers against his lips, keeping him still. “Let me wash the shirt, first, then we can do something.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” He pulls back and swoops the shirt over his head in one fluid sexy as fuck move

that makes me want to run my tongue across and map out every inch of well-defined abs I see. “Here you go.” He smirks, holding out his shirt to me while I stare like a fool, mouth gone slack.

“Here I go,” I repeat, staring at him like I’ve never seen a shirtless, good-looking man before. Geez, pull it together. “Thanks.” I pull the shirt out of his hand, spin around on my toes, and leave him in my room.

Smooth, real smooth, Lexi.

“Your sneakers and shirt are in the dryer,” I say, walking back into my room. He puts down a glass figurine elephant on the dresser he was looking at and turns around to face me. “Sorry again about Axel throwing up on you.”

“Like I said, don’t worry about it, shit happens, or in this case, throw up.” He smiles.

“Why and how are you so nice? You’re like...unreal nice.”

“I don’t think I’m any nicer than most people.”

“Then you don’t know most people. Most single guys who spent the day with a super hyper six-year-old, two rowdy teenagers, and paid for mostly the entire day trip at an amusement park would have stormed away as soon as the vomit hit the floor. But you’re still here. I know you like me, but...you’re still here?” I shake my head in mild disbelief.

“Yep, I’m still here with you. No plans on leaving until you kick me out. Which you can’t do until my sneakers dry.”

I walk further into the room. Stand right in front of him, look into his eyes, and tell him, “I would never kick you out of this house, this room, or my bed.” I put my hand on his waist, pull him closer, and kiss him.

“Good to know.” He kisses me back, running his hand up my back underneath my shirt. “I’ve wanted to touch you like this all day.”

“And I want you. Take it off,” I say, needing to feel his skin against mine. He sweeps it off and kisses my neck. I press my hand against his head and hold him in place relishing the

wet slide of his tongue down my neck. “More,” I gasp, as he sucks on a sensitive spot, as the back of my knees hit the bed and he wraps his strong arms around my waist, breaking what could have been an embarrassingly clumsy fall.

“I got you,” he says, pressing down between my legs when we land, gazing into my eyes.

I stare back into his eyes for a minute, not knowing why those words stir up a swirl of uncertainty in me, and even though I should know the answer from past experience I still ask, “Do you?”

He strokes a finger over my brow, and with a gentle smile that I have come to know is his trademark, true to god honest, and pure, he says, “Always. For as long as you want me, I’ll be here for you. I got you.”

I believe him, and with a sigh of relief, I close my eyes and just let it be. At this moment I trust him with not only my body but my heart. His fingertips trace down the side of my neck to the strap of my bra, fingering the straps tickling my skin, waiting...with uncertain eyes. “Take it off.” I nod my head, giving him permission.

He slips them off my shoulder, kissing one shoulder and then the other as they fall away. Sending tiny tingles up my skin turning into a full shiver when he snaps open the front, exposing my bare breasts to his full view. And although this is far from the first time I’ve done this, and all that I have done with men I hardly know, this feels different. My eyes flutter down and I touch the side of his face, bringing his eyes back to mine. I feel almost shy, but it’s thrilling at the same time.

As if he can read my thoughts he says, “You’re beautiful.” Leaning down and engulfing a nipple in warm heat.

With a breathy exhale my back arches, pushing off the bed, deeper into his mouth. My legs wrap around him, clutching him to me when cool air hits at the loss of his mouth around my abandoned, wet, distended nipple. He switches to my other aching hard nipple, his tongue rolling and sucking to the point of losing my mind, as his hard jean-clad bulge rolls between my legs, making my underwear wet, and wanting



much more. “Help me take this off.” My hands fumble, tugging impatiently at my shorts and underwear.

“Thank god, I thought you’d never ask,” he says. I laugh as he pushes my hands away to do it for me.

“Yours too.” I unbutton his jeans, impatient, as he pulls away taking my underwear and shorts with him. They go down my legs and drop to the floor, I watch panting, as his eyes trail over my body from head to toe

“Fuck. Do you know how gorgeous you look right now, spread across this bed?” he says, standing as he tucks his thumbs into the side of his jeans working them down.

His pants drop and he’s standing in all his glory, and it is *glorious*. Chest, abs, and...oh damn. My throat constricts and my eye goes wide traveling to the sexy cut v at his hip, the beauty goes both ways. He gets closer, resuming where he left off, and he fits perfectly between my legs. His mouth presses to mine, my hands sink into his hair while his hands cover my breasts, thumbs softly stroking over my sensitive nipples. The delicious weight of his body pressing me back into the bed as our tongues tangle. One strong hand goes over my quivering belly, down between my legs splaying them wider, his fingers playing in my wet heat making me gasp, “Noah.” Back rising off the bed, my hands grab onto his ass needing him to go further.

Rutting against my thighs, pre-cum making my thigh slick, he pants, “Lexi, condom?”

“Dresser.” I point. “First drawer, by the side.”

His glorious body raises off me, and faster than I anticipated, he has the condom out, opened, and rolled down his glorious cock. “You ready?” he says with a smile that would melt away any doubts if I had any.

I smile, spreading my legs giving him a clear answer. “Yes.”

His eyes lock onto mine, and the weight of his body covers me with welcome heat and security. My hands rest on his shoulder, and in almost breathless anticipation I watch as his

strong capable hands take his hard length, giving his cock two strokes. He aims, rubbing against my entrance, letting go as he slides through my wetness, and I catch my breath when the head pushes inside, stretching me open. He stops, bites his lower lip, and my hips swirl in sync with his easing the way into a tight fit around his glorious hard dick.

“Are you okay?” he asks, holding still, warm puffs of air blowing across the side of my face. Panting, I nod my reply, aching for him to just move so I can feel his dick deep inside me. Just as I’m about to say keep going, he pulls back dragging his cock out of me and I moan, loving the feeling of his body dragging against my skin on bare skin. Even more, when he forcefully pushes forward, sinking back into my body as we both grunt and groan, and my legs pull up higher, gripping his sides.

I raise my head and he kisses me, smothering my moans with a low growl. He pulls out slowly then rocks back inside me. Our bodies press together, sliding against each other getting slicker with perspiration, pushing and pulling against each other for release. He thrusts inside me so deep, hitting a spot that makes my eyes roll back and cry out his name. “Noah!”

I clutch his shoulder harder, my fingers digging into his flesh, sure to leave marks. His hand slips between us, rubbing my clit, as he keeps hitting that spot inside me. My walls tighten around his cock trying to suck him deeper into my body. I feel like I’m overflowing with the most incredible sensations as I come undone in his arms, trapped beneath him. I cry out, pressing my face in the side of his neck, overtaken by pleasure, my eyes shut as it rolls over me.

It’s even better when I feel him throbbing inside of me. His mouth presses to my ear, his breathing coming out harsh and ragged, holding me so tight against his chest I can feel his heart beating into mine.

I try to catch my breath as he loosens his hold on me, and slowly leaves my body. He rolls to his side and then reaches over taking me with him so we face each other. He runs a hand over my hair watching me, like he’s worried, lips press

together like he's not sure of what to say. He doesn't need to say anything because there is nothing for me to worry about for once. He's made this day perfect and what we just did adds the exclamation mark to make it outstanding. I smile and tip his chin up, nuzzling the side of his lips with the tip of my nose. "You don't need to say anything. This was exactly what I wanted and needed from you. You made this day a memory I will always think about and smile. You're probably sick of hearing me say this, but I don't give a damn. Thank you."

He chuckles and leans in kissing me. "And like I've said many times, you don't need to thank me. But you're welcome."

*Fourteen*



“Hey, Grandpa,” I say from the doorway of his room.

“Hey, you’re early. Was I expecting you today?” His forehead creases, watching me walk into his room.

I give him my best smile and kiss him on the cheek. “Well, we spoke earlier today and I said I might drop by.” I pull a chair next to his recliner.

He puts his hand over mine and says, “Put that chair back. You came here to visit me. I’m tired of this damn room. Let’s go in the yard for a walk around the garden.”

“You sure? It looks like you were about to take a nap.”

“Nap, my ass. I was just resting my eyes for a minute.”

“Okay. If you’re sure you’re not tired?”

“Young lady, don’t make me have to take you to task for mouthing off to your elders. Now get yourself up and walk with me. Fresh air is good for my lungs.”

I hold my hands up, amused. Glad to see some of his former bluster back. “I agree with you. Fresh air is good for us all, especially on a nice summer day. Where’s your walker?” I look around the room trying to find it.

“I don’t need that damn thing.” He pushes a button on his chair and I watch it practically raise him onto his feet without having to bend his knees to stand up. “See that. Now, why would I need that thing?” He tilts his head to where the walker is in the corner. “Besides, I’m going to have a beautiful girl on

my arm to help lighten my load. Now let's go." He holds his arm out for me to take.

"Yes, sir." I smile, taking his arm and holding on as tight as I can, leading him out of his door. I'm glad to see his fighting spirit is back. Almost like the grandpa I knew before his health started to deteriorate. When he was the grandpa I knew when I was a little girl, he wouldn't take anyone's bullshit or let anyone give us shit either, especially for my mother's behavior. When people would make snide remarks about her in front of us he would cut them down but he would do it so artfully with a smile and a wink to us that at times I wasn't sure he was agreeing with them or telling them to mind their own fucking business. But I'm sure the adults he was talking to knew.

For some reason, though—I suspect because of us—he let my mother get away with things he wouldn't tolerate from anyone else. That's just one of the reasons it hurts to see him like this, almost frail, but seeing him today and hearing him talk...you never know, he might prove his doctors and nurses wrong. I want and *need* him to be around for far longer than they think he will be.

"I've missed you," he says as we walk around the little garden in the back of the nursing home. "You should come to visit me more, bring the boys next time."

"I will. I thought it would be best for me to come during my lunch break this time, and I didn't want to wait too long before our next visit. I have to work later than usual tonight."

"I understand." He pats my hand as we stop at one end of the garden, where they have a little pond with two baby ducks the nursing home has adopted as pets, and the residents apparently love taking care of. "I wish..." he stops, takes a deep breath, and sighs.

I look at him, worried he might be getting tired from the walk down from his room and around the garden. "Do you need to sit on the bench?" I point to a bench on the other side of the little pond.

“No, no, I’m all right. It’s...well you work a lot, don’t you? You’re taking care of everyone, including me. It shouldn’t be that way.” He shakes his head looking away. “I should be taking care of you all, but look at me. I can’t even take care of myself so well. Don’t ever get old, it’s a bitch.” He looks back at me with a sad smile. “So much on such young shoulders isn’t right?”

Shoot. I clear my throat and school my face so my true emotions won’t show. If I don’t, I’m going to cry because he thinks he’s letting me down and that’s the farthest thing from the truth. If anything he’s the only constant I ever had in my life and through his example and hard work is the only reason I’m able to keep going for all of us.

I know if he could he would be the one doing it all, keeping this family together. “Grandpa, you have always taken care of all of us. You’re not letting any of us down. You have always been the one constant for us when everyone else let us down or gave up on us. I hope you know how much you mean to us. You’ll get better and you’ll come home. I know you will. So don’t worry about all that other stuff, we’re fine, okay?”

His lip curls up at the side in a lopsided smile. From this close-up in the sunlight next to him, I can see how much the mini-strokes have affected his facial features. And that breaks my heart even more.

“You need someone to help you out with those kids, Vanessa. If only you had a good man. Like I had your mama. Someone strong and dependable you could count on in good times and bad. I would worry less.”

I take a deep breath and hold it in for a few seconds, blinking back the storm of tears threatening to burst free. I know this happens from time to time, his memories and time get mixed around, but when it does it’s hard. I don’t want to upset him so I do what’s best and tell him the truth and hope it eases his mind. “You know, I did meet someone. He’s a good guy. I know I’ve said this a thousand times before but this time I’m sure. He reminds me a lot of you. He is kind and caring and he listens to me.”

“Really?” He stares at me, sounding more upbeat.

I nod. “Yes, he does.”

“In what way, because you think everyone is the one.”

“Well, let’s see. He’s great with the boys and they like him. Especially Axel. On Sunday he showed up at the house and surprised us with tickets to an amusement park. He paid for everything and refused to take a dime for anything, even though the boys probably bankrupted him with the amount of food alone they ate.” I smile. “And I forgot to tell you, he also helped me fix the porch that was falling apart. And you know how Drew is, a pain in the ass.” I smirk. “His patience has been tested and he’s passing the test.”

He laughs. “I’m so happy to hear it. Everyone needs to have an abundance of patience with Drew, but he’s a good kid. He needs someone with a strong will, and mind of their own to guide him and help keep him going in the right direction. You should bring this guy...what’s his name, again?”

“Noah.” I smile just saying his name out loud to my grandpa.

“Noah is a strong name.” He nods to himself. “Bring him by one day. I’d like to meet him.”

“Maybe, but he’s busy. He’s a cop.”

“Well, now! Look at that. I never thought I’d see the day.” He laughs. “I’m glad that I have though.”

I laugh with him shaking my head. “I’m sure you didn’t. No one else either.”

“Does he get along with Lexi?”

“He does. They get on the best. She really likes him. She hopes he’ll stick around. He promised he would but you know how it is. You never know what will happen, do you? She has high hopes for this one. I’m crossing my fingers it’ll work out for her sake this time.”

“If Lexi likes him and thinks he’s a good person, I’ll go with it. That little girl has a good head on her shoulders. She’s a bit too serious for her age though. She’s a thinker and a



nurturer all the way, she gets that from your mother.” He smiles warmly. “I hope she gets her wish on this one and Noah is finally the right one who sticks around for you.”

“Me too.” More than anything I’m hoping that maybe this is the one, and maybe just maybe, he can look past what I’ve done if he ever finds out because I have no intention of ever telling him about the club and what I do. It would be disastrous for not only me but my brothers, and there is no way I could put them in harm’s way to be ripped away from each other. I’m already risking too much as it is, for a little bit of happiness, for something that’s just mine. That makes me feel so good, like the way he makes me feel with one smile aimed at me or the touch of his hands against my skin. I want this. I want him.

“I want to see you finally settle down and be happy,” my grandfather continues, almost mirroring the thought in my head. “All of you, especially the kids. It’s about time you guys had something good in your lives.”

“You are so right.” I pat his arm, leaning my head on his shoulder, watching the ducks go by. “So right.”



I PULL INTO THE DRIVEWAY, surprised to see Noah sitting on the porch with his back turned to me. I wasn’t expecting to see him today. When we talked today, he said he was going to head home and get some rest and do some things around his apartment. I was disappointed. I wouldn’t see him but I understood. He’s been working and coming over here to help me fix things, painting on his off days and after work. Which I’m grateful for but seeing him now after Grandpa is exactly what I needed.

“What are you doing?” I say, leaning on the rail in front of him.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” He looks up, holding a paintbrush in the air with dark blue paint on it. He stands, leaning into my personal space, one hand on my hip.

“It looks like you’re painting, which is a surprise to me since you told me you wouldn’t have time for me,” I tease, hooking my arm around his neck.

“Lies. All lies.” He presses his lips against my neck and nuzzles the spot.

I lean into it letting the warmth of his body, the caress of his skin against mine, and the fresh soapy scent of his skin and aftershave fill and warm me, from the chill and realization of the ever-present looming loss of my grandfather. Even though it’s the middle of summer and the night is warm, while talking to Grandpa I felt it, something beyond my control coming...

“I couldn’t stay away. I came home, took a shower, ate, and did some things and during all of it, all that was on my mind was you. So here I am.”

“And here you are. Exactly when I need you.” I brush my finger through the side of his hair and kiss him. I break the kiss and smile. “So you missed me so much you decided to put yourself to work and paint?” I look at the half he’s done so far, it looks good.

He shrugs with a smile. “I was looking at the steps the last time I was over here—”

“Yesterday.” I smirk.

“Yes, yesterday.” He smirks back. “I was doing a light inspection of my handy work and saw how noticeable the old wood was from the new. I made a mental note, the easiest fix for it would be to paint it. I stopped by the store when you went to see your grandpa and picked it up. Thought it would be a nice surprise for you. And look...welcome mat! Great mat.” He grins. “It was on sale.”

How is this man real? He comes home from a long day at work at a high-stress job, hangs out with my brothers he actually likes, smart-mouthed attitude and all, and puts himself to work for free on a house that’s not even his. I look at the mat I hadn’t even noticed. Unfucking real.

“What do you think of it? By the look on your face, if you don’t like it I can return it. I do have an in with the owner of

the store, we're related. So...perks."

I swallow down the lump in my throat. "It's an amazing rug. In fact, when I was stacking them myself, I was considering buying one, I liked it so much. But here it is." I sniff, all of a sudden feeling stupid for getting emotional over a fucking welcome mat.

"Are you going to cry?" He looks at me in such horror it's almost comical. "I can return it—I will return it. Matter of fact —" He steps back reaching out to take up my new pretty mat

"Drop my mat! I say, moving him back. "I love the mat. The thing is, my grandpa isn't doing as well as I hoped he was, memory and everything. It made me sorta feel down. But I don't feel like talking about it now."

"I'm sorry. What can I do to make you feel better?" He pulls me in close with his free hand and rubs my back.

"This, you've already done it." I look at the brightly colored mat with flowers curling around each letter of the words, Welcome Home. "It's perfect. It's exactly what I needed right now and in my life. Thank you for being so considerate and caring."

"No problem." He pulls me in even closer, up against his chest.

I bring his head down and pull his firm lower lip between mine and stroke my tongue over it. He moans and my teeth bite down lightly, tempting him to open wider for me. When he does, my tongue snakes into his mouth sweeping through in a thorough kiss which leaves no guessing as to how much I appreciate it all and want him. "Put the paintbrush down. I have work for you to do inside," I say against his mouth.

"Yes, ma'am!" He drops the brush in the can with a thunk.

He grabs me by the hand and I try to keep up with him smiling past Ryan, Drew, and Axel, on the couch playing games. I smile and wave to them.

"Hey, guys, your sister is going to show me some spots that need touching up in her room."

“I’m sure,” Drew says, with a huff without looking our way. “Don’t touch them too loudly though. Younger ears than ours are down here.”

I shake my head. Always Drew with the comeback.

An hour later, the house settles down. I’m laying in bed with Noah and I get a text. And just like that, my happy bubble bursts, and reality starts to seep back in with a message from Celeste at the club. Rolling away from Noah, I lean away from him on my elbow to read the message. I have a date for tonight if I want it, definitely tomorrow night with a few guys and one with Thom when he’s in town next week.

I send off a quick reply to confirm for tomorrow night and let her know tonight is out of the question. It’s trickier now that Noah’s here some nights. He hasn’t spent the whole night but it’s cutting it close to finding an excuse for him to leave early or not come over at all. I exhale and put my phone under my pillow and lay back down facing him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I smile and kiss him. “It was a reminder text about something I had to do with Axel for school. I wrote it down in my reminders and set an alert for it.”

“Okay.” He kisses me back. “I have to go finish painting, I left the can open.”

He sits up and I sit up with him. “I’ll help. It’ll be done faster.” And it’ll keep me from feeling like a big fat lying jerk to this great guy, doing all of these things for me.

Why is he so perfect? And why the hell couldn’t he have been anything but a cop?

*Fifteen*



“You’re in here again?”

“Aunt Rachel, I’m getting a vibe here, and it’s not good. I thought you would love to see me more.” I turn around with a box of lightbulbs in my hand, in front of the aisle by the store entrance.

“Of course I would, but this is the most I’ve ever seen you in here. I would be extremely flattered if I thought for one minute you were just coming in here to see me, but I doubt it.” She turns her head not in the least bit subtle, looking at where Lexi is talking to a customer in the back of the store. A customer who looks exactly like my father.

“What’s Dad doing here?” I watch him put back a box of something and laugh when Lexi hands him another one in a different color.

“Hey, don’t worry. He isn’t going to run off with her. She’s just helping out a potential father-in-law.”

“What!” My head turns back to her. “Where did that come from?”

“Oh, please. Who do you think you’re fooling? You think because I don’t have a badge I can’t put one and one together? You’re in here way too much to shop, see me, or your brother, whose shift already ended.”

“I’ve been doing a lot of home improvement lately.”

“Right. Whose home? And don’t lie to me. You should have finished helping her with her porch weeks ago. I know

you're spending all your time with Lexi."

"What makes you think that?" My brows raise, tapping the box of bulbs against my leg.

"Let's see..." She cocks her head back, tapping the corner of her lips with her index finger. "She came in here with paint on her elbow and fingernails. The same shade you picked up the evening before. She was also humming that song you always sing. And she can't stop smiling."

"Really, how much smiling? More than usual—before she met me?"

She smiles, nodding her head. "Yes. I'm happy if you two are going out and having fun. I think she needs it. But I hope you know what you're doing with her."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she has a lot of responsibility, raising those boys by herself. She's not your usual twenty-year-old."

"Trust me, I know." I tell her how great I think Lexi is and how well we get along. When we talk everything clicks, and we're on the same page. Her brothers are a hilarious handful but they are good kids dealing the best they can with less-than-optimal circumstances and a mother who's, from what I know, an uninvolved opportunist. I see how hard she's trying to keep it all together for them and I want to help her in any way I can. If that means taking them out for the day and just letting them be carefree kids, and seeing her laugh and smile, enjoying herself with her friends without worrying about all the things she has to do and she is responsible for, then count me all the way in because she's amazing.

"Wow, take it easy there. You sound like a man halfway to the altar already." She chuckles, patting me on the chest.

I laugh. "Well...who knows. She could be the one."

"Then I don't think there is a better time than right now to maybe introduce your dad to her."

"Aunt Rach."

“What?” She shrugs innocently. “They’re already on their way over here.” She waves her fingers at me quickly, walking away past them saying, “Lexi, he looks happy with his marked-down purchase. Thank you for showing him where it was.”

“No problem.” Lexi smiles brightly at her and my father.

“Hey, you,” I say and kiss her on the cheek then look at my father. “Hi, Dad.”

“This is your dad? Oh my god, I should have known. The resemblance is right there now that you’re both standing in front of me.” She smiles.

My father looks between me and Lexi, brows raised with an obvious question. “Noah, I wasn’t expecting to see you here. It’s a good surprise, seeing as how it was your brother I was intending to run into, but he left early today as if he sensed I was coming.”

“Well, I’m sure he didn’t know you were coming to see him. I’m on my break, stopped in to see if Lexi could grab a cup of coffee with me or something. By the way, Dad, I’d like you to meet Lexi Brooks. Lexi, this is my Dad, Joseph James.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. James.” She shakes my father’s hand.

“Same here, Lexi. Thank you again for helping me.” He holds up the little box in his hand.

“It was my pleasure. And yes, I’m due for a break. Just give me five minutes to check out and get my bag from the back.” I nod and she says to my father, “Have a nice day, Mr. James.”

“You too, Lexi.” She leaves and he says, “This is a surprise. I didn’t know you were dating anyone.”

“I am. It’s new and she’s great.”

“The big grin on your face since your eyes landed on her told me what you thought already.” His lips quirk up in a small smile.



I'm not even going to try to deny it. As soon as I saw her...yeah, she's all I wanted to look at.

"She seems nice. Black, huh."

I sigh, looking at him. I don't know where he's going with this but I hope it's not where I think he's headed with it. I'm not in for it. I'm going to shut that shit down. "Is that a problem?"

"No, no!" He raises his hand. "You've never dated...you know...before."

"Not true. You know when I was in college I didn't bring everyone I dated home."

"I guess. It's not like with your brother though. Sometimes I wish he would have considered *not* bringing *everyone* home."

"What?" I say, feeling defensive on Holden's behalf even though I know he can defend and speak for himself which he's done too many times to count with my father. That's something that's been going on between them for years, saying too much to each other but not enough of the right things. Mostly me and my stepmother try to be neutral and unbiased with both of them. But that's when we can get both of them together in the same space.

"He could be more selective, not bringing everyone home is all I meant. Plenty of nice young women out there. *Plenty* of them."

"Dad, he's bi. Don't you think it's time you accepted it? Don't be one of those people."

"I'm not." He gives me a hard stare. "But it's a hard thing to accept when you walk out in your yard, where anyone could see your sixteen-year-old kid with his pants below his ass and some guy on his knees in front of him—doing the goddamn thing he was doing." He huffs with a red flush creeping up his neck to his face.

Back to this, I see. This has been a major thing in my house for years. That night wasn't one of Holden's best, with a house full of extended family. That was a dinner that will not

be forgotten, by anyone. Ever. “He was wrong and he was acting out. He wanted you to accept him and take what he was telling you seriously.”

“That’s not the way to get me to accept something. He intentionally wanted to disrespect and embarrass me in my own house. You never did things like that.”

“Holden and I are two different people, Dad. In all fairness, I did some stuff too. I just didn’t get caught.”

“Yeah, but it’s the lack of respect with him that really pisses me off.”

“Maybe if you tried to respect more or any of his decisions —”

“When he—”

“Dad.” I stop him, seeing Lexi coming back and not wanting to have this conversation between us, again, in front of her. “Let’s shelve this conversation for later. By the way, he might be coming to dinner—strong maybe.”

He rolls his eyes. “That’s what you said last time. Your stepmother was disappointed.”

“Something came up that he had to do.”

“Uh-huh, we’ll see,” he says with a heavy dose of skepticism.

“I hope if he brings someone, everyone is on their best behavior.”

“I’ll be on mine if he is. You should consider bringing Lexi. You know your stepmother, the more the better, especially if it’s someone you’re serious about.”

That’s true. Carla does love when I bring home anyone that’s potential daughter-in-law material, as she likes to say. “All right, I’ll ask her. Later, Dad.”

*Sixteen*



“Are you sure there’s nothing I can do for you—anything I can get you?” Noah says, rubbing my back as I sit on his lap wiping away a tear.

I shake my head, resting in the crook of his neck. He’s doing everything I need him to do. He’s gone out of his way again which he didn’t have to do. Miranda is sitting outside in their car waiting when they shouldn’t even be here, while he comforts me. I feel so useless sitting here crying. I knew he wasn’t getting any better. But when his nurse called and told me Grandpa had another stroke and it was more serious than any he’s had before, I just couldn’t hold it in. Streams of tears were running down my face in the middle of the household products aisle while I clutched the phone to my ear.

Rachel didn’t even wait for me to tell her the details of what happened. All I got out was “My grandpa had a stroke”. Before I said anything else, she told me to clock out and that she’d cover my register until my shift was over. I told her I’d work to the end of my shift—it probably wasn’t that serious because he’s had a few mini strokes before and he was strong, he was going to be fine again.

She wouldn’t even hear of it. She got my stuff for me because as much as I wanted to believe this time wasn’t different from the others, I was in a bit of a daze. I guess she could sense it. She said that family is a top priority in her book. They come first. I needed to go see my grandpa. I might have been saying I was all right and believed he was going to

be fine again, but my trembling body and watery eyes were telling her the real truth.

On my way to the nursing facility, I called Drew and told him everything Caroline said to me. I needed my brother with me. He understood what was going on, how devastating it would all be if we lost Grandpa like this. We aren't ready. I'm not ready for him to go.

We got to the nursing home after I picked Drew up from his friend's house. Luckily he was only scheduled to work half a day at his summer job. When we saw Caroline, I was crying all over again while she told us about Grandpa's now grim prognosis. It wasn't good. And suddenly the thought of Noah popped into my head.

I wanted him here with me holding my hand, soaking in what comfort I could get from him because that's what he does. Just being in his presence with his hand around me would have made me feel like things might be okay again.

"He's not coming home." I wipe my nose with the tissue in my hand. "I need to accept that and stop trying to give false hope to my brothers and myself. If he isn't here, I'm all they have to depend on. I can't let them down. The first thing I need to do is stop this useless crying on your shoulder."

He kisses the top of my head, rubbing soothing circles on my back. "Nothing about you or how you feel is useless. This would be difficult for anyone. You're not made of stone. You're allowed to feel and grieve a loss. Even if it's not a physical loss, it's still a loss of the grandfather you knew, and who knows you. A man I haven't met but from the stories you told me about him, he was one of the most important people in your life. He took care of you and protected you. You had an ally you knew was always going to be there to help shoulder the load."

God, how does he know? "That's exactly it." I put my hands around him, hugging him closer to me.

The thing is when we came back from seeing Grandpa and talking to his nurse—he couldn't communicate with us that well, it was sad seeing him like that in his bed looking frail

and broken. He wasn't the grandpa I've always known or even the one we've known for the past few years.

We picked up Ryan from his summer job and Axel from day camp on our way back and explained everything to them. We made plans to take them to go see him tomorrow, just in case... Then the ever fucking annoying text came through my phone. The one reminding me of what I had to go do tonight. And no, I can't turn it down even on one of the most devastating bad days. Especially now. I need to take care of my family financially, as well as emotionally.

When I pulled up to the front of the house there he was. Standing in front of his patrol car, Noah, it felt like my heart took a sigh of relief. He was here again just when I needed him. In all the commotion I'd forgotten to let him know about my grandpa. Even though he was the only other person I wanted with me, somehow I didn't reach out to let him know. *Crazy*. But he was here now. He hugged the boys as they walked by him with sad faces, no tears but nonetheless sad. Then it was me in his strong arms, wrapped around my back, soaking up some of his ever-present calm in his uniform, my blue wall of peace and strength.

Apparently, Rachel had the presence of mind as usual, like she always does, to call him and tell him what happened to my grandpa. Even though he was on duty he found a way to be here for me.

"You're not alone in this, Lex. You have me. I'm here for you. I'll do whatever you need me to do. I promise, whatever happens, you'll have me with you." He kisses my forehead, lifting my chin to look at him. "I need to get back to work. Do you need anything before I leave?"

"No. As usual, you've done enough. Thank you for caring enough...to come by. I needed y—" I can't say it. Instead, I wrap both arms around his neck holding him as tight as I can, and kiss him, hoping to convey how much showing up meant to me.

"When I get off I'll come over. I'll bring dinner. We can talk some more if you want?"

Damn. This is the problem with living two lives and trying to hide one away like it doesn't exist. Sooner or later they start to intersect, and it's a matter of time before they collide. "I would love that but Shauna, I already made plans with her. She texted me when we were leaving the nursing home. She's going to come and spend the night."

"Oh, okay." He smiles. But it's not his usual.

I feel like a big jerk for turning him down when he's trying to make me feel better, and I want to be with him. Instead, I'm going to some club to jerk some random guy off for goddamn money. Hell, I'm no better than a hooker, except they get paid better. "Would you come over tomorrow?"

"Sure, I can do that." He strokes his thumb across my cheek, smiling. "I'll bring some things and I'll cook for you and the boys."

I smile. "That sounds great."



I TAKE a shower and pick out the dress I'm going to wear tonight. As usual, it's something restrictively tight and short. These men seem to like that and as Celeste says, you gotta keep the client happy by giving them what they like, it keeps them coming back. Ugh! My life. I empty the contents of the bag I carry to the store every day and transfer my driver's license and anything else that will fit into my smaller bag for tonight.

I fit the five most important things in and fling them down next to my dress on the bed. I scoop the rest of the stuff up off the bed. I see a sheet of paper the nurse handed me with my name on it. When she gave it to me when we were leaving I stuffed it in my bag. Too concerned with everything I needed to do along with worrying about how Ryan, Axel, and Drew were taking all this.

Ryan will let me know if any of this is getting to him if I ask, and Axel is an open book most of the time. My biggest worry is Drew. His moods are so up and down, more than they

have ever been. If I ask him how he's feeling depending on the day he could give me a shrug and say he's all right, or leave me the hell alone, fuck. He's a mixed bag of emotions and it won't be good for any of us right now.

Oh well. I unfold the piece of paper which looks like another rough drawing. This time though, it's of what looks like...a bedroom, with only walls, a bed, and wood floors. It's similar to the other one he gave me last time but this one has an x on the floor. "Hmm...oh Grandpa." I put the drawing in my drawer with the other one. My phone rings and it's a text from Celeste,

Don't be late.

Your special client has requested to spend the evening with you again.

"I'm sure he has." I sigh and send a thumbs-up emoji back to her. I go downstairs to get something to eat before I put on my clothes and leave. Drew is in the kitchen, sitting at the table with the laptop open and a few envelopes next to him that look like the damn bills I forgot to stuff back in my drawers upstairs. "What are you doing?" I say, opening the fridge.

"I'm trying to figure out why the hell you didn't say anything about all these past due bills and our house about to go into foreclosure. You weren't going to tell us we're about to be fucking homeless!"

I close my eyes and summon all my calm. "Axel and Ryan will hear you. Stop being so damn dramatic. We're not going to be kicked out as long as I have next month's payment and I make sure we only stay two months behind."

"Are you serious? What kind of half-assed plan is that, Lexi?"

"I almost have all the money. I'll have the rest of it when I get my paycheck next week."

"It's the seventh of the month. If I'm reading this thing right—" He waves the paper in the air. "We only have until the



fucking fifteenth. What the hell, were you going to wait until we came home one day with a big fucking X and lock on the door before you said anything to us?”

“Of course not.” I close the fridge door, going over to him. “They can’t just kick us out like that. I researched it.” I grabbed his arm, forcing him to look at me and not through me like he wants to strangle me. “Drew, you gotta trust me on this.”

“Huh,” he snorts.

“I mean it. If I didn’t have the money in time—well, I would do anything to get it. Do you hear me, anything?” I stare into his eyes so he knows how serious I am. “I’m not like our mother. I won’t let us down. I can fix this. I always find a way, don’t I?”

Lips puckered, he nods his head. “You do. But this time feels different, Lex. You’re holding stuff back from us. *From me*. We don’t work that way. I know I’m acting like a little shit, but sometimes I can’t help it. I’m trying to figure some things out.”

“Like what? You can tell me.” I practically beg, squeezing his forearm. “You don’t have to figure it out on your own.”

“That’s the thing. This is something *I need* to figure out on my own. You can’t help me with this one.” He shakes his head looking down at where my hand is touching him.

“Are you in trouble, Drew? Please tell me if you are. Are you in some kind of trouble with the police, the people you hang out with?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. In the same way, you’re asking me to trust you, trust me. When I’m ready I’ll let you know.”

“Okay.” I take a deep breath and exhale but don’t feel any of the added tension from this conversation leave my body. “As long as it’s not anything that’s going to land you in jail or anything like that.”

“It’s not. But you need to be honest with me now. I overheard you talking on the phone a few months ago. I know

where you go some nights. It's not partying with your friends, is it?"

If I want him to be honest with me I need to be honest too, otherwise, he won't trust me, will he? "No. There's some stuff I'm not proud of. Stuff I won't go into details on but it's not as bad as you think. I'm not having sex with anyone or taking off my clothes. You know what a happy ending is, right?"

"For real, Lexi. It's that club not far from the freeway, isn't it? You have to be careful." He shakes his head. "You're worried about me getting arrested."

"I'm careful. And the cops have only been by there once when someone held a party there and some drunk knuckleheads were fighting. Someone must have called the police but nothing happened. They just broke it up, asked some questions, and left."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better that you're jerking off guys for money and fu—

"Hey! Don't." I cut him off so I don't hear anything he has to say which I know is only going to make me feel worse about the whole thing. "I'm not going to do it for much longer, okay? Just a few more months and I'll start looking for other jobs. I was even thinking about taking a CNA course. When school starts for y'all again."

"You are?"

"Yeah. I feel bad enough about this, but we need the money for the house and bills. What we all make together isn't enough without this."

"You shouldn't even have to do this. *And* you're dating a cop, Lex. What if Noah finds out? What then? How's that going to go? Possibly arresting your girlfriend isn't relationship goals."

I can't help but laugh a little even though this is far from funny. "He's not my boyfriend."

"Huh! You keep telling yourself that."

“He can’t be as long as I’m doing this. I know that. Besides, I’m careful. He won’t find out.”

“I hope you’re right. You know of all the guys Mom has brought through and the ones you’ve been with, I never thought I’d see you with a cop and I would actually, sort of, kind of like him. Who knew?”

“Who knew.” I shrug and sigh heavily trying not to think of everything that could go wrong if I get arrested for doing this or if Noah finds out. “Keep an eye on Axel tonight?”

“Lexi...I’m not judging you, but...I don’t like this.” He looks at me in earnest. “We can find another way to get the money.”

“I know and we will. I promise. But for now, I have to do this for us, Grandpa. By this fall when you guys go back to school, I’ll figure something else out. Right now I need us to be the team we’ve always been for each other. Okay?”

“Fine. For now. And you’re going to have to tell Ryan, too, all of it.”

“I will. Team Us?” I stick my hand out to him. He stares at me intently for a few seconds like he’s trying to find the truth in my words, before taking my hand. With a sigh of relief, I pull him forward into a hug, with a bit more hope than I had before I came down here.

“Team Us.” He hugs me back, it feels great. So freaking relieved. It feels like how we used to be.

When he’s ready to tell me what’s really happening with him, I’ll be here for him with my full support the way he’s supporting me now, even though he doesn’t agree with what I’m doing. The person I’m more worried about now is Noah. Drew’s right. How’s it going to work? He can’t find out. God forbid if something goes wrong and the club gets busted. Even I know that’s not a good look for any cop, even if the cop doesn’t know what the person he’s sleeping with does for money on the side.



“It’s good to see you again, Lexi. You look beautiful as always.”

“Thank you,” I say to Thom as he politely pulls my chair out for me to sit at a table in the back of the club farther away from the music.

“Seems like I haven’t seen you in way too long.” He takes a seat next to me.

“You might be exaggerating a little.” I smile. “We saw each other a week and a half ago.”

“Yes, but when a woman is as intelligent, beautiful, and as delightful as you, it can feel like a very long time.”

“Look at you throwing out compliments left and right. Don’t worry, I’m a sure thing. You don’t need to flatter me.”

“I know I don’t, but everything I said is the truth. I thoroughly enjoy being in your company. I’d pay even more to be in your company more often.” He smiles, eyes going over my face, settling on my lips briefly then back up to my eyes.

“Careful, don’t let Celeste hear you. You’re going to regret that,” I say jokingly but mean it.

He chuckles. “No...I don’t think I would. What do you know about me, Lexi?”

“Apart from what we’ve talked about when I’m here, nothing.”

“Would you like to know more?”

“When I come here I like to keep things professional. I don’t ask questions about clients’ personal lives. And I don’t go into details about mine. I like to keep conversations on a surface level.” My head tilts to the side, assessing him carefully—trying not to come off as if I don’t care what he does after he pays and leaves. “Like...finding out about your favorite drink, color, thoughts on the city. I even give great directions and advice on things to do and see while here. I

think the less we know about each other the better it is. No deep personal dives into anyone's personal life."

"You're like a Google map of things to do then. But better to look at." His lip turns up at the corners, stroking his fingers over the back of my hand, sending a frisson of tingles across my skin.

"Ah, there you go. Think of me in that way and we'll be fine." I return his warm inviting smile.

"Lexi, that's my problem. I think of you in many ways. That's not one of them," he says meaningfully. "I like you. And it seems like you like me as well."

"I do." He's charming and nice.

"Good. If you don't want to know anything about me that's fine, and I accept you want to keep your personal life separate. I'm going to be upfront with you. Clear on what I'm saying?"

"Go ahead."

"I'm unbelievably attracted to you. I don't just want to see you in here, with time limits and a thousand hundred different people, music blasting, not able to hear you. I have an offer for you."

"I don't want—"

Interrupting me, he turns my hand around on the table and clasps my hand. "Before you say anything or turn me down, listen to what I have to say and offer. You may not think so but *I* respect you. I want to see you when it's possible, at any time when I'm here, which looks like it's going to be a regular monthly occurrence for business. I'd like to take you out to lunch, dinner, breakfast, whatever, and just have a conversation with you and get to know you without digging too deep into your life, when I'm not here of course, since these are your rules. It can be lonesome when I'm in a new state where I know no one. But I've met you and I like you."

"I'm flattered but what would you want in return? I'm not a prostitute—this is sounding like a proposition for one. I'm not naive. I don't think all you want is to hang out and eat and have a good conversation."

“You’re neither of those things.” He nods. “I like that. I’m not going to force you to do anything you wouldn’t do outside of here. But yes, I would hopefully want more. But all in your time and at your own pace. If nothing else comes out of what we usually have in here, that’s okay. I can make this worth your while, Lexi, I’m not here to waste your time.

“You are beautiful, intelligent, and charming, and you’re here. Which lets me know it’s not by choice. I don’t know what responsibilities you have in your life but maybe I can help alleviate some of them with this.” He pulls out his phone, taps the screen a few times, then turns it to face me.

Oh my god! I see five figures which is exponentially more than what I make working for Rachel and Celeste combined. I could never make this much money even with a boatload of overtime and getting another part-time job. “Why?” I ask, watching this handsome, seemingly well-to-do man who is articulate and cultured. “Seems like you could have any number of women you want, you wouldn’t have to put them on a payroll.”

“I’m not in town long enough to cultivate a long-distance commitment to anyone. It’s hard to find time to find someone you like. Why should I when I already found you? I’m here for a few days out of the month at the most. You’ll be my date if I need a date and when I’m free we’ll see each other. Think of it as a sort of friends with monetary benefit deal. No pressure of course.”

“Of course.” I huff. It’s definitely a proposition if I ever heard one but for unknown reasons, I’m not that offended. It could be from all those numbers he showed me on his phone and the prospect of ridding myself of financial stress and debt...and the thought of losing my family home...and the state taking my brothers away from me if I can’t financially take care of them legally. Friends with monetary benefits... could I do that...?

“What do you think?”

“I think you’ve given me a lot to think about. Certainly not what I was expecting when I walked in.”

“I know. Think about it and get back to me. Take down this number.”

I take my phone out and enter the phone number he gives me.

“I was busy this week. The only time I could set this visit up was tonight. I’m going back home tomorrow morning. I’ll be back at the end of next month. You can let me know then, or before then. Hell, or just give me a call to say hi if you want.” He smiles.

I wanted a way to solve all of our financial problems and here it is. In one way it’s better than working for Celeste and still yet it’s worse. I’m doing something I told myself I would *never* do.

But how bad is it really if it’s only Thom? He said I don’t have to do anything I don’t want to do. That I wouldn’t do outside of the club. Shit! But Noah. How—if we’re not that serious. Maybe there is a way I could have him still. If he doesn’t want more—to be in a serious committed relationship. Maybe if this is only a temporary arrangement for a few months. Maybe I could make this work, for all of us, including me and Noah.

Like a never-ending run on a hamster wheel of consequences and doubt, so many *maybes*...

*Seventeen*





“I’ve never had Mediterranean food. It was good, even Axel ate it,” Lexi says, closing the door to her bedroom and locking it. “Where did you learn to make it?”

Before I turn to answer her question, I notice two lit candles bathing the room in soft white light, giving it a cozy intimate feel. “My stepmom, Carla. She’s a great cook. She loves cooking all types of food from all over the world. Her dream is to take a cruise around the world.”

“That sounds cool. She’s adventurous.” She leans back against the door with a sweet smile curving her lips. So sweet I can’t help pulling her toward me and encircling her waist.

“She is but, unfortunately for her, my dad isn’t. I don’t see that cruise happening for her with him anytime soon. Unless we wage a major campaign on her behalf for him to go with her.”

“I’ll help. I’m with Carla, get the initiative going and I’ll be the first to join on her behalf.” She puts her hands on my chest and runs them up over my shoulder, fingers playing with the skin just under the collar of my shirt, making my most important body part below the waist take a more active role in our conversation.

“You will?”

“Yes.”

“Carla is going to love you.” Yeah, she is, like I think I could. I look into her eyes and cradle her face in my hand and kiss her.

She breaks the kiss, brushing her soft lips against mine, enticingly. “I had a nice time tonight.”

“Good. So did I,” I say, continuing the kiss, as our bodies slowly move back in the direction of her bed.

“And I’m going to make it even better. You deserve it.” She pushes me back on her bed and straddles my hips.

It’s not every day someone overpowers me. Sprawled on her bed, watching Lexi prowl toward me, I’m ecstatic Lexi did. Obviously, the way my knees buckled just now when we kissed helped her.

My heart stops, then sprints when she towers over me. I crane my neck to hold her stare.

Desire burns my chest, and I whisper, “What are you going to do now you’ve got me at your mercy?”

The sinful grin she offers as a reply does funny things to the butterflies in my stomach. “I guess anything I want, right?”

I swallow hard as anticipation grips me by the throat when she straddles me and sits on my thighs. Bracketing my face with her hands, she inches her lips to mine. As much as the caveman within wants to grab her and pull her down, I stand still and allow her to run the show.

Her warm breath fans my lips, heady as wine. I can’t resist leaning in. With a smirk, she freezes.

Her lips touch mine when she murmurs, “Eager much?”

I arch an eyebrow. “You fucking kidding me? I need your lips.”

She nuzzles my cheek with her nose. “I wanted to see how long it’d take you to beg,” she confesses. Her raspy words caress my ear, sending tingles down my spine, and hardening my cock. The zipper leaves indentations on my shaft.

With a sigh that scorches my senses, she adds, “It’s backfired. I’ve got an aching hollow only you can fill.”

In a naughty move, she rubs her sex along my length.

I hiss.

She moans, capturing my mouth.

I curve my fingers around her hips, while she buries hers in my hair.

I slide my tongue along hers.

She scrapes my scalp.

My hands go under her skirt and I squeeze her ass cheeks. My cock threatens to explode.

She sways back and forth on my lap, moaning.

The air burns my lungs as I breathe in the scent of her arousal when I cup her breasts over her top. The hard tips puncture my palms and I see stars imagining their taste under my tongue.

Lexi pulls away, dragging my lower lip between her teeth.

Still straddling me, Lexi unfastens my belt and unbuttons my pants. Holding my stare, she slides down the zipper and slips her hand inside my briefs.

“Hot and hard, exactly how I wanted you to be.”

“That’s all you, babe.” My facial muscles ache with my wide grin. I shrug. “What can I do? I’m a sucker for you.”

A dark cloud flickers through her gaze. It’s gone so fast that I doubt it was even there.

She hides her face between my neck and shoulder, latching her lips on a spot under my ear as she wraps her fingers around the base of my dick.

“You’re an amazing man, Noah,” she murmurs.

I lose the ability to form rational thoughts when her fingers stroke me. She glides them up and down, igniting my body like a fucking wildfire. The hot fingers tracing each throbbing vein along my cock have me hissing and groaning as I bunch her top over her breasts, pulling her bra down to reveal her flesh. The padded cups push her breasts together.

I dip my head to lick the brown nipples. “You taste better than food,” I groan, mouth full of her trembling softness.

She sinks her teeth into my earlobe, thumbing the tip of my cock. "I'm dying to taste you."

Before I can decode her meaning, Lexi kneels between my thighs, pulls her top over her head, and tosses it behind herself, getting rid of her bra.

My cock misses her fingers, but I'm entranced watching her use them to play with her breasts. Lexi locks eyes with me and tugs at her nipples. She rolls them between her fingers, making my erection twitch against my belly. I get out of my clothes. She arches her back, pushing her breasts up.

Unable to resist the private peep show, I cup her shoulders and pull her in, covering a nipple with my lips. I suck, hard. She whimpers, wrapping her fingers around me again. When I move to the other breast, trapping the hard tip between my teeth, she presses her thumb on the slit crowing my cock. We gasp. I flick her nipple with my tongue. She fists the mushroom head of my erection. She squeezes it and I groan, letting go of her breast.

"Fuck, Lexi."

"That's the plan." She chuckles, splaying her hands on my thighs, spreading them wider. Her next words unravel me. "Let me taste you, Noah. I want to suck you until you come deep into my throat. Can you do that for me?"

I cup her face, thumbing her cheeks and dipping my head to smooch her lips, tender from our kisses.

"I've been dreaming of that for the longest time."

"So have I." Her smile could light the whole town for a week.

It gets my heart thudding against my ribs. "Relax and let me worship your glorious cock."

With a dry throat and burning chest, I lean back and nod. "I'll behave".

Lexi sheaths the head of my erection with her mouth. Her silky tongue swirls around the tip, licking and teasing the slit there. I buck up, sliding halfway inside her mouth.

She glances up and murmurs around my flesh, “Relax.”

“I can’t. I promised I’d let you do this, but all I want is to grab your hair and drill your mouth with my hard-on.”

With a wink, she licks my length, root to tip, sucking spots that make me see stars. I fist the covers, groaning, grinding my hips. She holds my thighs down. Bobbing her head, she hollows her cheeks and sucks my dick like a delicious treat. I throw my head back and howl when she cradles my balls while allowing me to slide down her throat. Bright spots of light burn my closed eyelids when pleasure gathers at the base of my spine. I arch off the mattress when she hums around my shaft and her fingers squeeze my balls.

“I’m going to come,” I warn her with a strangled grunt.

She vibrates her approval in a moan, hurling me over the edge. I pour my orgasm down her throat in endless hot jets. She gulps, groans, and strokes my thighs. When I begin to deflate, I open my eyes and smooth her hair.

“You’re amazing,” I confess, smiling into her stare.

She releases me with a pop, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “You taste better than I dreamed of.”

The idea she’s fantasized about my cock warms my chest like a fireplace in winter.

“Come here.” Cupping her chin, I pull her up and cover her lips with mine.

Her sweet taste mixed with mine makes for a decadent treat I devour. I glide my hands down her back to her still-covered ass.

“You’re overdressed.” I chuckle, sliding her skirt down her thighs.

She breaks our kiss, rises to her feet, and steps out of her skirt and underwear. “Not anymore.”

My eyes rake over her body from head to toe, my dick springing back to life. “You’re perfect.”

“I’m not.” She shakes her head, darkness flashes again across her expression.

Before I can question her, Lexi pushes my back onto the mattress, climbs on it to straddle my hips, and kisses the hell out of me. Lost in this world of sinful pleasure, I bury my fingers in her hair, kissing her back, melding us together.

I scoot up until my shoulders reach the pillows. Rolling us over, I pin her down. We’re both out of breath when I pull away.

Bracing myself on my hands, I stare down at her swollen lips and flushed cheeks. I trace her mouth with a thumb. “You’re breathtaking. I could just gaze at you for the rest of my life.”

She smiles. “Right back at you.”

She pulls my head down and we lock lips again. This time I slow down to savor her. I stroke her tongue with mine as I lie on my side. I run my fingers down her neck, her chest, and belly until I reach her sex.

“You’re drenched,” I whisper. “I need to have you fucking badly. But I also want to worship every inch of your body.”

She mumbles something incoherent as her hands knead my shoulders.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I taunt her.

“Yes,” she elongates the word and thrusts her hips up when I dip an index finger inside her sex.

Sucking the base of her throat, I add a second finger, spreading her tight walls, searching for her sweet spots. I moan when her body squeezes my fingers. Blood rushes down my body, filling up my cock into a full erection. Lexi arches her back off the mattress when I lightly pinch her clitoris between my fingers. Her arousal sweetens the air between us. I return my lips to hers. I stroke her tongue with mine in the same rhythm my fingers stroke her fire. It burns my skin when her juices coat my hand. She’s almost ready for my girth.

“Open up for me,” I ask in between kisses.

She pulls a knee up and I insert a third finger, spreading her until her sex quivers. My cock throbs, begging for the haven of her body.

Holding her gaze, I whisper, "I've got to grab a condom from my wallet."

She shakes her head. "Too far. Top drawer."

Stretching up to retrieve the packet, I smile at the urgency in her tone, and the way she can't put a sentence together. My heart beats faster realizing she's as eager as I am. She steals the square from my hands, rips the wrapper with her teeth, and hands me the condom. I kneel between her spread thighs, suit up, and glance down. Her core glistens under me and pulls me in. I hook my fingers around her knees, pulling them up against her chest.

"Next time, I'll taste your sweetness."

"Need. You. Inside. Now."

"There's no other place I'd rather be."

Guiding the head of my cock to her entrance, I slide it inside and wait. I brace my hands on the mattress on either side of her head. She hugs my hips with her thighs. I feed her another couple of inches, pausing. She locks her feet behind me.

"Stop teasing," she demands.

"I'm not, just giving your body time to adjust."

Digging her heels into my ass, she pulls me down and buries my cock inside her tight channel to the hilt. "There. I'll adjust as you go."

This woman! My heart bursts inside my chest. I take a deep inhale and claim her mouth as I pull my shaft almost all the way out of her. When I thrust back in, her body squeezes me, and I swivel my hips to make sure I hit all her naughty spots. She matches each of my movements with a sway of her body, pressing her legs tighter, and arching her back.

I set a lazy rhythm to our sexy dance as the pleasure builds inside me. Her walls tremble around my cock and my balls

threaten to burst. I keep myself in check until her body squeezes the hell out of my dick, and she buries her head into the pillows.

“God, Noah,” she wails.

A sheen of perspiration covers our bodies as she moans and whimpers, tightening her arms and legs around me. Her body undulates under me, I sink inside her. With a grunt, I explode in another earth-shattering orgasm. As I unload, I kiss her lips, moaning inside her mouth.

For a couple of beats, I only hear the sounds of our flesh colliding and our hearts racing as my soul soars and my mind shatters. I float back to bed, to her embrace, and the ebbing quivers of her sex.

I shut my eyes to relax but doze off. When I open them up, Lexi’s back is retreating toward her bathroom.

Wait.” I say holding her hand before she gets out of bed. Before you distracted me I was going to ask you something. I was going to ask you if you wanted to come to dinner at my father’s. You’re kinda special to me and I want them to meet you.”

“I don’t know, Noah. Meeting the parents is sort of a big deal.”

“I know.

“It usually means something serious.”

“And I’m serious about you, Lexi.”

She blows out a breath releasing my hand. “Look, I know I’ve already met your father but this will be different. A formal meeting like we’re a real couple or something.”

“Or something?”

“We have a good thing going here. Why ruin it by complicating things? Why do you want to make things more serious than they need to be? We’re having a good time.”

“A good time is all well and good.” I nod in agreement. “But I want to be with you. I think we are great together.”



“And so do I! So why ruin a good thing?”

“Because I want more than this. I’m that guy who wants a relationship and likes commitment.” I flick my finger between us and the bed. “I assumed what we were doing—all the time we’ve spent together was leading up to something more serious.” I stare at her, doubting if I could have been wrong about what’s been happening between us. But I can’t be the only one who feels the connection between us.

“I...” She stops, eyes darting around the room she falls silent, eyes cast down as if she can’t look at me anymore.

I’m conflicted by the impulse to pull her to me and comfort her and getting up and pacing the room in frustration. I thought we were headed in one direction. But...shit I need to know what we’re doing here because this is more than just I like spending time with you, and the sex is great, sort of thing. It’s even more frustrating that I know she’s holding back something from me. She wasn’t with Shauna yesterday. I would really like to give her the benefit of the doubt before I start digging into things further and finding out things that I probably won’t want to know.

“What do you think is going on here, Lexi?” I pull back from her making a little more space between us. “I know what I want but what do you want?”

“I...I, I need to go to the bathroom.”

“Lexi.”

“No, I’ll be back.” She holds up her hand and moves away from me, and leaves me alone in her room like she couldn’t escape fast enough.

Fuck.



### *Lexi*

I shut the bathroom door, make sure it’s locked, and brace myself against the sink, looking into the mirror. “Fuck, fuck,

fuck.” I can’t keep doing this. He doesn’t know who I am and if he did, he wouldn’t want to be with me. He wouldn’t care if I was only doing this to save my family, to keep us from ending up on the street or worse separated from each other. He’s a cop. His job is to follow the rules, the law. And I’m breaking it. Drew was right. This can’t work. I knew it was coming but it was too soon. But sooner or later they find out who we are and they leave. I should learn by now, they always leave.

I come out of the bathroom in an old light blue robe I’ve had for years, on legs that feel like they’re walking through molasses, knowing what I have to do. I push open my door expecting to see Noah still in the bed but he’s not. He’s dressed and standing by my bed, head bent. “Where were you really last night?”

“What?” I know what he asked but I don’t know why he’s asking right now. He knows what I told him. So why the hell is he asking—unless, damn...he knows.

“Where were you? And before you say here with Shauna, really think about why I’m asking.”

“Why are you asking then?” I’m fucked. It’s obvious he knows something or else he wouldn’t question what I told him. He’s not asking in the voice I’ve come accustomed to. It’s the other one, the one that wants answers, with the ring of authority.

He lifts his head staring blankly at me, in a calm steady voice, “I want to hear you say it.”

“No.”

“No? Okay then.” He sighs, expelling a breath of air like he’s preparing himself for whatever he’s going to say next. “I kept thinking about how sad you were about your grandfather. I wanted to check on you and drop something off that I thought would make you feel better. When I got here though I saw you getting into your car and driving away. I wasn’t sure what was happening because you said you were going to be at home all night with Shauna. But there you were, well dressed and looking fabulous by the way.”

“Thank you,” I say with a hint of sarcasm. I cross my arms, pulling my robe closed closer around me, listening as he talks, feeling defensive and as if my privacy was being violated.

“Mmm...you pulled up to a club, got out, and went in. I was sitting in my car. I wasn’t sure what was going on. On one hand, I wanted to go in and ask you what the hell was happening. But you know how that would seem. So I fell back and went into surveillance mode. Sooner or later you would come out and maybe I would get a clue about what was happening.

“Not for one second did I think, though, that you might be there to see someone else. So I reasoned, maybe Shauna wanted to help you feel better another way. Maybe she told you to meet her there at that particular club. If anything, I’d wait till you came out and make sure you got home safely and that would be that.”

“That thought made me feel better. But then, after about an hour, when you came out you weren’t by yourself. Some guy had his hand on the small of your back and you turned to him and he kissed you on your cheek. To anyone, it would look innocent, but it wasn’t, was it? Do you want to tell me now who that guy was and why you lied to me? Or should I give you one of my theories?”

“Why stop now, it seems you have all the info, Officer James.”

“Still hope I’m not right.” He falls silent as if waiting for me to say yes but I stay silent and he clears his throat and goes on. “I did some asking around—”

“Sure you did. I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

“You shouldn’t but with you, I’ve been slipping.” He blows out a harsh breath running his fingers through his messy hair. The same hair not too long ago I ran my fingers through. “I found out some interesting things about that place. I hope—I don’t want to think it but, Lexi—”

“I don’t owe you anything,” I say, cutting him off. The last thing I need is for him to ask questions of me I can’t answer. It’s not only my life that telling him the truth will affect. Other girls work there, Shauna—if he knows the truth they’re going to be in trouble and it’ll be all my fault because I wanted him so badly I disillusioned myself into thinking I could live on both sides of the law and he wouldn’t find out.

I’m pissed at myself for not thinking, for being so stupid! So I do what comes naturally to me to protect the people I care about. I go into defense mode.

“Where I go and who I see is my business. I can’t believe you followed me like a criminal. I’m not one of your suspects, Officer James.”

“Back to that again.” He shakes his head like I’ve disappointed him in some way. “And here I was thinking we’ve come so far. I was wrong. Not often that happens, but we all get fooled once in a while, don’t we?”

“The only one fooled here is me believing I could trust you.” I point a finger at him.

“You’re not serious about me are you?” He huffs, staring at me. “This is a temporary step for you isn’t it?”

No! I want to yell and tell him this thing between us is real for me, but I can’t.

“You don’t want this chaos and what comes with my life, Noah. Our families and lives are different. I told you before: men don’t stay once they see who we are. This could never work. You’re not the only one who was fooling themselves.”

“This can’t work because you don’t want it to work.” He shakes his head, his unblinking eyes steady on me. “You are so caught up in the past and shit that happened to you you can’t see what’s in front of you. You have insecurities and you’ve been hurt. I know you hurt, but this is sabotage at your hands. I’m here, Lexi, I wasn’t going anywhere.”

I’m tired, so tired. It’s falling apart. “You’re one of many men who have walked through that door downstairs. When you have had enough of this life and all the responsibilities

that come with it, you are going to walk right back out without a second thought, it's inevitable. So don't make starry-eyed promises to me you can't keep." I shake my head, feeling the prick, the telltale signs of tears behind my eyes. "I've heard them all, from my mother, from my father, from my stepdads."

"You're so hurt you can't help but inflict pain on yourself before anyone else does, is that it?"

I say nothing. I don't want to cry. Not yet.

"Tell me the truth, Lexi. I'm here begging, let me help you if you're in trouble. I won't—"

Oh no. I hold both my hands up. I can't let him go on filling my head with more hope or worse yet, bringing him into this. We can't work, we never could. He's too good for me. "Leave. We're done. This will never work, and you and I know it."

He reaches for me with sad eyes, but I also know suspicions. "Lexi."

I move back out of his reach, feeling a wave of unexpected anger. "Get the hell out of my house! Just go and stop making this harder than it needs to be. This thing that we've been doing is over. Don't come back. I don't want to see you anymore. Don't stop by, don't call, don't come to check on us. Don't come back. I don't want you. Do I need to make it any clearer? You're not wanted!"

With nothing else but what I can describe as a cursory look, he walks past, grabs his wallet off the table, and seconds later the door shuts behind me. Then another door closes in the distance, but this time I imagine the force and power of wood hitting wood sounding through the neighborhood as it splits into pieces.

Fuck. I swipe my hand across my face, angry, hurt, and ashamed. I'm ashamed of lying to a great guy, ashamed of being my mother without me even knowing it. I've become her.

I walk over to the dresser and blow out one of the dripping candles. I pick up the other one from across the room and then

I hear crying. Damn. That's Axel. I put the candle down and go into his room where he's sitting up in bed looking small, his arms wrapped around his legs.

"What's wrong?" I whisper, sitting beside him, and hugging him to my chest.

"I heard something. It was loud."

"It was nothing. Noah just left, he must have pulled the door in a little too hard."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. Come on, lay down and get back to sleep."

"Can you stay?"

"Sure, I'll stay until you fall asleep."

"Okay." He lays down with his head on my lap.

Not even five minutes later he's back to sleep. I gently ease him down on the bed. "What's that?" I turn to the door, sniffing the air. It smells like smoke. Oh my god! I run out of Axel's room into mine. Oh my god. The candle! The rug, curtain! I rush to the bathroom and fill a basin with water. I almost trip running back with water spilling over the sides. Standing back I throw the water on my carpet and rush back into the bathroom filling the bucket again and throwing it on the curtain. Smoke rises spreading around the room and choking me but most of it is out. Covering my mouth and coughing, I grab my blanket off the bed and beat at the rug then the curtain furiously until they fall to the floor, and I brush it over to the carpet with the blanket. I throw it over the spots that are still glowing on the rug, still beating the blanket against it.

What the hell? Covering my mouth and stinging eyes with my arm I open the bedroom window. I can't believe that happened. The damn thing I'm working so hard to save was almost burned down by me and a fucking candle. Fuck my life. The carpet and curtain are ruined. I can't stay in this room tonight. I'll probably suffocate to death from smoke inhalation the way things have been going.

God, the smell is awful. I turn on the fan to the highest speed and take up the candle and the plate it was resting on. Won't be doing that again. I close the door behind me so the god-awful smell doesn't spread too much around the rest of the house. Thank god I closed Axel's door when I ran out and he didn't wake up. And no thanks to the two brothers who are sleeping like the dead. The house could have burned down with us in it and they really wouldn't have noticed. Sighing, I go to Drew's room but stop before opening the door. I'm tired. And I just need to be alone with my thoughts. Let it all sink in. All the responsibilities of trying to—just trying and failing to do it all.

I swallow down the lump in my throat, remembering Noah and all the things that were said. I press my lips together and turn away from the door. Where are the adults when I need them, I need one. One who will tell me what to do and how to fix it all before it all crashes down. I sniff and walk down the opposite end of the hall and open the door that hasn't been opened since he went away. Grandpa. It's stuffy in here but smoke-free. It still smells faintly of his cologne and the little satchels of potpourri he used to spray with it and leave in the corners of the room. I don't bother to open the window. I want to keep as much of him with me for as long as possible. I turn on the night lamp next to his bed. And as warm as it is I lay down in the middle of his bed pulling his sheet around me, imagining him here. One man who I love dearly who has always taken care of me and looked out for us when no one else was there, and the other man who is new to my life, but no less important. I press my face to the pillow, thinking of my grandpa and Noah, and let the tears I've been holding back go.

*Eighteen*





“Can I borrow your power drill, the one with the drill bits?”

“Sure,” I say into the phone, to Holden, slumping back on the couch and staring at whatever show is on.

“Cool. I’ll be there within the hour. I was thinking about starting a new project. Making something functional and shit, like a chair.”

“Really?”

“Really. I don’t know, I guess going with you to Lexi’s has given me a fixer-upper bug or something. Like the wood is calling to me to make something through my blood.” He laughs.

Damn Lexi. The one person I don’t want to think about he has to bring up. Not that I was doing a particularly stellar job of not thinking about her. She’s all I can think about. I still can’t believe how things ended. A week later and I’m still in a stupor over that night. I sigh, blowing a noisy breath I can’t hold back.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I lie, hoping he’ll believe me and ask no more questions.

“You don’t sound it. You don’t sound like your usual encouraging annoying self.”

“Then it’s your lucky day.”

“Now I know something is wrong. Sarcasm from you...is like me rolling up to my old detention center and tap dancing in a top hat and cane across the room. That shit just wouldn't be right.”

“Well, I don't know what to say to that.”

“Yeah well, I'll be there within the hour to get the drill.”

“Okay.” I drop the phone back down on the couch next to me and resume trying to empty my mind of all things Lexi. Once again failing miserably.

I don't know how long after, disorientating, loud banging jars me up and out of the couch followed by offending noises. God, if this is what it sounds like when we knock on doors, no wonder we don't get a better response. Right now I feel like taking the person's head off.

“Knock, knock open the door, bro. You have company.”

“Unless you have a search warrant I suggest you knock that off. I have a gun and I know how to use it.” I open the door, letting him in.

“Somebody is in a foul mood. Good thing I didn't come empty-handed.” He holds up a bag of food with the name of the fast food place not too far from here and a six-pack of beer. “It sounded like you needed one of these.”

“You're right. I do.” I take the six-pack and bring it back to my spot on the couch.

“Are you going to tell me what has you acting like me on a family road trip with Dad?” He sits on the other end of the couch and rests the bag of greasy food on the floor between us.

“Nothing's wrong. It was just a long day at work.” I pop open the can and take a long drink, welcoming the burn going down. “Nothing was going right, and I almost got my ass chewed out by my superior for something that wasn't my fault.”

“Hate when that happens. Usually, I'd tell my bosses to go fuck themselves and feel better about it. But I guess you like your job.” He shrugs, plucking off a beer and opening it.

“Yes I do, most days.” I grin for the first time today while taking another drink from my can.

“I’m surprised you’re not at Lexi’s hanging out or fixing something.”

“We don’t do that anymore.”

“Do what?” He stares at me with the can to his lip.

“Hang out.”

“Do you mean hang out or *hang out*,” he says, making quotation marks with his fingers.

“Neither one.”

“Why the hell not? You were all over each other the last time we were all hanging out. I got that guy’s number. His friend looked like she wanted to give me hers too but I thought it would be a dick move to ask her for it later.”

“Great, that was then, this is now. Things change, and it would have been a dick move.”

“Would you stop being so goddamn vague and annoying? I was giving you til the end of the month to ask her to marry you and move in with her. Then I’d be forced to be the reasonable one and talk you off of that ledge. What the hell happened? And don’t bullshit me either. I know how into her you were.”

“You’re right about one thing. I was into her. Hell, I think I even loved her. But I don’t think she felt anywhere near the same for me.” I shake my head, feeling so pathetic and stupid for letting my guard down and not following my instincts. “Always go with your first instinct. From past run-ins with her mother, I should have known starting up anything with Lexi Grayson would be nothing but trouble.”

“I’m confused because I’ve been around you when you’re together and when she’s not with you and it’s not the same. She looks at you with those cartoon heart eyes. She’s more affectionate with you than I’ve seen her with anyone besides her brothers. Even at work when you’re not around all anyone needs to do is mention your name and the girl lights up like a

Christmas tree. If that's not some type of love or genuine feelings for you...I don't know what is. Did you do something to fuck up like arrest one of her brothers? I wouldn't be surprised after hanging with the little knuckleheads, especially Drew."

"I didn't arrest anyone related to her, lately. But I might have to if I keep digging and looking for shit I don't want to find out."

"Again!?" He sits forward sighing in his frustration. "Clarify, what the fuck are you talking about?"

"I saw Lexi coming out of a club with a guy the same night she told me she couldn't see me because Shauna was coming over to help cheer her up after her grandfather's stroke."

"And..."

"What the hell do you mean and!" I jerk out of the couch, almost crushing the empty beer can.

"I mean, maybe Shauna took her out to take her mind off her grandfather. That's some heavy stuff to deal with. Sometimes drinking is the distraction you need." He looks pointedly at the dented can in my hand.

"Nope. I asked her about it. And she lied." I turn around, feeling disgusted at the thought of that argument again. I walk behind the couch and pace in a straight line to the door and back.

"I've known Lexi for a while and we've worked together a lot. She doesn't seem like the lying type to me. At least maybe not without a reason."

"You're saying I'm a shit for all cop that can't tell when the person he's involved with is lying?" I briefly stop pacing and look at him incredulously.

"Calm down. When did you get so touchy? I'm just trying to figure out what's happened from the little I know, sheesh."

"Sorry. It's been a rough two weeks."

"Sure. So you confronted her and called her on her lie, and what happened next?"

“Before that, I basically told her how much I cared about her and wanted her to meet Dad and Carla. She said we were getting too serious. And from what I already knew—but she didn’t know I knew because I followed her to the club that night, I was angry and I wanted answers. Because I was telling her I wanted a real relationship with all the ups and downs which includes me helping her out of whatever problem or troubles she had, and she rejected me, like all these weeks we spent together weren’t even worth considering something more serious.”

“Mmm.” He nods his head

“Mmm, what?” I stop again and look at him, hand grasping the back of the couch.

“So your feelings were hurt because she rejected the idea of you swooping in to solve all her problems?”

“Please, she wouldn’t even admit to anything. I did some asking around and found out some stuff about the club she was coming out of.”

“What club?”

“The Vibe. It’s not far from the interstate.”

“I know that place,” he says with a fond smile. “I’ve been there before but it’s been a while. Maybe a year and a half ago.”

“So you know what goes on there and you see why I would be upset?”

“I didn’t say anything goes on there, *Officer*.” He crosses his hand over his chest. “But if I’m talking to my brother we might be able to have a more open conversation off the record.” His brow raises, staring at me.

I let out a long breath and nod. After all, I’m not working a case here. And I have no interest in doing so. “Fine.”

“First off, I’m going to let you know life is full of happy endings, and in *there*, if you’re looking for it, you can have it. That’s all there is. Do you get what I’m saying? *Happy endings...*” He drags the words out.

“Huh.” I scoff.

“Second, did Lexi admit anything?”

“That’s the problem, she didn’t admit, and most telling—deny anything. I got my answers from what I saw. The guy with his hand on her back kissing her, why was she there in the first place when she should have been at home!” I run my hands through my hair so hard my nails dig into my scalp.

“Maybe she is working at that club and picking up extra money on the side to help her family. Is that so bad? And it seems you deliberately didn’t point blank ask her the real question on your mind, because you are a cop. You know what you would have to do.”

“I—”

“Uh.” He holds a finger up, cutting me off. “So you’re working on the ‘don’t ask don’t tell’ policy.” He smirks. “I gotta say that could be dangerous in your lines of work. When your occupations and the person you’re involved with don’t meet up to each other’s standards of crime and justice, *or* if they do meet up. I think arresting your girl is a relationship ender.”

“We don’t know if she entertains there,” I suddenly say, defending her from something I don’t know is true or not. “It is a club. People go there to have fun.”

“You are right about that. I had a lot of fun there back in the day. Good times.” He nods wistfully.

“Knock it off.” I walk around the couch and throw myself back on it.

“So what if she moonlights once in a while? It isn’t a crime.”

“Actually, it is.” I turn my head toward him and roll my eyes. “And if something happens there one day, like getting raided, I don’t want to be the one reading her her rights or anyone else she knows.”

“It shouldn’t be a crime, you know. It’s a profession like any other.”

“An illegal profession, and that’s what it is until the laws change.”

“Well keep thinking optimistically. She’s just there to have fun and blow off steam with her friends. With the responsibilities she’s carrying around, she deserves it. Shoot, I’d be off the walls if I was her.”

“Fuck, I know.” I rub my hands over my face. “The thing is, I can’t be with her and turn a blind eye. I wear a badge and I took an oath to serve, protect, and uphold the law. This is one of those times I wish I wasn’t like Dad, I didn’t take the responsibility of that badge so seriously.”

“But you do.”

“But I do. And for the first time, I realize how hard it is to choose between what I’ve sworn to do and the person I love. Maybe this is what Dad felt like all those times with you?”

He grunts, picks up his can, and turns it to his head before answering me. “Maybe. Want to know something?”

“What?”

“Going over to Lexi’s and doing things with her brothers felt like being a part of a family again. Something I haven’t felt in a long time. It felt good. Felt like I was wanted there.”

Looks like I wasn’t the only one who grew attached to Lexi and her family. I’m not the only one losing something they didn’t know they were looking for or wanted.

“Look at us, uh, two sappy mother fuckers.” He smiles trying to make light of what he just admitted. “Geez, being around you is making me lose my edge. I’m going to have to leave here and knock over a garbage can or something.”

I reach over and pat him on the leg. “Don’t worry about it, you’ll never lose your edge. Once a pain in the ass, always a pain in the ass.” I smile.

“Thanks.” He chuckles.

“And you know,” I say seriously. “We are still a family, even if it’s just the two of us you are always welcome wherever I am.”

He nods and taps my leg with his fist. At least I got one thing out of this mess. The start of a renewed relationship with my little brother.

“Pass over that greasy bag of goodness so I can drown my sorrows.” I point to the almost forgotten bag on the floor.



*Nineteen*



“Thanks for helping me move some of this stuff in here, Shauna.”

“I was here anyway so why not just do it?” She puts an arm full of my clothes on the bed and sits next to me at the end.

I look around my grandfather’s room with half of my things moved in and only his dresser left to move into my room. It was a hard decision to make but it was time to finally admit the truth. My grandpa’s gone. I thought I would have more time but it turns out we didn’t. And it’s been a rough couple of weeks. When I think I’ve accepted not seeing him again and things are going to be fine, I’ve cried my last tear, I’m proven wrong. That’s when the tears come the most and when they start, I can’t stop.

What pulls me together somewhat is Drew, Ryan, and especially Axel. Knowing that every time Axel sees me falling apart it affects him the most. He’s eating less and waking up sometimes twice a night. I don’t even try to discourage it when he sneaks into my bed in the middle of the night and falls asleep. I just hold him and tell him we are all going to be okay and nothing’s going to happen to any of us, cause that’s his biggest worry losing one of us. And it breaks my heart. It breaks even more when he often asks what happened to Noah. Why isn’t he coming back? And the one that really got me the other day. ‘Doesn’t he like us anymore?’

No, Axel, it’s not that he doesn’t like us. It’s that your sister has screwed everything up and run him off so she

wouldn't have to see the look of disgust on his face when he found out what she did with other men for money. Yeah...not something you can say to a six-year-old who feels like he's losing everyone he cares about.

I'm pulled out of my head and overthinking when Shauna's phone chimes with a message. She looks at it and types something. "I didn't know it was this late. I have to be at the club tonight. You good here?"

"I'm good. Most of my things are here. Smoke-fume-free. I can do everything else myself and tomorrow, when Drew and Ryan come home from their friend's houses, they'll help me move the dresser to my room."

"You know I could call and cancel if you want? I'll ask Celeste to find someone else, tell her my best friend needs me more."

"No. Bad enough I haven't been there since Grandpa died. She'll think I'm trying to sabotage her business or something. Somehow she found out about Thom's proposition to me. She was not happy about losing a good customer and me."

"For real? No wonder she's been more strict with us and gave us all a refresher course in club rules and fraternizing with her clientele outside of the club."

"Sorry about that."

"Don't worry about it. I don't think she cares much about fraternizing outside the club if she gets a cut of whatever they give us. You never did tell me if you were going to accept his offer. I think it came at the perfect time actually. I mean your grandfather, god rest his soul, is gone which means another set of bills for you *and* there is no more hot cop. You don't need to worry about that anymore."

"You are right about Grandpa and the bills that keep piling up. But Noah...sure the money would be great. Hell, I could quit my job at the store if I wanted with what Thom is offering. I could catch up on the mortgage and stop coming near to hyperventilating almost every night when my head hits the pillow and I'm alone staring up at the ceiling. But Noah..."

I can't stop thinking of him. I know I hurt him. I can't drag him into my life. He doesn't fit in here, in our life. We're on two different paths, mirror opposites."

He's smart, one of the kindest and most thoughtful men I've known besides my grandpa. He's going places in life. In a few years, he'll probably make detective. And where will I be? On some rich man's payroll to be at his beck and call? I shake my head at the thought. "All I can offer a man like Noah at this time in my life is lies. He deserves better than that, this. He's too good for me."

"Fuck that. You are every bit as kind and utterly unselfish as that man. You have so much to offer. I saw you two together. You both had a lot to offer the other. So stop selling yourself short. Your life is not near perfect, but you are doing what you need to do to support and protect your family. I'm just going to say it, you're better than me because I don't know how you do it all, including putting everyone else's needs ahead of your own."

I roll my eyes. "Please, I know you. If you were in my shoes you would do the same thing for your family and the people you love."

"Maybe." She stands up taking one of my hands. "You were falling in love with him weren't you?"

"Maybe," I say, quietly holding my head down not admitting the truth, I don't even want to admit it to myself.

"Lexi, stop being so hard on yourself. You're a good person. You're only doing what you need to do to survive—whatever decision you make about that offer." She hugs me tight, and I hug her back before she leaves and locks the door behind her.



"OKAY...YOU can put it in that corner over there," I tell Ryan and Drew, each holding up a side of my dresser. "Oh no!" I stop them pointing to another side of the room. "I think it would look better closer to the door—you know what..."

“Lexi! This thing isn’t light, make up your damn mind or I’m leaving it in the middle of the room and you can move it yourself.” Drew glares at me.

“All right, all right, there in the corner, where Grandpa’s writing desk was.”

“Great! This thing weighs more than it looks,” Ryan says, putting it down and shaking his arms out.

“Good thing there’s two of you isn’t there, to help carry each other’s load.” I laugh. “Get it? Carry each other’s load.”

“No. The only one laughing at that lame-ass joke is you.” Drew pushes the dresser more into the corner.

“Whatever. It was funny.” I wave them off, moving in front of the dresser to get a better look, and notice it’s tilted to one side. “Does it look like it’s sinking to you?”

“Oh shit, it is,” Drew says.

“Oh, my god. The wood is breaking! Guys! lift it back up and move it over!” They lift it back up and shift it over and off the spot that was breaking. “We can not afford for that thing to fall through the floor. It’s going to leave a gaping hole up here and through the living room ceiling.”

“Is everything going to fall apart in this house,” Ryan mumbles.

“As long as I don’t have to fix it—”

Ryan cuts Drew off. “Too bad we can’t call up Noah.”

“Shut up.” Drew slaps him in the chest with the back of his hand.

“Oh.” Ryan’s eyes shift toward me and then away. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” I brush over his apology. It’s not fine. But they don’t need to feel bad for just bringing his name up. No need for them to tiptoe around like he never existed when they were building a friendship with him too.

“We’ll be downstairs. Come on, foot in mouth, so we can finish the game and I can kick your ass.” Drew yanks Ryan by the arm out of the room.

Exhaling a long breath I go survey the damage to the floor. “Yep, it’s cracked.” I touch and push at the most broken end and realize something. It’s loose. That’s strange. I try to lift the piece with my hand but it’s sticking and I’m afraid of getting a splinter. Okay then. I look around the room and see my grandpa’s old letter opener on the bed. Perfect. I push the sharp tip into the groove of the wood and pop it up with a little effort. Not just loose wood it seems, and pull up two more pieces out of the way.

What the heck is this? I get my phone and shine the flashlight over the open space. “Envelopes?” Why are all those envelopes doing down there? “Grandpa had a stash of something, it seems.”

I pull each one out wondering what the hell is in them. I put down the phone, and carefully open the envelope with the letter opener. “Holy cow,” I whisper in disbelief. “Is this what I think it is?” I take out one of the papers and take a closer look, looking at the back and front closely. Holy—it is! Stock certificates, and a lot of them too. I can’t believe this. I put them back in the envelope, a smile spreading across my face, I grab another envelope, open it and almost scream. It’s money! Not just a little money either if there’s more in the other envelopes. Ten, twenties, fifty, and hundred dollar bills.

“Oh Grandpa, god bless your non-trusting bank heart.” I rip open some more envelopes, giddy with joy to find they are also filled with money and more stock certificates. Oh my god! I can’t believe this. All this time all this money was sitting here underneath our feet and heads and none of us had a clue. We could have lost the house and everything and we wouldn’t have known a thing— “Oh my god, the fire.” To think—I don’t want to think about it. Thank god the house didn’t burn down and I had to move in here.

I sit back and look at the envelopes in front of me, relieved, but damn, Grandpa, why didn’t you say anything about this? Wait, maybe he did. I get up and open the drawer I kept the drawings that he kept giving me. The ones I thought were just doodles of a room. Looking at them now and around the room, I realize they weren’t just some random room

drawing. It was this room, and always in the corner with or without from what I can see *now*, is his writing desk. There's an X in the corner. I groan at my stupidity, "I'm such a fool." He was leaving me clues.

"Oh, Grandpa." I sniff. "You old lovable fool." We don't have to worry about losing the only home we have ever known. "You can't even..." I wipe my eyes, not able to complete the sentence. "You're not even here and you're still looking out for us." I turn around and laugh scooping up all the envelopes on the floor and dumping them on my bed. Running to the door, head shaking, and shouting, "Drew, Ryan, Axel, get your asses up here now!!" I wait for them, trying my hardest to take the smile off my face. When they come up the stairs I give them a stern look.

"I didn't do anything!" Axel says, with innocent pleading eyes, which almost make me break into a grin.

"Yeah, what he said." Ryan nods his head in Axel's direction while Drew gives me his patented, 'I'm bored.' whatever stares.

"Follow me." I twirl around, walk back through the door, and point to the bed.

"What's that?" Drew says.

"Boys, Grandpa has come through for us again. Saved our asses."

Drew stares at me blankly. "What are you talking about?"

"Take a look," I say, grabbing an envelope and giving them each one. "Open them."

"Holy shit!" Ryan squeaks. "Are all of these filled with money? Fifties and hundreds?"

"Some of them are filled with stock certificates as good as money and gold." I smile.

"We're rich!!" Axel squeals. "I'm getting all the toys I want." He hops around the room and waves the envelope.

"Wow, Gramps really came through this time. We're not losing the house?" Drew asks but nods his head like he's

answering his own question. “Clutch Grandpa, always in the nick of time.” His smile was so broad I could see teeth I haven’t seen in years.

A laugh of pure joy and release bubbles up from inside of me and I rush toward them, enveloping them in my arms. “We are not losing our home!” I don’t have to take Thom’s offer! I can afford proper child care for Axel! We can pay all of our unpaid bills! I can go back to school. “We’re going to be okay.” I step back and wipe my eyes and watch them go around me and look through the other envelopes.

I’m so fucking relieved and happy. God, I haven’t felt this light and happy since...Noah.



*Twenty*



“Noah.”

“Hey, Miranda,” I say, putting away my bag in the locker room.

“Thought you might want to know there is someone out there waiting for you.” She smiles with her hands on her duty belt.

“Who?”

“Your ex’s kid brother.”

“What?” Halfway closed, my hand stills on my open locker door. “Which one, and why would they come here to wait for me?”

“Officer James, this is a police precinct. How does someone most likely end up in here, unwillingly?” She holds up her hand and clicks them together. “Silver bracelets.”

“Oh shit, Drew?” I close the locker and lock it.

“That’s the one.” She points at me. “Smart mouth, snarky attitude. Freely throwing out his opinions of law enforcement officers. Mr. Personality himself.” She shakes her head looking the opposite of offended, more amused than not.

I smile and roll my eyes. God knows I know firsthand about his free-flowing opinions. That kid just doesn’t know how to hold his tongue sometimes. “I hope he didn’t offend anyone too badly. Who brought him in and for what?” I seriously hope it isn’t for anything serious. Hopefully, I’ll be able to help him out of whatever he’s gotten himself into.

“Nah, he’s fine. But lucky for him, I intercepted him when I recognized who he was. I put him in one of the rooms to wait for you. He got into a brawl with a bunch of kids at that game place. Some things were damaged but easily replaceable it seems. If the damages are paid for, the owner said he won’t press charges. The other two boys’ parents were called. I told Officer Grimes we knew this kid and we’d bring him home and inform his guardians of the situation.”

“Thanks, Miranda.” I sigh, relieved it’s nothing too serious.

“No problem. Besides, I knew this would be the perfect excuse for you to go see his sister.”

My eyebrow raises. “Why would I need an excuse to see his sister? We’re not together anymore. Not that we were anyway.”

“Oh shut up. And stop moping and go figure out where things went wrong and get that girl back.”

“I am not moping around. More importantly, I’m minding my business.”

“I’m minding mine, too, partner. And yes, you are moping. Two months.” She puts up two of her fingers. “I’ve had enough. I want my optimistic level headed partner back. The one who changes socks at least three times a day because he’s afraid of sweaty feet. Bring that weirdo back.”

At that, I laugh. “Fungus is a serious thing. I keep telling you: athlete’s foot can take you down faster than a perp on the run.”

She laughs out loud. “See, there he is. I missed him. This is your chance to go talk to her.”

Miranda doesn’t even know why we’re not together anymore. I mean, I told her everything because she’s Miranda and she would settle for nothing less. But I left out the most incriminating parts like the name of the club and my suspicions about what might go on in there.

“I saw her with another guy like I told you. She wouldn’t even admit to it.”

“Cut her some slack. Her emotions were probably all over the place so soon after her grandfather’s death. Maybe it really wasn’t what you thought it was, she was just blowing off some steam. Plus you were the dope who told her you were following her and giving her the full criminal surveillance treatment.”

“Really,” I say.

“If the shoe was on the other foot, how would you feel if you weren’t a cop and the guy you were involved with followed, and was watching your every move on top of the traumatic day you had with your grandfather dying? And you were probably sounding very accusing when you brought it up to her, after what felt like a rejection of your feelings for her. Am I right?”

Damn her. “No, you’re not right.” I’m practically pouting. It’s annoying that she *might* be right.

She smiles and pats me on the shoulder. “You know I’m right. Go talk to that girl and find out what the real problem is. See if you can work things out.”

“Weren’t you the one who said dating her came with too much baggage or something like that?”

“I did. But I saw how happy she made you. That trumps me being right. I think she was good for you. And you were a good influence in those kids’ lives and hers. You weren’t going home to an empty house at the end of a shift. You had something to look forward to, to take your mind off of some of the shit we go through in a day. In this job, you need that. You were helping each other be happy.”

“I was happy.” I look over her shoulder at another row of lockers. “It’s not as if I was sad before her. But I didn’t realize how not happy I was until it was over.”

“I know.”

I take a deep breath and exhale. “We better go get him and bring him home.” I lead the way out of the locker room and prepare myself to have a difficult conversation with Lexi.



I OPEN the back door of the squad car for Drew and walk him up the porch steps while he holds a bag of ice over his knuckles. “How’s the hand?”

“Better. Thanks for the ice,” he mumbles. “Do we have to tell her about this? Can’t I just pay for the damages? No one gets upset and it’s all good.”

“You know I can’t do that,” I say, knocking on the door in the least aggressive way possible.

“You can. you’re just too damn by the book to do it, for me.” He looks at me with a crooked smile.

“I can take you back to the precinct and let someone else deal with you so you can see how by the book I am?” I quirk an eyebrow at him.

“Nah, I’m good with you.”

“Mhm.” He’s partially right.

“Who is it?” Lexi’s voice comes through the door.

“Noah.”

Without another word the door flies open and my heart clenches at the sight of her. It feels like I haven’t seen her in so long. And I realize how much I’ve missed just seeing her face. “Hi.”

“Hi,” she says wide-eyed. “What are you doing here?”

I hold my finger up and reach beside me and pull Drew back into view at my side.

“What did he do now?” she asks, then swiftly turns her head to her brother. “What did you do?”

“It wasn’t my fault this time. I was minding my own business with some of my friends when these guys bumped into us. One of them spilled his drink on us and we’re like, you’re not going to say anything? Then they start mouthing off—like what? Dude, you’re in the wrong. Next thing I know

fists are flying—I was not the first to lay hands on anyone. You believe me right? Noah, tell her?” He finishes his rambling with a beseeching look my way. “I’m the injured one here. I’m the only one that got hurt.”

“That last part is a lie. A few faces were hurt, including yours,” I say.

“Oh come on, Drew.” She sighs. “I thought we went through this and had an understanding, you were going to stay out of trouble.”

“I was sticking to the agreement and minding my business, Lexi!”

“It doesn’t look like it,” she snaps back.

I can see this escalating into something it doesn’t have to and ruining my chances to have that talk with her. “Okay, let’s calm down. Lexi, I’m sure we can agree, right now, the most important thing is he’s all right. No charges are going to be being pressed as long as the minor damages are paid for by all parties involved for the damages, which won’t be much.”

She plants a hand on her hip and shakes her head. “At least that’s something.”

“Whatever. I’m going upstairs. I need to rest my hand.” He brushes past Lexi into the house still holding the ice pack over his hand pressed against his chest, making a face at her.

“Here’s the info you need for the game store.” I take a folded-up paper out of my pocket, unfold it, and hand it to her. “The owner will be expecting a call from you.”

She takes the paper from me and looks at it. “Thanks once again for bringing him home. I’m sure he appreciates it too. Even though you might not know it by him being...well, him as usual.”

“Not a problem. He’s not really a bad kid. By the way, are things better between you two? Things don’t seem as combustible as before.”

She chuckles. “They are.” She keeps looking down at the paper she’s now toying with in her hands.

“That’s good,” I say, wishing she’d look at me again. “I wish the same could be said for you and me.”

“We’re fine.”

“No, we’re not.”

“We are,” she mumbles unconvincingly.

“If we’re so fine, look at me and tell me that.” I lean in putting my hand on the door frame.

She barely raises her head, peeking up at me from under her lashes.

“Not good enough.” I have so much to say but don’t know where to start. I sigh in frustration. “Lexi, we need to talk. Can I come in, please?”

“Okay.” She lowers the paper in her hand and lets me pass. Closing the door she leans back against it. “I—”

“I—” We both say at the same time then stop. I smile and move a little closer to her. She returns a nervous smile. “You go first,” I say.

“No, no, you go.” She fumbles with the paper still in her hand like she’s afraid to put it down.

“Things didn’t end well the last time I was here. They haven’t been going much better since then either. I miss you, Lexi,” I say, holding my breath to see what she says.

“I miss you too.”

Oh, thank god. At least I’m not alone in this with all these feelings. But I can’t just forget everything else that I know. I have put it all out there for her to know how I truly feel good and bad if we’re going to get anywhere. “As much as I’m glad to hear you feel the same, I’m also angry.”

Her eyes lower. “Oh. I’m sorry,” she says, in a voice so small and unlike her.

“Sorry for what? For pushing me away and throwing away something that could be great, because of what? Make me understand, Lexi. What the hell are you so scared of?”

“What am I not scared of when it comes to us?” She huffs. “You’re too good for me, you know?”

“No, I don’t know. But you keep telling me this. You don’t see what I see. It goes beyond looks. You’re one of the most selfless people I know. Caring for everyone else at the expense of your well-being. It’s admirable, the way you keep your family together by yourself.”

She shakes her head. “You think all these good things about me and make me sound like some kind of saint. But I’m far from one. You deserve someone worthy of all those words you used for me. Maybe one day I will be.”

“You are. I don’t know why you can’t see that.”

“Wait, let me say this. I was fooling myself when we were together. I thought I could keep certain parts of my life separate and pretend one didn’t affect the other. But I was wrong. I knew we couldn’t be together when I told you not to come back, before that really. I didn’t want to hurt you. I think you have an idea what happens at the club you saw me at.” Hands going still, she lowers her head.

“You don’t have to say what it is. That would be best for both of us.” I point to myself as much as my uniform.

“I owe you some kind of answer from that night though. You deserve that. I don’t go there anymore. And I’m not ever going back. That’s the first step in trying to change things for me that would make me feel the tiniest bit worthy of being with a good guy like you. I’m going to go back to school, nursing.”

“That’s great, Lexi. I’m happy for you. I can see it, you’re a natural nurturer.”

“Thanks.” The side of her lip curls up into a faint smile. “My gramps would be happy. I saw how the nurses took care of him, they were good to him. Good people.”

“You’re a good person, too, Lexi.”

“Maybe, I’m trying to be better. I’m a liar. I was lying to you from the beginning.” She looks at me, eyes welling up.



I walk up to her and pull her into my arms. I can't stand watching her hurt this way. Her head resting against my shoulder, I stroke her hair. Hurt that she doesn't see how great she is. "You were doing what you needed to do to help and protect your family. I won't turn my back on you even if we are not together, I will always be here for you if you need me. Make no mistake about it, Lexi, I still want to be with you. I still want us."

"Why would you still want to be with me?" She looks up, eyes shining with tears.

"You keep asking why I would want to be with you, why this? When you should be asking why not you? Aside from what you think makes you unworthy of being happy, you still can't see the caring determined person you are. The fighter who will go to any length to protect her brothers and keep her family together. Even at the detriment of her own emotional health and happiness. All you have sacrificed and you still can't see who you are? You're going to keep pushing me away and I'm going to keep coming back until I can make you see all the beautiful things you are, through my eyes."

"Then you're a glutton for punishment." She sniffs, wiping her hand across her eyes.

"For you I am, because you deserve someone who can withstand all the things going on in your life. Anyone who can't is not worthy of being in your life, standing by your side through it all."

"And you believe you're that man?"

"I am that man. I'm not everyone else. I'm not going anywhere, I'm here for you. Let me repeat this. I am here with you."

She closes her eyes and another tear rolls down her cheek. Like she's trying to compose herself. I swipe my thumb across her cheek, wiping it away. I lean down and place a kiss on her cheek and say, "I love you." Her eyes pop open wide and she opens her mouth to say something but I shake my head and continue. "But it's one thing for me to know it. If this is going to work...do you believe it?"

“Yes. I believe it and I love you too.” She cradles the back of my head in her hands and kisses me hard on the lips. “I love you and I believe you and I want this to work. I’m glad you came back.”

“Me too.” I open my mouth and sweep my tongue into hers in a searing kiss, tongues sliding together as her hands slide through my hair and across my scalp pressing me in as close as we can get, without falling over on top of each other.

She breaks the kiss not pulling away, lips brushing, a soft exhale leaving her lips. “This time will be different, I promise. No more lies.”

“I believe you.” I stroke my thumb over her chin. “I believe you. We’ll start over. This time we’ll both be honest. And it’ll be better than before because you know I love you and I’m not going anywhere, it’ll be something new.

“Something new...I like that.”

I like it too. I lift her face to mine and continue where we left off with something new and well worth the wait.



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Shaniel Watson writes books she likes to read: sultry, emotional stories, with imperfect characters who eventually get their happy ending.

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