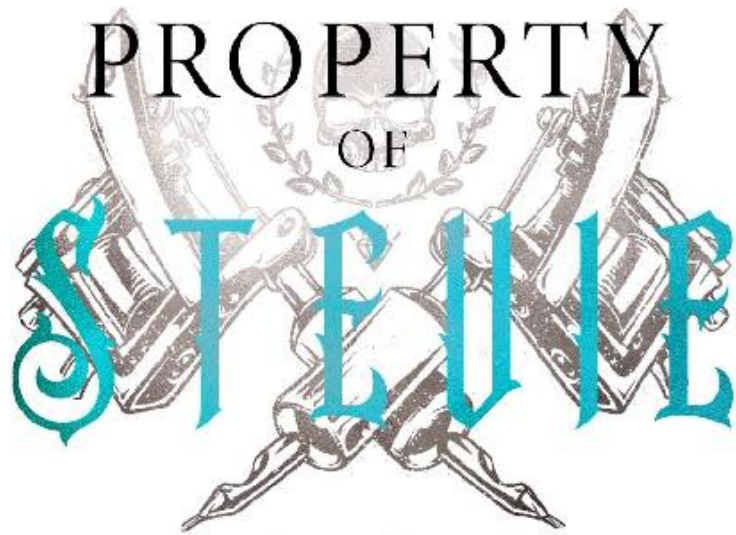


STERILIE



Hel'sen's
novel

DJ KRIMMER



DJKRIMMER.COM

STEVIE

HEL'S INK

BOOK FIVE

DJ KRIMMER

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Brooke,

*Without you, my books would still be in my
notebooks.*

*I love you & thank you for your constant
support*

Xoxo

DJ



CONTENTS

[Content & Trigger Warnings](#)

[Translations](#)

[Stevie](#)

1. [Stevie](#)
2. [Brooks](#)
3. [Stevie](#)
4. [Brooks](#)
5. [Stevie](#)
6. [Brooks](#)
7. [Stevie](#)
8. [Brooks](#)
9. [Stevie](#)
10. [Stevie](#)
11. [Brooks](#)
12. [Stevie](#)
13. [Brooks](#)
14. [Stevie](#)
15. [Brooks](#)
16. [Stevie](#)
17. [Brooks](#)
18. [Stevie](#)
19. [Brooks](#)
20. [Stevie](#)
21. [Brooks](#)

[Stevie](#)

[Come Stalk Me](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Notes](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by DJ Krimmer](#)

CONTENTS

[Content & Trigger Warnings](#)

[Translations](#)

[Stevie](#)

1. [Stevie](#)
2. [Brooks](#)
3. [Stevie](#)
4. [Brooks](#)
5. [Stevie](#)
6. [Brooks](#)
7. [Stevie](#)
8. [Brooks](#)
9. [Stevie](#)
10. [Stevie](#)
11. [Brooks](#)
12. [Stevie](#)
13. [Brooks](#)
14. [Stevie](#)
15. [Brooks](#)
16. [Stevie](#)
17. [Brooks](#)
18. [Stevie](#)
19. [Brooks](#)
20. [Stevie](#)
21. [Brooks](#)

[Stevie](#)

[Come Stalk Me](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Notes](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by DJ Krimmer](#)

CONTENT & TRIGGER WARNINGS

I do my best to present any and all content in the gentlest of lights but please, take care and make sure to check in with yourself. Only you know you well enough to decide if you should proceed.

Remember to always put your mental health first and you matter.

Possible Triggers:

Stevie Contains:

- Attempted SA of FMC
- Abuse
- Pregnancy (not MC)
- Infertility
- Online Bullying
- Guns
- Anxiety & PTSD

Content:

- Uterine Fibroids & Endometriosis
- Hysterectomy
- American as Second Language Side Character
- Explicit Language
- Explicit Sexual Situations

TRANSLATIONS

For Baka - Croatian

Bejbe - Baby

Ne - No

Ej - Hey

Mlijeko - milk

Kuja - Bitch

Jebi Se - Fuck You

Djed - grandfather

Svinja - pigs

Sjajno - Great

Budi tiho - Be Quiet

For Vincent - Cajun/French

Cher - Sweetheart

Comment ça va? - How are things

Ça c'est bon! - that's good

STEVIE

NEW ORLEANS

“Puppet!” Cringing at the sound of Vincent’s voice, I force a smile as I hand the young woman the aftercare instructions for her new tongue piercing.

“If you have any problems—”

“Puppet!” He yells again, making my eye twitch and sending a cold chill running down my spine.

“Don’t hesitate to call.” I continue, fake smile still plastered on. The girl gives me the universal woman look, silently asking if I’m alright. I’m not, but that’s not her concern, so I give her a nod. She says thanks and leaves the shop. Once I’m sure she’s left, my mask drops and I turn to see why my boss, mentor, and boyfriend - Vincent, is screaming for me this time.

“Yes?” I ask softly as I walk into the tiny closet he calls a break room. I watch the blond-haired man raise a pierced brow at me, and I feel it as the dread sinks into my body. My straight stance to wilt, and my gaze falls toward the floor.

“Wanna try that again, Cher?” Cher is a common term of endearment here in my hometown of New Orleans. Yet every time he calls me it, I feel my stomach churn. Puppet is bad enough, but Cher only comes out when he’s giving me my last warning, even if it’s my first.

“Yes, *sir*?” I say feebly, and I feel my cheeks warm from the embarrassment. If my Mama and Baka could see what I’ve turned into, they would be so ashamed. Hell, I am ashamed. I am a strong Louisiana woman raised by the strongest Croatian

women ever to exist. I was brought up to take no shit from anyone, to hold my head high, and to never, *ever* dirty my knees for a man. Yet, here I am, reduced to being this man's servant at his beck and call. He says jump, and I do it without question. He says down, and my knees drop faster than my brain can register.

Vincent chuckles lightly as he walks up to me. He stands about my height, which is an unimpressive five foot seven, but his icy, steel-colored eyes have a way of striking fear into my very core.

“Such an obedient puppet.” He pats my face with more force than necessary. “I saw your circle on the calendar at the apartment,” he purrs as he curls my long black hair into his slender, tattooed hand.

“Yes, sir,” I whisper. Tomorrow is the day. The day that my two-year apprenticeship is over. The day I'm supposed to begin my paid job as a piercer here. Two years of living in his apartment, working under him in *every* sense of the word. Seven days a week, fourteen or more hours a day, with no pay. If I needed clothes, I had to ask him. And since he was paying, he got to decide the outfit, along with my meals, my shampoo, and even the feminine care products—all had to be approved by him.

“Well,” he leans in, running his pierced tongue over my neck, causing a shudder to run through me. “Do you feel like you've met the... requirements to graduate?” My heart stops as I stare at him, eyes wide.

“Vincent,” I breathe out. “I-I've done everything you've asked and more! I've done ninety percent of the piercings for nearly a year now.”

“And?” He flicks his wrist, pulling my hair and forcing a sharp cry from me which only angers him further. Quiet obedience is what he expects—demands—of me. But I can't... two years of this hell, and I only stuck it out because his shop is, or was, the shop to work at in New Orleans, at least until his partner left six months into my apprenticeship. Now, the place is mainly known for his erratic behavior or him sexually

harassing the clients. Vincent's cold laugh pulls me back to the present as he jerks my hair again, pulling my face towards his.

"You, Cher, have only finished part one of the apprenticeship. Next is you have to pay me back."

"W-what?" I sputter while trying to remove my hair from his grip, but it's useless.

"You've been my financial burden for two years. Start paying me back, and maybe you'll have a job here."

"How can I do that if I don't get paid?!" I snap, and my eyes widen. Oh no. No, no, no. I didn't mean to. "Vin-... Sir. I'm sorry." I squeak out as his cold eyes narrow.

"Oh, Puppet," he sighs in faux disappointment. "Have you learned nothing? We have rules, Cher, and when you break the rules, you must be punished. Now, get on your knees." My lip wobbles as I try to shake my head. God, please, not again. I can't, I can't do this one more time.

"Vincent," I beg, my eyes filling with tears, but they only make him smirk as he runs his tongue over my cheek before hovering his lips over my ear.

"On your knees, Puppet." His voice is cold and unfeeling. "That pretty mouth only has two uses, agreeing with me and sucking my cock. And it's done neither today. Now, do your job." He says through gritted teeth as he yanks me by the hair, forcing me to my knees. I take a slow breath as my shaking hands go to his jeans to unzip his pants.

"Hurry up before I make you take it up the ass." He's both made and delivered on that threat before. I'm pulling his zipper down when I stop. I can't explain why, but at this moment, I can't handle it anymore. Something inside me snaps, and before I realize I've done it. I drive my fist directly into his crotch, and Vincent screams and falls over. I cry out, feeling my hair ripped from my scalp when he doesn't loosen his grip. Flailing around, my hand collides with a penholder. It falls, and a pair of office scissors lies within my reach. Without a second thought, I grab the scissors and cut the hair he has wrapped around his hand, freeing me from his grasp.

I stumble back as I get to my feet and run out of the piercing shop with Vincent's promises he'd make me regret this following me out the door. I believe he will, too, but what other choice do I have? Stay and continue to be sexually assaulted and abused by the man who is supposed to be my mentor? How did I let it get this bad? How did I go from being completely independent to having a monster of a man controlling every aspect of my life? Never again. I will never allow a man to hold power over me again.

STEVIE

CHAPTER ONE

TATTOO CONVENTION - NEW ORLEANS

“**O**n your knees, Puppet.” Vincent’s voice behind me is just as cold and unfeeling as I remember. How is this happening? *Again, after all these fucking years.* His familiar words cause my knees to buckle and my palms to go sweaty. This can’t be happening. I thought the shop’s bodyguard, Brooks, had scared him off earlier, but Vincent was waiting for me when I came down from checking on Indy. My old mentor, the man who abused me in every way, is here, and I can’t get away. “Get on your fucking knees and do your job.” He says through gritted teeth as he yanks me by my short hair, forcing me into a private bathroom. I stumble against the wall as he shuts the door, nearly crumbling at the deafening sound of the lock being engaged. I won’t let him take me, not again. Not without leaving him a bloodied mess. Even as I think this, my body trembles, and the burning sensation starts up in my nose and behind my eyes.

No, Stevie, you will not cry in front of him.

“Please,” I whisper, forcing the tears to stay down as I touch my smartwatch behind my back and pray that I’m calling Janie or Ren.

“Hurry up before I make you take it up the ass.” He snaps, smacking me upside the head. It’s always the same threat. He never wanted to fuck me anywhere but the ass or mouth because of the blood. He loved to remind me how disgusting it was that I bled constantly.

“Peaches?” I hear in my earbud, and I let out a sob. Brooks. Despite how much that man annoys me on the surface, I swear to god I’ve never been happier to hear his voice call me that stupid fucking name. “Stevie, where are you?” His voice is a near-feral growl, and I look at the scraggly man gripping my hair.

“I hate this haircut,” he spits while forcing me to my knees. “I much preferred that long hair I could yank.”

“Location baby, location,” Brooks says in my ear, his voice panicked and rushed. If I speak, Vincent is going to attack me. But if I don’t... fuck it.

“Private bathroom, next to the pamphlet rack-AH!” I cry out as Vincent grabs me, ripping my earbud out and throwing it across the bathroom.

“You’ll regret that one, you fucking bitch.” He smirks and goes to grab my shirt. I instinctively shove him away with all I have and run to the door, frantically unlocking it just as Vincent grips my hair and slams my forehead into the door frame. I’m disoriented and seeing stars as he shoves me to the floor.

“No!” I scream, clawing at his hands and face with everything I have.

“Stupid cunt!” He backhands me before gripping my throat to cut off my air supply. I try to smack his hand away, but he adds the other and squeezes tighter. “I was hoping to hear your cries as I fucked your ass, but you know I don’t mind doing it with you uncon—” The door flies open with a bang and we both jump. Brooks’ massive body storms in, his eyes landing on us, full of rage. I’ve never seen him look so angry before.

“I’m going to fucking kill you,” he growls while grabbing Vincent by his throat and lifting him off me like he weighs nothing. Though, considering Brooks’ massive build compared to Vincent’s much smaller one, I guess he probably doesn’t.

“B-Brooks!” I cough out while weakly standing up and grabbing his large bicep. “Don’t. Just get me out of here.

Please, I don't want attention on us or you to get into trouble." I whisper, praying no one walks by. Both Indy and I have been attacked today, I know the guys will want to go home if they find out and I can't be a damsel in distress to my friends, especially when none of them know my history with Vincent.

Brooks glances at me briefly before punching Vincent in the face. I hear the clatter of teeth hitting the tile before Brooks grabs me by the wrist and pulls me out of the bathroom. We hasten our way through the lobby, avoiding the crowd for the convention, and he instructs me to take us to my room. I silently agree, unable to fully comprehend what has happened and what is happening now. We reach my hotel room, and I hand him the key card from my pocket. Once he ushers me inside, he locks the door and turns to me. I can see the adrenaline is still pumping through him; he's nearly vibrating.

"Thank you," I whisper, eyes still locked with his. Brooks' eyes possess a mossy green hue with delicate brown flecks. They remind me of the gigantic old oak trees in the local forests after a storm. Like those moss-draped branches, his eyes are a truly captivating and enchanting sight. Or at least they usually do, but now there is a heated darkness in them, I feel in my very core.

"I should've killed him." He snarls while moving closer to me. His fingers trail over my torn shirt, and an electric current runs through me. A million thoughts race through my head. The secret crush I had on him, him ruining said crush, and now him standing here, having just saved me, and we're alone, and fucking god, he's so good-looking. I am not lying when I say Brooks Dawson's body is a fucking masterpiece. His physique is large and overpowering. Every line and curve seems to have been chiseled with the precision of Michelangelo himself. His shoulders—broad and commanding—scream safety and protection, something I yearn for at this moment.

My eyes break from his and travel lower, over the rapid rise and fall of his powerful chest, past the tapering of his shirt that accentuates what I imagine is a torso as equally defined and powerful as the rest of him. His forearms are tanned and

corded, flexing with every clench of his large fists that rest against muscular thighs. He's absolutely, infuriatingly gorgeous, and when you put all that together and top it off with his voice and that fucking sharp, scruffy jaw. It's easy to understand why he has an overly confident tone in his voice. Brooks has a powerful voice, it's always upbeat and playful. I'd go as far as to say overly confident or cocky. It's one of the things that I like about him, secretly, of course. No one needs to know about my crush on this giant of a man.

"Are you alright?" He breathes and his voice is not his at all. His unshaken, commanding voice has been replaced with concern and something more, something desperate.

"Brooks?" I look up to meet his gaze again. Still as dark and dangerous as I've ever seen. It doesn't intimidate me, but it should. Everything about Brooks should intimidate me. It's taken years of therapy and exposure to the guys at Hel's for me not to go into a panic attack just being near a man, but with Brooks, I've only ever felt safe, even now.

Closing the distance between us, I place my hand on his jaw. *My god, he's tense.* It amazes me how my simple touch morphs him. His body visibly relaxes, and though he is still over a foot taller than me, he somehow isn't taking up all the space in this small room. His eyes shudder before closing as he nestles into my palm. My breath hitches as his warm fingers tenderly encircle my wrist, anchoring me to his face as though it's a life preserver thrown out to save him from being consumed by the depths of the dark waters.

"Stevie." My name has never sounded so good, like a prayer and a hope. His eyes open, and the darkness is replaced with a heat that I know matches the one growing inside me. I know what he's asking without him saying it, and though I shouldn't, I can't stop my head from nodding my consent. It's all it takes: one slight nod, and before either of us can blink, his lips are on mine. I whine eagerly into the kiss, and my hands grip his shirt, pulling his body flush with mine. Possessed, I have a desperate need to have his overly large, protective body as close to mine as possible. I want to be overwhelmed by his presence. I want his body to suffocate me

like the best-weighted blanket while I become intoxicated by his scent.

“Oh my god,” he whispers when he pulls away from my mouth. “Fuck, those lips feel better than I ever imagined.” *Imagined? Oh fuck, has he been feeling this pull all this time too?* Brooks grips my hips, and he pulls me to him, causing me to let out a sharp gasp as his erection presses against me. I reach my hand between us, cupping his cock through his jeans. “F-uck!” He grunts out as he leans his head against my shoulder.

“If we are doing this,” I whisper in his ear while massaging him. “I don’t want it slow, no sweet talking. You need to fuck me and be gone before my friends realize I’m missing and come looking for me.”

I watch him as he pulls back and looks at me in shock for a moment before nodding. “Sure, yeah, a quickie.” He mutters, fumbling, almost nervously, with his pants. I chuckle at his awkwardness as I slip out of my pants, noting there’s no blood. There hasn’t been any today, but I never know if it will change with my condition.

I lay on my bed, and holy...

“Brooks,” I stare in wonder at his thick, long cock with an impressive apadravya piercing through the head. He looks from me to his cock and gives me a sheepish smile.

“Okay, so I was trying something out a couple of years ago,” I lean forward, grabbing his cock and looking over the piercing. “Jesus Christ,” he whimpers while jerking in my hand.

“It looks good, great placement, and the heal—”

“Peaches,” he says through a ragged breath. “Baby, your hand is on my cock. I really appreciate your compliments on the healing of my piercing, but I really, *really* cannot stress how little I care about it right now.” I throw my head back, laughing at his statement, not realizing I entered piercer mode. My laugh ends abruptly, and I let out a squeal as Brooks’ massive arm flips me over to my stomach. He moves me so

easily, which I'm not used to because of my larger body. "You ready, Peaches?" He whispers, and I give him a soft nod before lowering back down. I feel him lining his cock up against my entrance before pushing inside me, and— "Holy shit," I groan, flattening my upper half further against the mattress. "Brooks," I whine his name as his massive cock slides in, filling me perfectly.

"Fucking hell, you feel amazing, Stevie," he praises while running his rough hand under my shirt and up the only tattoo on my back - a tattoo of a spine with angry snakes coiled around it. "You ready?" He breathes, and my response is to push back against him. "Fuck," he growls out, gripping my hips possessively as he and I find our rhythm, and fuck, it feels too good. His piercing massages my walls with the perfect amount of pressure, and I feel as though I'm about to fucking explode already.

"Brooks," I mewl while pushing back and grinding when he's fully sheathed inside me.

"Fuck," he grunts, his grip tightening on my hips as he drives himself deeper. My god, I will be bruised in the best way tomorrow. "I'm so fucking close, Stevie," He warns, and I feel his movements becoming faster, tense and jerky. I grab one of his wrists and put it on my clit.

"I need...stimulation." I pant before hearing his sharp intake of air when he finds *it*.

"Holy shit, is that a piercing?" I chuckle at his question.

"Yeah, so I was trying something out a couple of years ago," I mock between pants. "Now, use your hand and get me off," I order, and he smacks my ass before playing with the piercing between his fingers. The sensation is nearly too much, and my body shakes as I cry out his name.

"That's my baby," he groans while thrusting into me so fast and deep I know I'll be ruined forever. There is zero chance I'll ever be able to fuck another man that could make me feel as good as Brooks is with just this quickie. "Keep screaming my name. Tell god who you're worshipping now."

“You,” I whimper out, feeling all the coils inside me, getting ready to snap. I’m going to explode. “You, Brooks, you fuck me like this, and I’ll worship you until the day I die. Oh, shit...” I cry out as everything snaps and my vision goes white, causing me to see stars.

“Stevie,” I hear him moan out softly. “You feel so fucking good, fuck...” he grits out while rubbing my clit. He roars out my name as his thrusts become frantic before he releases himself inside me.

We lay in silence for a moment together before he removes himself from inside me and heads to the bathroom.

“Shit,” I hear him curse, and a minute later, he walks back out, holding a towel. “Peaches baby, I think you started your period.” He says, and oh... my god, I’m so embarrassed. I look at him, knowing the humiliation is all over my face. He waves me off while walking up to me with a towel. “Hey, calm down. It’s not a big deal.” I feel my lip wobble as tears threaten to spill. Brooks runs the towel over my inner thigh, and I try to smack him away.

“Stop,” I snap quietly. “Y-you don’t have to clean up my blood, that’s—”

“Shut it,” He states, gently pushing me to my back. “You gave me the best sex of my life and you think I won’t clean you up?” He scoffs, “What kind of piece of shit do you take me for?”

“Brooks, I’m bleeding. It’s... fuck, it’s not my period.” I feel him freeze his movements as he glances up at my face.

“What is it? I didn’t hurt you, did I?” I hear his panic, and, fuck does he have to be so sweet?

“N-no, I have a condition. Endometriosis. Along with Uterine Fibroids. They cause me to bleed often, and sometimes it happens during sex. Sorry, I should’ve warned you so you could’ve made the choice to still fuck me.”

“Peaches, if I hadn’t already shot my payload, I would fuck you again right now. Blood washes off. As long as it’s not painful for you, why would that deter me?” Oh. Oh no.

Shaking my head, I shove him away, scooping my pants up and heading to the bathroom just as the tears fall. God damn it, that was so sweet. Thoughts of how Vincent would make gagging noises when I would bleed fill my mind, making me cry harder. My condition makes it so hard for me to feel confident and for Brooks, Brooks to be the one to not only act unbothered but to say he would go again... damn, I need to get out of this room, away from him. After I finish cleaning myself, putting on a pad, and washing my hands, I walk out to the hotel's main room and lock eyes with Brooks. He must see my decision to bolt out of the room because, as I turn and run, Brooks grabs my wrist and pulls me back, pressing my back against the wall. I stare up into his eyes as I feel my heart rate quickening.

“Peaches.” His low growl sends shivers down my spine. “There is zero chance I’ll be able to let this be a quickie. So you best know that now.” I relax at his playful wink and give him a playful shove and eye-roll.

“Well, you best figure out how to be okay with it because this is a one-and-done big man.” I don’t know who I’m trying to convince with that lie, Brooks or myself.

He lets me go to the door before his words stop my departure. “I will never be done with you, Stevie.”

BROOKS

CHAPTER TWO

CALIFORNIA

Me: How many times have you come thinking of me?

Peaches: New number, who dis?

Me: ha ha

Peaches: What do you want, big man?

Me: Uh, it's Daddy

Peaches: HA! Wrong kink, my guy.

Me: Eh, worth a shot.

Peaches: How's Chicago?

Me: It's miserable. I'm laying here in this uncomfortable bed with an erection that won't go away.

Peaches: Sounds tragic.

Me: Painfully so.

Me: Any ideas on how to help it?

Peaches: Don't they have websites for this?

Me: Peaches, if you're on a website, I won't be home next week.

Peaches: Why?

Me: Because I'll be very busy murdering everyone that's subscribed to your site after Greyson sends me their info.

Peaches: *swoon* Look at the big strong possessive man coming to swing his cock around.

Me: Why do I like you?

Peaches: Right? I ask you that question ALL THE TIME.

Laughing, I shake my head before sending her another message.

Me: I gotta go do my final rounds. Can I call you after?

Peaches: I mean, if you're expecting something—no. It's been a painful day.

Me: All I want is to hear your voice.

Peaches: Ew.

Peaches: Fine. Be careful.

Smirking, I tuck my phone into my pocket before walking out of my room in the massive suite and checking the area. I hear my client and whatever women he has snatched up for the night in his room. *Fuck, they're loud.* Once I'm sure the area is secure, I head back to my room and shoot off a quick text to my business partner, Greyson.

Me: I hate you for leaving me to do this.

Greyson: I broke my wrist. How could that be helped?

Me: By not trying to perform tricks on that stupid bike like you're 13?

Greyson: Shut upppp, go tap some ass. Those rockstar groupies are always horny as fuck.

After sending him a middle finger emoji, I tap Stevie's name and smile as she picks up on the second ring.

"So, is this the part where I should start moaning?" She deadpans, and I laugh.

"I mean," I stretch loudly before dropping my voice to the low purr she seems to enjoy, even though she pretends to hate it. "Moan, all you want, Baby. You wanna hear Daddy pant your name?"

"Goodbye," she says, making me laugh again.

"Okay, okay! What are you up to?"

"Reading and trying to enjoy a night to myself," I smirk as I lay back in my bed.

"Feisty, huh?"

"Just irritated," she mutters, and I frown at the seriousness in her voice. For the last couple of months—since the convention in New Orleans—Stevie and I have become friends with benefits. Her choice, not mine. If it were up to me, she would be in my arms every night, and every day I would try to show her how amazing I find her overly irritable, stubborn ass. But she won't, so I take what I can get, which is friendship and booty calls. "The surgeon is once again telling me to wait because it's a permanent solution, and since I'm not married and have no kids, I must not know what I want."

I roll my eyes and shake my head. Stevie has been fighting for a hysterectomy for a few years now. This surgeon was hopefully going to be the one to take her side and give her the surgery she *needs*. Her appointment to schedule everything was today.

“I’m sorry, baby,” I say softly. “What if you went out of state?”

“What’s the point?” she scoffs. “So I can spend money on travel just so those assholes can tell me I’m either too fat or I will regret it? No, I may as well stay here and be miserable.”

“How’s work?” I ask, trying to change the subject, evidently choosing the wrong topic here, too.

“Four college guys came in and got penis piercings. One asked for my number, which I mean, it’s nice to know I can pull a college freshman—at least it was until he said he was into cougars.” I can’t hold the snicker back, and she groans. “Shut up.”

“Have you talked to Janie about moving to part-time?”

“No. I mean, I already am pretty much part-time with the amount of time off I’ve taken due to the pain, but I haven’t told her I want it to be permanent. I’m afraid she’ll be mad at me or think I hate her.”

“Peaches, just because you don’t want piercing to be your job forever doesn’t mean you hate her. Janie will understand.” This silence is uncomfortable, and I let out a sigh. This isn’t an easy conversation for Stevie. It’s one we’ve had several times before. Since the convention, hell, maybe even before, Stevie has been finding less and less joy as a professional piercer. I think she likes the people she works with, and she’s confident in her abilities as a piercer, so she keeps doing it. But the nights I stayed over when she had to go to work the following day, I could see the dread and anxiety filling her, and I hated it. Stevie is a people pleaser, though; she would rather suffer than express her feelings. Except with me, she has zero qualms with telling me exactly what’s on her mind.

“What are you reading?” I know that’s a safe subject. Stevie is a monster smut lover. A self-described ‘monster smut slut’, but I refuse to call her that. Anyway, she’s addicted to these monster romance books. I’ll be honest, they give me the ick, but whatever, she enjoys them.

“Hunting Season,” she says, and I hear the smile in her voice. “So, Hanna is a new girl in this mountainside town known for Bigfoot sightings. She’s headed to her car one day when she’s attacked, but thankfully, she’s rescued by Lorenzo—”

“Lorenzo? In a mountain town?”

“Oh, because ‘Brooks’ is such a common name?” she snaps. “Anyway! ENZO, for short, rescues her and takes her back to his cabin—”

“Why would he kidnap the girl after she was just attacked?” I smirk at the annoyed growl I hear. This is the only thing I like about these books; I tease her, and she gets all pissy and tells me to fuck off. It’s more fun in person because I get to see her nose scrunch up and her eyes get all squinty.

“Because!” she growls. “Turns out she is his fated mate! So he has a primal urge to take her with him and protect her!”

“Primal urge, huh?” I chuckle as she sighs.

“You just don’t understand good romance.”

“Oh yeah? How many cocks is *Enzo* sporting?”

“One!” she says defensively. “This book focuses on knotting, thank you very much.”

I pinch my brows together as I try to decide how deep into this subject I want to go. “Knotting?”

“It’s where he’s inside, and the base of his cock swells so that they’re stuck and—”

“Okay!” I laugh, waving my hand. “You win, I tap out.” She giggles lightly, and fuck if that’s not the greatest reward. “So, are you missing me yet? It’s been two weeks.”

“Please, I’m in paradise over here. No giants trying to break down my door.”

“Who’s breaking down the door? You gave me a key.”

“Shut up!” She hisses, and I laugh again. We talk for a few more minutes before Stevie says she needs to go to bed. After saying goodnight, I sigh while staring at the dark ceiling. The

same thoughts are going through my head like every night. My mantra to keep me in the right mindset, to keep me realistic and grounded.

We are friends with benefits. Nothing more.

Don't get attached.

This is temporary.

Even as I repeat it, I know that, at least for me, Stevie is more. I'm already attached, and my feelings for her are anything but temporary.

STEVIE

CHAPTER THREE

PRESENT DAY - CALIFORNIA

“**M**ore!” I cry out as Brooks grips me by my thighs and slams me into the wall of my apartment while plunging his cock deeper inside me. My nails dig into his sweat-slick back as he captures my mouth with his in a scream-silencing kiss as he thrusts harder. Turning us around, he lays me on my mattress while putting my ankles over his shoulders.

“Fuck!” He growls, his head falling back. “Baby, that tight pussy of yours is going to be the death of me.” I cry out in pleasure just as headlights from outside come through my window.

“God damn it!” I growl. My Mama and Baka are here to make the three a.m. donuts. I just wanted an orgasm before I had to start this long day.

“Oh no, no, no,” He laughs through his labored breaths. “You ain’t getting off this ride yet.” He thrusts into me again, and I cry out.

“You know I can’t be quiet!” I growl, slapping his arm. Brooks leans over me, clamping his large hand over my mouth before thrusting again. His palm muffles my cries, and I watch him smirk.

“Now,” he purrs while rotating his hips so his piercing rubs against my walls. “You *are* coming on my cock before you leave. Are we understood?” I nod and watch in the dim street lights as Brooks’ torso moves, his muscles contracting, sweat

running down his chest and stomach. I scream and fight his hand as his free fingers find my clit.

Shivering and shaking, I spread my thighs wide, and he has to bite back a cry of his own as he drives further in. I feel myself contracting, and when I snap, I rake my nails down his chest while screaming into his hand. Brooks hisses in pain as I feel him fill me.

“Fuck! Stevie!” He whimpers as he releases my mouth, leaning down to kiss my lips.

“Okay,” he chuckles while calming his breathing and removing himself from me. “I want two peanut butter donuts and one maple bacon.”

I punch his arm as I go to the bathroom to get ready. “You know where the shop is! Go downstairs and get it yourself!”

“Peaches,” he whines, lying on my bed. “If I go down there, your grandma will kill me. Pleasse?” He flutters his eyes, and I shake my head before shutting the bathroom door to get ready for the day.



“Next!” I call over the noise of the early morning crowd. Friday mornings are one of the bakery’s busiest days, and today is no exception.

“Hey, Stevie,” I smile warmly at the large bearded man. Fox Simmons, co-owner of Hel’s Ink, where I work as a piercer when I’m not here helping at my family’s donut shop: Nuts About Dough.

“Hey Fox, I didn’t have a pick-up order for you guys. Did Baka take it down?” Baka, my Croatian grandmother, is in her eighties and not always there with her memory, though half the time, I think it’s more her choosing not to remember something than a real issue.

“No, no,” Fox says softly. “I wanted to grab Torch her usual. She’s not in a great mood.” *Torch* is one of my best friends, Janie, the other co-owner of Hel’s Ink and Fox’s fiery little wife. Lately though, her fire has diminished a little more since returning from the East Coast six months ago, where Janie underwent some pricey IVF treatment. She made it to nine weeks and had a miscarriage.

Nodding, I turn to make Janie her preferred decaf iced coffee and stuff a couple of donuts in a bag for her.

“You working this afternoon?” Fox asks as he forces me to take the money for the items.

“Yeah, I get off here at eleven, and I’ll be heading over. I think I have Sadie working with me today.” As if on cue, I see the young, petite woman dancing her way into the shop. Sadie is the unofficial shop apprentice. She came in about three months ago and just started cleaning. She organized everything and then got us lunch. The guys refuse to hire her, and I don’t blame them. She’s a complete sweetheart, if not a bit of an oddball, and she doesn’t have a single tattoo, piercing, or dyed hair, and she doesn’t cuss. She’s a hell of an artist, though, which I think is why Janie lets her hang around and pays her under the table.

“Oh!” Sadie beams as she cranes her neck to look up at Fox while adjusting her round glasses. “Mr. Simmons! Good morning! You are smelling particularly fantastic today! Would you like me to take your order to Hel’s?”

Fox shifts uncomfortably, his cheeks reddening. “Sadie, I tell you every day not to call me that. It’s weird. Also, you have to stop telling people they smell good.” She blinks her hazel eyes briefly before shrugging and looking at me. Sadie is on the shorter side with light brown hair and has the most innocent face.

“Hi, Ms—”

“Sadie...” I warn, and she gives me an almost pained look.

“I hope you all know how perturbed my moms will be if they knew I was not addressing my superiors correctly.” She

says under her breath.

“We ain’t your superiors,” Fox groans while grabbing his items. “I’ll see y’all at the shop. Oh, Sadie! You could grab a dozen for me, actually. I’ll see you at the shop.” I smile and give him a wave before turning back to Sadie.

“Who this?” I startle at my Baka’s voice and turn to glare at the tiny old woman.

“Baka,” I sigh, “You know Sadie. She helps at the tattoo shop.” My grandmother looks the girl over before nodding.

“You ever kill a man?” I watch Sadie’s face blanch, and I smack my face.

“Mama!” I call before quickly boxing up the poor girl’s food.



Looking myself over in the mirror, I nod in satisfaction. My chin-length green hair is curled and swept to one side. My makeup is light, just foundation and my sharp eyeliner. I use a cotton swab to wipe the excess makeup off my dimple, nostril, and septum piercings before looking at my attire: black leggings and a green button-down shirt with a black vest over it. I feel pretty good today. No bleeding or bloating, so I want to look as cute as I feel. I’m a bigger girl, but it’s never bothered me. I enjoy and am confident in my body. I’m not one to shrink or shy away, wear overly baggy clothes, or anything of that nature. If you don’t like the way I look, don’t look.

“My god, Peaches,” Brooks’ voice startles me as he leans against the wall. “You look so fucking good, I might just have to—” I hold my hand up.

“You mess this hair up, Dawson, and it will be the end of this... thing we have going on.” Brooks feigns a hurt

expression as he clasps his hands over his heart before walking over and wrapping his arms around me. I force myself not to enjoy the warmth and safety his embrace fills me with like it always does.

“Baby, you wound me. How could you call the magic that is us a ‘thing’?” I roll my eyes and shove his chest. He doesn’t move. Why would he? Brooks is massive, six feet, seven inches tall, with a body of powerful muscle. For most, he’s very intimidating to look at, but I find him to be a teddy bear, which only makes this arrangement more difficult.

“There is zero magic between us. We’re friends. You have a nice cock, and you know how to use it. Plus, you’re unbothered by my condition. Don’t make this into something it’s not.” This is the same conversation we’ve had several times after he and I have had to ‘let off some steam.’ Brooks and I are friends, sort of. We text a lot, and he hangs around Hel’s and acts as the security guard there. Which I still think is weird, considering there are four or five massive, tattooed men working there at any given time. He and I hang out a little outside of the shop, but it’s not often. I don’t want a relationship, and I know he does. As much as I don’t like to admit it, I would like to as well. But a hook-up, now and then, is all I have to offer him. I can’t allow another man to have control over me. Letting someone in, allowing them to hold my heart; no one deserves that kind of power.

“One day,” he chuckles before kissing the top of my head, “You’re going to realize you like me. And I will give you the biggest fucking I told you so.”

“Wow...” I smirk. “Well, I definitely ain’t feeling it right now.” I squeal as Brooks pulls me to him and backs me against a wall. His green eyes fall to my lips and... I can’t do this. “I don’t have time for another round,” I say, trying to make this not as awkward. I watch the conflict in his eyes, but he nods and backs away as I walk through my tiny, messy studio apartment. I live above my Baka and Mama’s donut shop. It’s supposed to be temporary. I plan on finding a more permanent place now that I’m making good money as the piercer at Hel’s. It’s just hard for me to leave a place I feel safe in. But my

surgery is coming up soon, and the steep staircase leading to the apartment is going to be a lot to handle while healing. I'm both nervous and excited. Maybe even a little in shock still. It took my friend Ren pulling some strings about a month ago, but a surgeon finally agreed with me and scheduled the hysterectomy. I can't wait to have it and no longer have this be the focal point of my life.

Grabbing my backpack and phone, I head towards the door. "You going to be able to lock up?" I ask, turning back toward the man. He chuckles while crossing his powerful arms over his broad chest.

"Between the two of us, who is the one that actually locks anything?" Okay, he has me there.

"Just don't get caught by Baka again. Explaining to her that I needed you to reach something I couldn't—"

"You're the one that came up with that excuse!" he laughs. "I work in security! You could've literally said you thought you heard something and wanted me to check it out. Or... I don't know, you were having a friend over?"

"Oh, well, don't you have all the answers. Besides, I don't have male friends over."

"What am I then?"

"Currently? A pain in my ass." I blow out a raspberry with my tongue before walking out my door and down the steps that lead to the entryway. You can either go around the stairs and end up at the door for the kitchen, or if you go out the exterior door, you're in the parking lot.

I make it three steps away from the building when I hear her.

"Stefa!" My baka calls out. Turning, I see the grey-haired woman slowly hobbling over to me on a... *Oh, for the love of god.*

"Baka!" I call out in annoyance as I walk back to the insane old woman. "Who did you steal this cane from?" I watch as the woman feigns insult as she clutches her chest.

“Stefa! I no steal cane! It trophy for victory.”

Raising my brow, I cross my arms over my chest. “Victory?” I repeat and instantly regret opening my mouth. Baka’s eyes go distant, and she dramatically moves her hand through the air.

“There I was in my village, the year, 1945–”

“So you were about five in this story.” Her blue eyes narrow as she points the cane tip at me. “I just want to make sure before you continue.”

“*Poštovanje Stefa!*” She yells as I drop my head into my hand.

“Baka, I *do* respect you! I just don’t have time to listen to this story.” Baka huffs as she turns away, no longer needing said cane to support her.

“We see how you feel when I die. The tears you cry, wanting one more story, Stefa. You wait.” Rolling my eyes, I turn back and hop in my car, heading to Hel’s Ink.



Atlas, one of the tattoo artists, sighs dramatically as I set my stuff behind the counter.

“I’m not mad, Stevie, just devastated. Nika promised me those cinnamon crunch bagels.” I give him a blank stare before shrugging.

“You know where the cafe is. March your little butt over there and get them.”

He scoffs, “Little? Stevie, these are full-fledged cakes. Don’t even pretend like I don’t have the biggest cake– Hey! Virginia!” Atlas, with his goofy grin, calls for Derek, another one of the artists at Hel’s. Derek is the shop grump. He’s a

man of few words, most of which are moody, but he has a big heart.

“I have an appointment. What?” Derek asks, popping his head into the piercing area.

Atlas turns around and lifts his shirt, popping out his ass at Derek. “I still have the best ass, right? Like these are tasty cakes.” *Why does he keep calling them cakes?* Without missing a beat, Derek looks at Atlas’ ass, then back at his face.

“I mean, you did, but I think you’re kind of flattening out since Howard. Dad life is making you flabby.” Derek walks away, and I try to hide my laugh as Atlas stands in the middle of the waiting area, stunned and insulted.

“Oh no,” he whispers, looking at me in horror. “It’s your fault!”

“Me? What did I do?” I am full-on laughing at this point.

“Ren has been trying for years to get me all chunky, and she’s using you to do it, plying me with bagels.”

“Except I didn’t bring you any bagels!” I rub my temples before shooing the man out of the room.

“Stevie, come on, you’re like my sister and bro friend,” Atlas says as he turns to look at me, jaw set and tone serious. “You could still bounce a quarter off my ass, right?”

“Atlas, I say this with all the love I have in my heart. Get the fuck out, or I’m going to bounce something off your head.”

Sighing, I return to the piercing room and begin the set-up, pulling out the display jewelry and turning on my machines and some soft pop music. I’m in the middle of cleaning the glass cases off when there is a tap on the door. I smile as Sadie walks in with my client, Rowan.

“Hi, I’m Stevie,” I say to the thin teen. According to my client chart, Rowan is nineteen, goes by they/them pronouns, and is here for a navel ring. They give me a shy smile before tucking their long black hair behind their ear.

“I’m so nervous about this,” Rowan says, and I nod while pulling out the jewelry selection for them to pick from.

“Well, I’m fast and try to make things as painless as possible. Pick out which piece you want, and we’ll get this going.”



“Okay,” I say calmly as I line the needle up on the client’s navel. “Big breath in and on the count of three, blow out, 1... 2...3.” I drive the needle through and cork the bottom before reaching for my tray to grab the jewelry. “Doing great, Rowan,” I smile at them as they continue to take slow breaths.

“My dad will be so pissed.” They chuckle nervously while staring up at the ceiling. I give them a small laugh.

“When I was eighteen, I got my tongue done. My mom cried for weeks.” They laugh as I slide the piece through and tighten the ball. “Go check it out.” I gesture to the mirror as I clean up. Rowan stands and looks at their new piercing in awe.

“Stevie, this is... I love it, thank you!” I smile and walk them to the counter, where I go over aftercare and check them out. Once done, I walk up to the tattoo area where Fox and Derek are tattooing clients, while Ash and Atlas are... having a staring contest.

“Stevie,” Ash stares, face unmoving. “I will give you five dollars to blow in Atlas’ stupid fucking face.”

“Stevie would never betray our friendship like that. You’re watching the kids. I haven’t gotten to hear my wife scream in a month.” I rest my head in my hand.

“Wow, you’re such a romantic there, Atlas.” Unfortunately, Atlas suddenly has to sneeze, and he loses the match.

“Fuck yeah!” Ash cheers. “Sunday will call you with the details.” He smirks, and I shake my head before walking back to the piercing area.

Sitting in my chair, I wince as I feel the familiar cramping. “Wonderful,” I mutter, knowing what happens now. I will be bleeding soon. I hate my condition. I mean, anyone would hate having endometriosis and uterine fibroids, but I have a deeper hatred than just the condition and the nearly constant side effects. It’s how I’m treated by the medical community, being plus size and a woman. They all say “lose weight” or “let’s put off surgery until you’re older.” It’s beyond frustrating. I’m a woman, and the surgery will make it impossible to have children, and obviously, I’ll change my mind and regret it. Even though I’m pretty sure I’m already unable to have kids. Still, they know better, right?

One of my best friends, Ren, talked to her mother, a big wig surgeon, and she got me in to see a surgeon willing to do the surgery. It’s still about a month away, though, and whenever my bleeding starts, or my stomach swells, or I am so exhausted I can’t stand, it just makes it feel so far away.

I hear my phone buzz on my station and grab it, chuckling when I see who it’s from.

Brooks: Okay, my client that I told you I had to watch today? It’s a... Well, I think it’s supposed to be a dog.

Me: This 100% goes against our 72-hour text rule.

Me: But I have to see this dog.

Brooks: Peaches, I wouldn’t be texting you if I wasn’t genuinely concerned right now.

Brooks: It literally looks like someone fed it after midnight or something.

Brooks sends me a picture, and, “Oh no,” I laugh out loud at the ugly little thing.

Me: Look at that tongue!

Brooks: Her name is Lady.

Brooks: WHICH SHE AIN'T

Me: What kind of breed is it?

Brooks: I think it's the kind that died eight years ago and her owner couldn't accept it.

Me: oh my god! Stop it! You are there to protect her body! Protect it!

Brooks: FROM WHO STEVIE? NO ONE is going to come within ten feet of this thing willingly.

Brooks: She is the thing that nightmares are made of.

Brooks: I may need to be protected... if you're interested

Me: No back-to-backs, and also I started bleeding.

Brooks: I've been with you for a while now. The blood doesn't bother me, Peaches.

Been with? What the...

Me: You have not 'been with' me. Don't make it weird.

Brooks: You like it weird and you know it.

Me: GOODBYE

Turning the alerts to silent, I let out a long sigh before turning to my computer and surfing through the different piercing

groups and boards to see what's happening in the community. It appears to be a relatively calm day online, which is always lovely. It's upsetting and stressful when the community turns on one another, especially when so many things need to be addressed and made better in the future.

"Speaking of," I mutter when I see the all too familiar and triggering face in the comments. Vincent, with a girl with pink hair and... a leather collar? She looks so degraded; her eyes are glazed over, and *I know* nothing she is going through right now is consensual. I feel my bottom lip quiver as I read the title of his post: *Breaking in the new girl*.

He's lower than scum. I hate him so fucking much, and it angers me that he's *still* abusing his position to hurt women. This industry is so hard to get into. Knowing the hell you have to endure, I can say without a doubt if I had been aware to begin with, I wouldn't have done it, even though I'm out on the other side. I'm still not great. Sure, through therapy—both professional and exposure—I've gotten to a place where I can be around men and pierce them and engage, but...

My eyes drift to my phone, and I am overcome with a feeling of loss. I can't explain why loss though. How can you mourn something that you never had?

Looking back at my computer, anger and determination fill me as I open a Word document. I shouldn't do this. I've spent years keeping my past to myself. And now, I'm about to let it out to the world. It's a bad idea. I know how this industry is, and I know the type of backlash I'm going to receive. But...

Breaking in the new girl.

I shudder, remembering when I was the new girl being broken in. I can't. I won't allow anyone else to be harmed by him or the other predators out there hiding under the guise of "mentor." I'm only one voice, and it may not make any difference, but I refuse to be quiet about this anymore.

I need to organize my thoughts, and then I will start taking my voice back and hopefully save some of these other apprentices in the process.

BROOKS

CHAPTER FOUR

“Brooks, thank you so much for caring for my little lady!” The breathy blonde woman hugs me so tightly I’m afraid her fake tits might burst. I look at the demonic dog sitting on a pink tufted chair that I’m sure costs more than my vehicle before giving the woman an uncomfortable smile.

“No worries, Mrs. Whiteford.”

“It’s Ms. You can call me Carrie.” She gives me a wink, and her overly large lashes seem to weigh her eyelid down, making it take some effort to open back up. “You know,” *oh god, here we go*. Instantly, I reach for my phone and hit the camera icon before hitting the video record. I’ve been through this too many times. I won’t let her make me out to be the one that made a move on her. “Why don’t you stay for a while?” she purrs. My eyes land on Lady again, and I flinch. *Fuck, that dog is ugly*. It also likes to try to kill itself any chance it gets. Apparently, I was hired to protect Lady from herself. She spent all day yesterday rubbing her two brain cells together to get just enough charge to do something stupid; like try and fall down the stairs, drown in the pool, or get taken by a fucking bird of prey.

Safe to say, it’s been a long twenty-four hours.

“I actually have to get going,” I give her a fake smile as I back towards the door. “It’s my sister’s birthday, and I... still have to pick my girlfriend up. Have a nice day.” I rush out the large door and head down the massive steps across the driveway to my Jeep. Once inside, I let out a loud groan. I set

up my business to keep people safe, not watch wealthy ladies' dogs.

I glance at my phone. *No new messages.* Well, that's not true. My mom and sisters are all texting to ensure everyone is ready for my sister's birthday tonight. My best friend and business partner, Greyson, is texting me memes. But the one person I want a message from, there's nothing but silence.

Stevie Campbell.

Jesus, that woman has me wrapped around her pretty little finger, and I'm completely fine with it. I have spent months now working this woman over. Stevie is a tough one. She doesn't let anyone in, and there are parts of her that even her closest friends don't know about—one of those things being that her and I occasionally hook up.

I should be fine with that, and I know most men would love this setup, but I'm not most men. She and I rarely hang out alone for more than five minutes if we aren't going to fuck. I'm addicted to Stevie Campbell, and like any addict, I will suffer through anything to get my next hit. Whether it's those five minutes, a simple text, or the green light to sneak into her apartment and fuck her brains out, I want it. My life consists of counting the seconds until I get my next hit. Or it did, until it became too much. About three months into our arrangement, I couldn't do it anymore. When I brought it up to her, she surprisingly agreed. I thought that meant we would start dating. Instead, she took us to the friend zone, and it's taken a couple of months to get her to even do the occasional hook-up again.

I do like this arrangement better than the other. At least this time, when we talk at Hel's, I'm treated more like a friend in public, and I get more text messages and talks. She still has strict rules that I respect because I know she has a lot of trauma from her past relationship with that fucker, Vincent. One of my biggest regrets is not killing him when I saw them in the bathroom at the convention in New Orleans. Him on top of her, choking her into unconsciousness. Remembering that day makes me violent, so I try to keep it at bay. I know what happened that day was nothing compared to what he had done

to her while she apprenticed for him. She's never gone into details, but it's not hard to figure out he did everything he could to hold his power over her. I just hope one day, she will see me as someone who wants to be with her because I care about her and not because I want power over her.

I want to text her, but I don't. I'd been shocked she answered when I texted her about the dog. It made my whole night. I hate the three-day rule with texting, but I only have myself to blame. I'm the one who told her it was a reasonable boundary to keep us from the "emotionless" fuck-a-thons we were having. But again, I desire her heart and soul, and I can't get to that part of her if I'm only seen as a casual lay.



"BROOKIE!" Spencer, one of my four little sisters, walks over and hugs me around my waist when I enter our mom's house. Spence is the second oldest of my sisters, turning thirty-two today.

"Hey, Spence," I smile softly as I embrace her. Spence is also the tallest of my sisters, reaching nearly six feet, but my six-foot-seven frame still towers over her. "Happy birthday. How are you feeling?"

She rolls her eyes, "I'm fine, Brookie. Come on, everyone is out back. I see you're flying solo again."

"Yeah, she's working tonight, sorry." I wince and then follow her through our family home to the backyard. My family knows about Stevie. Well, they know the version I've told them. The version where we have been dating for four months, and she's just as crazy about me as I am about her.

"Brooks!" My mother, Rosemary, wraps her arms around me. Well, as best as she can. She's a small woman, which is where my other sisters get it from. Spencer and I got our size

from our father. “Awww... Is Stevie working again? I really want to meet her.”

Scout, sister three and the biggest pain in my ass, scoffs before sipping her beer while bouncing my niece, Charlie, on her hip. “I’m beginning to think she doesn’t exist.”

“Watch as I give a shit,” I say dryly.

“Language!” Mom scolds, “Scout, your brother wouldn’t lie to us about such a thing. Now knock it off.” *Great mom, make me feel worse.*

“Where are Pip and Bug?” I ask, referring to sisters one and four. Pip, or Leah, is Charlie’s mom and just moved back here after her fuck face of a husband beat her while she was pregnant. Yeah, best believe he has an ass beating coming. According to Leah, a local guy in their town did beat James, but it doesn’t matter to me. He has an ass beating coming to him from me the next time he contacts my sister.

“They’re coming later,” Mom says, handing me a cold beer. “Tyler is getting a new chair, and your sister took her so I could prepare the party.” Tyler, or Bug, was in an accident with our father about ten years ago that left her in a wheelchair. Unfortunately, our father didn’t survive the crash. This was back when I was with the fire department and was called to the scene. It will haunt me forever. The busted glass, the blood, my baby sister lying in the median, and my dad dead on arrival. Regardless of what the many therapists have said, I hold a large amount of guilt, and I will until the day I die. Had I been with them, had I not picked up the extra hours, I could’ve saved them, I could’ve kept Bug from spending the rest of her life in a goddamn chair, and my dad might still be here.

It’s safe to say I still have issues with the memories of that day. So, for the last ten years, it’s been me taking care of the Dawson women. Probably too much care. I obsess over them. I worry constantly about who they are with and what they are doing. I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to stop. Honestly, that I am not completely grey or bald is nothing short of a miracle.

As the party progresses, I enjoy the time with my family. Spencer opens her presents, Leah and Tyler join us, and we have some of Tyler's amazing cake. It's beautiful, as always. Tyler made it look like a basket of bright, colorful flowers. She's a terrific baker, and her cake decorating is impressive. It's a shame she doesn't try to make a career out of it. She lacks the confidence, though. Despite the mask she puts on, Tyler is scared to take a leap for fear of failing. I think she could do amazing work, and I often think about how she and Stevie would get along, bonding over their shared talent. It's no secret Stevie loves baking and working with her family at the donut shop. I've gone into the shop and seen Stevie decorating pastries. The smile on her face and the look of calm she has while baking is a look she has nowhere else. Tyler is the same way.

Glancing at my phone, I notice a new message from Janie Pierce. Frowning, I excuse myself and walk away from the women so I can read the text.

Janie: Brooks, I think there might be a tiiiiiny problem I need you to help me with.

She sends me a link, and I open it... fucking shit. It's Stevie, and it looks like she's reading from a script. Her body is shaking, like she's nervous, and there is a slight waver in her determined voice.

"Hi, I'm Stevie Campbell, and I'm the piercer at Hel's Ink." Okay... I don't feel like this is going to end well. "I've been a piercer on and off for many years and..." She lets out a small chuckle before shaking her head. "It's silly. I have, like, no followers, so I guess I'm just speaking into the void, but I want to talk to y'all about the mentor and apprentice relationship and how dangerous and predatory it often can be."

"Fuckkkk," I groan as I look at the views. Thousands, and it was only an hour ago. I hit Janie's contact and hit the call button.

“Brooks! How’s it hanging?” I can hear the nervousness she’s trying to hide behind her question.

“She didn’t,” I say as I walk out to the front porch. “Stevie did not get on there and—”

“Ohhh yeah, she did. Names, locations, talked about Nuts and Hel’s. She doesn’t seem to go into the gory details, but you can put the pieces together on what she’s hinting at happening. It’s ummm... I’m nervous about how this will go because it’s hitting the algorithm.”

“So, how many people do you think will see it?” I ask slowly. I don’t know much about social media and the internet, but Janie was a social media icon a few years ago before taking over her father’s tattoo shop with her now husband, Fox.

I hear Janie let out a long breath over the phone. “Honestly, I don’t know. But, with the way the comments are flooding in and a large percentage of them being negative, I am going to say it’s going to be big.”

“So, what do you want me to do? You know more about the internet than I do.”

Janie chuckles. “Listen, don’t insult my intelligence, Brooks. Obviously, you and Stevie are having some kind of secret relationship.” I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. How does she know? I have made sure. “I can smell it a mile away. I know when people are boning. Plus, you two make it too obvious. She went from hating you, to laughing around you at the shop, and you are constantly looking at her ass, so give it up, it’s old news.” *Pft... maybe to you. I would classify what we have as a relationship.* “Now, what I want you to do is be aware. I already know Stevie is going to refuse to take this video down. Despite the backlash she will receive, she will feel right about what she’s said and won’t want to be silenced.”

“I mean, she is right. If this is really happening, it should be addressed.”

“Uh huh... and when does addressing it ever go well? She is about to get torn apart in the worst way. I just hope it doesn't bleed into the real world, but if it does—”

“That's where I come in.”

“Precisely.”



Pulling into the empty parking lot of Nuts About Dough, I kill my engine and stare at the backdoor. I usually have to park in a different lot and walk over, but she's not getting that tonight. Not when she is refusing to answer my texts and calls. Arrangement be damned. I told her I needed her to let me know she's okay, and she's ignoring me. After the phone call with Janie, I went back to my sister's party, but I was distracted for the rest of the night. My mind continuously going to Stevie, and my hands unable to stop refreshing the video; watching it go from thousands of views to tens of thousands, the hundreds of comments going to thousands, and her follower count skyrocketing. There were a hundred bad comments for every one nice comment, and my blood was beginning to boil.

After promising to bring my girlfriend over the next time, I left the party. I went to my house and started calling, texting, and emailing her, and the fucking brat ignored me.

Or she's in trouble and can't answer me. I have no idea which, so here I am, storming up to her unlocked door. “I'm going to kill her,” I growl as I open the door and walk up the stairs. I try her door at the top of the stairs, and when I'm met with no resistance from the lock, I am both terrified and furious.

Tapping on the door as I walk through it, I look around her studio apartment. “Stevie?” I call out, wishing I had thought to grab my gun before walking up here. I hear movement from

the bathroom and see the door cracked open, a warm light glowing. I put my hand on the door. “Holy shit, Stevie!”

Stevie sits on the floor, her body slumped against the shower glass door. “Fuck. Baby, what happened?” I panic as I pull her head to look at me. She’s so pale, and her eyes are hazy.

“Mmm... Brooks?” She croaks, and fuck, her voice is so weak.

“Stevie, w-what happened? Did someone attack you?” Her dark brows furrow as she looks up at me.

“What? N-no, I have a migraine and started bleeding. I think I got light-headed.” I take a deep breath to calm my nerves.

“Okay,” I tell her while standing up. “Come on, I’ll get you to bed.” I lift her to her feet and hold her as she grabs her stomach and doubles over. “Come on, Peaches, let me get you to the bed, and I’ll take care of you.” I walk her to her pull-out bed and cover her up once she lays down.

“I can handle this myself,” she snaps under her breath, and I roll my eyes.

“Yes, because you’re doing such a great job. Both doors unlocked, collapsed on the bathroom floor, not answering your goddamn phone, not to mention that video you posted.” She stops rubbing her head and looks at me.

“What video?”

“The video that the entire internet is freaking out about? The piercing—”

“Entire internet?” She interrupts while reaching over to her end table and grabbing her phone. “Oh... my god.” Her wide eyes find mine, and she shakes her head. “I-I... I didn’t think it would blow up. Nothing I do ever gets attention. Oh god, do you think he will see it?”

I tamp down the blinding rage. I know she’s talking about Vincent, and fuck it, let him see it and try some stupid shit. He’s still at the top of my list of people to kill. Actually kill,

like murder. I'm not one of those "I will beat his ass for touching her" types that don't really do anything. I have zero qualms about making sure that waste of space isn't breathing.

"I don't know, I would assume, but it'll be okay. You know I'll keep you safe."

"Brooks," she whines.

"Stevie, fuck around with me, and you'll find out I'm not as agreeable as you think. I will keep your ass safe. Starting with making sure you lock your fucking doors."

"Oh, and how are you going to do that? You going to come check every night?" she scoffs.

"Yeah, Peaches, every single fucking night. I hope you enjoyed those days off from me because we're about to get real fucking close."

"Perfect," she moans into her pillow, and I stand to grab her medicine, some water, and her heating pad. Once I return, I give her the pills and water while plugging in the pad.

"You want me to rub your back?" I ask, watching her curl up in the fetal position. I don't wait for a response because while I know she does, she will tell me no. Sitting on the pull-out mattress I absolutely detest, I lift her sweater slightly and start rubbing her lower back. She lets out little moans of probably both pain and relief as she slowly drifts off to sleep.

Once I know she's fully asleep, I look around the small apartment and sigh. I can't leave her alone here. What if something happens, and I'm not here to protect her? The anxiety that thought fills me with is nearly suffocating. With my mind made up, I take one of the couch pillows and place it between us so she can't yell at me in the morning. Though she probably will anyway, and rest my head on the mattress.

I have no idea what I'm going to do. How do I keep her safe from the entire fucking internet? Even as I think that, I know my biggest fear isn't everyone out there threatening her, it's the ones who will try to make good on that threat. There's only one option I have to make sure no one can get to her.

She's going to have to be under my complete protection.

STEVIE

CHAPTER FIVE

“Well,” my beautiful mother sips her coffee as she mulls over her next words. “Bejbe, I understand that there isn’t much we can do now, but I feel that the girl this morning with the bat was a bit much.” I rest my head in my hands and groan. It’s been three days since I made that video. Millions of views, shares, and comments, and now they’re stalking me. And today, some angry apprentice came into Nuts while I was working with a baseball bat.

“Ah,” Baka scoffs as she sits at the table in the empty restaurant. “That was nothing. I could snap her legs like the chicken wings if your bear would let me.” I laugh lightly. My Baka and Mama are the most extraordinary people I’ve ever met, and I love them so much. Baka is an immigrant from Croatia. She moved to the United States long before I was born. She was a housekeeper and cook for years until Mama started a bakery shop with the money from my dad’s life insurance when he passed away. Mama and Baka live in a house together. It’s a small bungalow with an urban farm in the backyard. I love that little house with its green siding and giant lilac bushes. I planned on staying there after my operation, but now that the stalking and death threats have started, I know I can’t involve them. Even though I’m pretty sure Baka would love to deal with them.

“I’m so sorry,” I sigh. “I had no idea it would go to hell like this. And Brooks isn’t my bear.” I don’t know how to make him go away. He’s been constantly around. Calling, texting, showing up, staying for all meals, or being at Hel’s if

I'm there. I understand why, but I don't like the added attention.

"It's no your fault, you no apologize, Stefa."

"I'm just worried *he* is going to contact me," I mutter into my hands.

"Bejbe," Mama's soft voice coos. *Bejbe*, or "baby" in English, has been my only pet name that I've ever approved of. I like my name, Stevie, and it's the name I prefer to be called. Except for Mama and Baka, who insist on calling me by my given name, Stefa. "You can't live your life in fear because of one man."

"One man who should be fed to the pigs," Baka grumbles. I only told them the reason I left New Orleans after my run-in with Vincent at the convention in New Orleans, even though I've been back in California for years now. It's not a time in my life that I'm proud of, and I didn't want to bring that shame to them. Of course, when I said that, Baka hit me upside the head and started screaming obscenities in Croatian... I think. I don't know. I told her I couldn't understand her, and she replied that it was because I'd become lazy with my Croatian, as though I am given the opportunity to use that language so often outside of these two women.

"Baka, you can't murder every man that you don't like." The old woman barks out a laugh.

"This! This is what is wrong with your generation. Eye for an eye, Stefa. The man hurt you! Then you cut off his testicles and serve them to him minced in pasta." I curl my lip at the visual.

"Okay," Mama says slowly before looking back at me. "So, what are you going to do? You won't stay with us and can't take those stairs after surgery. Plus, I'm worried about your safety right now. You being here alone..."

"I know. Brooks said he would have his company come out and help beef up the security or something."

"Alone?" Baka chirps, and I groan. *Here we go*. "The big bear with the beard and the—" she makes hand motions in the

shape of a round bottom.

“Bakaaaaa...” I whine while hiding my face. “You know his name is Brooks, and whatever you’re about to say, please don’t.”

“Ne! Stefa! You listen to Baka! I know the bear man stay here at night! He cares for you, yeah? You climb the bear man! You tame the bear man, and you marry the bear man. Right now!”

“Mama!” I look to my pink-cheeked mom for help as she tries to hide her laughter behind her coffee cup. “Traitor,” I mutter.

“Ne! Stefa Kovac, you turn the ears on! I know you give the milk to him in the cover of darkness.”

“This isn’t happening, this isn’t happening,” I mutter repeatedly. Baka taps the top of my head.

“You drag the bear man in here to show you have claimed him. He big. Strong. With the muscles and the money, you get him now.”

Well, this conversation is going swell. “Baka, what happened to ‘men only good for one thing’?”

She scoffs, “You listen to your Baka. The bear man was in the vision—” Mama and I both groan. I’ve been hearing about “the vision” since I was ten.

Baka raises a brow in warning to both Mama and me, “The attitude, both of you. My vision was real.”

“Baka,” I sigh, exhausted from the day. “I love you, but my soulmate is not a bear. He and I aren’t living in the jungle. Just because Brooks is large doesn’t make him a bear. Besides, he lives in the suburbs across town.”

“Ahh,” she waves her hand. “Baka know what she saw. Bear man with nice butt, he is the one. You wait, Stefa, Baka never wrong.” I watch her walk away, leaning on the cane, though it’s on the opposite side from where she had it the other day.

“You switched sides!” I call after her before looking at my all too amused mother. “I wish you would do something about her,” I hiss.

Mama chuffs, “What would you have me do? Tie her to a chair and gag her?”

“Happened before!” Baka calls from the back room, startling us. “Three men try to tie up your Baka. Ha! I ate their cocks for breakfast.” Mama spews her drink everywhere as I drop my head into my hands.

Maybe not staying with them won’t be such a bad idea.



Wow, talk about being salty. Your boss didn't want to fuck you — Get over it.

This is why no one takes females in this industry seriously.

If it was so bad of a place to work, why not leave? No one forced you to stay.

Man, imagine being her mentor and just getting thrown under the bus like this.

Like... spoiled much? No one gets paid to apprentice. Get over yourself.

Staring at my laptop screen, I bite on my thumbnail. It's a nervous tick of mine, no other nail, just my left thumbnail. The comments aren't too bad today, the public ones anyway. The private messages are talking about my weight, my voice, that I deserved what I got. I even have other piercers sending me death threats. I made one video talking about the apprentice-mentor relationship and the abuse that often happens, and I've become public enemy number one overnight.

Sighing, I set my laptop on the coffee table before sliding to the floor and turning on the camera. Maybe if I make another video explaining that I meant no harm to the community, that I was just trying to shed some light on a topic that needs to be addressed, maybe they will calm down, and everything can return to normal.

Once I hit the record button, I give my best smile to the camera.

“Hi, guys,” I breathe out. “For those of you that don’t know, I’m Stevie, and... boy, I gotta tell you, I didn’t expect the video I posted to blow up the way it has. This is both a positive and negative thing. So, a little about me - as stated in my previous video, I was in an unhealthy relationship with my mentor while apprenticing. Unfortunately, my story is not an uncommon one. After a piercing and tattoo convention I attended last year, I saw many apprentices, especially female or fem presenting, were still not being paid, were being sexually harassed, abused, and more. So, I wanted to speak about it.” I take a long breath, trying to gather my strength. I am a people pleaser to a fault, and having thousands of people angry at me, well, it’s wearing on my mental health.

“I wanted to start with this,” holding my hands out to know where to insert the screenshot later in editing. “This is the Fitzgerald Act, and I would implore you all to get well acquainted with it. The Fitzgerald Act states that it is illegal not to pay your apprentices. Sometimes, though, it’s expected they work seven days a week with no pay and no medical benefits, and it leads to them becoming dependent upon the mentor more often than not. This can leave them open to abuse.” Rubbing the back of my neck, I sigh and blink slowly.

“If I have somehow upset anyone, I apolo—” I freeze when I hear my words, staring at the camera. I shake my head and laugh lightly when I realize I am about to apologize for upsetting the very people who are the abusers. “Wow, after all these years, I still find myself apologizing for things that aren’t my fault. So, you know what? No, I’m not sorry. At all. Fuck you predators out there taking advantage of us. Fuck you to the people stalking me in my life, and a very special fuck you

to Vincent.” I end the video with a middle finger, and I can feel the adrenaline pumping through my body. For a second, I contemplate possibly sleeping on this and looking at the video with fresh eyes in the morning.

“Fuck that,” I mutter, going to the fridge and pulling out my bottle of wine. I walk back to the coffee table and sit down, preparing to edit the video.



I jump at the knock on my door, having just uploaded my video. I am about to get up when the door opens. Brooks stands in the doorway, momentarily frozen with what looks like irritation on his face. I watch as he runs his tongue over his lips. Yep, that’s irritation.

“So help me god, Stevie, you keep these fucking doors locked. What if someone just walked on in here?”

“Someone did.” I roll my eyes as I take another sip of my wine. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m checking to make sure everything is safe and locked up. Which it’s not.” I give him a shrug.

“Leave now, and I’ll lock it, scout’s honor.” He snorts while handing me a brown bag. I look in the bag and...

“Shut up,” I gasp, pulling out the gourmet gelato container. “If this is tiramisu.” He chuckles lightly while sitting on the couch.

“Of course, it is Peaches,” I squeal when I see that it is indeed tiramisu gelato. It’s my favorite gelato, and only one place in our area makes it.

“Oh my god,” I moan between mouthfuls. “This is so good. I don’t even care what the catch is. It’s worth it.”

“No catch, Peaches. I just wanted to make you smile when I came here to check on everything.” *Oh, that’s... fuck, that’s sweet.* “How are you doing with the comments?” Shrugging, I take another spoonful of the gelato before answering.

“Fine, I’m used to hateful comments about my physical appearance. I just wish I could get them to see that I’m not trying to hurt anyone. I’m trying to help bring awareness to improve this industry. I don’t want others to have to go through what I did.” I trail off, looking down at the container.

“I know,” he lets out a sigh before standing up. “Peaches, I know your heart is in the right place. I just worry you’re going to get hurt trying to prove a point.” I give him a small smile.

“Don’t you have enough clients to worry about? You don’t need to add me.” He gives me a long look as he opens my door.

“Baby, my clients are my job. I don’t worry about them. I only worry about the people I care about.”

BROOKS

CHAPTER SIX

Rubbing my temples, I shake my head as I sit in an empty chair at Hel's Ink, waiting for the stubborn fucking brat with turquoise hair to show up. *Why?* Is all my overly annoyed mind can think of as I watch Stevie's newly uploaded and second very viral video on my tablet for the fifteenth time today. She sticks her middle finger up and I toss the tablet on the station. This is it, I'm going to have to sit on her. I see no other option. This woman is quite literally going to give me a goddamn aneurysm.

The worst part? She must've done this either just before or just after my visit last night. Meaning, either way, she tainted my gelato. Oh yeah, there is deceit in that frozen dessert now and I'll be goddamned if I ever get her another one... maybe. At least not for a month.

Fox scoffs as he throws a water bottle to Derek before sitting down in his chair. "Stevie's balls are definitely becoming more pronounced."

"Yeah, she's usually the quiet people pleaser." Derek says, and I nod in agreement. This video is bad. No, the original video was bad, but this one? This one is dangerous. She's calling her abuser by name. She is purposefully antagonizing the viewers, and she is showing a complete disregard for her safety. It's giving me the worst case of heartburn and anxiety. All I can think is where is she? What if something is happening to her? And I'm not there. I'm not there, again. I can't save someone I care about, *again*.

“I thought I made it clear to her that she needed to take the last video seriously. I know Janie told her not to make a follow up video.” I grumble, while squeezing my hands together through my bouncing knees.

“Stevie is like thirty years old,” Atlas says while patting my shoulder. “She can make her own decisions.”

“You don’t say?” I grunt out sarcastically and stand just as Nix walks in. Phoenix, or Nix, is their newest addition to Hel’s. He’s going to be helping out when Fox and Janie leave soon for another round of IVF treatment in Florida. He’s some hotshot cover up artist from the UK with an annoying attitude and an even more annoying accent that the girls here seem to fawn over... Stevie included.

“Alright.” Nix says, setting his bag down and patting Atlas on the back.

“Yeah, I’m good, why?” He asks and Nix gives him a confused stare.

“No, ‘alright’, like hello?” Atlas shakes his head slowly.

“Nix, you need to learn English.” Nix looks up to Fox and me, and shakes his head.

“Brooks!” He smiles, spotting me. “Mate, when are you going to go out with me? These wankers are tied down.” I shift uncomfortably, unable to say the line here that I say everywhere else. The last thing I want is to play wingman to this fuck.

I’m about to come up with an excuse when Atlas snorts. “Aren’t you like seventy? The early bird special at the pancake house doesn’t really constitute ‘going out’.” I look away, trying not to laugh. Nix is older than all of us, forty-eight or forty-nine, but it’s not like he’s an old man. The girls like him, though, so Atlas especially has taken it upon himself to fuck with Nix at every turn. The only problem is that Nix fucks back and the sweet, lovable Atlas has a surprisingly short temper.

Nix raises his brow while running his hand through his salt and pepper hair. “Funny, your wife doesn’t seem to mind the

age.” Atlas slams his hand on his metal station before standing up and getting in Nix’s face.

“Listen here, Crumpet.” He spits and Derek snorts a laugh behind me. “Take cracks at us all you want. You bring our girls in it, and I’ll break your stupid tea-swilling face. Don’t test me.”

“Did I miss something?” Stevie’s voice says and I whip around to look at her. Oh, fuck, she’s pretty. She’s in a green tank top and ripped black jeans that cling to her thick thighs in a way that makes me want to hide her from every man in the world. Her soft, naked arms are literal perfection with the tattoos that cover them. Her right is sporadic tattoos here and there but her left is a full sleeve of halloween themed tattoos ending with a jack-o’-lantern on her hand. It’s so fucking sexy, and with those cheek piercings, fuck. It’s almost enough to make me forget I’m irritated with her. *Almost*. Though... angry sex doesn’t sound too—

“Stevie, love!” Nix’s attention towards Stevie snaps me out of my fantasy of taking Stevie into her piercing room and bending her over a table. “I saw your response video last night. Fucking brilliant babe.” He smirks and... why is she blushing? He shouldn’t be making her blush. She shouldn’t be... *why* is she blushing?

“Yeah,” I huff out, pulling her attention to me. *That’s right Peaches, eyes on me. I’ll treat you way better than that prick, if you would fucking stop staring at me like I’m nothing but a fucking sex machine.* “You and I really need to have a discussion about your social media privileges from now on.” Okay, I could’ve said that better. Her cheeks redden and she balls up fists, and I know I am about to get it.

“Now, you listen here, you overgrown neanderthal. You think just because you have a couple inches swinging between your legs, you’re going to tell me how to run my life?” Fox, Atlas, Derek, and Nix all start snickering at her comment. The *perfect* way to show support.

“Peaches,” I say calmly, “I am not trying to run your life. I’m trying to protect it.”

“Yeah? Well, no one asked you to!” She snaps and god damn it, my hand is twitching to grab her and take her in the back. A couple inches, ha. We’ll see if she’s still singing that tune when I ram these *couple inches* down her—

“Are you two about to kiss?” Atlas asks, and it’s then I realize I’ve crossed the room to her, and Stevie and I are pressed up against each other. Both of us glaring at the other. Stevie turns red before backing away.

“I hate all of you.” She snaps before walking into the piercing room. Well, today is off to a fantastic start.



“So my thoughts were a purple accent wall to put all the special trinkets from our travels, but Derek is refusing to let me paint one of the walls purple, and I am like... Is it a trait of older men to enjoy just beige?” Indy has not stopped talking for two hours. And I don’t mean casual chit chat that dies down and picks back up. I mean full on chatterbox. She has been the only one talking this entire time. I’ve been updated on the nonprofit that Indy started where people dress up like princesses, giants, whatever and go hang out with the kids at children’s hospital. It’s really sweet and I’ve volunteered with the Crown Project a couple of times. She’s incessantly talked about that; I know about every place that she and Derek have gone, about her decorating their bedroom and how she wants a purple wall. How Derek suggested purple bedding and she said how about both.

Indy is a sweetheart so I won’t stop her talking, but anyone else and I would’ve screamed obscenities at an hour and fifty-five minutes ago. Plus, I think Stevie sent her to sit with me to try and run me off. It’s a good try but... I ain’t losing this battle.

“Indy!” Ash, her brother and another tattoo artist, calls from up front. “Nuts has our order ready. Are you going with Sadie?” Indy stands up, and pats my shoulder.

“Now, I’m going to leave you alone with her. Just remember she can’t see you if you don’t move.” And with that oddly terrifying advice, Indy grabs her cane and leaves the shop. I’m about to text Greyson when a crash in the private piercing room grabs my attention.

Running back there, I nearly trip over myself while trying to come to a stop. “Holy shit,” I breathe out as I see Stevie on the ground. I run over to help her up, but she swats me away.

“I’m fine, I just tripped,” she winces, as pink stains her cheeks.

“Hey,” I kneel down in front of her, noticing the blood on her arm. “I think you cut yourself when you fell. How’s about you let me help you?” I *think* she’s attempting a glare, she’s not delivering on it though. Standing up, I reach my hand down, thankful she takes it this time. Once she’s standing, I watch her knees go weak. “Alright Peaches,” I sigh, trying to stay calm. I lean down, placing my arm behind her knees.

“You will blow your back o—Oh my god!” I snort at her remark while chuckling as I lift her up and she puts my neck in a death grip.

“Stevie, look at me. Do you really think lifting you is going to faze me even the slightest?” I ask as I lay her on the piercing table. “I mean, I’ve thrown you around plenty.”

“Throwing is different from carrying. I’m a big girl,” she mumbles softly.

“Uh huh, and I’m a bigger man.” I give her a wink while reaching over and grabbing some paper towels. “Hold this on your cut— What’s wrong?” I panic as I watch a tear roll down her cheek.

“I hate this,” she croaks. “The assholes online, my surgery coming up, the constant on and off bleeding, you having to be here. I’m already having a bad day and I don’t feel attractive and then I had to twist my damn ankle.”

“Stevie,” I sigh softly, “I’m really sorry this is happening to you. You don’t deserve... well any of this.” She closes her eyes and rests her head back. “And for the record, I find you attractive. All the time. You look really pretty today.” I mutter, trying to sound casual. Stevie opens her eyes and looks me over before pursing her lips and shaking her head.

“Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“Stop trying to give me a pep talk. I don’t need it.” Rolling my eyes, I stand up from the stool.

“It’s not a pep talk. I’m being serious! You are attractive!”

“I know I’m attractive! I am telling you to stop saying you are attracted to me.” She huffs while looking away.

“Why?” I ask slowly as I notice the pink hue over her cheeks. “Is it because you like it?” Her eyes go wide before shooting back at mine.

“I never said—”

“It’s just a question, Peaches.” I murmur, leaning over her. “It’s not a proposal. Do you like that I’m attracted to you?” I can hear her swallow before she gives me the smallest nod.

“What are you doing?” She breathes, and I watch her gaze land on my crotch.

“What does it look like?” Her eyes move up from the bulge I know is growing in my pants to my eyes.

“They could come in here any minute,” she breathes. “They could hear us. And then they will know all about this thing we’re doing.”

“You really know how to make a guy feel wanted.” I joke dryly while leaning over her chair. “All you gotta do is tell me to stop.” I taunt while closing the door to the small room before walking back to her. I give her a look, silently asking if she wants to continue and as soon as she nods her head, my hands are unzipping her jeans and slipping them down.

“Are you sure? I mean, I’m not currently bleeding, but I could start, and the blood—Oh my god,” I watch her head roll as I cup her pussy in my hand.

“Baby, don’t take this the wrong way but, lay the chair back and shut up.” Stevie laughs as she lowers the back down and I reach my hands up her soft, full waist. “God, you’re so fucking soft,” I marvel while moving her shirt over her chest and my fucking god... her tits in her bra... “I love this bra,” I whisper in appreciation while running my hands over the lace skulls. “But I will cut it the fuck off if you don’t unclasp it.”

Stevie sits up and unclasps her bra while I remove my shirt and jeans before staring in wonder at the woman before me. Jesus Christ, it’s always the same, every time I see her I’m reminded there is zero chance I’m coming out of this arrangement unscathed. Fuck, there’s zero chance I’m coming out, period. I have hard, real feelings for this woman and it’s going to destroy me when she says goodbye. I’m fucking selfish and greedy when it comes to Stevie, and I will deal with that heartache later.

Grabbing her full hips, I yank her towards the end of the chair, making her squeak in surprise.

“Baby, are you going to be able to keep quiet?” I breathe while staring down at her. Her ample tits, her dark pink nipples, her creamy, soft, rounded stomach, and her generous hips. “God fucking damn, you have to be the most gorgeous creature on this planet.” She blushes lightly but smiles.

“Thank you, but you and I both know I don’t enjoy the talking.” She winks and I have to force myself not to roll my eyes. That’s her way of telling me I’ve gotten in my ‘flirty talk’. I slide her panties down her soft skin, tossing them over my shoulder and...

“Holy shit,” I inhale sharply as I stare down at her spread legs and the bright green balls decorating her clit. That’s new from the ring she usually wears.

“You like i—Oh my god!” she gasps as I run the flat of my tongue up her slit. Fuck, she tastes so good. My mouth has never been down here and fucking Christ, what a crime that is.

I never want to come back up. “B-Brooks! Fuck, hang on!” She pants out as her back arches. I press my hand on her stomach to hold her down so she doesn’t fall off as I flick my tongue over her piercing. There is no hang on. She says stop and I stop. Otherwise, she better hang the fuck on. “Oh!” she cries out, and I feel her wiggle under me to spread her legs wider. “Brooks, no one... oh my god... listen, you don’t have to do this.” I momentarily pause, consuming her delicious pussy and stare up at her with heated eyes.

“Does it look like I’m down here suffering to you?” I ask, a little annoyed that she’s stopping me, but then I see the hesitation in her gaze. Where had her confidence gone? “Hey,” I whisper, climbing up to cup her face. “Stevie, what is it?”

“I just,” Her cheeks heat and she avoids my gaze. “Nobody has ever given me... this and with my condition, I bleed a lot and unexpectedly and I just... if I taste weird or there is blood going on I don’t want you to be grossed out.”

“You don’t taste weird,” I state firmly, pressing my forehead to hers. I watch her eyes roll and just like that, I’m annoyed. “You know, I don’t care much for your attitude today.” I say as I trail my hand down and over her stomach until I reach her pussy. I stick two of my fingers in, causing her to gasp and shudder under me. She closes her eyes as I pump in and out of her, collecting her arousal on my fingers. “Open your eyes.” I demand, pumping once more. “You look right at me.” For once, she does what I say and opens her pretty blue eyes. I give her a couple more pumps before pulling my fingers out of her.

“Open that infuriating mouth,” I growl softly as I bring my fingers, coated in her arousal, up to my mouth. I make her watch while I suck them clean before leaning down and capturing her mouth with mine, forcing the taste of her from my mouth into hers. She inhales sharply before I pull away, leaving her staring at me with wide eyes. “See,” I smirk before going back down. “Delicious isn’t it? Now, if you don’t mind, I was in the middle of my meal, and I’m not one who appreciates being interrupted.”

Her moan sends a bolt to my cock so powerful I nearly blow my load in my boxers. “Baby,” I purr between sucking her clit and penetrating her with my tongue. “Your sounds have such a choke hold on my cock right now.” I insert my fingers inside her, pressing up and stroking her walls. I continue to flick and suck her clit; playing with her little piercing is going to become an addiction, I can feel it.

“More,” she moans through her pants. “More tongue, please Brooks.” She whines as her fingers grip my short hair, pushing me closer. I moan at the sting as I kiss, suck, and tease her clit. I feel her walls fluttering, so I slip a third finger inside while running my teeth over the bud. Her thighs shake as she arches her back. She slaps her hand over her mouth as she screams while arching off the table. I feel her tightening around me while she greedily grinds her pussy against my mouth. I allow it. I welcome it. I lick and suck her completely clean, finishing her off with soft kisses on her now swollen clit.

“Fuck,” she whispers out in disbelief. “That was...”

I stand and adjust my rock hard cock as she gets dressed.

“Do you wanna go to my place?” She asks and god damn it, yes. I am ready to throw her over my shoulder and run there.



“Stefa! You bring the bear! Sjajno!” Nika spots us as we are sneaking into the back of the cafe. She clasps her hands together before walking up to me and wrapping her arms around my... Is she groping my ass?

“Baka!” Stevie huffs while leaning against the wall. “Leave him alone and take your hands off his butt!”

“Very firm.” Nika nods in approval. “You do the weights, yeah?”

“Uhh... I guess? Stevie?” I give her a confused, ‘save me’ look, to which she responds with a shake of her head and a “you’re on your own”.

“Do you find Stefa... how you say? Desirable?”

“Okay!” Stevie slaps the wall and laughs awkwardly. “Baka, kitchen. Brooks, upstairs.” Stevie shoves me towards the steep, narrow staircase with a door at the top.

“What’s that?” I ask her, looking at the red envelope taped on the door. Stevie winces as she tries to straighten. Fuck, I may’ve been too rough with her. Sometimes after sex or even just my fingers, Stevie is in pain and will bleed..

“I have no idea. No one can get through here without a key.”

“Stay here,” I order and head up the stairs, anxiety beginning to course through me. I get up three fucking steps before I hear her behind me. “I swear to Christ, Stevie. I said stay.” She scoffs as she continues to walk up with me.

“I ain’t no dog, you can’t just order me around. It’s my apartment.” We get to the top of the steps and I remove the envelope from the door only to find **“CUMSLUT”** written under it.

“The fuck?” She gasps as she pulls out her keys and goes to unlock the door. It’s already unlocked. I stare at her and she shakes her head. “I swear, I locked it.”

“Downstairs,” I order, pulling out my keys and handing them to her.

“But, I need—”

“Get your ass into my Jeep, lock the doors, and I will call you when it’s clear. Go, now.” I don’t wait for her to respond as I pull my pistol out, causing her to gasp loudly.

“You have a gun?” I flinch at her loud voice. Does the element of surprise mean nothing to her?

“Of course I have a fucking gun! Bodyguard!” I say, gesturing to myself. “Did you think I was going to use a stern lecture to make these threats leave you alone? Now— Oh, for the love of god!” I growl in frustration as she walks past me into her apartment.

I get in front of her as we walk through the ransacked apartment. Everything is torn apart, her curtains are only half up and the walls are covered in obscenities that make my blood boil. Once I’m sure we are the only ones in the apartment, I tell her to get her things and I call the police.



“You have the feeling in your testicles?” Nika mutters to me as Stevie talks to the cops.

“The... what in... Ma’am—”

“Nika, you call me Nika until you marry Stefa. Then I am Baka. But no ma’am. I no escape torture with nothing but my piss rags to have the bear call me the ma’am.” *Piss rags?*

“Uh-mmm, okay Nika,” I laugh nervously as she... sharpens her knife while watching Stevie.

“You feel in the balls, yeah?” She points the tip of her knife near the vicinity of my dick and I would be a liar if I said it didn’t terrify me slightly.

“Feel what?”

“The passion and the jealousy. Your woman, talking to the big law man... you want to fight him, bear man?” Would it be wrong of me to tell the cop that *I* don’t feel safe?

“Nika, I— Stevie and I are just friends, so no, no jealous... balls.” This is the weirdest conversation I’ve ever had, and I once learned about mucus plugs in a birthing class I had to take my sister to. But something about Nika, I don’t know. She’s batshit crazy, but I love it. Like she will make you the

best cookies but also might slit your throat, all while giving you that grandmotherly smile.

Nika's expression darkens as she continues to slowly sharpen her knife. "You no lie to Nika. I know when lying. I smell it. And when Nika smell the lie, Nika gets, ah what the word..." She stabs her knife into the butcher block while she thinks.

"Ej! Law man!" She yells to the officer as he is making his way towards the door. The guy turns to her and gives her a nervous smile. I can't blame him. When they showed up, she tried to hit the officers with a cane.

"Yes, ma'am?" I watch her face fall again.

"What the word for feeling-" She grabs her knife and stabs it over and over in her block. The cop looks from me to Stevie.

"She knows my body cam is on, right?" Stevie waves him off.

"Just go on, Kevin, thanks for your help." Once the cop is gone. Stevie stares at Nika, who is cleaning off the counters.

"Knock it off, old woman," Stevie snaps. "Are you trying to get arrested?"

"Ah! Prison here, like a vacation. You want real prison? I tell you--"

"Baka!" Stevie growls and storms out of the cafe area, back to where the steps to her apartment are.

"Go on bear man... before I remember the word." She doesn't need to tell me twice. I hightail it out of the cafe and up the stairs to Stevie's apartment.

"Peaches?" I call out when I don't see her. I hear a faint curse from the bathroom. I tap on the door and it opens, I find Stevie standing at her sink, sobbing. "Stevie," I breathe, and pull her to my chest as she sobs into my shirt.

"How did they get in? How am I supposed to stay here until my surgery? I-I... oh my god. What did I do?" Another sob wracks through her, and I hold her tighter. She smells so

good, woody with amber, and maybe vanilla? Something sweet from downstairs is definitely mixed in there.

“Hey,” I say softly against her hair. “Listen, why don’t you grab your stuff and come to my place? You will be safe there.”

“That doesn’t sound smart,” she snuffles. This woman is impossible.

“Fuck off, that’s the smartest decision I’ve made all day.” I tap my chin in thought before shrugging. “Besides making you come on my tongue.”

“Shut up,” she groans and pulls back and slaps my chest. She’s silent for a moment and I can see the pros and cons list formulating in her mind as she stares at me with her blue eyes. Her left eye is my favorite. It has this one little part that is a light brown, it’s so small that if you weren’t looking, you’d miss it. But I don’t miss it, I find it every single time. “Brooks,” her whisper pulls me back.

“Yeah?”

“You—can I tell you a secret?” I’m not sure why we are whispering, but I continue to follow suit.

“Of course.”

She snaps her mouth shut, as if she’s afraid to say it out loud. Shaking her head, she looks up at me and I see a fear in them that guts me. “I feel safe with you,” my whole body goes numb at her confession. Stevie feeling safe with me is a dream come true, but it’s also terrifying because I can’t ever let her feel unsafe again. I have to keep her safe.

STEVIE

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Well, you know he likes you,” Janie says as she, Indy, and I sit on the back porch at Janie’s house, sipping mimosas. Brooks needed to go to his office today, and because I am no longer allowed to do anything without a babysitter, I either had to go with him or be with someone. So Janie told me to come over, and we could watch Fox and Derek chop wood, which is not nearly as dull as it sounds. Though, watching my friends get all horny over their guys is kind of cringy. That could be envy talking, though. I mean, I have dick on demand, but I don’t know; lately, the dick part isn’t what I’m craving the most. It’s the stolen glances, the way he shamelessly flirts with me. God damn it, I need to stop. I am not getting into a relationship with any man, including Brooks. No matter what I seem to want as of late.

“Yeah,” Indy smiles from behind her sunglasses. “Stevie, he’s had a crush on you since we worked the night shift at Hel’s. Oh! You got it, Daddy!” Indy cheers, and I watch Derek, the quiet introvert, shake his head and give Indy a small, reluctant wave.

“Please stop calling me that!” He calls back, but you can tell he doesn’t mean it with his unusually light tone and the slight smirk tugging at his lips. Derek is the definition of a grump, except with Indy. Which makes them that much more adorable because I have seen photos of this man in a swimming pool, holding penguins just to make her happy.

“Is he ever going to pop the question?” Janie asks, and Indy laughs.

“Maybe? I mean, I’m okay either way. I know after what his ex-wife did, the thought of marrying again gives him anxiety. We’ve talked about it, and I told him I’m happy with how things are and there is no rush or pressure. If it happens, it happens.”

“That’s so sweet.” I smile and pat Indy’s hand. “Janie, I should be ready to return to work after this weekend. I’ve just got to finish getting things organized at Brooks’.” I had to take this week off after Brooks forced me to go live with him. Force is probably a strong word. Honestly, after finding out someone had broken into my apartment, I didn’t want to be there alone. Not that I would’ve admitted that. When he said I was going to his place, he was met with minimal resistance, and I know he noticed. Thankfully, he didn’t say anything about it. I don’t do scared, and I really don’t like relying on others, especially not a man. But, once again, just like at the convention after Vincent tried to attack me, I find myself wanting to run into Brooks’ arms and have him shield me from the world.

“Are you sure? I don’t want you to do too much, plus with the shit happening with your videos,” she says, her eyes never leaving her husband. “Hey, Papa Fox! You need an oxygen tank? You look a little winded!”

Fox barks out a loud, “Ha!”

“Why don’t you come down here, and I’ll show you ‘winded’!” He calls back, causing Janie to squeal and squirm happily in her chair.

“Yay! I’m soooo getting fucked when all of you leave.” She claps, and I roll my eyes.

“I’m about to go get the hose for both of you.” I look at my phone and see massive amounts of notifications still pouring in.

“Want me to stop that shit from showing up?” Janie asks, and I shake my head.

“No, I deserve it. Good or bad, I put that out there, and I have to accept others’ opinions.”

“Opinions?” Indy scoffs while sipping her drink. “Stevie, those aren’t opinions. They’re threats!”

I let out a sigh while resting my head back. “I’m aware, but there are good people in the mix. Scared people like I was. People who have gone through what I did are thanking me for speaking out. I can’t disappear on them.”

“Babe, I love you, but I will chain you to a bed and leave you there to protect you from those fuckers.”

“Oh, promise?” I give her a playful shimmy as we share a laugh. Looking at my phone again, I see Mama sent a text to let me know she’s here to pick me up.

“Alright, I got to go. Mama’s here, and I gotta swing by Nuts before heading back to Brooks’.” I kiss them both quickly before waving to the guys and heading to the driveway.



“Brooks?” I call out while opening the front door and trying to balance the box of pastries in my hand that Baka insisted I bring to *‘feed my bear.’*

“Well, hey there, beautiful,” I scream as a male voice hits my ears. I see a large, very tattooed man dressed in an all-black suit walk towards me with a smile on his face. Who the fuck is he? Oh god, did the people online track me here, too?

“G-get back!” I yell, dropping the box as I stumble and fall back out the front door. A pair of strong arms grab me to keep me from falling. I know the smell. It’s fresh and masculine, with hints of citrus and cedar wood from his soap.

“What is going on?” Brooks pants as he wraps his arms around me protectively while pulling me into his chest. I let

out a small whimper as I bury deeper into his embrace, but freeze when the man speaks again. I think his accent is Boston, maybe?

“Sorry fucker, I think I startled your girl there.” He chuckles nervously, and I turn my head to look at him. He is rubbing the back of his head and giving me a sheepish smile.

“Sorry, beautiful. I didn’t mean to give you a heart attack. I was helping Brooks get some stuff in. I guess I should introduce myself. I’m Greyson.” He sticks his tattooed hand out, and I stare at it warily before loosening my death grip on Brooks’ shirt.

“Stevie.” He gives me a smile before picking up my box.

“Well, Stevie, I will be on my way. Now that I’ve scared you, I can see that I’m on this asshole’s shit list, so I better fuck off before he decides to beat my ass.”

“Fuck off quickly,” Brooks states through gritted teeth. Greyson gives a two-finger salute before walking around us and heading down the sidewalk. Brooks, arms still wrapped around my waist, looks down at me. “Are you alright?” He asks softly, and I can’t help but smile softly.

“Y-yeah, now that my heart is slowing down.” That’s a lie; it’s still pounding, but I know it’s not from the scare. It’s from Brooks’ massive body wrapping around me so protectively and how his deep green eyes look into mine. I watch his eyes flicker to my lips. “You hungry?” I ask, pushing away from him.

“Um, yeah, I guess.” I see his hands flexing, and I wonder if he’s feeling the same empty coldness I am now that we are separated. That’s new. Initially, I was happy to see him go after sex or whatever. But now...

Eyeing him, I instantly go pink when I realize he’s doing the same. “Well, good.” I laugh nervously, breaking the stare. “Because Baka sent me here with about ten pounds of pastries to feed you.” I walk into his clean, modern home and head to his kitchen. Brooks’ home is an open-concept single-level house, all rooms connecting seamlessly. Wide-plank oak

floors, bathed in natural light, resonate with the neutral color palette of muted grays, soft whites, and subtle earthy tones. The focal point of the living area is the breathtaking floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking his own personal oasis.

His backyard is breathtaking, though in all honesty, it's not what I expected from him. Towering palm trees sway gently in the breeze, casting shadows on the vibrant exotic plants that cover the landscape. A symphony of tropical plants envelops the outdoor space, creating a vibrant and captivating mix of colors, textures, and scents. I couldn't tell you what most of them are; my thumb isn't exactly green, and I could kill a cactus, but it's all so beautiful. At the heart of his haven, Brooks has a pond lined with smooth stones and adorned with water lilies. I haven't been out there yet, but I want to know if fish are in the pond. It's my favorite part of his backyard, mainly because it has a waterfall. Yes, a fucking waterfall.

Inside, every piece of furniture in this living room, and the rest of the house, for that matter, is expertly chosen for comfort and style. Plush sofas and accent chairs with captivating geometric patterns add a nice touch—low-profile coffee tables and minimalist shelving showcase carefully curated art pieces and keepsakes.

The kitchen would make Baka and Mama weep. It is complete with cutting-edge stainless-steel appliances, polished quartz countertops, and pendant lights with matte black accents that emit a warm glow. The massive walk-in pantry is a baker's wet dream.

However, it wouldn't truly be Brooks' house without the technology that's integrated throughout the entire property. He has a centralized home automation system that manages the lighting, climate, security, and television. All the windows and doors have security contacts, and there are cameras on the inside and outside of the house that alerts if movement is detected. It was something I once found to be "too much" when I would sneak over here occasionally. But now, I am thankful for all the security measures being taken.

"Alright, I have to ask," I say, breaking the silence. "Why is everything so..." I wave my hand around, gesturing to his

house.

Smirking, Brooks leans against the counter while crossing his arms over his chest. It's unfair how such a casual move can turn me on so fucking quick. "So what?" He asks, amusement lacing his words.

"So open and low," I state, looking at where the countertops hit him. Brooks is way too tall for these counters. Hell, I'm nearly too tall. "I mean, it's all just wide and short." The cocky amused look leaves his face, being replaced with one of a soft, almost sadness.

"Oh, that's for my little sister, Tyler. She's in a wheelchair. I try to make the house as accessible to her as possible, and she's really into baking, so I had the counters lowered for her since my kitchen is where she usually bakes. The countertops are adjustable." I watch him walk over to the island and push a button on the corner, and the counter moves up.

"Oh, wow, that's..." *Kind? Sweet? Caring? Beautiful?* "Really cool," I inwardly groan at the dumb choice of words before turning around so I can busy myself with the pastries. I'm about to plate them when his camera chimes and an automated voice sounds, "**Driveway.**"

"Expecting company?" I ask as he looks at his phone.

"Oh fuck," I watch him pale, and panic washes over me.

"W-who is it?" I ask as Brooks heads to the front door, his body tense and eyes wide with fear.

"Stevie, you have to believe me when I say I am so sorry, and please, please don't freak out." He opens the door before I can ask what he is talking about, and a woman about our age walks in, carrying a little human, and an older woman stands next to her.

"Mom," Brooks says, and I hear the nervousness in his fake happy tone. Mom? Oh, no. "Pip! What a surprise. Come in."

"Hey Brookie, we just wanted to come see you before the farmers—" Brooks' mom stops speaking when her eyes land on me. "Oh!" She smiles brightly and walks over to me. "You

must be Stevie! We were starting to worry we'd never meet you!" She pulls me into a hug as I stare in bewilderment at Brooks, who looks like he would love to be anywhere else right now.

"Oh?" I laugh nervously. "Yeah, things have been kind of chaotic." It's the best excuse I have. Why is Brooks talking about me to his mother?

"Do you think you'll be able to come over next weekend?" His mom asks. "I know the girls are just dying to meet Brookie's girlfriend! He talks about you so much!"

Girlfriend? I glance up at Brooks, who has the most apologetic look on his face. *Oh, he's fucking dead.*

BROOKS

CHAPTER EIGHT

Oh god, I'm a dead man.

I continue to watch as *all* of Stevie's people-pleasing southern hospitality pours out of her while she chats with Mom and Pip. She's playing this girlfriend role so well, too well. Throughout this afternoon, I've thought several times that she's going along with this. That it's happening, and she will have my back fully.

Then, her eyes meet mine and... I'm a dead man.

"Well," Mom sighs as she and Pip head to the door. "We've taken up your whole afternoon. We'd better go if we're going to get to the farmer's market. Stevie, please come over next weekend." Stevie smiles brightly as she leans in to hug my mom.

"I think we can get there, right baby?" *Is... is she talking to me?*

"Uh-huh." My voice cracks. *Smooth Brooks, fucking smooth.* Once the door closes and my mom and sister are down the driveway, I feel the room drop in temperature. Stevie turns to look at me and... fuck.

"Girlfriend?" she hisses, and my hands instantly go up in defense.

"Listen, it's not what you think."

"It's not? Because to me, it seems like you are lying to your family about me being your girlfriend."

“Okay, it’s exactly what you think, but wait!” I panic as she lunges at me. “I had a good reason!”

“Oh,” she laughs dryly. “I can’t wait to hear this one.”

“They kept trying to put me on blind dates. So, I told them I had a girlfriend.”

“Why me?”

“You had texted me, and my sister saw your name, and she asked if you were my girlfriend. It was a little white lie, I said in a panic, and it blew up.” *Much like this.*

I watch Stevie relax and shake her head. “So what now?”

I chuckle while scratching the back of my head. “Well, Peaches, you could always admit your feelings for me, and we can make this legit.” I can barely hold back the laughter at the look of horror on her face.

“Actually, Brooks, that’s a great idea.” My smile falls as I stare at her, confused. “I do have feelings for you. Irritation and horniness.”

“Mix those and you got true love, baby.” I give her a smirk as she reaches up and smacks me on the head.

“I’ll pretend to be your girlfriend, but only when your sisters or mom are around, and only until I move out. Then, it’s over.”

“Well, lucky for me, I have a family function every day for the rest of my life. Also, you’re not moving out until the threat is handled.”

“Uh huh... okay, Romeo, and how long will that take? Surely someone as capable as you can handle a little backlash from a viral video relatively fast.” I approach her, pressing my hips against her so she can feel me.

“Sweet Peach, there’s always another threat.”

“I’m bleeding,” she whispers, her eyes on my lips. “It’s too much.” Nodding, I go to move. Her bleeding doesn’t bother me, but if she says it’s too much, I don’t push. She has told me

several times that it can be painful to have sex, and the last thing I want is to cause her any unwanted pain.

Stevie grips my belt loop, holding me to her. “I could always,” she suggests and runs her hand over my cock.

She drops to her knees and unzips my jeans. Stevie gave me a blowjob once, about three months ago. Oral is something we haven’t explored much. Her being self-conscious and me just not asking for it. The one time she did, fucking god, I could’ve cried, it felt so good.

“Shit,” I whimper as her tongue runs up the underside of my cock. I brace myself against the wall and a growl rumbles in my chest. “Stevie, fucking shit,” I hiss as I watch her slide my cock into her mouth. I feel my tip rub against the ball of her tongue piercing and, “Fuck!” Panting, I stroke her hair as she moves back and forth, her cheeks hollowing as she sucks me.

“Baby, listen if you’re... fuck, right there... if you’re trying to punish me for earlier. Shit...” Groaning, I roll my back and stare up at my ceiling. “Hey, Stevie, I swear if this is my punishment, I’ll start lying more.” I feel her chuckle before she removes me from her mouth.

“No, but that’s a good idea. Maybe I shouldn’t let you come.” She taunts, and I feel a fire ignite in me.

“Peaches, you try that shit, and we’re going to have a problem,” I warn, and she smirks up at me.

“Shut up and fuck my face, Dawson.”

“I’m sorry. I think I just had a stroke.” I laugh, but notice she’s not joking.

“I want you to fuck my throat like you would my pussy.”

“Ste—”

“Come on!” she whines. “You seriously are going to leave me on my knees?” Nodding, I caress the back of her head as she grips my thighs. I thrust into her mouth slowly, expecting her to gag on my length, but there’s nothing. Looking down, I

see the mischief in her eyes as she tugs on my thigh to keep going.

“Jesus Christ, you don’t have a gag reflex?” She answers by forcing my cock all the way into the back of her throat. Fucking shit, I could blow already, just feeling the way her throat constricts around me. After a second, I grip the side of her face and thrust down her throat, repeating the motion again and again. Her hands run up my thighs and under my shirt, and I revel in the burning sting of her nails raking down my abdomen.

“That’s it,” I growl, my thrusts becoming more erratic. “Stevie, I’m two pumps from blowing my load down your throat,” I warn, and her response is to hollow her cheeks and start humming as I continue. I grip the sides of her head as I move her up and down on my cock. I feel myself coming, and I swear I think I’ve died and seen the gates for a moment.

Stevie sucks and licks me clean until I’m too sensitive to handle the contact. Standing, she gives me a soft smile before heading to the kitchen, leaving me standing with my sore cock out and a look of shock on my face.



“Good evening, gorgeous,” I smirk while watering my plants in my backyard. Stevie stumbles onto the deck, hair a mess and one eye still closed. After the fantastic blow job, Stevie went to take a shower, and I could tell she was hurting. She said that her stomach was swelling, so she went to lie down. I checked on her after about an hour and found her sleeping.

“What time is it?” She mutters while looking around.

“About seven, what?” I raise my brow as she continues to just stare at me. Both her eyes now open wide, and her mouth forms an “o.” Feeling uncomfortable, I look behind me to see what she could be staring at, but there’s nothing. *Wait, is it*

me? I look back towards her and bounce my pecs, making her blush, and *oh yeah, she's gawking at me.*

“Stevie!” I gasp, feigning offense. “Are you ogling my naked chest? Without my consent?”

Her sweet, creamy face turns hot pink as she looks away so fast her neck nearly snaps. “I uhh... I wasn't ogling... I just...” she huffs in annoyance while struggling to find her words. I chuckle while walking up to her.

Standing at the bottom of the steps, I smirk as I try to make my voice low and flirtatious. “Oh, my sweet peach, you have my consent to ogle me anytime, anywhere.” Her face deepens, and her head starts to shake back and forth.

“I hate you. I was looking at the marks.” She grits out before walking to the other end of the porch and sitting in one of my green Adirondack chairs. She winces as she sits.

“Yeah,” I chuckle, looking at the scratches. “You got me good this time. Worth it, though. You hungry?” I ask, while wrapping the garden hose back up. “I was thinking about ordering some food.” Stevie glances at me before shaking her head.

“I'm not hungry.” My face falls, and I walk up the stairs, heading over to her. I watch her body stiffen at my approach.

“Did you eat at Nuts? Because you didn't eat when you got here.” I ask softly while halting my movements, not wanting her to freeze up anymore.

“No,” she mumbles while shifting.

“That means you haven't eaten at all today.”

“I did eat something,” she smirks, and I roll my eyes.

“Ha ha,” I state sarcastically.

“My medication makes me nauseous. It's fine, I'll eat tomorrow.”

“Are you going to tell me how to help with the pain?”

“I didn't expect you to have this type of backyard.” I roll my eyes at the subject change but let it go and turn my head,

trying to stare at my yard through her eyes. I don't have grass. I find it boring. Instead, I transformed my yard into a tropical oasis. Trees and palms line the property and act as a natural privacy fence. My yard has a gravel path leading to a large pond with a waterfall with massive monstera and philodendrons growing up the sides. The yard and trees are full of giant pothos of different variegations, begonias that are bold and brightly colored, and massive agave. I guess it isn't something one would expect from me.

"Yeah, most don't," I say while sitting in the free chair. "Years ago, I went through a dark time," I admit, hoping that by opening up, maybe she won't be so tense around me. "I was really bad off, and the therapist I saw told me I should try to find something to do that demanded my attention. I think she meant a pet," I chuckle lightly as I look around the yard. "But one day after therapy, I was walking around in this high-brow area of the city and came across this plant shop and, I don't know, I walked in, and this woman was super nice and talked me into buying this tiny basket of pothos," I say before pointing to the leaves crawling up the trunk of a tree that must be over a foot long. "I nearly killed it and was more upset than I thought I would be. I went back, and she helped me figure out watering, shading, and all that. Shortly after, she closed the shop, but I was obsessed with how much I was getting my plant to thrive. Within a year, I had turned my yard into this."

"I can't imagine you being in a dark place," she breathes, eyes never leaving my pond. "You always seem so put together."

"Years of therapy and a really good mask. Plus, I have to be put together." I shrug, looking down at my dirt-covered hands. "No one wants personal security from a man with major depression and PTSD issues."

Stevie rolls her head to glance at me. "Why?"

"Why what Peaches?" I ask softly as I stare into her pretty eyes.

"Why wouldn't someone hire you? Having an illness or disorder shouldn't make you less hireable."

I chuckle, “Peaches, my job is to be hyper-aware of all possible threats to my client. Having anxiety, being startled easily, and experiencing days where getting out of bed is a chore isn’t safe for me or the client. It’s why I do more office work and don’t do many live-in positions.”

“Can I ask what happened?” I think of all the times I’ve been asked this and how I’ve told them all to take their questions and shove it up their ass. But it’s Stevie asking, and I would tell her anything... everything. Even if it’s the part of me, I never share with anyone.

“It’s not a pretty story,” I warn. She shrugs slightly while resting her cheek on her fist.

“Are they ever?” Giving her a light smile, I run my hand over my beard.

“So, I have four sisters: Leah, Spencer, Scout, and Tyler. I’m the eldest, and Tyler is the baby. I’m sixteen years older than her. I’ve always been protective over my sisters, but after the accident it became... bad.”

“Accident?” She asks, and I nod slowly.

“Before Knuckles, I was a firefighter and medic, so my hours were twenty-four on, forty-two off. It was late, and I was sleeping at the firehouse before taking my time off because it had been a long day. We got a call, and a few of the other guys had food poisoning, so I told them I would go.” I clear my throat, trying to clear the lump forming. “We arrived on the scene of a car accident; the driver had a heart attack and lost control. The car went head-on into the barrier and then spun and rolled. The driver was dead on our arrival.” I sniff and try to ignore the stinging in my eyes. “It was my dad,” my voice cracks as the scene plays in my mind. The flipped-over family car that Dad had taken such good care of. His body suspended in the seat, bleeding onto the roof of the vehicle.

“He and my sister, Tyler, were on their way home from looking at a college she was touring.” I can feel her gaze on me, but I know I will break if I look. “They were ten minutes from the house,” I whisper, looking at my hands. “Tyler was ejected from the car. It’s a fucking miracle the impact didn’t

kill her. All we can guess is that she was relaxed because she was sleeping, which helped with the impact. She broke both her arms, her legs, and her spine. She's in a wheelchair now, which is good. It's a manual one. She spent a long time in an automatic one because she didn't have the mobility in her arms or the strength. She likes baking and decorating cakes. I think you would like her." I try to give her a small smile. Looking at her, I see the tears streaming down her cheeks. "Oh, baby, no, don't cry."

I move to her, kneeling between her legs and cupping her cheeks. "Please," I whisper. "Stevie, you're breaking my heart."

"That was so fucking sad!" She cries harder as she pulls me into her chest.

"I—what's happening? Am I supposed to comfort you or?" I'm so fucking confused. She's sobbing while holding me.

"Is that why you're so anal about everyone's safety?" Stevie sniffles while pulling away to look at me. "Because you're scared you won't be there in time?"

"Yes," I confess plainly. "I obsess over my sisters and mom... and you." I watch the flush appear on her cheeks, and she looks away. "So, now you know why I no longer like doing too much fieldwork. I fear getting attached and something happening because my guard was down."

"But you are now," she points out, and I crack a smirk and nod.

"Well, I'm already attached to you, Peaches. I lost that battle a long time ago."

STEVIE

CHAPTER NINE

God, I'm in so much pain.

My body hurts so badly. I'm sick and weak and can barely move out of my bed. It's hard not to be bitter when this happens. I was so happy, feeling so good for a few days, and here we are. I'm supposed to return to work tomorrow, and now I can't move. Not to mention, last night, I got text messages from him.

Looking at my phone, I stare at the text messages again.

Unknown: Puppet

Unknown: Puppet, I know you ain't out there avoiding my texts.

Unknown: You will answer when I call you. You have caused quite a storm for me, now you best clean it up. You can either fix this or I'll come there and help you fix it.

The light tap on the door pulls me out of my thoughts.

"Alright, Peaches," his voice is calm, but also holds no playfulness. "Time for proof of life. You gotta open the door."

"Brooks," I groan as I weakly get up from the bed. "I'm obviously alive. You can hear me talking."

"If I can't see it, I don't believe it." His voice calls from the other side of the door while I unlock it and rip it open.

"Then explain oxygen," I grunt in annoyance. Brooks smirks, and his eyes shift from me to the room before his face

drops.

“Oh, fuck. Baby,” he breathes, and I turn to follow his gaze. *Oh, fuck* is right. He looks from my bloody sheets to my shorts, and humiliation fills me as I shove past him and run into the bathroom, slamming the door shut and turning the shower on. God damn it! How had I not noticed?

“Fuck, that’s a lot.” I groan, looking at my blood-soaked shorts and thighs. I want to cry, even though I know that after this surgery, I shouldn’t have to deal with this again; it doesn’t bring me peace right now.

Stepping into the shower, I pull the head out of the holder and start rinsing myself off while holding back my tears. I hurt, I’m bleeding heavily, I’m stuck in this house with a man that I have the weirdest situation with, I’m being harassed on the internet for speaking the truth, my ex is texting me, and now I’m going to have to replace Brooks’ sheets and possibly mattress.

After a longer-than-necessary shower, I dry off and grab a pair of panties from the towel closet. I’ve been dealing with this long enough to know that the best place to keep underwear is in the bathroom. Once I have my pads secure and my underwear up, I wrap my towel around my front and make a beeline for my room, running straight into Brooks’ massive back.

“Fuck!” He curses as he whips around to grab me, and in the process, he grabs the towel that is already doing a shit job covering me. It rips from my body as I stumble backward and bump against the wall.

We stand there, completely unmoving. Him with eyes wide, mouth open, and towel tight in his hand. Me with similar eyes, a red face, and my tits on full display, along with my large black high-waisted underwear that had a clear outline of the massive postpartum pad I have on.

“I,” he coughs as he looks up at the ceiling and reaches his hand out, which has a death grip on the towel. “Stevie, I am so sorry.” He whispers, and I snatch the towel to cover myself before storming to the closet. I grab a long-sleeved shirt and

pajama pants and slip them on before turning around to see him still staring at the wall.

“I’m dressed. You can leave now.” I state, turning to take the sheets off the bed. “What the hell?” The sheets are clean and new. Turning to Brooks, I see him rubbing the back of his neck.

“I changed them. Do you need a heating pad or anything?”

“I... no. Is the bed ruined? I’ll replace the sheets and the mattress if—”

“No,” he waves his hand. “I cleaned it up, no big deal.” No big deal? It is a big deal, a huge deal. My Endometriosis and Uterine fibroids make my flow horrible. It’s one thing to expect a man to be cool when you’re on your period because we’re adults, and it’s a normal function. It’s quite another to expect them to be okay with a murder scene going on down there. Not to mention the bloating, the depression, me having to lie in bed, dirtying sheets. So yeah, it’s a huge deal. It’s a huge deal, and I don’t want it to be.

“Hey!” Brooks’ panicked voice causes me to look up at him. “Why are you crying?” Crying? Reaching my face, I feel the tears coating my cheeks. *God damn it! Not again!* I’ve been crying so much lately, and it’s starting to piss me off.

“S-sorry,” I whisper, rubbing my face on my sleeve. “It’s just... ugh...” I growl, trying to mask the sob. “I really appreciate you not making this a big thing. Though, I guess now I am making it a big thing.” I sniffle as I watch Brooks. He looks conflicted. His brows are pulling together, his eyes darting all over me while his hands clench and unclench at his sides.

“What can I do to help?” Brooks asks. “How can I make you comfortable until your surgery?”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that.” I laugh nervously as Brooks’ face becomes serious.

“I want to. I don’t want you in pain. And I’m pissed off about you crying over the bed. I don’t know who made you feel like bleeding is so horrible, but if I find out, they’re dead.”

“Brooks,” I whisper softly, feeling too overwhelmed by his kindness. “Why are you doing this? It’s not your job.”

“Because I like you, Peaches, and I will continue to do nice things for you like I have been, and you can continue to hate me. That’s fine, but I’m not stopping.”

“You... *like* me?” I squeak out, but stop when something else hits me. “I don’t hate you, Brooks,” I admit softly and watch the look of hopefulness appear on his face. Shit, I didn’t mean to do that. I can’t be with him that way.

“Stevie,” he says softly as he steps closer. “Let’s clear the air here so there is no misunderstanding or miscommunication. I am more interested in you than just physically, and while I know you are not in a place to want to date, I can’t help my feelings. They’ve been this way for a long time, and I don’t plan on them changing anytime soon. So, now you know.”

I stare at him, speechless. “You can’t like me that way,” I whisper. “Brooks, we... You have to stop it. Nothing can happen between us.” I see him wince slightly, and it’s as if I slapped him. Fuck, that hurts. It hurts because Brooks is a sweet man who makes me smile and cares about my feelings. One that makes me feel safe and... oh fuck, do I have a crush on him?

“Is it,” he pauses as if he’s trying to figure out the proper words. “Is it something I did?”

I give him a soft smile and shake my head. “No, Brooks, you’re great. I just can’t be with anyone.” I can’t give someone that kind of power again, but even as I think it, a part of me knows Brooks might already have some of that power.



“Atlas!” Ren’s very terrifying voice cuts through the tattoo shop as she enters. I am standing in the tattoo area, talking

with Janie, Brooks and the guys as Janie discusses her upcoming trip after the convention at the end of next month. Janie and Fox are going to a fertility specialist in Florida and will be there for several months while she goes through IVF.

Atlas has a full-body shiver before putting on a nervous smile and looking up at the blonde.

“Hey, Princess! How is my pret—”

“Fix it, now!” She orders, shoving a cinnamon hair girl towards him. The girl is cackling wildly at Ren.

“Addy,” Atlas sighs and turns to the girl who wrinkles her freckled nose. “What did you do?”

“Ughhh...” She rolls her eyes and holds out her hand. Atlas and I peer at the hand and... oh, shit.

“An eggplant?” Atlas looks from the purple tattoo on the girl’s hand to her slim face.

She gives him a shrug. “Gotta represent that cock loving lifestyle.” Nix sprays the drink from his mouth as he smacks his knee.

“Fucking brilliant.”

“Don’t you encourage it!” Ren snaps. “Now, fix it At! I can’t have her walking around with this.”

“Uh, her has a name. And maybe I like it. You always want to make sure to showcase your strengths, Ren. Mine is eggplant farming.” Ren is beginning to resemble a tomato at this point.

“Pretty girl,” Atlas says, touching Ren’s face in a way that does *not* make me long for Brooks in any way, shape, or form. My eyes betray me and find their way to where the man in question is sitting, staring directly at me. I feel my heart rate pick up and I quickly look back to Atlas and Ren. “I would love to help, but actually,” his eyes move over to the snickering grey-haired man at the station in front of him. “Nix here is *the* master cover-up artist, and since it’s on her hand.”

“Oh, come on now,” he groans, all humor gone. “Mate, you’re daft if you think I can do fucking shit there.”

“I told you to speak English!” Atlas growls, and Ren rushes between them. “Okay, baby, sit.” She turns to Nix and raises one brow before his cocky grin is gone, and he motions for the girl to walk over to him.

“So who is she?” I ask Ren as she sits on At’s table.

“Adeline, my little sister,” she grumbles. “She’s going through her rebellious teen stage at twenty-three. And she’s about to get kicked out of mom and dad’s because between that tattoo and her dropping out of college, they’re done with her.”

“College is a scam,” Adeline calls over while Nix draws on her hand. “Think about it: society as a whole has been brainwashed into believing that you cannot be successful in life without an idea. Your very intelligence is measured by whether you sat in a classroom for an additional four to twelve years. Not only that, you go into tens of thousands of dollars into debt for a piece of printer paper with your name stating that you have good attendance. And for what? So you can go out and get a job and make the same amount of money you would’ve fresh out of high school? Except now everyone expects you to be more mature, have your shit together, and be financially responsible. When in reality, all you’ve done for two decades is go into an embarrassing amount of debt that you will never recover from and waste your life being institutionalized.” I look from Adeline to Ren and cringe while waiting for her head to explode.

“While it’s nice that you have the luxury to think that way,” Ren states through her gritted teeth. “Not everyone is as fortunate as you. A lot of people have no choice.”

Adeline scoffs as she turns to her sister. “Have no choice to what? To go out into a society where they deem you better than others based solely on the fact that you know how to sit and listen? Oh, and god forbid you have thoughts opposing the professors.”

“Which leads us to our final point,” Ren snaps. “You’re getting kicked out because you fought with your professor?”

“No,” she says firmly. “I’m getting kicked out because my professor wanted to fuck me for a better grade and I said no.” Nix, who was about to start the tattoo on her hand, freezes and looks up at her eyes wide

“He wanted to fuck you for better grades? That’s really a thing?”

Adeline scoffs, “Of course, it’s a thing. You’re telling me they don’t do that over in that pond?”

Nix’s face falls as he stares at her. “Well, first off, I couldn’t tell you because we’re not in a pond.” He says dryly. “And second, I never went to Uni, so I couldn’t tell you what was happening there. Sure, you hear things on telly—”

“Oh, my godddd!” Atlas whines. “You are in America! It’s a television, and the only “uni” in here is your brow!”

“Atlas,” Ren warns. “Go to the back and have a cupcake.”

“All you want is to fatten me up. I’m on to you.” He says as he walks to the back room.

“Actually, it’s just he’s quiet with food in his mouth.” I chuckle lightly as Ren slowly shakes her head and looks over at me. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with this girl,” she says through an exhausted breath. “My parents are going to kick her out, and I’m not going to let her live with me.”

Adeline laughs, and the sound is infectious. It’s funny. She sounds more similar to Atlas with her attitude than her own sister. “Come on, sissy. You’re not going to let me live with you? That’s hurting my heart!” She cries sarcastically while Ren gives her an unamused stare.

“I would gladly allow you to live with me if you could take responsibility for absolutely anything in your life.” She snaps while rubbing her temples.

“Well, where am I supposed to go? I will be on the street when Mom and Dad kick me out. No food, no clothes, oh god! No Ferguson!”

Atlas barks out a dry laugh as he returns. “If you have to say that you will be without your butler, you’re going to be

just fine.”

Adeline glares at him, her lip curling in disgust. “You know what, Atlas, I was rooting for you and my sister, but now, not so much. You’re dead to me, big guy.”

“I’ve been married to the man for a couple of years now, and we have a child together. I don’t think he needs your blessing.” Ren mutters.

“Well, good! Cuz he doesn’t have it. Ow, that hurts!” Adeline snaps as Nix begins the tattoo.

“Well, yeah, I bloody expect it would hurt. I’m having to go over a thick line on your hand. Why the fuck would you get such a thing on your hand? I mean, it is funny, but if you ain’t got the balls to keep something like this for the rest of your life. Why would you do it?”

Adeline shrugs her slim shoulders. “Eh, I lost a bet.”

“You lost a bet?” Ren’s voice once again reaches angry territory, and I feel like it’s my moment to step in and try to diffuse the situation, but just as I’m about to offer up my place, the bell chimes, and my appointment walks in. He looks really familiar, though I can’t place him.

Standing up, I go and greet the thin man. “Travis, right?” I ask. He seems nervous, which isn’t unusual in the shop, but he has piercings, so it’s not as if he doesn’t know what he’s getting into...

My thoughts are interrupted when something is thrown in my face. I don’t know if it’s dirt or sand, but it goes into my mouth and eyes despite my glasses. “Fuck!” I cough out and stumble backward. I hear a commotion, and I’m sure it’s Brooks and the guys, but I can’t see anything.

“Get her to the back!” I hear Janie’s voice, and I feel hands—Ren’s, I think—grab my arm and lead me to the back.

“Addy,” Ren calls out. “Call the cops! Ash! Some help!” I remove my glasses and rub my face when a hand stops me.

“Don’t, Stevie,” Ash says, and I hear rustling. “I’m going to try and flush your eyes out, but don’t rub at them, okay?” I

nod, unable to speak, whether from the shock or the pain in my throat. I can't believe someone just came up and threw sand in my face.



“Hey, Peaches,” I don't open my eyes as I continue to lie on the break room couch. I hear him sit down on the coffee table. “How are you?”

“My eyes and throat feel like they fought a cheese grater.” I croak out. “Are the police gone?”

“Yeah, baby, they took the fucker. Well, they will. He has to go to the hospital first for treatment.”

I remove the damp rag from my eyes. “Treatment for wh—oh fuck.” Between my lack of glasses and my injured eyes, I can't see much, but what I do see is a busted lip and a bruising eye. “Br—”

“Don't,” he waves it off. “He got a shot in, and I'm not happy about it,” Brooks mutters before taking my rag and heading to the sink. He comes back and folds the freshly cooled rag over my eyes. “I'm sorry,” he whispers softly, and I hear so much regret in his voice it pulls at me in a way I'm not used to.

“For what?” I ask softly.

“I should've protected you. I didn't think—”

“You mean you weren't prepared for some guy to throw pocket sand at me?” I joke while reaching my hand out. I grab his hand, intertwining our fingers. He inhales sharply, and it sends a jolt through me. Like despite all the sex, this is the most intimate we've ever been.

“Stevie,” he breathes and fuck, that is affecting me in all the wrong ways.

“Brooks, do not feel guilty about this, alright? You couldn’t have known.” I hear him shuffle, and I know he’s mentally beating himself. I pull our laced hands towards my chest and place his hand over my heart. “You feel that? If it’s beating, then I’m okay, and you did your job.”

“Stevie, it’s more than a job, damn it.” He growls, and I feel his thumb stroke over my heartbeat.

“I know it is Brooks,” I admit nervously. “But I need it not to be, alright?”

“Why? Why won’t you let me l—”

“Hey Stev- oh,” *Fuck, Janie.* Ripping my hand out of Brooks, I sit up, my rag falling into my lap. I don’t need even decent vision to know the bitch is grinning. “I was, ummm... going to see if you would like Brooks to take you home.” She tries to hide the snicker in her voice, and it’s now I know I must end my best friend. I love Janie with all my heart, but her mouth is massive, and all of our friends will know what she saw before I reach his Jeep.

“Yeah,” I relent while blinking slowly. Fuck, it hurts. “Do you mind?” I ask Brooks like he really has a choice. He shakes his head before standing up.

“No, Peaches, come on.”



How did I get talked into this? I sigh as I look at myself in the mirror. I have on a mid-length, dark floral dress with pockets that elongates my waist. I curled my hair and went for a minimal makeup look. It’s been five days since the pocket sand incident, and while my eyes are almost entirely better, I still don’t want the risk of any fallout getting in them.

“Peaches, we got to... woah.” Brooks breathes as he looks me over. I can feel the heat from his gaze as he looks over

every inch of me. Something is changing between us, and I'm finding it harder and harder not to want to be around him. It's killing me. "Stevie, you look... you look beautiful." He gives me a smile that causes a flutter in my chest and my cheeks to pinken.

"I... Thank you," I bite down on my bottom lip nervously. "Of course, I know you're just trying to butter me up because I'm still mad at you over having to do this."

"Uh! That's unfair. You completely accepted Mom's invitation on your own, Peaches."

"You really need to stop with the peaches thing!" I groan while shoving past him. "Your family is going to ask, and that stupid story I came up with on the fly isn't going to work!" I had told everyone that Brooks made an ass out of himself over a peach danish that a kid wanted, and that is what started our war and my "hatred" of him, but that couldn't be further from the truth.



"Baka!" I hiss while hiding behind the display of donuts. Shit, why does he have to be here when I'm working? "Please, just deal with him." Baka stares up at Brooks, the man who had just interviewed for a bodyguard position at Hel's, and is quite literally making me swoon. Yes, fucking swoon. When he smiled at me the other day when I was at Hel's, my knees went weak. I'm a disappointment to feminists everywhere.

"Why? He no good to you? He touch you! I will kill—"

"Shhhh!" I panic, waving my hands in her face. "No, I just..." I feel myself blush, and Baka gets a knowing look on her face.

"Ahhh I see, you want the fruit ah? A bite into his peach, yeah?"

"What? No, Baka. I don't want to bite into Brooks' peach."

“Aw, come on now,” His cocky yet smooth voice sends a cool rush through me. I turn to see Brooks smirking at me. “My peach might be the sweetest peach you’ve ever tasted.” I’m going to die from this level of embarrassment.

Without looking, I grab a pastry, shove it into a bag, and hold it out to Brooks. “On the house, have a nice day,” I mutter as Brooks snickers.

“Aww... that’s very–” Brooks stops talking as he peers into the bag before laughing loudly. “Peach danish, huh?” No... no, I did not. I look at him in absolute horror.

“Give me it back!” I reach to snatch the bag, but Brooks moves back.

“Oh, no, no, no!” He laughs. “This is mine now.” I watch as he takes a bite of the danish and moans with it in his mouth. “Well, I can say without a doubt, your peach is definitely the sweetest peach I’ve ever had.”



Brooks spins me around, pulling me out of my thoughts as he pushes me against the wall. I stare up into his green eyes, his left one still sporting a bruise.

“Baby, you’re the one keeping us in hiding. You say the word, and I’ll scream it from the mountaintops.”

“Brooks, I—I can’t...” I watch his demeanor dim, and I feel so bad. He goes to pull away, and god help me. I grab the collar of his shirt and pull his lips to mine. He molds against me instantly, and damn it, I crave it. I crave him. Pulling back, I look into his hazy eyes. “There are things I can’t give you, Brooks.”

“Baby, you are all I want.” I let out a choked sob at his sincerity, and because I’m stupid and probably a horrible person, I lean in and kiss him again.

“I want you too,” I admit against his lips. I hear his sharp breath, and I squeeze my eyes shut tight. “But you wouldn’t be happy with me, Brooks.”

“W-what?” Brooks backs up and looks at me in confusion. “Stevie, you are what makes me happy. How have you not figured that out yet?”

“Don’t do this to me,” I state, holding back my tears. “I *can’t*, Brooks.”

“Why?” he snaps. “What is so wrong with me, Stevie? What is it that makes me good enough for a fuck but not a date?”

“What? Brooks,” my voice cracks, and I feel so small. Is that what he thinks? “Brooks, baby, it’s –”

“I swear to god, say that line, and I’ll lose my shit.” I hear the waver in his voice as he focuses on anything but me.

“It’s true!” I shout, my tears spilling. “You think I don’t like you? Brooks, come on! I adore you, you giant asshole! I can’t have you, though!”

“Why not!” He shouts back.

“Because the last man I let in beat and raped me for two years!” I scream through my sobs. “Because I was a prisoner the last time I lived with a man! I had no money. I couldn’t buy pads without his permission and his money! Do you know the humiliation I endured, having my condition and having fucking Vincent tell me I was bleeding too much and he wasn’t paying for my pads? I left that place with no clothes, food, phone, or money. I refuse to be that helpless again! It doesn’t matter how much I like you because between my past and the fact that I can’t offer you a family, nothing can happen!” I’m shaking between my sobs as we stare at each other. Brooks’ gaze, no glare, is so dark and heated, and I don’t know who it’s meant for.

“So,” he licks his lips before letting out a dry laugh and shaking his head. “So because of something some fuck did—the same fuck I’m trying to protect you from—you won’t give me a chance? A chance to show you that a relationship isn’t

supposed to be that way. A chance to show you what it's like to be cared for. And if that isn't a good enough excuse, you're telling me that you also don't want to be with me because you can't have kids?"

"Brooks, you have a big fam—"

"I'm aware of the size of my family. That has nothing to do with me." He states firmly. He looks so betrayed, and it guts me.

"The fact that you think you not being able to get pregnant is some sort of deal breaker like I didn't know that months ago pisses me off. I can be patient and show you I'm a good guy while you heal from the trauma from that fucker. But what... How am I supposed to fix this? I could tell you I'm fine with no kids, and you will think I'm lying because I must be, right?"

"I just, I don't want you to regret anything," I say softly while wringing my hands together nervously.

Brooks shakes his head, his phone chimes, and he sighs when he looks at it. "I'm going to be late for my mom's." Nodding, I start for the door.

"Right, well, let's go. I can fix my makeup in the Jeep."

"No," his voice sounds distant and detached, and I freeze. "No reason for you to go." Furrowing my brows, I stare at him in confusion.

"I'm your girlfriend tonight." I try to give him a smile, but it doesn't deliver.

"Stevie, the only thing I regret is lying to my family about you. Because having to tell them the truth or another lie that you left me, it really sucks."

"Well, don't tell them." I manage a small smile before gesturing to my dress. "I got dressed for you. I am going there for you."

"Why? Now I know where I stand, why bother?" I'm silent for too long. I watch Brooks give me a broken look, and I feel in my soul that we aren't going to recover from this.

“Stevie, I... Baby, I’m in love with you,” Oh... oh my god. “I’m so in love with you that if all I can have from you is the occasional hook-up, I’ll take it. Because a piece of you is better than none. But I need you to understand. Doing this... It’s like ripping my fucking heart out and grinding it under your shoe every goddamn time.” I gasp and clutch my chest. He’s in love with me? He’s in love with me, and I’ve been leading him on? For how long? He... he can’t.

“Please,” I sob out, my tears blinding me. He’s the only person I’ve felt comfortable with, and now I feel like I will have to let him go. “Don’t leave me, Brooks, please. We can stay friends! We can still hang out, and we can-“

“Don’t tell me we can stay friends,” he whispers, shaking his head. “Baby, the way I love you... do you think I could watch you in someone else’s arms? Watch you smile at him? No, we can’t stay friends because I don’t want to be friends. I am so sorry, baby, but that is the one piece I can’t keep.”

“This isn’t fair!” I cry out. “I can’t give you what you want!”

He gives me an irritated laugh. “I know, baby, and I won’t force you.”

“So that’s it?” I whisper, rubbing the ache in my chest.

“Yeah, baby, I think so. You’ll always be able to get to me if you need-” Shaking my head, I grab my keys and rip the door open. I need to get out of here. I need to get away from him.

STEVIE

CHAPTER TEN

“Poor bear,” I recoil at Baka’s words as I sit in the cafe with Sadie, Indy, and Ren. I just told them all about the argument and confession from Brooks, and the last thing I need is Baka taking his side.

Though I can’t blame her, I would side with him, too.

“Okay,” Ren’s calm voice grabs my attention, and I know she’s about to say something completely reasonable, and I’m not going to want to hear it. “What would be the harm in trying? If you have similar feelings for him?”

“I never said I was in love with him,” I state while laying my head on the table.

“Neither did I. I said ‘similar’.”

“Because! I don’t–”

“Want to be a burden?” Indy raises her dark brow. Glaring at my friend from my spot on the table, I scoff.

“It’s d–”

“Different with you two?” Ren supplies, and I jerk up.

“Well, I’m glad to see I don’t need to be a part of this conversation.” Ren rolls her eyes before shaking her head.

“Stevie, you have told us all the same thing. You have been our neutral voice of reason in the past. Now, if you really don’t have feelings for Brooks, I would say yes, you need to cut it all off because Brooks is a nice guy. He’s got a massive

heart and doesn't deserve to end up hurting any more than he already is."

"What if," I cringe at the thought racing through my brain. "What if I let him in, and he ends up like my ex?"

"Then I kill him!" Baka shouts, slamming her... where did her butcher's knife come from? "You no listen, Stefa, so Baka explain *again*." She looks at the girls and points her crooked finger at all of them. "Same for all you. Now, first you take knife and plunge it—"

"Baka!" I groan as Ren and Indy start cackling, and Sadie pales while Baka makes stabbing motions with her knife.

"Ne! Stefa! You stab and twist! Always with the twist."

"Baka! I don't want to kill him! I'm not concerned with having to do that!" Baka furrows her brows together as she does when she's trying to figure out what someone is saying.

"So, no kill the bear? Not even little kill?" She asks slowly.

"No Baka! I like him! He's good to me and makes me feel safe and respected! Why would I want to hurt someone like that? Geez, everything doesn't have to result in something so final!" I huff before looking back at my very amused friends. "What?" I ask before turning back to Baka to see her smirking.

"It almost like Baka know all the things. Again, you no listen." Baka walks away, and I look back at my still-grinning friends and shit. I completely walked into that one.



Walking up the drive to Brooks' house, I jump when I see him sitting on the step, his head down, staring at the sidewalk.

"I thought you would be at your mom's," I say as he looks up. His face is so sad and lost, and I hate that I'm the cause of it.

“Canceled,” his usually strong, overly confident voice is weak and timid. “Not in the mood to be around them right now.” He looks up at me, studying over my face. “Are you alright?”

“No,” I say tenderly as I go to my knees in front of him.

“Stevie,” he goes to pull me up. “That can’t feel—”

“Will you be my boyfriend?” I blurt out and watch him visibly flinch.

“W-what? What about earlier?”

“I’m scared,” I admit, avoiding his gaze. “But I’m more scared of not having you. I would want rules set, but—”

“No.” My head snaps up to meet his eyes, and I feel embarrassment and rejection filling me.

“No?” I say softly, and he nods.

“I want to be your boyfriend, but I can’t, not yet. You and I need to experience each other in a more romantic setting. So, I would like to take you on a real date.” He gives me a slight, crooked grin, and I relax.

“Alright, Brooks, what did you have in mind?”

BROOKS

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“What’s this?” Stevie asks when I set two bags next to her on the couch. I give her a slight shrug before sitting next to her.

“Date night,” she eyes me warily before opening one bag and pulling out the board game.

“And what do you propose we do with this?” She asks with a hint of irritation in her voice.

I chuckle softly. “Well, I propose that you and I play it,” Stevie looks from the game to me and then back at the game again before laughing and shaking her head.

“If you and I play this game, there is a one hundred percent chance I will murder you within ten minutes. Trust me, this is not the date idea you want.” It’s not. I actually had a very different night planned with an expensive restaurant and a carriage ride, but Stevie is having a bad day. Her stomach is bloated, and she is bleeding so severely that I feared she would need to go to the hospital. So, here we are, me trying to make it seem like this was the plan all along so she doesn’t cry while also secretly canceling the driver that should be here any minute. I take the game from her and set it on the floor.

“I figured as much,” I mutter softly as she scoffs.

“And what does that mean?” Ignoring her question, I continue my statement.

“Luckily for you, I always have a Plan B,” I smirk while gesturing towards the other store bag. She opens it, and I see

the smirk tugging at her lips, causing her dimple piercings to pop. She pulls out the pack of canvas boards, paint kit, and brushes.

“You can’t be serious? Brooks, there is no way I can paint anything.”

“Well, this will be a crappy experience for you because I am an absolute master with the brush.” I watch her raise her brow skeptically, and I shrug. “I guess only time will tell, Peaches. So what do you say? Are we going to have a paint night?”

“Okay, Dawson, I’ll play.” I watch her situate herself better before looking back at me. “So, what are we going to paint?”

I give her a playful grin as I unwrap the pack of canvas boards. “We’re going to paint each other.”

“Each other?” She asks slowly, and I give her a nod.

“Yep, you and I are going to paint a portrait of each other.”



“I think they are adorable,” I smirk while staring at the two portraits on the table before going back to get the screws in the wall. Actually, they’re atrocious. As bad as Stevie is at painting—which is horrible—I am a thousand times worse. When I unveiled my masterpiece to her, she thought I was kidding and laughed. She laughed so hard, and when she realized it really was me doing my best, she laughed even harder. So, as punishment, I’m hanging them side by side in the living room once they’re dry. I even printed little paper cards with the titles and “artist name” underneath.

Mine is a painting of her, and I may have taken some... artistic liberties. I gave her a peach for a head that may more closely resemble an orange. Though I made sure to include her dimple piercings, and those fuckers are perfectly level. There’s

a messy turquoise swirl over the peach, and she asked if it was a cloud, which is insulting. Obviously, it's her gorgeous hair. The best part of my painting, though? Her cleavage. We were painting for about... two hours, and I'm sure I spent most of that time paying homage to that glorious chest, much to her horror.

The title of my piece: *Resting Peach Face*.

This, of course, kicked Stevie's competitive side into gear, and well... next to the big-titted peach is a painting of a man's chest with a bear's head. *Un-bear-able* is the title she went with.

"Brooks," she wheezes between cackles as I set my drill down. "You can't hang these up! What will people think?"

I shrug as I walk over to her and rub her cheek to remove a spot of paint with my thumb. "You think I care what anyone else in this world thinks besides you? They can be amazed at my art collection, or they can fuck off and be jealous. But it stays here, front and center."

"Why?" She chuckles lightly, and fuck, I want to kiss her. It's been hard the last four days. We haven't so much as fist-bumped since my confession. I'm trying to do this right, do it slow, and make sure she is ready. She's given me an opportunity to be with her, but I refuse to fuck this up. So, she's in charge, regardless of how badly I want to claim her mouth.

"Because," I whisper out, "You are front and center." I hear the small intake of air pass through her lips. She leans up, and I nearly die when her lips brush across mine.

"That was smooth," she smiles, and I can't help but return one.

"Thanks. I've been waiting for the right moment to use it." I chuckle lightly as she laughs again.

"This was fun," she smiles as I sit on the couch, taking her feet and beginning to massage them. "Oh my god," she moans as I press my thumbs into her arch.

“Well, what can I say? I’m a fun guy.” Stevie rolls her eyes.

“I was worried I would’ve ruined our date plans tonight. I didn’t expect an at-home date.” There is a silent moment before she pokes me in the chest with her toe. “Of course, you did say you always have a Plan B.”

“Trust me, this worked out way better than the original plan,” I say nervously while rubbing her calves.

“Oh yeah, because laying on the couch while I’m in stained sweats, no bra, and completely bloated while rubbing my feet is the ideal first date.”

“I’ll have you know. I find your feet very attractive, so this is the ideal first date.” I give her a playful smirk as she hits me with her pillow.

“Tell me what you had planned,” I groan as I lay my head back.

“Nothing, really. Limo to Cranes, dinner, wine, and a late-night carriage ride. Really, it was totally not a big deal.” Stevie stares at me, her face slack and her brows pushing together.

“Brooks,” she whispers, and I wave her off.

“Peaches, you are the most important part of the date. Trust me, I’m much happier here, making you feel comfortable and hanging up our artwork. We can go to dinner anytime.”

“Thank you,” she whispers, and I watch as she winces while twisting herself before resting her head on my chest. “Despite the pain, this has to be the most fun I’ve had on a date.”

I kiss the top of her head while holding her to me. “Good, that’s all I want.”



“I like her,” my mom smiles as I help her carry dishes into the kitchen while Stevie sits on the couch, playing with Charlie and talking with my sisters. My mom, sisters, and Charlie decided to get together today, and while I told Stevie we didn’t have to go since I’m sure she still wasn’t feeling great from the other night, she insisted.

“I do, too,” I say tenderly. Dinner went better than I could’ve hoped for. Stevie was funny and charming, and I can tell my sisters love her, especially Tyler, who apparently orders takeout from Nuts About Dough all the time, but has never been in due to their steps.

Going back to the living room, I sit on the couch next to Stevie and make a silly face at Charlie to make her squeal. Grabbing my niece, I hold her above my head before kissing her on her cheek.

“Uh oh,” Pip teases from her spot across the coffee table. “Stevie, you better watch out with Brookie. The man gets around Charlie too long, and the baby fever starts up with him.” I freeze and fuck, I can feel it. Stevie’s entire body stiffens, and her energy shifts. To my mom and sisters, Stevie’s demeanor hasn’t changed, but I know her. I know every micro-expression she has.

“That’s not true,” I try to joke lightly. “I just have a fondness for my niece.”

“Uh huh...” Scout snorts. “Don’t try that with us. Stevie, this man, comes from a big family, and trust me, a bunch of kids is definitely his dream. So don’t worry, great dad material here.”

“Oh,” Stevie’s fake smile breaks my heart, and I watch her hands wrap around her abdomen. “I have no doubt Brooks will make an amazing father one day.” My gut twists at her words.

“Are you looking to have kids soon?” Pip asks, looking up from braiding Scout’s hair.

“Uh, no. I’m actually having a hysterectomy next week due to my chronic illness, so no babies happening here.” Her voice cracks slightly as she stands up and smooths out her dress, the same pretty one she was going to wear the last time we were coming over here. I’m starting to think it’s cursed. “Excuse me for a moment.” She smiles politely before walking out of the living room. I hear her go through the kitchen and out the back door.

“Good going,” I grit out, handing Charlie back to her mom.

“How were we supposed to know?” Pip asks in confusion.

“You’re not! You’re just not supposed to throw the baby thing around. Jesus Christ! Do you know how hard this is for her?”

“I do,” Tyler says softly, and I wince. While recovering, Tyler spent a lot of time with infections. Especially UTIs, as well as she went septic after her spinal cord surgery. It caused a lot of issues, one of which is, due to massive scarring, there is next to no chance of her conceiving. “And Brookie is right, you guys shouldn’t be shoving that on them, hell Brookie may not want kids! He has a job that can be dangerous, plus he always has to deal with us.” I give Tyler a squeeze on the shoulder before walking through the kitchen and out back. I find Stevie around the side of the house. She has her arms around her stomach as tears roll down her face.

“God, baby,” I whisper, walking over and pulling her into my arms.

“Sorry,” she snuffles. “I’m just—”

“Shhh... baby, you don’t have to explain anything. You hear me? Come on, let’s go home.”

“Oh! No, I don’t wanna do that to your family.”

“Baby, it’s getting late. I’m tired and have to go to the office tomorrow, anyway. Come on,” I say, pulling her around the house that leads to the driveway.

“Shouldn’t we say bye?” she asks as I open the door.

“Nah, I’ll text them later.”



“Stevie,” I say softly, trying to break the silence in this vehicle. “I’m really sorry about that.”

“Why don’t you have a duck on your Jeep?” she asks abruptly as I pull into the driveway. Putting the Jeep in park, I turn and look at her in confusion.

“Because they’re stupid,” I huff, probably a bit too defensive. She cocks her head to one side while squinting her pretty eyes.

“No one has left you a duck, huh?” *Fuck*. Rubbing the back of my neck, I look away while shrugging. *Jeep Ducking* is something that started a couple of years ago where you leave rubber ducks on a Jeep with a nice note, and the owner is supposed to display them on their dash.

“The whole thing is ridiculous. So what, a random person leaves a duck on my Jeep, and I’m then forced to showcase it forever?” I grunt out before looking back at her and sighing. “No, okay, I’m large and intimidating, as is my Jeep, so I don’t fit into the Jeep Duck community.”

“You could buy yourself one, so people knew it was okay.”

“That defeats the purpose,” I mutter, getting out of the vehicle. Something feels off, and I’ve been in my business too long not to trust my gut. I reach into the door and pull out my holstered gun, slipping it into the back of my jeans before catching up to Stevie.

“Well, how are people supposed to know you’re a marshmallow!?” she asks, still on the duck thing.

“They’re not because I’m n– Wait,” I stop her from moving. Something definitely is off. Why didn’t my motion lights go off when we walked up to the door?

“Brooks, it’s not–”

“Stevie,” I hiss, bringing my finger to my mouth to tell her to hush.

“Puppet.” At the sound of a male’s voice, I draw my gun from its holster while pushing Stevie behind me.

“Do not come any closer,” I snarl. My lights decide now is the time to come on, and there he is. Vincent, Stevie’s old mentor and ex-boyfriend. “Back the fuck up,” I warn, leveling my gun.

Vincent holds his hands up in mock surrender. “Easy there. I just wanted to see how she’s doing. Cher,” he purrs in his thick Cajun accent, which grates my nerves. “Comment ça va?”

“Don’t you talk to her!” I snarl, “Baby, go inside, lock the door behind you.” I whisper, but Stevie is frozen in place and has a death grip on my shirt.

“Baby?” Vincent chuckles. “Puppet, you got yourself a new man? Here, I thought I ruined you for others. Ça c’est bon!” I’m going to put two in his skull on fucking principal alone. “Alright, I see I’ve come at a bad time. So, here’s the thing: our Puppet here has created quite a problem for me. I’ve lost three apprentices in the past month, and I had a spot on a panel for a convention here, but somehow I was removed due to *unethical practices*.” Tsking, he shakes his head and stupidly takes a step towards us.

“Bud, if you think for one second I won’t shoot you in the knee, you have another thing coming. Now, get the fuck back.”

“Cher,” Vincent snaps, and I feel Stevie flinch. “Are you going to fix the issue, or will I have to?” Vincent spits on my sidewalk before looking at my gun. I move to go towards him, but Stevie lets out a cry of protest. Smirking, Vincent lazily waves his hand before turning. “See you around, Puppet.”

Once he's gone, I turn, holstering my gun and wrapping myself around Stevie's shaking body.

"He's here, he's here." She whispers again and again into my chest.

"Shhh..." I kiss the top of her head. "Listen to me, baby. I won't let him get you." That's a fucking promise, no matter what I have to do.

STEVIE

CHAPTER TWELVE

“You know what they don’t make enough of?” I sigh as I lie on Brooks’ lap, staring at the television.

“What’s that baby?” He asks softly. He’s being so sweet today. I mean, Brooks is always good to me, but tomorrow is surgery day, and I would be lying if I said I wasn’t nervous. So much so that I nearly had a freak out online when some people were commenting with hateful things about me and my family. Brooks had to take my phone away, and we’ve been lazing around on the couch since. But now it’s late, I can’t sleep, and I’m wanting to stress eat but can’t because I’m not allowed to eat until after surgery. Which only makes me want to do it more.

“Monster romance shows,” I say simply and smile when I feel his hand rubbing my back stop midway through a stroke.

“Oh god, not this again.” He groans while laughing. “I mean, they have Dracula and Frankenstein.”

“Mmm... No, more like... okay, what if there was like a wolf shifter... eh, no, overdone. Oh!” I bolt up and stare at his apprehensive face. “A Kraken!”

“A Kraken? Like the sea monster?” I watch his nervous smile as I nod.

“Oh, my god, yeah! Because I mean, tentacles.”

“Tentacles for wha—oh... Oh! Stevie!” He scoffs and shakes his head as I laugh.

“Hey! Don’t you hate on them! You’re going to be reading them to me while I recover.” He barks out a laugh.

“Absolutely never! I will have Ren come and do it. She reads that stuff.”

“It’s not the same!” I groan. “Besides, Ren gets all practical. ‘Why does he have two penises? A six-foot cock can’t fit into a virgin’s vagina’ blah blah blah. I love her, but that totally takes me out of the moment.”

“Two...six-foot... What are you reading?” he asks, horrified, and I can’t help but laugh again.

“Listen, I have yet to see a romance that can rival that of the Scorpion’s Siren! It should go down in history as the greatest love story of all time.”

“Scorpion? So he’s a little-”

I scoff, “Ain’t nothing little about Aror. He is over seven feet, two dicks, and his tail can be used for-”

“Okay!” Brooks laughs. “Okay, Stevie baby, I adore you, but I’m not reading you the story of Aror the Scorpion with two dicks.” I pout, crossing my arms and looking away.

“This is exactly why Aror and Kimmy’s relationship is so perfect. He would’ve read it to her.”

“Well, I guess you’ll just have to settle for a boyfriend that rubs your back and feet while you read about the scorpion king to yourself... silently.”

“Actually, he’s a general. And boyfriend? You’re not my boyfriend.” I quirk an amused brow and watch as he cringes and rubs the back of his neck.

“Right, I know. I just-” his phone rings, and he groans while fishing it from his pocket.

“Janie?” He says, and I hear Janie’s muffled voice screaming on the other end. “I think this is for you,” He mutters, rubbing his assaulted ear.

“Janie, what’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong? I’ll tell you what’s wrong!” She shouts, and I can hear Fox in the background, trying to get her to calm down.

“I am all the fuck way across the country, getting everyone and everything BUT a penis stuffed up my vag, and my bestie is going in for surgery tomorrow, and I can’t get her on the fucking phone!”

“Oh shit,” I wince and smack my head. “Sorry, Janie, Brooks turned my phone off because of the hate comments. How are you?”

“Annoyed, violated, and horny.” She huffs out, and I chuckle.

“Why can’t you have sex?”

“Ugh, pelvic rest. I’m forced not to have sex for at least a week.”

“Oh, you poor thing. How will you survive?” I grumble while walking into my bedroom and lying on the bed.

“I don’t wanna hear it. You have dick on demand over there with your *friennies with bennies*.”

“That is horrible. Don’t call it that. And we have barely even kissed since before our date. He is taking things so damn slow I might have to bust out the vibrator.”

“Torch!” I hear Fox groan. “At least take this conversation off speaker!”

“How about you bite my ass, old man? Go be broody somewhere else!”

I chuckle lightly. “Glad to see you two are enjoying your time away.”

“Ha, get this. We are in the same hotel we were at for the convention a couple of years ago. You know, the one where Fox was a fucking child and told me he couldn’t love me.”

“Oh, my god!” he growls. “I swear to Christ, I’m going to drown you in the fucking bathtub.”

Janie continues talking as if what he said doesn't faze her, which I guess it doesn't. Those two have a relationship where they have to bicker with each other. It's a little weird at first. Their constant sarcastic remarks, pranks, and threats, but they like it, and there is zero doubt that they both are head over heels for the other. "So they gave us the same fucking room he destroyed my soul in."

"Woah, talk about a bad omen," I say as Brooks comes in and leans on the door frame. Fuck, he's good-looking. He has on pajama pants and a "Knuckles Security" short-sleeve shirt, showing off his bulging biceps and corded forearms.

"Right?" Janie huffs. "The old man here was all like 'Well, maybe this is our chance to turn a negative into a positive.'" She says in her mock Fox voice, causing me to snicker. "Long story short, I got a new room." Brooks' phone vibrates against my ear, and I instinctively look at it.

Greyson: Got eyes on Po'boy

I look at Brooks, who has a questioning look on his face.

"Alright, babe, it's almost midnight here, so I know it's late there. Get some rest, and I'll make sure Indy keeps you updated tomorrow. Love you." I hang up with Janie and hand Brooks his phone back. "Po'Boy?" I inquire and hear him whisper a "fuck" under his breath.

"Stevie, I'm just trying to keep tabs and collect information on him to keep you safe." I nod, and I can feel my stomach filling with anxiety. So much anxiety. The hate online, Brooks and my rocky relationship, him saying he's in love with me and us not addressing it. Then there's the surgery and Vincent. It's all just too much.

"I think I'm going to try to get some sleep," I tell him, resting my head against my pillow. Brooks looks hesitant to leave, but he nods and walks to the door.

"Alright, baby, good night."

"Night," I mutter as I close my eyes, even though I know I won't fall asleep until they drug me on the operating table

tomorrow.

BROOKS

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“This is fucking ridiculous,” I growl as I stand from my chair and start pacing again.

Indy sighs, not looking up from her cell phone. “You are so annoying. Go do some push-ups or glare out a window. We will call you when she’s done.” I glare at the raven-haired woman, though it’s pointless as she’s still staring at her phone while Zora sits beside her, knitting.

“I’m so glad you’re so calm you can play on your phone,” I grumble while trying to sit back down, only to feel like I’m going to freak out if I don’t continue to pace.

Indy purses her lips before looking up from her phone. “Really?” She leans back in her seat, smirking at me. “I’m currently managing Stevie’s social media, working on making all her accounts private and tagging all the threats to send to Greyson, so I wouldn’t really say I’m ‘playing.’”

Stevie’s mom, Zora, looks up from whatever she’s knitting, “Are they still being mean to her?” I wince at the worry in her voice. I know Zora worries about Stevie; we all do, but while mine and especially Nika’s approach is more ‘eliminate the threat,’ Zora is a worrier. I have had to stop her several times when I’ve found her reading the comments on Stevie’s socials, and I haven’t dared to say anything to her about Vincent.

“Unfortunately,” Indy mumbles while giving Zora a reassuring smile. “But don’t worry, they will calm down eventually, and the hateful people will move on. It just takes time. Stevie is strong. It’ll be alright.”

Zora stares at the yarn in her lap before taking a long breath. She tucks a fallen lock of salt and pepper hair behind her ears before looking at me with glassy eyes.

“She’s all I’ve got,” she manages to choke out, and it kills me to see her breaking. “Stevie is so strong. She always has been. It’s been me, her, and Mama since my husband passed away when she was four. Even then, Stevie was always so grown up. I know now that she was forced to due to the struggles we endured, but she just wasn’t the kid I had to worry about. She was so helpful, a straight-A student all the way through high school. She would have a full ride in college, and her life would be set.” She lets out a small laugh before dabbing her misty eyes. “Then the bloating started, and the bleeding and pain. Her senior year, everything changed. The doctors wouldn’t listen, the school didn’t care, and her grades were slipping. Mama and I tried talking to them, but no one took us seriously. Due to the pain, Stevie lost her scholarships and decided to test out of high school early. We were in Louisiana for another year before Mama, and I talked to her about moving to California. I thought it would be a good new start; maybe out here, she would find a doctor to help her. She had just started working at a piercing shop and was enjoying herself, though, and said she wasn’t ready to move.”

I watch the sadness and regret fill her tired eyes as she stares at the ceiling. “I should’ve made her come,” she whispers. “Mama and I had been out here three weeks before we discovered the shop changed owners, and she had a new boss. And it was two damn years before we saw her. She would just say she’s too busy or work is crazy. We didn’t know the real extent until long after she moved here.” She takes a breath, and a tear rolls down her face. “That man took my bejbe and broke her. When she came to us, she couldn’t even be in the same room with another man.”

“Why didn’t she press charges?” I ask, even though I know why most victims of domestic violence stay silent out of fear.

Zora lets out a dry laugh, “We tried! God help us. Mama and I did everything to convince her, but she refused, saying that unless he would be gone for life, it would only anger him.

And then Mama was ready to take care of it herself.” I laugh until I notice she’s not being funny.

“W-wait, is Nika... are her stories true?” I ask in shock. Zora gives me half a shrug.

“While I won’t confirm or deny it, I will say it’s best to assume that she’s telling you the truth.” I feel a chill run through me, and I think back to the stories I’ve heard Nika say that we all just figured were the ramblings of an old lady.

“Jesus,” I mutter.

Zora nods. “She was ready to take care of the issue permanently. But Stevie begged and pleaded with her to let it go, and she did. I would give anything to go back to that time and make Mama go anyway. Because now he is back, and I feel like I’m going to lose her again. Between this surgery and her trauma, I don’t know how she will pull through.”

Indy places a hand over Zora’s. “She’ll get through it. She is the strongest person I know.” My phone vibrates, and I excuse myself when I see it’s Greyson calling. Once out of earshot, I answer the call.

“What’s up?”

“Hey Brooks,” Greyson’s voice comes through. “I have a location on your guy.” Prickles run over my skin. *Now?* I’m not ready now. Stevie is still in surgery. I can’t leave her.

“Where?” I manage to get out while peering back into the waiting room to see Indy still talking to Zora.

“Still in our neighborhood, nice hotel. I found he was using someone else’s credit card, a woman I believe is his current apprentice.”

“Perfect,” I see the surgeon walking into the waiting room. “I’ll call you back if that man takes a piss outside that hotel, I want to know.” Hanging up, I walk back in as the surgeon approaches Zora and Indy.

“She did very well,” she states warmly, her dark eyes crinkling in the corners. “We did have some complications, though.” She takes a seat, and I feel my knees go weak.

Calm your ass, she said Stevie did well. Even as I continuously remind myself of this, it takes real effort to hear the surgeon over my rapid heartbeat.

“Ms. Campbell was further along in the stages of her endometriosis than originally thought. She had growth on other organs. I believe we succeeded in our removal, but there is a chance of it growing back. She is going to be on hormone replacements to help with the surgical menopause, so that should, hopefully, help with the regrowth, but she’s going to have to be conscious of what’s happening and stay up to date on her checkups.”

I speak before anyone has the chance to. I need to know how she is. “Is she okay? Like, awake?”

The surgeon nods. “She’s okay, she’s still coming out of the anesthesia and will be in recovery for a little while still, but once she’s moved to her room, you can see her.” Zora thanks the surgeon, and once she’s gone, Zora collapses against Indy.

“She’s alright,” Indy whispers while patting the crying woman.

Zora takes a breath before reaching out and grabbing my hand, gesturing for me to sit by her. I do as asked, and Zora dries her tears before looking at me, her face suddenly hard.

“How much are you being paid to watch Stevie?” Her voice is low and direct.

“I’m not,” I admit, matching the seriousness in her tone. It’s the truth. Janie offered to pay me once I moved Stevie in, and I refused. I couldn’t take money to protect the woman I love.

“I want him to disappear.” She says through clenched teeth. I blink in surprise and glance at an equally stunned Indy.

“Zora—” The woman stops Indy by holding her hand up.

“I have seen the comments on her videos,” she whispers. “The threats... I know they are just words, but...” Her eyes go glassy as she stares back at me. “My bejbe... is still afraid to have long hair.” I furrow my brows.

“What?” Stevie’s hair is shorter, a little below her chin, but what did that have to do with anything?

Zora sighs, “Stevie’s hair was black as night, like mine and Mama’s, and past her chest. She had beautiful hair, and she loved it. When she came to us, half the back of her hair was cut to the scalp, and chunks were missing or just growing back. She cut her hair off, never let it grow again, never goes to the salon, and never allows Mama to brush it; that was their thing her whole life. *He* did something, and I know he’s coming back. I see the comments, and I know one of them is this man.” Her weathered hand tightens on her yarn.

“How much, Mr. Dawson?” I don’t need to ask what she wants a price on. I know what she wants. I look at Indy and am surprised to find her just as angry as Zora. I would’ve seen her as the one telling Zora what she’s asking is wrong, but she isn’t. Still, I can’t talk to either of them about this.

“I think it would be best not to discuss this. Just know that your daughter is safe with me, and no threats are coming that I’m not already handling.” I choose my words carefully, and I see her about to fight. Instead, she stops and stares at me for a long moment before nodding.

“That’s all I can ask for.”



“What are you doing here?” Stevie’s weak, sleepy voice groans as I enter her hospital room. Despite Zora’s protests, Indy rode home with Zora for the night, and now it’s my turn to see her. She looks so different. Her skin is grey, her hair is tangled, and the lack of dimple piercings is almost unnerving.

“What do you mean?” I chuckle as I sit in the chair next to her bed. “I am coming to stare adoringly at your face for the next twelve hours.” She groans again and weakly waves her hand at me.

“Get away with your gross words.”

“No,” I grin stubbornly. “In fact, I’m going to look at you with big eyes and say things to make you uncomfortable all night. Did you know you have this curve in your lower back, and every time I see it, I want to drag my tongue across it?”

She wraps her arms around a pillow that is situated over her chest as she tries not to laugh. “You will hurt me if you make me laugh.” She warns, and I hold my hands up.

“Alright, Peaches, fair enough. How are you?”

“I would be better if I didn’t have these drugs in me.” She whines while trying to shift. “They’re making it hard to think.”

“Baby, you don’t need to think right now. Just rest. The drugs are to help with the pain.” She makes a tired noise and rolls her head towards me despite her closed eyes.

“Brooks,” she mumbles softly.

“Yeah?”

“I like it when you call me baby.” I see the slight smile tug at her lips, causing my heart to skip a beat. I reach out, putting my hand around her cool one.

“I like calling you baby,” I admit, running my thumb over her knuckles.

“Brooks,” she whispers again. “I kind of like peaches, too.”

Laughing, I shake my head. “Now I know the drugs are messing with you.”

She gives me a sleepy smile. “Can you stay with me?”

“Baby, I wasn’t going anywhere tonight. You’re safe.”

“No, I mean... stay with me forever.” She mumbles, and my body stills. She’s drugged. She doesn’t know what she’s saying.

I force myself to sound smooth and cocky, even though, on the inside, I’m anything but. “Careful Peaches, one might

think you're starting to catch real feelings." Stevie's head nods as she fades in and out of sleep.

"Not starting," she whispers. "Already caught."

STEVIE

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Mama,” I sigh in annoyance as she and Baka continue to fuss over packing everything in the hospital room. “Y’all need to stop. I’m fine.” It’s been three days since my surgery, and I’m finally getting discharged. What was supposed to be an overnight stay lasted longer because of Brooks. I don’t know what the man said to the staff after the first night, but they were all overly, and I do mean overly, attentive and decided that I would do best to recover a little more here.

So now, I stink, I’m sore, and as soon as that fucker comes to pick me up and take me home, I’m taking shears to one of his plants for making me stay here.

Wait... home? That’s not right. It’s *Brooks’* house. Though, as much as I don’t want to admit it, his house is starting to feel like my safe place.

“Stefa!” Baka scolds while zipping up my backpack. “You leave your Mama alone!” I groan loudly but allow them to finish before I get into the wheelchair. I bite back a cry as I move to the chair.

Once outside, I see the massive all-black Jeep Wrangler waiting out front. I joke and say it’s meaner-looking than most Wranglers I’ve seen. Brooks went on a tangent once about it being some special “high altitude” something or other. I don’t know anything about vehicles, except that Brooks doesn’t have a Jeep duck, which bothers me to no end.

“Hey, Peaches.” Brooks walks over, ready to help me out of the chair, when Baka stands between us.

“Hmmm...” She hums as she studies over Brooks. “You having the sex with our Stefa, and you no come to say hi in the three days?” My face falls into my hand as Brooks looks like a deer caught in headlights.

“W-What?” He laughs nervously, looking at me for help.

“Baka! Brooks is trying to get me into the Jeep. Please let him help.”

“Ah yes, let him ‘help.’ He no buy the cow now, Stefa! You give too much the mlijeko! Now, he no visit!”

“Uh... Ma’am, I assure you, I’ll buy the cow.” Oh, sweet Brooks. Sweet, stupid, moronic Brooks. I know he thought he was helping, but he walked right into Baka’s trap. The old woman grins ear to ear.

“You hear Zora! Stefa marry the bear man! You all laugh at Baka. She crazy with the visions. Is this where the Americans would drop microphone?”

Someone, please take me away.



“Sorry,” Brooks winces when he hits a bump. I shake my head while hugging the pillow.

“It’s alright, hubby,” I smirk as he chokes on his own spit.

“Yeah, what the hell was that?” He asks, and I wave my hand dismissively.

“Baka is worried that I’ll be unwanted by men because I don’t have a uterus. And she insists you are the man in her vision for me. Plus, she likes your ass.” He laughs uncomfortably before pulling into his driveway.

Brooks gets out of the Jeep before rounding the front and coming around to open my door. “Do you want me to carry you in?” He asks, and I want to laugh at him, but the sincerity in his tone stops me.

“No, thank you. I’ll walk. It would probably be too painful on my incisions. I just really want to take a shower. I feel so gross.” I laugh lightly. Brooks nods as he walks me into the house.

“I got a shower chair in your bathroom to make it easier. If you need help, just yell for me.” He says, and I pull away.

“Yeah, because letting you see me naked is exactly what I’m going to do.”

“I see you naked all the time,” he says slowly as I shake my head.

“That isn’t happening anymore.” I state, walking to the bathroom.

“W-wait, what?” He walks up next to me, stopping me from entering the bathroom. “Stevie? Did I do something?”

“No,” I state as firmly as I can. “Yeah, we had the friends-with-benefits thing, but now that—”

“That I’m your boyfriend?” I roll my eyes.

“I asked you to be, and you said no, so we are not boyfriend and girlfriend.” He lets out a huff.

“Alright, Peaches, what are we then?” I think for a moment before shrugging.

“No idea. We like each other but have no sex. So, an old married couple?” I walk into the bathroom and shut the door before letting out a tired breath.

“I’ll have you know that my grandparents are in their nineties and still have sex!” He calls through the door, and I shudder at that image.

“Go away, Brooks!” Glancing at the tub, I see the chair sitting in it, waiting for me. I begin removing my clothes, trying to muffle my cries of pain while doing so. I don’t want

Brooks to come in here. And knowing him, he's on the other side of this door waiting to bust in.

I turn the water on so it can warm up and am about to climb into the shower when I stop. I know I shouldn't. Nothing good will come of it, but I do. Turning around, I look at myself in the mirror, and everything hits me like a wrecking ball.

It really happened. They really took it. I should be happy and relieved, and a part of me is. Still, at this moment, I feel a deep sort of loss and sadness I wasn't expecting. I hover my hand over my lower abdomen, and I can almost feel the emptiness. But that's ridiculous, right? How can I feel the loss of something the size of my fist?

No one will want you now. Especially not him.

I gasp at the intrusive thought. I have to stop this. This surgery was to give me a better life. I should be thankful, not sad. But even as I think these thoughts, I *am* sad, and now I'm filled with shame for feeling sad.

I manage to get myself into the shower and go through the motions of cleaning my body and washing my hair. By the time I'm done, I'm too exhausted to move anymore. So I sit in the chair, staring at the white-tiled wall while the hot water droplets turn cold against my skin as they run down my cooling body.

"Alright, Peaches," Brooks' voice sounds so far away as he opens the door. I don't bother trying to stop him. I couldn't even if I wanted to. The energy it would take to utter words is more than I have to give right now.

"Fuck! Stevie," He rushes into the bathroom, and he must've grabbed my towel because he's wrapping it around my cool body. "Baby, oh my god, you're freezing." Am I? I feel almost numb. Brooks hoists me out of the chair, and in my head, I tell him to be careful not to hurt himself, but I can't get it out. He lays me on his bed before going to his closet and returning with a hoodie. I allow him to slip it on and smile softly at the bagginess of it. There were no baggy hoodies in my past relationships unless they wore mine.

Wait, *relationship*? This is not a relationship. This is—

“Baby,” his voice snaps me back, and I look into his eyes. “Please talk to me. Are you tired? Did you overexert yourself? Do you need your painkillers?”

“Brooks,” I barely get his name out. I feel exhausted on a soul level. I see the worry etched on his strong face, and I wish I could tell him I’m okay and have him believe it. But it would be a lie that he would easily see through. “No one will ever love me now.” *Did I say that?* I must’ve, though I didn’t mean to. I didn’t mean to let out one of my deepest fears, not to anyone, especially Brooks.

Brooks touches my cheek and uses his thumb to brush the wetness off my cheek. Tears. When had I started to cry?

“Stevie, sweet girl, listen to me. You have no idea how much you are loved.”

“No man will want me, I’m not a real wo—”

“Knock that shit off.” He snaps, and I watch the fire ignite behind his eyes. “I have no idea what you’re going through, Stevie, and I won’t even begin to try to act like I understand it. But I will not have you lay there and say that shit when you know damn well it’s false.”

Snorting, I roll my eyes. “You’re just being nice.”

“Yeah, well, one of us has to be. You know damn well my feelings for you. They haven’t changed. I may not bring them up because I want you to feel comfortable the next time I declare anything, but that doesn’t mean the feelings are gone, Stevie.” Brooks goes to his feet. “I’m going to grab your medicine and some water.” I want to stop him, to talk to him about what he said, but instead, I let him go. His feelings haven’t changed. So, he *is* in love with me?

I look at the closed door in stunned silence. He’s in love with me, and that realization isn’t scaring me like it did in the past. In fact, I can feel the warmth spreading over my body, wrapping me in calm serenity, and I nuzzle into the pillow.

He loves me.



Brooks taps lightly on the opened door before walking in with a to-go cup in his hands. *When had he left?* I remember him bringing me my pills, but I passed out shortly after. Fuck, I am starting to hurt and feel stiff now.

“Hey, Peaches,” he looks and sounds exhausted. I give him a small smile that I don’t really feel as he sits on the edge of his bed. “Here,” he hands me the cup and the straw. My fake smile immediately becomes genuine because he got me boba tea.

“How did you know I like this?” I ask softly while trying to sit up.

“When you were working the night shift at Hel’s, you and Indy debated the best-flavored boba tea, and you said you would die before saying there is a better one than Lychee. I had one, and I’ll be honest, I don’t know what the deal is.” He chuckles, but I’m in absolute shock.

“Y-you remember that?” Hell, I barely remember that argument. I certainly couldn’t tell you what flavor Indy said.

“Yeah, I think that was your first night back after you had a cold. I remember you kept having these sneezing fits. You had on a really cute outfit. White shirt, black trousers, these glittery green suspenders, and a black hat with your hair curled under it.”

“How on earth do you remember that? I don’t even remember that.” Brooks shrugs as he slips his shoes off.

“I remember important things.” He states as if it’s the simplest answer.

“And what about that night was so important?”

“You,” he says with zero hesitation. His eyes lock with mine, and I can’t move or breathe.

“Me?” I whisper back, unable to look away. Brooks nods slowly.

“Peaches, one day you will realize that I’m not kidding when I say you are important to me.”

“Brooks,” he sits on the edge of the bed and moves a stray lock of hair out of my face.

“Why do you keep your hair short?” I blink as I try to catch up to his question before giving him a tired sigh and trying to move to get comfortable.

“Vincent used to wrap my hair around his hand and pull me by it,” I say, keeping my tone as even-keeled as possible. “It was his way of making me... submit. I don’t know. During our last encounter at the shop, he tried to force himself on me and had my hair in his fist. I couldn’t escape. I saw some scissors and ripped and cut myself free. I guess I’ve been apprehensive to grow my hair back out since then.” I look up at the deep scowl on his face and give him a small smile. “Brooks, it’s—

“No, it’s not.” He cuts me off. “Don’t say it’s fine. Don’t brush off what has happened to you.”

“Sweetheart, if you expect me to have some breakdown moment where I collapse into your arms weeping over some asshole, you’ll be disappointed. I’m afraid of him, but I ain’t opening up the past and crying about it again.” I note the small uptick on his lips and raise a brow. “What?”

“Call me that again,” he purrs, and fuck that hit me somewhere it shouldn’t.

“C-call you what?” He leans over me, his lips so close to mine that I can almost feel them.

“Say it.” His order is barely above a hushed whisper, causing my eyes to flutter as they meet his.

“Sweetheart,” I say on a breath right before his lips crash to mine. I moan into his mouth, and he greedily consumes it before nibbling on my bottom lip to gain access to my mouth. I’m about to give him what he craves, but I move too fast. “Ow! Shit!” I cry out at the jolt of pain in my abdomen.

“Fuck,” he curses as he bolts up and removes my blanket. “I’m so sorry, fuck do I need to take you to the hospital?” He goes to lift my shirt, and I stop him. I know he’s seen the wounds when he took me out of the shower, but in my head, he was too busy to look at them. I’m generally not self-conscious about my looks. I like my full figure. But with this new body, I’m not ready to like her just yet.

“I’m alright,” I say, pulling the blanket back up. “Just got too eager, I think.” I give him a small laugh as he sits back down.

“Yeah, we should probably refrain from the eagerness for a little while.” He smiles shyly, and fuck if it doesn’t make my heart flutter. “Well, you should get some rest, so how about I read you a story until you fall asleep?” Furrowing my brows, I’m about to ask him what he’s talking about when I see him grab my paperback of *Scorpion’s Siren* off my nightstand.

“Are you serious?” I ask, a lump forming in my throat.

“Hey, you said that Aror would’ve read to Kimmy. I’m not about to be upstaged by a two dicked scorpion man.” He chuckles as he starts reading the first page. I can’t comprehend it, though. How could I? With his intimidating size, massive muscles, commanding voice, and sharp angles, this man is sitting on the edge of the bed, reading me monster smut because he loves me. As I watch him in fascination as he makes voices, comments on different parts he reads, and even blushes, I realize that I may have fully broken my rules and fallen in love with Brooks, too.



Unknown: Puppet

Unknown: PUPPET

Unknown: CHER!

Me: Please leave me ALONE!

Unknown: I DID leave you alone. Despite everything you owe me, I let you go. And YOU Cher, YOU are the one that invited me back in. Now, fix what you did.

Me: No, I spoke the truth, I'm NOT letting you control me anymore.

Unknown: Okay, Puppet, I'll see you around.

Unknown: I still love you

I continue to bite my thumbnail while looking over the texts. I'm an idiot. I should've ignored them.

"What's wrong?" Brooks asks as he pulls us into the parking lot of my doctor's office for my post-op check-up.

"Nothing," I muttered from behind my thumb. Brooks' large hand grabs mine and pulls my hand to his mouth. He kisses my thumb so softly that it sends flutters through me.

"Stop munching on your thumb then," he teases, giving it a small bite that nearly causes me to moan out. I don't want to tell him. The last few days that I've been recovering have been beyond amazing. Our talks, the movie nights, and him reading to me, I've realized that I do absolutely love this giant man, and that thought terrifies me.

"Vincent texted me," I admit and hiss when his hand tenses around mine.

"Sorry, baby," he whispers, kissing my hand. "Let me see your phone," his voice is so soft, like a protective hug, but the darkening in his moss green eyes and the tension in his scruffy jaw tell me it's taking everything in his power to remain calm.

"Brooks," I move my hand from his and cup his face. He instantly closes his eyes and rests into my palm.

“Stevie,” his voice is almost strangled, “Baby, this is so amazing, but if you don’t give me your phone, I’m going to take it, and I’m probably not going to be nice about it, and then I’m going to hate myself.” Rolling my eyes, I hand him the phone as I see my Mama pulling up.

“You go ahead and look through it. I gotta go—”

“I am not looking through your phone,” he interrupts, handing the phone back. “I just wanted to see the messages. Are you okay to go inside without me?” I watch him put his ear bud in his ear and I know he’s about to call Greyson.

“Yeah, I’m sure I can handle it,” I say dryly, and I’m about to get out when I see his dark face staring forward. Gently leaning over, I kiss his cheek, causing him to spin and look at me. “I like you,” I say, watching his stunned expression morph into a genuine, sweet smile.

“I like you too, baby.” He leans over and kisses my forehead just as Mama walks to my door and opens it.

“You need a chair, bejbe?” I shake my head as I slowly get out of the Jeep.

“No Mama, I’ll walk.” Turning back to Brooks, I notice his face morphing again. “Will you be here when I get out?” Brooks gives me a small smile.

“I won’t leave you, Peaches.”



“You and Brooks seem closer.” Mama smiles as she scrolls through her phone. I feel my face grow hot as the nurse takes my blood pressure cuff off.

“Y-yeah, I mean... I—”

“You like him, yeah?”

I scrunch up my face, giving her a pained stare. “Don’t tell Baka yet, okay? You know she will start on the vision thing.” Mama laughs, lightly shaking her head.

“My god, she’s going to be impossible to live with once she finds out.”

BROOKS

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Staring at my laptop screen, I rub my face with my hands as Greyson and I continue to look over everything we could dig up on Vincent Landry while sitting at Nuts about Dough. It's not where I want to be, but between Stevie telling me I'm smothering her and Zora calling to say Nika nearly stabbed a man for commenting on Stevie's video, I felt it best to come in and check on everything. Plus, Stevie kind of kicked me out again.

It's ridiculous; she just had major surgery. I don't want her moving around so much. I get that it's helpful in the healing process, and the doctor said at her visit yesterday that she wants Stevie to start being more active, but I don't want her to overdo it. I don't want her to do something without being there to ensure she's okay. Being away from her while she's vulnerable is such a shitty feeling. It's that helpless feeling again, like I get with my sisters or mom. All the what-ifs start, and then my chest starts to hurt.

I blink as my phone buzzes. I pick it up, thinking it's Stevie asking me to return home. I'm disappointed when I see Indy's name on the screen.

Indy: Hey Brooks. Last minute, I know, but Luca has a cold. Anyway, can you sub with him tonight at the hospital?

Me: Maybe? Can I call you in twenty minutes?

Indy: Absolutely! No pressure! If you can't, I'll ask Dex.

Yeah, she's definitely going to have to ask Fox's cousin, Dexter, to do it. I don't know much about him other than he's some big sports player, I couldn't tell you what team or even sport. All I know is there's no chance I will be able to give those kids the attention they deserve with my mind on Stevie and this fuckstick.

I glance back at the unremarkable man in his social media profile picture. Vincent is thin, with long, scraggly blond hair and piercings all over his face. He looks unwashed as he sits with some pretty young woman on his lap. She looks like she'd rather be anywhere than in his lap, and it makes me wonder if she might be his newest ex-apprentice.

"Interesting," Greyson mutters, and I look at him as he leans over my chair.

"What is?" I ask as he pulls up another social media account, and there's another photo with a different young woman with long dark hair like the previous one and the same uncomfortable look on her face.

"Those photos are two years apart, and it's the same facial expression. Does he have another?" Greyson asks, more to himself as he starts typing away while I glance up to look as Nika eyes me. I feel like she might be mad at me for siding with Zora on the "no stabbing the customers" rule.

"Fucking shit," Greyson sighs, and I know what he's found.

"It's her, isn't it?" I ask, feeling nauseous. Greyson nods before moving to show me the photo on the screen. It's weird seeing Stevie with long black hair. I look at how she's standing, so proper and tense, with the tightest smile and nervous eyes. I glance at the caption, and I have to force down the growl.

Puppet begged like a good girl, so I gave her a set.

Gave her a set? I look over the photo of her again and notice the redness on her face. *Her dimple piercings.* He gave her those. One of my favorite things about her, he gave her.

“You alright?” Greyson asks. I glance at him and shake my head.

“No, man, I don’t think I am.” I let out a dry laugh. “I think I need to figure out where he’s staying, and fucking end him.”

Greyson gives me a nervous laugh. “Brooks, I love you and will always be your alibi, bail, and lawyer. I will help you bury the body, but—”

“Who bury the body?” Nika’s voice causes a literal shriek to leave me.

“Nika! What the hell? You can’t just sneak up on people like that!”

“Why no? I sneak, and then I hear more. Now, who bury?” Her eyes focus on my screen, and I watch them narrow. “Kuja...” she hisses as she storms up next to me. “This the man! He hurt my Stefa! Where? You tell Nika where!” I look from the angry woman to Greyson, then back to her.

“Nika, with all due respect, I don’t think you should be involved in this.”

“No, involve? What is?”

Greyson chuckles as he sits backward on the chair next to mine to get closer to her eye level. “It means,” he smirks, shaking his head. “Don’t you have a sweater to kni—” Nika punches him in his throat faster than I could blink, and Greyson is left gasping for air.

“Jebi Se,” she spits at the sputtering man. “You think because Nika is old and you have the cock you know the best?” She laughs and shakes her head. “I was taking over the villages while your djed was making the mistake of not pulling out. Do not fuck with me, boy.” She warns through gritted teeth before making a motion with her head. “Now, get the fuck out. A woman is speaking.” Greyson stares at me before shaking his head and leaving the cafe.

“Nika,” I say slowly as she inspects her nails. I can’t believe I’m having to have a conversation like this with

Stevie's old grandmother. "You can't go around assaulting people."

"Really? I did. Now, no bury the body. Svinja."

"I... Nika, I don't speak Croatian."

"Ah... you Americans. Learn the one language and think you set for life. I know eight languages, and I own a donut shop. You work it the bodyguards, and you speak only the English?" I chuckle and shake my head.

"I speak Spanish. I said I didn't speak Croatian."

"Pfft. And why no? Croatian a good language!" Leaning back, I cross my arms over my chest and stare at the woman in amusement.

"Well, I've never needed to learn it."

"Well, now you do. Your girl is mostly Croatian, the parts that matter." She mutters the last part, and I snort out a laugh.

"Not a fan of Stevie's dad, huh?" She waves her hands dismissively.

"You no fan of expired meat. His meat expire long before his heart did." I turn in my chair and cough to hide my laugh.

"I'm sure he would appreciate being remembered so fondly."

"He do one good thing, and it take him a minute to do. I know this, it was between the commercial break of the spinning wheel show. You know the one? Guess the words and win the prizes. Zora think I can't hear, I hear all. She also bad faker," Oh my god, this woman has to stop. I'm going to die from laughing but also, I don't know how happy Stevie would be knowing I now know how she was conceived. "Man very dim in head, and he have the soft cock handshake. You no trust a man who puts a soft cock in your hand as introduction."

"Uhh... yeah," I laugh lightly. "I can honestly say I wouldn't want a soft cock in my hand." She nods before looking me up and down.

“Are you marrying my Stefa?” I nearly fall out of my chair at her question.

“Uhhh...” Laughing nervously, I look around for someone, *anyone*, to help me. Naturally, I’m left here alone with this psychotic old woman. “I wouldn’t say we are at the marriage portion of this relationship.” Man, is it getting hot in here?

“Relationship? You mean...” I watch realization dawn over her weathered face, and a devious smile emerges. “Ha! Zora! Mama right! The vision of the bear!”

I’m about to ask her what she is talking about when someone busts through the door. It’s fucking Vincent, and I jump to my feet instantly.

“Where is the bitch?” he snarls as he shoves Zora, who is walking out of the kitchen, into the counter.

“Hey!” I roar as I approach the would-be man and grab him by his shirt. “You seem to have a problem keeping your hands to yourself.”

Vincent spits in my face before smirking. “Could say the same for you. Putting your cock in my pussy.” He barks out a laugh, “Not that I did much in that nasty, broken thi—” I punch him across his face before dropping his unconscious body to the ground.

“Really? One punch?” That’s depressing. “Nika! NO!” I yell as I grab the old woman as she is charging Vincent with her cleaver.

“Ne Bear! He hurt my Stefa! I kill many men but none more worthy! You let me down!”

“Nika!” I say as I set her on her feet and grip her shoulders. “If anything happens to you, Stevie will die. I will handle Vincent.”

“What will you do?” Zora asks, pulling Nika to her side. I sigh as I grab my phone and tap out a text, telling Greyson to come back to the cafe.

“I don’t know, and it’s best that you two don’t find out.”

“Brooks,” I freeze at Nika, calling me by my name; it’s jarring. I look at the woman, and for the first time, I see a scared grandmother, and it’s heartbreaking. “I... I come from a time when men take what they wanted from the women. You keep head down and mouth shut. Only once for me, and then I took to the fights. I come here to the America to protect my bejbes. My Zora and later, Stefa. To know I failed my Stefa, and to know that coward is here, still taking...” she scoffs while shaking her head. “You no fail our girl. No other chances. You make him go, or you give him to me. This ends now.” It’s an odd conversation to have with your girlfriend’s mom and grandma while her ex is unconscious on the floor of their donut shop. But then again, nothing with my girl has ever been what you would consider “normal.” I give Nika a nod just as Greyson walks back in.

“You!” Nika huffs. “You no bury the body. That how you end up trading the cigarettes for chips!” Greyson looks from Nika to me, then to Vincent and back.

“Okay, I’m not sure what’s going on, but if that crazy woman punches me in the throat again, I’m going to be pissed.”



“Please!” Vincent screams through his snot and tears. “I-I don’t know why I’m here!”

“You haven’t even touched him yet.” Greyson sighs as if disappointed. Vincent has been in our holding room at the office for twenty minutes and is in near convulsions. I look from the cowering man to Greyson, who is leaning against the wall with a bored expression on his face.

“You know exactly why you’re here,” I sigh in agitation. “You won’t leave Stevie alone.” His sniveling stops, and he looks up at me.

“What the fuck did that bitch tell you? Because I haven’t been around her fat ass since—” I walk over and grip his throat with my hand. Vincent struggles against the cuffs, securing his wrists to the chair as he stares into my eyes.

“Call her that again, and I’ll break your fingers,” I warn lowly. “Do we have an understanding?” Vincent gasps in response, and I let his throat go.

“Now,” I crack my neck and knuckles before turning back to him. “I know you took advantage of Stevie when she apprenticed for you—”

“That’s bullshit!” He yells, spewing spit and snot everywhere. Deciding I’m going to have to get his attention, I walk up to him. Grabbing his hand, I take his pinky, and in one swift motion, it snaps. The sound causes Greyson to gag, and I roll my head to look at him in annoyance.

“Sorry,” he groans over Vincent. “You know I got a thing about that sound.” Vincent is screaming as loud as possible while thrashing his body around violently as he tries to break the cuffs. I roll my eyes before smacking him upside the head.

“Shut the fuck up, it was a pinky. Now, here’s how this is going to work. I am going to ask you questions, and you are going to answer them truthfully. Lie to me, and you’ll feel far worse pain than that pinky, got it?” Vincent nods frantically, and I give him a firm pat on the cheek. “Now,” I say slowly, “I know you took advantage of Stevie while she was apprenticing.” I eye him, waiting to see if he tries to lie, but he’s silent. “I want to know what you did to her.”

I hear Greyson’s shoes shuffle, and I look up to give him a warning look. I know it’s against the original line of questioning we discussed. It’s an invasion of Stevie’s privacy, and I’m not supposed to ask. But let’s face it, I’ve kidnapped and am torturing her abuser without her knowledge, so in for a penny and all that.

“Uhh..” Vincent shudders as he tries to put a sentence together. “I... I didn’t pay her. I t-talked down to her. I made her... oh god, I’m sorry.” He sobs, and I raise my brow.

“Made her what, Vincent? Made her fuck you? Made her suck your dick?” I growl through my clenched teeth. I know the answers to all these questions. Stevie told me some after I found him in the bathroom, attacking her in New Orleans, but I need him to say it. Confess his sins so that I can dole out the punishment he deserves. “Tell me, why is she afraid to have long hair?” Fear oozes from his grey eyes, and I hear the sound of liquid hitting the floor beneath him, a dark patch growing on his crotch. Oh, for fucksake, the bitch has pissed himself.

“I-I used to grip her to... to make her—” I cut off his confession by snapping his ring finger. His screams reverberate through the room. It’s soundproof. The room’s purpose is to talk with high-profile clients, but it works for this, too, I suppose.

“I told you the truth!” He screams out.

“I appreciate that. And to show my appreciation, I left your eyes alone. Now, why are you here?”

“Fuck you,” he snarls, and I’m about to break another digit when my phone rings again. I look at it and sigh before turning to Greyson.

“I’ll be back,” Walking out of the room before answering the phone. “Peaches, what’s up beautiful?”

“Brooks, where in the fuck are you?” She sounds annoyed, and I chuckle lightly.

“Missing me already, baby?” I purr, causing her to sputter and huff.

“No! You just left, and I’m stunned at how long you’ve gone without checking on me.” How long has it been? Fuck, I’ve been so focused on Vincent I lost track of time.

“I had some things I had to take care of at the office. Besides, you said I was up your ass, so I’m giving you space.”

“I’m over the space now.” She mutters, and I chuckle while leaning against the wall.

“What’s up, baby?” I ask. and she sighs in annoyance.

“Fine. I’m sorry I jumped your ass about being up mine. I want you to come back home.” Home. I love that she is referring to my house as home. Glancing back at the door to the interrogation room, I let out a breath. “Okay, I’ll be home soon. Just rest, baby.” Hanging up the phone, I walk back into the room to find Vincent with a rag shoved in his mouth. I raise a brow at Greyson, who shrugs.

“Brooks, he wouldn’t shut up. I was getting a headache.” Nodding, I walk up to Vincent, cracking my knuckles and grabbing another finger.

“Now, why are you here?” I ask again before removing the rag.

“I need... a hospital.” I roll my eyes. This can’t be real. Two broken fingers, and he needs a hospital? My mind goes to Stevie and the pain she must’ve endured from him, both physical and psychological. I think of Zora being shoved so carelessly into the counter. He’s hurting the women that matter most to me, and I feel myself snap. The adrenaline and anxiety overflow, and before I realize I’m doing it, I take my gun from its holster and aim it at his knee.

“Answer me, or you will need a hospital!” I shout in a voice I barely recognize. I should put one in his fucking skull. How dare he? How fucking dare he touch my girl? Scare my girl. I’ll kill him and not lose a second of sleep. The trembling man lets out a sob as he rolls his head back.

“I came to get Stevie to take down the videos. She’s fucking ruining me! I told you the truth at your house! No one will work with me because of that cow!”

I hold my hand out to Greyson, who walks over and places a suppressor into it. Sure, the room is pretty much soundproof, but I don’t want Greyson or me to lose our hearing over this waste of space.

“Alright, Vincent, here’s how it’s going to go,” I say as calmly as my adrenaline-fueled voice will allow while screwing the suppressor onto my pistol. “You’re going to forget about Stevie, forget she ever existed. You’re going to leave this state and start a new life, a better, more charitable

life. And I know you will do this because I will ensure someone is always in the shadows watching you. You'll never know who it is. It could be your best friend, the love of your life, anyone. And the moment you waver even slightly," I set the suppressor on the top of his hand and pull the trigger, shooting him clean through the palm. "I'm going to be there to end you," I grab the screaming man by the back of his head while ramming the suppressor into his mouth and glaring deep into his watery eyes. "You touched my girl, Vincent, and I don't like it when people play rough with what's mine. So now, you lost your hand privileges." I smell the literal shit and roll my eyes. "Fucking bitch," I snarl, ripping the gun out of his mouth, breaking teeth along the way. I drop the gun on the table before looking at Greyson.

"I got it," He states, shooing me off. "You need to take a breath before going home."

I walk out of the room and down the hall to the locker area to clean up and calm down before heading home to Stevie.



I jump at the tapping on my driver's window. *When had I driven home? How long have I been out here?* I turn off my Jeep and slide out of the seat, my eyes meeting hers. The sun is setting behind me, casting her in pretty gold and pink hues. She's so fucking beautiful.

"Brooks," she says softly, her face twisted in concern. "Sweetheart, what's wrong?" Sweetheart. I've never had a pet name from a girl. I don't look the type I would assume. But she's calling me Sweetheart. It melts me.

I reach out and slip my hands carefully around her waist as I pull her to me.

"I like you," I whisper into her neck. "So fucking much, baby." I feel her wrap her arms around me tightly as she pulls

my face to look at her.

“What happened?” She asks, and I shake my head. I can’t tell her what I did. I can’t tell her because I can’t have her look at me in fear. Stevie’s face softens as she reaches up and kisses my lips.

“I like you too. Now come inside.” I nod and follow her into the house with a feeling of dread in my gut. I’ve never shot a man before or shoved a barrel in a man’s throat. But with Vincent, there was no hesitation. For Stevie, I would do anything. But my fear is, will this come back on me?

STEVIE

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“So, how are you feeling?” Brooks’ sister, Tyler, asks as she, Spence, and I move around in the kitchen at Nuts About Dough. The café is closed, and I volunteered to take them here so we could work on baking Brooks’ birthday cake.

“I feel pretty good. A little discomfort if I move too fast, but I’m happy with the healing time after a month.” Tyler wheels over to our commercial fridge and sighs longingly.

“This would be my dream, just to bake all day.”

“Not me,” Spence snorts. “This is quite literally torture. I would rather buy a pre-made cake.”

“Pre-made cakes taste like ass,” I state as I turn on the standing mixer. “Plus, you get to add all the amazing extras to make this cake perfect for you. Every flavor has a personality. The fun part is mixing them to find what matches the customer.”

“Precisely!” Tyler beams, wheeling back over with ingredients in her lap.

“So, how are things in the piercing world?” Spence asks, and I know my flinch is noticeable.

“I would rather be baking cakes,” I state softly as I hand the mixing bowl to Tyler.

“So why don’t you?” Tyler asks. “It’s not like you have to be a piercer.”

“My mom couldn’t afford me full-time. And while I’m not overly excited to return to full-time piercing, I would miss my friends if I left completely. Though, I might not have much choice if the hate doesn’t stop. I don’t want Hel’s to be dragged into it, you know?” Guilt fills me with the thought of leaving my closest friends but also staying and having them deal with my problems.

“Do you like piercing?” Tyler asks while patting the pans of cake batter against the counter to release the air bubbles.

I give her a half-shrug. “It’s not my dream job, but I love my friends.”

“Your friends wouldn’t want you to do that job if you weren’t happy,” Spence states as she dips a pinky in the batter, causing Tyler to smack her sister away.

“My annoying sister is right,” Tyler says, while trying to blow a fallen lock of hair out of her face. “They’re your friends. They love you and want you to be happy.”

“It’s not that simple,” I sigh as I sit on the stool. I may be feeling better, but I’m definitely not 100%, and any activity wears me out quickly. “If I left, they would have no piercer.”

Spence raises a brow. “So train one, hire one, go part-time, and have limited piercing days.” She waves her hand to stop me before I can speak. “I know what you’re doing, Stevie. This one right here has the same condition.”

“Condition?” I look to Tyler, who gives her sister an irritated look before Spence continues.

“Yeah, you are both chronic people pleasers. You will sit there and be miserable just so that someone else doesn’t have to feel uncomfortable. Perfect example. Tyler here has loved your donut shop for years. Never came in, though, because it’s not wheelchair accessible, and she didn’t want to be a bother.”

“Spencer!” Tyler gasps as her cheeks flush red. Her anger waves her off before pinning me with her chocolate eyes.

“Stop worrying about what others think. This is your life, Stevie. Stop wasting it, pleasing everyone else.” We get back to baking Brooks’ cake, but Spencer’s words replay over and

over again, making me wonder, is this life the one I want? And if not, what do I want?



“Stevie!” Atlas cries as he embraces me. “Oh, my god! We missed you!” I laugh as I pat the man on the arm before looking at everyone, all my closest friends. Well, except for two. Janie and Fox still aren’t back from Florida, but should be soon, and we are all hoping and praying they come back as a plus one. I spot Sadie talking with Nix and wave to the girl.

“Sadie, can I talk to you?” She nods and follows me back to the piercing area, her eyes wide and round behind her glasses.

“Yes, Stevie?” She asks, and I hear the nervousness in her voice. I give her a reassuring smile.

“Wanna learn how to be a body piercer?” I watch as her eyes brighten, and the biggest smile appears on her face. I know that smile. I remember having the same smile when Mama and Baka would spend the weekends teaching me how to bake and decorate.

Wait, is... is that where I really feel like myself? I look around the shop. I love it here because of the people I work with, but I don’t leave here feeling happy or fulfilled.

“Really? You want to be my mentor?” Sadie’s excited voice pulls me back into the present, and I smile at her.

“Sadie, do you want this? Really, truly want this?”

“Oh, more than anything! I want to be a piercer and tattoo artist with all my heart!” She smiles so brightly.

“It won’t be easy, babe,” I warn, and her smile only intensifies.

“The things worth having are never the easiest to achieve.”



“Baby, are you sure you want to do that?” Brooks stops tending to one of his massive plants, a philodendron of some kind, but I’m not sure. The other day, he tried to tell me the names, and I glazed over.

Looking up from *Scorpion’s Siren*, I give him a nod. “I love Hel’s, and I love the family I formed there, but my heart isn’t in it, and this year, with my illness, Vincent, the people online, and us. I just realized my happiness is elsewhere.” Dropping his hose, Brooks makes his way over to me. His shirt clings to him like a second skin from the yard work he’s been doing. I smirk as he reaches my lounging chair and plucks my book out of my hand. He studies over it for a moment before raising a brow.

“So wait, he’s fucking her in the ass, her pussy, *and* using his tail to stimulate the clit?” I chuckle while snatching the book back.

“Aror is gifted. He’s also using his pincers to stimulate her nipples.”

“Way to be an overachiever,” He mutters, and I burst out laughing. Brooks kneels next to my lounge and *holy shit... is he?* I watch as he lowers my shorts, taking my underwear with him.

“Brooks,” I hiss, looking around. “We are in the backyard! You have neighbors!”

“Mhm,” he mumbles distractedly as he kisses my inner thigh. “Rose and Vernon, nice people.” I gasp as his tongue flicks across my center. “I would rather that not be our conversation, though.”

“Then what conversation do you want to have?” I pant as I lay the lounge flat and allow my legs to fall to the side. It hits

me suddenly that I may be lightly spotting still. It's not much, but I don't want him to go down on me and get freaked out. "Oh fuck! Brooks, I might still be--"

"Jesus fucking Christ," He growls in irritation before driving his face right into my pussy, his tongue penetrating my core. I moan loudly at the act and lean on my elbows to better watch him as he grips, licks, and sucks my clit.

"Brooks!" I cry out while he continues to lick me and play with my piercing. I whine louder as I arch into him. He growls in approval while moving his mouth faster.

"Oh god," I pant as I feel the tightness forming. He gives me one more hard suck, and I lose it. Screaming his name, I tightly grip the back of his head as I move against him, exploding on his mouth and tongue.

Once licked clean, Brooks slips my shorts back up my legs and leans over me, smiling like an idiot.

"I may not have two cocks, or a tail and pincers, but I think I still got you seeing stars." I playfully smack him before pulling him down for a kiss. I love how he kisses me, like each time he's cherishing it, cherishing me. That's all this man does, is cherish me, over and over again.

"I love you." As soon as I say it, I slap my hand over my mouth and stare at him, my eyes wide. He looks at me in just as much shock, and I know I have to get out of here. Standing, I start walking towards the house.

"Stevie, wait!" He calls, running up to me.

"Nope! I can't talk right now. I completely forgot I need to take care of--"

"Hey! Hey!" He stands in front of me. "Peaches, you ain't dropping that and walking away. Settle down."

"I didn't mean to say it!" I snap, feeling overwhelmed and itchy.

"Because it scares you or because it's not true?" He asks, and god damn it.

“You know which.” I snip as he steps closer, invading my space.

“Say. It.” He orders through clenched teeth.

“Because it scares me,” I admit, watching as he nearly falls to his knees.

“Good,” he breathes as a small smile forms on his face.

“Good? Why is that... *How* is that good?”

“Because I can handle scared. If you’re really in love with me, that’s all I need to know. I will do whatever I have to in order to help take that fear away, but first, I had to know if I was the only one fighting for something here.”

“No,” I choke out while stepping into his embrace. “You’re not the only one fighting, Brooks. I am in love with you, but that fear... I’m afraid it’s too much.”

He gives me a small laugh before kissing the top of my head. “It’s alright, we’ll work on it together.”

BROOKS

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I stretch, allowing my body to slowly wake up from sleep. Opening one eye, a literal shriek escapes me as I'm met with a familiar pair of blue eyes mere inches from my face.

"What the fuck!" I yell, clutching my chest as Stevie starts cackling.

"Happy birthday!" She grins, and I give her a dry look.

"So what? You thought cardiac arrest would be a great way to ring in thirty-nine?" I watch her bite her bottom lip before leaning over and kissing my lips softly.

"I mean, I thought that getting your heart pumping might be beneficial."

"Oh?" I breathe as she rakes her teeth over my neck while she straddles my lap. "And how do you propose we accomplish this?" I place my hands on her hips, and a realization hits me. She has nothing on but a shirt. I see her mischievous grin and pull her to me. I kiss her pillowy lips and my hands run under her shirt, reveling in how her soft body feels. Her skin is like silk, so smooth and delicate. My hands reach her large breasts that are hanging naturally without the support of a bra, which is perfect. I love her sexy bras, but fuck, there is something about having her natural and easily accessible that calls to me on a primal level. She lets out the smallest whine that flips the switch in me, and before I can register it, I'm ripping her shirt off and moving to her now

exposed tits while she pulls my rock-hard cock out of my pajama pants, rises up, and impales herself on me.

“Fuck!” I groan loudly, rolling my head back while thrusting into her tight, wet pussy. “Oh my god,” I watch in slack-jaw amazement as she moves up and down while grinding against me. Her tits bounce with every movement, and the act is so sinfully erotic, I don’t know if I should worship her, devour her or weep. “Best birthday ever.” I joke as I grip her waist, rolling us so I’m on top. I grip her soft legs behind the knees and spread her wider as I drive deep inside her again and again.

“Ah! Y-Yes! Brooks!” She cries, her nails digging into my forearms. I love the pain. I welcome it as I rotate my hips, causing her back to arch as she lets out a ragged scream, and I feel her walls tensing around my cock. I’m so fucking close, and her contracting pussy will be my undoing.

“Come for me, Stevie,” I growl through my pants while moving so we are eye to eye. “I feel those walls squeezing my cock. Let go and come for me. Now.” I watch her eyes roll back in her head and she explodes, screaming my name to the heavens. I follow shortly after, my cock only allowing another two pumps before I fill her completely.

I lean over her, nipping her chin and neck as I remove myself from inside her. “I love you,” I whisper against her skin. Her body stiffens, and I shake my head. “I don’t need you to say it back, baby. I just needed to say it.”

“So, what do you have on the agenda today?” She asks, and I pause my descent to her glorious tits to look at her.

“This, right here, all day and all night.” Stevie snorts and flicks my head.

“Cute, but you know the Hel’s crew, Greyson, my family, and yours are all coming over this afternoon.” My face falls momentarily before I shrug.

“Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve had to keep your ass quiet,” I smirk while tickling her sides.

“S-stop!” she laughs while shoving me off and standing up. “Well, if you’re not planning anything, I’m kicking you out after breakfast.”

“W-what? Why? I told you what I want to be doing today! You!” She laughs while patting me on my shoulder as if what I’m saying is cute.

“You did me. Now it’s time to play with your friends so I can prepare this place.”

“But you’re the only one I wanna play with,” I pout, before sucking one of her nipples into my mouth.

“Dawson!” she scolds while pulling away. “Go take a shower and calm down.”

“Better idea!” I hop off the bed and move in front of her. “You and I take a shower together! It’s a tradition!”

“Tradition?” she says, unamused. I nod quickly. “Brooks, this is the first birthday I’ve celebrated with you!”

“Right, well, a tradition has to start somewhere.”



“Again!” Greyson calls, and I step into my jab before throwing a cross and finishing with a roundhouse kick to his side. Greyson grabs my foot and pulls me off balance before sending me to the floor and locking me into an arm bar. Cursing, I smack his thigh, signaling I’m tapping out. He releases me and helps me back to my feet.

“You’re getting flabby there, birthday boy,” Greyson taunts as he throws me a water bottle. “Too many of your workouts on your back recently?” He suggests with a smirk. I glare at him before sitting on the mat in the dojo we frequent.

“Shut up,” I grumble, pouring the water over my head. “I can still whip your sorry ass.”

Greyson snorts, “Right, that will remain your delusion.” He winks as I flip him off. “Seriously, what’s up with you? Usually, you last longer than thirty seconds.” His phone dings, and I roll my eyes at the name. *Leah*.

“I’m not talking to you until you stop fucking my little sister,” I mutter, and Greyson shakes his head.

“Trust me, if your sister were offering, I wouldn’t be here with you. What is with this ‘talking’ thing? She just asked how I was doing. I’m horny, that’s how I am. But if I say that, it’s wrong.” He whines as if he’s insulted or creeped out by it.

“Well gee, I guess Pip is just a nice person, damn her. Now, lose her number.”

“I would,” he sighs dramatically. “But you know—”

“Careful,” I warn, chucking my bottle at him. “So Stevie told me she loves me,” I admit, staring at my hands resting between my knees.

“Look at you! Only took forty years to get a woman to fall for you.” He marvels, and I drive my fist into his thigh.

“You know what? Why do I even talk to you?” Greyson shrugs.

“Apparently, I just have one of those faces that make people want to talk to me.” He mutters, looking at his phone again and curling his lip. “She sent me a picture of her holding a puppy? Why?”

I snatch his phone, look at the photo of Pip with the puppy, and roll my eyes before sending her a selfie of me scowling in response. “There, now she’ll leave you alone,” I say, tossing the phone at him.

“Dude, that was the worst cock block—”

“It’s. My. Little. Sister.”

“She’s in her thirties, hardly a baby. Hell, she has a baby.” I raise a warning brow, but Greyson shakes his head. “I would never down a woman for having a child. I’m just saying, you act like I’m going after a teenager.”

“No, you’re going after my emotionally shredded little sister, whose husband was a piece of shit, and left her alone and pregnant. She had to pick everything up and come all the way back home. She is not looking to get her heart broken again.”

“Brooks!” Greyson laughs nervously. “Bud, I’m not into Pip that way, I promise. Listen, if it’s really bothering you that much, I’ll stop talking to her, alright? Trust me, I’m not looking for all that. I just like her ass.”

“Get back on the mat,” I growl. “I’m beating your ass.”



“What the fuck,” I mutter to myself while pulling into my driveway. At least, I think it’s my driveway. Getting out of my Jeep, I stare at all the streamers, balloons, and the massive yard sign with a... rubber fucking duck on it.

“A fucking rubber duck. What the actual fuck, Peaches.” I mutter as I walk into my house.

“Happy Birthday!” is the loud chorus that rings through and I shake my head.

“Why are you all wearing rubber duck shirts?” I ask before my eyes land on Derek. “Oh, not you, too?”

“Look, I’m just as disgusted with myself, but she made me.” he states, gesturing to Indy, who looks like a kid in a candy shop.

“And who looks the absolute handsomest?” She squeezes Derek’s cheeks, and he groans in annoyance.

Walking to the kitchen, I spot my mom, Tyler, and Stevie. All three are working with Nika and Zora to prep the food and make last-minute touches on my cake. My yellow rubber fucking duck birthday cake. When will it end?

“You got jokes, Peaches. I’ll give you that.” I chuckle, walking up to kiss her but stopping myself. She and I haven’t kissed in public. Hell, my side of the family was told a lie about our dating, and her friends don’t even know.

“You kiss Stefa or just stare at her like she food?” Nika scolds, causing heat to flood my cheeks as I stare at Stevie.

“I, uh, just didn’t want to inter–mmff.” Stevie’s mouth tastes like frosting, and fucking Christ, I want to consume her. I grip her cheek as I slip my tongue into her sweet mouth and nearly moan at the welcoming of her tongue against mine.

“I’m going to vomit!” Tyler groans, causing Stevie to break away, her face turning a stunning shade of red.

“Sorry,” she apologizes, and I glare at my sister before spinning Stevie around and tucking a turquoise lock of hair behind her ear. I let out a breathy chuckle while taking my thumb and brushing the flour off her cheek.

“Don’t be sorry. You can put your tongue down my throat anytime. Bug can take off if she doesn’t like it.”

“Shut up. Our parents are right there.” She mutters, and Nika scoffs.

“Not first time around a man bejbe. At least he good. Now your mama’s man,” she shudders, and Zora gasps.

“Mama!” she hisses, her cheeks going red before the two of them start shouting in Croatian.

“What are they saying?” I whisper to Stevie.

“It’s ummm... better you don’t know.” She gives me a quick peck on the cheek. “Your shirt is on your bed.” My face falls.

“Oh, Stevie, no.” I groan as she beams up at me before patting my ass.

“Go on, you can’t be the odd man out.”



“Man,” Atlas sighs while looking over my yard. “This is beautiful. Oh, Howie, don’t eat that!” I watch as his toddling boy tries to lick the rocks on my water feature. Atlas scoops him up and looks around. “Okay,” he laughs. “Mommy didn’t see that, so Daddy isn’t in trouble. Anyway, this yard is really amazing.” I nod as we head back to the group set up in my yard. All are sitting around as the sun is beginning to set.

“Thanks, I enjoy it. There are a few new plants I’m trying to get in here,” I tell him and sit down next to Stevie, who is feeding Ash and Sunday’s baby girl, Evie. “But it’s becoming a pain to get healthy ones imported.”

“Why not call the woman who helped you before?” Stevie asks, and I shake my head.

“She’s been gone for years,”

“Good land,” Nika says approvingly. “Like... jungle.” She eyes Stevie and Zora, who both give her a groan. I make a mental note to ask Stevie about it later.

“How are things with the social media?” Sunday asks from her spot on Ash’s lap.

“Alright, I guess.” Stevie stands up as she puts Evie over her shoulder to burp her. “I try to stay off as much as possible, but the hate emails and people going to Nuts or Hel’s seem to have slowed down. The convention is going to be the real test, though.” We all fall silent. I would give my left nut to get her to cancel going. I know she won’t, though. It would kill her to not follow through with her commitments or to let someone down.

Atlas looks up from his spot on the ground with Howie and Ren. “Well, you know you’ll be safe at the convention with us there, Stevie. Nobody is going to hurt you.”

“Yeah,” Ren nods. “Plus, didn’t your old mentor get pulled from the convention? So you won’t have to worry about him either.” I shift uncomfortably as my eyes briefly lock with Nika’s. Nika gives me the slightest shake of the head before looking away. Stevie doesn’t know about Vincent’s visit to the donut shop or my questioning him afterward. I’m not thrilled with keeping it from her, but I also don’t want her to worry unnecessarily. It’s over, and he’s out of her life for good.



“Did you have a good birthday?” Stevie asks, while cleaning up the kitchen. I walk up behind her and wrap my arms around her soft waist, nuzzling her neck and inhaling her scent.

“Mhm,” I mutter, inhaling again. It’s been a long night, and while I love everyone for coming out, my social battery is drained, and I just want to hold Stevie and ground myself.

“I still have to give you my present,” she laughs, and I shake my head.

“You gave me enough. Now, hold still, I’m enjoying this.” I mumble before whining when she wiggles free.

“Come on, Dawson,” she laughs as she drags me outside. We walk to my Jeep, and I raise a brow.

“What?” I ask, and she motions to the driver’s door. Walking around, I freeze at the yellow rubber duck with black sunglasses perched on my side mirror. I pick him up and see the paper under him.

Smile, I love you.

Xoxo Peaches

My head whips to look at her, and I notice her nervous posture.

“D-Do you like it? I know it’s cheesy, but—” I cut her off with a kiss.

“You have no idea,” I breathe, kissing her again. “How much I love this.” I pull her into the house before closing the door, my tongue forcing its way into her mouth. She moans at my rough need, and I devour the sound. “Brooks,” she pants between kisses as I slide down her pants before unbuckling my jeans.

I walk us to the couch and bend her over the arm. “Does that hurt?” I ask gently, trying to make sure not to hurt her incisions. They’re healed, but I know too much pressure can cause her discomfort. She shakes her head and moans as my hand makes contact with her bare ass. “That’s my girl. Give me those sexy noises.” I run my fingers up and down her slit before plunging them deep inside. “Holy shit, wet already, baby?” I muse, and before she can make some witty remark, I drop to my knees and bury my face in her pussy. I release a growl at her soft moans before smacking her ass again.

“Oh fuck,” she whines while I massage her ass cheek and flick my tongue over her sexy as fuck clit piercing. “Fuck me, fuck me.” She chants, and I release a soft chuckle.

“Greedy little pussy you got here, baby.” I grip her hips to angle her better and moan out as her body shudders while she accepts my cock. I waste no time, not even a second, to allow her a breath before pulling back and driving deep inside her, again and again.

“Brooks!” She screams my name to the heavens, and my god, it’s the sweetest sound. She grips the couch for dear life, her knuckles going white as I fuck her with more force than I ever remember using before. She screams in both pain and pleasure, mewling for me to give her more. And I do. I’ll give her anything, everything. All she has to do is ask. “Oh god!” she yells, and I feel her coming undone around my cock. I refuse to stop, not until I’ve given her every ounce of pleasure her glorious body can handle.

“Fuck, your pussy is perfection,” I growl, grinding against her. “You are perfection. I’m fucking addicted to you, Stevie, and I will never quit you. Ever.” I feel her tensing again, and I grip her thighs, spreading her further as she tries to tense up. “I love everything about you, Stevie,” I pant, my balls tense as I feel myself creeping towards the edge, ready to fall over with her.

“I-I... I love you, too! Oh, no...” she screams, and I slam her to me as I feel myself come with her. Her body shivers with aftershock as we come back down. Pulling myself out of her, I spin her around and she kisses me before I can say anything.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“For what?” I chuckle, still enjoying my high.

“For being too scared to admit how I felt about you for so long.”

I smile as I tuck a lock of hair behind her ear. “It’s alright Peaches, I already knew you were crazy about me—Ow!” I laugh when she pinches me.

“Such a pain in my ass,” she laughs while leading me to my bedroom. Wait, my bedroom?

“Baby, if you’re wanting another round, I’m going to need water, some cake, and like.... eight to fifteen minutes.”

“Oh my god, shut up!” She says in fake annoyance. “I want to go to sleep!”

My cocky demeanor free-falls, and I stare at her, eyes wide. “Sleep? In... in here? With me?”

“Yeah, with you. Don’t make it a big deal. I’m nervous enough.” Other than the time I crashed at her place after she posted the second video, we’ve never actually slept together and while I’ll be completely chill on the outside, inside, fuck yeah, I’m making this a massive fucking deal.

I give her a neutral look and a noncommittal shrug. “I mean, sure. Whatever you want. No biggie.” Stevie snorts out a laugh and shakes her head as she crawls into my bed.

“You’re about as smooth as sandpaper, Dawson.”

“Fair observation,” I state while removing my shirt and crawling into the bed with her. She molds to me like we’ve spent a lifetime doing it, making my heart skip over itself. I hear her chuckle and look down at her.

“What?” I ask nervously, and she shakes her head.

“You just fucked the holy hell out of me while we were wearing rubber duck t-shirts.”

“Yeah, well, when I replay it in my head, you’re going to be in that skull bra I love, and I’ll be bare-chested.” She shakes her head again before pressing her lips to my pec.

“Nah, I like the original.”

STEVIE

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“I am so excited!” I squeal while hugging Janie to me. Janie and Fox just returned from Florida, and today is their first day back at Hel’s, and Janie is pregnant. The treatments and transfers were successful, and everything went smoothly for the first time since they started trying for a baby. “How do you feel?”

“Tired,” she laughs lightly. “And nervous, I’m constantly afraid, but the little Bean has a steady heartbeat, so I’m trying to hold on to that. Other than that, the morning sickness hasn’t been too bad, and I don’t really have any super weird cravings.”

“Yeah,” Fox scoffs. “You just need an entire bottle of hot sauce on everything.” Janie rolls her eyes at her husband.

“I can’t help what Bean wants! Besides, you will gladly get me hot sauce. I don’t see you over here forming a human ear.” Fox sighs before wheeling his chair over to Janie and kissing her stomach.

“Give your mommy heartburn tonight, okay?” Janie smacks him away.

“Don’t tell them that! What if they listen?” Fox shrugs before going back to packing up supplies for the convention this weekend.

“Then I guess you were successful in your ear-forming capabilities.”

“Well, I’m ecstatic,” Atlas beams. “Our kiddos need a new playmate.” He smiles, gesturing to Ash. “Plus, we are going to look hot as fuck with these babies.”

“You are all married,” Indy states, and Atlas huffs.

“Yeah! Hot to our wives. Just because you are still trying to woo your man doesn’t mean I’ve stopped with Ren! She expects to blush daily.” I look from Atlas to Janie and notice her giving me *the look*. We all know the “Mama J” look. She knows something is on my mind, and she’s about to—

“Out with it, Stevie.”

“O-out with what?” I ask, playing dumb, hoping she is done with this. The redhead scowls while crossing her arms over her chest. Sighing, I look at everyone, my closest friends, the people who helped me along my journey to heal. I feel the stinging in my eyes as I look at Janie. Her annoyed face softens, and I know she knows.

“I’m sorry,” I croak out, and Janie walks over, wrapping me in a hug.

“Babe, all I want is for you to be happy. You will always have a place here, even if it’s limited.”

“What’s up?” Fox asks, and I take a breath and look at my people.

“I love you all so much, and I will treasure the time I’ve spent here, but I think I’m ready for the next phase in my life. So, I want to take a more part-time role as the piercer here and mentor Sadie.”

Atlas looks from me to Sadie, who is nearly vibrating. “You sneaky bastard,” he whispers. “You actually got one of us to mentor you.”

Sadie shrugs, “There was no hope. One of you was gonna give. I was just worried it would be Nix.”

“Oi!” the silver-haired man calls from the drawing station. “Ya know, I sit here and act a proper gent and still get fucked.”

“I’m not talking to you, Crumpet!” Atlas yells across the shop.

“Yeah? Well, maybe we should. After all, you didn’t invite me to the birthday party.” My face falls, and I look at Atlas.

“You said he was sick.” I hiss under my breath.

“He is,” Atlas taps his temple. “In the head.”

“At,” Fox groans, and Atlas waves him off.

“Anyway, I, for one, can’t wait to see what adventures you get into, Stevie.” he wraps me in a hug, and I can’t help but smile in his embrace. Atlas gives some of the best hugs you’ll ever receive. “I do still expect my standing order from Nika, though.” He whispers into my hair.

I will miss this group, but I know it’s not goodbye, and I know that this new path I’m taking is the right one for me.



“Listen,” Brooks’ voice purrs in my ear, and I can’t help the grin forming on my face. “Meet me in room 1412 in ten minutes.” I turn around and smack his arm.

“Stop it, we are at a convention!” I push at his chest, but he leans against it and whines.

“I know, but you in those tight jeans and that halter top are doing things to me.”

“Well, you’re going to have to do things to yourself. I gotta work the table.” I laugh at his pout as I finish setting up the displays. I know Brooks is acting extra flirty because I’m nervous, and he knows it. Hell, I’ve had to pee for two hours and have been holding it because I’m too afraid to go to the bathroom. The convention is busy, and the guys are all busy with clients and vloggers.

Meanwhile, the piercing side has been a little less than popular, and I’m not sure if that’s due to my videos or the giant scowling man who snarls at anyone who gets near the

booth. I won't tell him to leave, though. I can't. His massive stature and angry expression are the only things keeping me together.

"I love you," I whisper, reaching up on my toes and kissing his tense jaw. Instantly, he softens and looks at me, his beautiful eyes holding so much warmth and sincerity.

"I love you t—"

"Brooks," a voice interrupts. Brooks looks up, and I turn to see a familiar officer, Kevin Garrett, and a female cop I don't know.

"Yes?" Brooks says slowly.

"Kevin!" Janie calls. "You come to get something added to that piss ant tattoo? Gonna nut up and get a period at the end of that quote?" Kevin gives the redhead a dry look before turning back to us.

"Brooks," Kevin sighs apologetically. *What is going on?* "I know you, man, so if you can just walk out with us, we don't have to make a show of it."

"Wait, what?" I say loudly as I push myself between the officers and Brooks. "Why? Why are you making him leave? He's been with me the whole time!" I raise my voice to get the gang's attention and note Fox and Janie heading over.

"What's going on, Kevin?" Fox asks, and I notice Brooks is trying to push me towards him.

Kevin shakes his head. "Brooks, you're under arrest for the kidnapping, assault, and attempted murder of Vincent Landry. You have the—"

"What!?" I scream, and as Kevin moves to grab his cuffs, I shove him away.

"Hey!" the female cop barks. "That is an assault on an officer!" She reaches for her cuffs, and Brooks holds his hand out.

"Leave her alone. I'll go with you." He turns to me with an apologetic look. "I love you. Stay with Fox, you hear me?" I nod numbly as I watch Brooks walk out of our booth.

“Brooks!” Janie calls to his retreating figure. “Not a fucking peep until Frank gets there! I fucking mean it.” Janie puts her phone to her ear and walks away, leaving me standing in my booth with Fox, a thousand questions running through my mind and no one to answer them.



“You eat more!” Baka scolds me while waving her wooden spoon in the air.

“Baka,” I groan through my tears. “I am not hungry! Please! I need to figure this out.”

“Ahh.” She scoffs and looks at my mom and the large group. Everyone is here. The Hel’s gang, Brooks’ mom, sisters, and Greyson. “You see how she treat me? All day I work to give her the Pašticada, and she take two bites!”

“Mama,” my mom says softly, patting my Baka’s hand. “She’s under stress. Let’s all take a breath.”

I shake my head, letting out a sob, “I don’t understand! He didn’t do anything!” I smack the table in frustration before looking up at everyone, my vision blurry with hot tears. I look at Greyson, who is burning a hole into the floor, and ice runs through me. *Oh, my god. No.*

“Greyson and Janie,” I state firmly, walking behind the counter and into the kitchen. Once they walk in, I lunge at Greyson, beating his chest until Janie wraps her petite body around me to pull me back. I force myself to stop, not wanting to hurt Janie or the baby.

“What did he do?” I grit out as Greyson rubs the back of his neck.

“Stevie.”

“What did he do!?” I scream through my tears. I watch as the kitchen door opens, and Baka walks in.

“Budi tiho!” She hisses, looking from me to Greyson. “You lips loose like a whore,” she snaps before smacking him upside the head.

“I didn’t even say anything!” he growls, and she flicks her wrist dismissively.

“You no have to. You have the sinner’s eyes.”

“Baka,” I sob weakly as I drop to my knees in front of her. “What do I do? They’ll lock him up. This will destroy him and his family. I—”

“Stefa ne,” she grips my face firmly and looks into my eyes. I watch her demeanor soften, and she pulls my head into her chest, hugging me to her. “You listen to your Baka, yes? I take care of it. You no worry so much. You no talk to no one out of this room, yeah?” I nod, not ready to let her go. I want to ask her what she’s going to do. What can a crazy old Croatian woman do to help Brooks’ legal problems? But then again, I would be a fool to underestimate Nika Kovac.

BROOKS

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“I swear to Christ. Brooks, it’s just you and me here, bud.” Richard Franklin, otherwise known as Frank, says. Frank has worked with Janie and the shop in the past, so she sent him over here to help me.

“I ain’t your bud,” I grunt out. I’m not in the mood for this asshole. I’m starving, exhausted, and stressed the fuck out over Stevie. I’ve been in holding for a day? Two? I don’t fucking know. I can’t think straight. The woman I love is out there, and I don’t know if that fucker has found her and hurt her. I’m helpless, and I can’t save her.

“I’m the only fucking bud you got right now, Dawson,” Frank growls under his breath. I get the feeling he isn’t used to not having his ass kissed.

“I told you I ain’t talking until I know Stevie is and will remain unharmed.”

“And I told you she is fine,” he retorts.

“Well, call me crazy, but I’m going to require more proof than the word of California’s top defense attorney.” Frank shakes his head, letting out a chuckle.

“I am trying to find a way to get you out of this mess, and you’re focusing on seeing your girlfriend? Why not focus on getting the fuck out of here, and then you can see her?”

“Why are you so against me seeing her right now?” I raise a brow. Frank runs a hand through his thinning hair as he leans forward.

“You realize how fucked you are, right? No, don’t answer that. I’m going to assume you have enough brainpower to know. If I allow her to see you, you will blow any chance we have of you walking.” I lean back on the chair and shrug.

“Don’t see how that’s possible, being there is no chance of me walking until I see her.”



“Hi! You’ve reached Stevie! Leave a message, and I’ll get back to you!” I resist the urge I have to drive my fist into the phone before hanging it up and walking with the officer back to my cell. I take my spot on the bench and continue to stare at the same spot I’ve been staring at since I got here. Replaying the events of Vincent over and over again.

Attempted murder? I shot him in the hand. How is that attempted murder? Sure, I left him with Greyson, but I know he didn’t do anything.

If this is indeed an attempted murder, it means that Vincent is still alive. This makes an unsettling thought run through my head: What if the entire situation was staged with the sole purpose of trapping me within these walls so that he could get Stevie?

My heart stops as the helpless feeling consumes me once more. I can’t protect her. I can’t see her, can’t touch her. I can’t even get her or anyone on the fucking phone. No one will talk to me except for Frank, and Frank is the one person I don’t want to talk to until I know Stevie is okay.

STEVIE

CHAPTER TWENTY

Staring out the window of Brooks' Jeep, I try not to allow more tears to fall. It's been two days, but it feels like two years. I glance over at Greyson, who is driving me and Baka to see Frank. Apparently, Brooks isn't cooperating with Frank at all. Greyson said Frank can basically only get one thing out of him, and it's that he wants to see me. It's breaking my heart. I feel so much guilt over him being there because of me. I hate this.

So now, I'm going to Frank's office and demanding he take me to see Brooks. He needs to do whatever is necessary to get him out of this whole thing. I stare at the yellow duck on his dash and feel my lip wobble. *Stay strong, Stevie. He's going to get out of this.*

The three of us enter the luxurious, modern law office just as Frank is about to walk out.

"Mr. Franklin!" I call out, stopping the man. He turns and looks at me before shaking his head.

"You are not supposed to be out alone. How will I get him to talk to me if I can't verify that you are safe at the house?" I point behind me.

"I have people with me." Frank looks at Greyson and Baka before rolling his eyes.

"Let's go to my office."

The elevator ride is silent, as is the walk down the cold, sleek hallway to his surprisingly warm-looking office. Lots of

dark wood, books, and *is that a pothos?* I stare at the plant. It's a much smaller version than the massive one climbing up the tree at home, but it definitely looks like a pothos.

"Alright," he sighs, sitting in his leather chair behind his desk. "What can I do for you?"

"Is that a Pothos?" I ask, surprising everyone, including myself.

"I don't know," he says slowly. "My niece is a plant person. She got me a bunch for my office before closing her shop. It's the only one that's survived. Is that what you want to talk about?"

"Stefa have nothing to say," Baka speaks as she moves towards Frank's desk. I look at Greyson, but he's as confused as I am. "I am the one that shot Vincent. I shoot him, and I do it again. Now let the bear go."

"Baka!" I cry out, running towards her. "I'm sorry, Frank, she doesn't know—"

"Ah!" Baka yells and points her finger. "Stefa, I tell you to listen. You no listen, you go wait in the car." She turns back to Frank. "Let him out."

"Well, this has all been very entertaining, but I am not the one that put him in jail. I can't just let him out. Also, you coming here with your little old granny to fall on the sword isn't going to go over well when this goes to trial, so I suggest you leave this out."

Frank stands to leave when Baka pulls a gun from her bag and drops it on Frank's desk. "Oh my god," I slap a hand over my mouth.

"Smith and Wesson nine millimeter with suppressor," she points at the metal cylinder. "Vincent Landry abused my granddaughter, stole from her, attack her again last year, and then come back now." Did Brooks tell her about the New Orleans convention? "He come back, he make her life hell again. No one stop him. He come to my shop and assault *my* daughter." *Mama?* I whip my head to Greyson, who shakes his

head, telling me not to speak. “Yes, I shot him. Right through his worthless hand.”

Frank looks from the gun to Nika before sitting back down. “There is no record of a disturbance at your shop on the day in question, I’m assuming?”

“Why record? I take care of problem.” Frank looks from Baka to me and then lets out a small laugh.

“Vincent insists it was Brooks who did it. This could throw a wrench in it, create doubt.” He moves his head back and forth in thought. “Alright, I might be able to work with this. Let me make a call and see what I can do.”



“Brooks!” I run up to him as he walks down the steps of the police station. His head whips up, and I watch his whole body relax when his eyes lock on me.

“Oh my god,” he whispers as he runs to me, lifting me into his arms and spinning me around.

“Stop!” I laugh. “You’re going to hurt yourself!”

“Shut. The. Fuck. Up.” He says between each kiss. “I love you. God, baby, I love you.” I feel myself crying as I pull him tighter, fearing that if I let go, this will all go away, and he will still be in there.

“Come on,” I whisper, “Let’s get you home... and maybe a shower.” I wrinkle my nose as he laughs.

“Yes to both, please.”



“She took the blame?” Brooks asks as we lay in the bed together. Once we got home, we showered together. Then we ordered pizza, and have been eating pizza and cuddling in his bed since.

Nodding, I swallow my bite before answering. “Yeah, she had the gun,” I say, still in shock from it all. “She said that Vincent came in and attacked Mama.”

“Yeah, the prick pushed her into the counter.” I freeze at his words and raise a brow.

“Yeah, how did you know? Baka said she did this herself.” I watch as he flinches and mutters a “shit” under his breath.

“Alright, look, I was at Nuts with Greyson. Vincent showed up, shoved your mom, and said some shit about you. I freaked out and hit him. Your grandma was there and,” he gives me a pained look. “Stevie, she called me Brooks and got choked up.”

“Your name is Brooks,” I whisper softly, confused by his statement.

“Yeah! And when has she ever called me by my name? Never. But she did, and she looked at me and begged me for help. What was I supposed to do?”

“Oh my god,” I breathe out and stare at him. “You shot him in the hand?”

“Yes.” He says simply, no regret. “Stevie, I will do anything for you, and I mean that.” He leans in, his hand running up my neck. “I’m in love with you, and no one is going to hurt the woman I love and walk away.”

“You nearly went to prison,” I whisper, my heart pounding in my chest.

“Worth it. There is no punishment I could receive that would make me regret defending or protecting you.” He says softly as I lean in, kissing him. Straddling his lap, I wrap my arms around his neck to deepen the kiss.

“I am completely in love with you, Brooks,” I whisper softly as I cup his face in my hands. He gives me a small chuckle, and I cock my head to one side. “What?”

He gives me the sweetest kiss before his signature cocky grin appears. “I told you so.”

BROOKS

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Are you sure about this?” Leah asks as I sign the paper and hand it to the older woman across the counter to notarize it.

“Never been more sure of anything in my life.” I take the paper back, pay the woman, and Leah and I leave the office. It’s been two months since I was arrested, and while Stevie and I have our good days and days where we are ready to go at each other like cats and dogs, but we always sleep in each other’s arms every night. And that’s something I don’t want to lose, ever.

At first, I thought about proposing. I went ring shopping at least three times, but each time, I would stare at the rings, and all I could see was the look of panic on her sweet face. She would’ve felt trapped again under a man’s rule. I don’t ever want her to feel that way with me. I fear it’s starting to happen, though. Vincent is no longer an issue since he was found to be “falsifying police reports,” and several women in his home state are coming forward about the sexual, physical, and financial abuse they endured while apprenticing for him, so he’s been pretty busy elsewhere. With the threat gone, Stevie has been busy starting up a cupcake business with my sister, Tyler. I’ve noticed she’s been trying to find ways to become more independent. I caught her looking at apartments two weeks ago.

It gutted me, though I pretended not to be fazed. I get it, even before she told me it’s not because she doesn’t love me. She just needs a place that can’t be taken from her again. It’s

hard to handle hearing that, but I also realize that Stevie is someone who needs to see action, not just be told. So, this is me showing action.



After dropping Leah off at her apartment, I drive home and frown at the rental car in my driveway. Getting out of my Jeep, I cautiously walk into my unlocked house —god damn it, Stevie—and look around. I see Stevie’s turquoise hair in the backyard and head out the door.

“Stevie?” I call out, causing her to jump.

“Hey, sweetheart!” She waves, motioning for me to come over.

“Whose rental is in the— Holy shit,” I look at the massive potted plant sitting next to someone. “Oh my god, Rory?”

The silver-haired woman looks at me and grins brightly. “Jesus, Brooks, look at this place!” She leans in and hugs me. “You’ve kept everybody alive and thriving. Stevie here got you quite a gift.” She gestures to the plant – a philodendron ‘Jose Buono’. It’s the same plant I’ve been trying to obtain for a while now. I watch the plant’s leaves shimmer like a mosaic of emerald and cream in the sunlight. The variegated leaves temporarily hold my gaze. They’re massive, larger than my forearm.

“How...” I look at Stevie, who shrugs.

“What? Like you’re the only one with a special set of skills.” Rory chuckles at us as we head inside to talk. She tells me about her life on a ranch in Montana with her husband and their kids and that she started an online plant business there and ships all over, but when Stevie reached out and told her who she was buying the plant for, Rory made a special trip out here to hand deliver it.

We spent the day catching up, talking about plants, and discovering that Frank is Rory's uncle - small world. She left me with some instructions on the new plant and her info for her site, along with an invitation for us to visit anytime before we said our goodbyes.

I look at the beaming Stevie and kiss her. "You're so amazing." I smile.

"I know, and you better not kill it or any of these plants because you get all mopey when I move out."

"You could save my plants and me by just staying here," I suggest and watch her face fall.

"Brooks, I need—"

"I know, but what if you could get that here?" She furrows her brows.

"How? You own the house. You can quite literally hold this roof over my head."

I grab the envelope off the counter and hand it to her.

"What's this?" She asks, and when she opens it, a sob of surprise escapes her. "Brooks!" Her voice cracks as she looks at me, her eyes filling with tears. "You can't."

"I did," I say softly. "I want *you*, Stevie. I want to wake up to you every morning and sleep with you every night. Nothing in this world means more to me than you and your happiness, including this house. So, it's yours. The deed is yours. Now *you* have the roof, the security, and the power."

She's barely able to stand due to her sobs as she shakes her head in shock. "I am not worth this!"

"No," I state simply. "You're worth so much more. This is only a small gesture, something I thought would help you see that I don't want any power over you. I want to be *with* you. And, if you let me stay here, in your house, in your world, I promise I will spend all of my days making you see that you are worth everything to me. That there is no one above you. You own my heart and soul, baby... and now my home."

She gives me a strangled laugh before hugging me tightly. “Yes,” she whispers, pressing her lips to mine. “You can be my roommate.”

STEVIE

EPILOGUE

“3, 2, 1... done!” I say over Brooks’ overdramatic cries of pain as Sadie and I tag team his nipple piercings.

“My fucking christ! Ow! Stop it!” Brooks cries as he bats away Sadie.

“Stop being a baby and let her do her job.” Once Sadie is done, Brooks goes and looks in the mirror.

“I can’t believe I let you do this to me.” He groans as he looks over his new piercings.

“You lost the bet.” I shrug while tossing him his shirt.

“That’s not fair. I didn’t know you would cheat and have Ren get you passes.”

“It doesn’t matter how I got them. You said that there is no way I would get passes to Monster Smut Con. You lost.”

“So now I have sore titties, and I have to go to monster fuck fest?” My eye twitches, and I count to three to refrain from flicking his nipple.

“Of course not,” I smile and walk out of the piercing room towards the tattoo area. I see the man I’m looking for talking to a very pregnant Janie. Janie is due with a little girl in the next few weeks, and her pregnancy this last trimester has been rough on her, which she has made everyone else’s problem.

“Nix!” I beam, and I can feel the dark glare coming from behind me. “You wanna go—ah!” I squeal as Brooks hikes me over his shoulder and smacks my ass, earning cheers from the guys as if he is a caveman clubbing his mate and dragging her

back to the cave. He takes me to the piercing area before letting me down and glaring into my fucking soul.

“Not. Funny.” He grits out. I smile mischievously up at him and lick his lips teasingly.

“So? Are you going to Monster Fuck Fest with me? Because Leslie Loress will be there with the special edition Scorpion’s Siren Trilogy, and I’m not missing out on them.”

“I just bought you that trilogy for your birthday! Along with the Fae’s Familiar Omnibus!” I roll my eyes.

“And I love them, but *this* is the Monster Smut Con exclusive cover, and there are limited quantities. So, are you going to help me get them or not?”

He sighs and shakes his head. “I said anything for your happiness, Peaches, but I’m eating like six of those cupcakes you and Bug made tonight.” Smiling, I hug him, trying my best to avoid his nipples. I know it was a bet, but I kind of think they’re hot. I won’t tell him that until they heal, though. Otherwise, he won’t follow proper piercing aftercare.

“What are you thinking?” He asks as we walk out of Hel’s to go home.

“That had I not nearly gotten myself killed on the internet, you and I wouldn’t be together.” He lets out a laugh while helping me into his Jeep before getting in on the driver’s side. I can’t help but stare at the yellow duck. Since I gave it to him, he’s been gifted multiple Jeep ducks, but he’s re-gifted them all, all except *Sgt. Quackers*, who is always front and center on the dash.

“While I’m happy things worked out the way they did, I would’ve still ended up with you.” He states, pulling out of the parking lot.

“Really? And how do you know that?”

“Because Peaches, I’ve been working on getting you to fall for me since the day you handed me those danishes.”

The End

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NOTES

While some inspiration has come from real people (with their permission), please remember that this is fiction and the details in the story are not related to real people or events.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Crowned the Queen of Banter, DJ Krimmer is known through the community for her witty, smart mouthed characters. In real life she will often say her slogan is:

“Purposely Awkward, Accidentally Funny.”

It’s a slogan she takes very seriously.

When DJ isn’t making inappropriate jokes or hiding from the worst imposter syndrome known to writer-kind, she’s weaving contemporary romance stories filled to the brim with imperfect alpha-holes and witty females whose love conquers every hurdle thrown their way.

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