

Redemption SERIES

SWEET
spool

JESSICA PRINCE

Sweet Spot

A FAKE ENGAGEMENT SMALL TOWN ROMANCE

A REDEMPTION NOVEL

JESSICA PRINCE

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CHAPTER

One

THIS CLASS WAS BULLSHIT.

I dropped the paintbrush I held in my right hand while lifting the wineglass in my left to my lips and sipping deeply as I took a step back to inspect the painting I'd been working on for the last hour.

I tilted my head from side to side and squinted my eyes. It looked . . . bad. *Really* bad. Which didn't make any sense, because I could have sworn I followed the instructor's directions perfectly. It wasn't like they were very hard. This class was barely a step up from paint-by-numbers, for crying out loud.

My friend Poppy came up beside me. "How'd you d—oh." Her smile faded into a frown, her head tipping to the side as she studied the square canvas resting on my easel. "Uh . . ."

"Is it really that bad?"

She patted my arm sympathetically. "It's the effort that counts."

I dropped my head backward and scoffed. "Give me a break, Pop. The sign outside advertised this class was for twelve and up."

She snorted before curling her lips between her teeth to hide her laughter. "Well, that girl over there looks like she might be in middle school."

"I saw her," I deadpanned before gulping the last of my cabernet. "And even her painting is better than mine."

Humor dripped from her words as she said, “I wasn’t going to say anything . . .”

I shot her a killing look and snatched up the wine bottle, refilling my glass. “I don’t get it,” I complained, glaring at the travesty of a painting like it had personally insulted me. “First I totally butchered that fruit bowl I was trying to make at Wine and Wheel a month ago.”

“Is that what that was supposed to have been?”

I shot Poppy a flat look. “Then I couldn’t even make a simple scarf at that Sip and Knit night we did the other week.” I waved my hand at my painting as I took another drink of wine. “Now this. It’s like I don’t have a single artistic bone in my body.”

She let out a fake thoughtful hum, but there was no missing the sarcasm that coated her tone. “Maybe if you tried making something *without* the wine, you’d have better luck.”

I snorted into my wineglass and took another sip. “No thanks. God, talk about boring as hell.”

A throat cleared and we turned to find the instructor standing behind us, a sour expression on her face.

“Not this,” I quickly back-peddled. “This class is a blast. Totally better than all those others. Five stars all around. My review on Yelp is going to say just that, mark my words.” I lifted my glass in cheers with an awkward laugh as she rolled her eyes and walked off. I looked back at Poppy and pulled my mouth into a wince. “Think I managed to play that off?”

Poppy shook her head on a huff of laughter. “God, I love you. You’re such a disaster.”

My face crinkled in an offended glower. “Your tone said that was a compliment, but your words cut deep.”

She snorted and threw her arm around my shoulder, pulling me in for a sideways hug. “It’s all love, sweetie. You’re a *lovable* disaster. It’s part of what makes you you.”

A bewildered laugh bubbled up from my throat. “You can’t be serious. What makes me me is the fact I’m a freaking

mess?”

She bopped me on the tip of my nose. “A *lovable* mess. Don’t forget that part; it’s the most important.” She gave me a small jostle. “Can we get out of here now? Jase just texted that he’s eager for me to get home. If you know what I mean,” she tacked on at the end with a lascivious waggle of her brows.

My features pinched with disgust. “Oh, *blech*, I don’t need to hear that!” I shook my head, trying to clear away the disgusting image she’d left behind.

Jase Hyland, Poppy’s husband, also happened to be my boss. However, we’d known each other for so long that most of the time he felt more like a pain-in-the-ass older brother I got immense joy from tormenting rather than the dude who signed my paychecks.

He first met Poppy through his sister, Farah, when he’d come to visit. She’d been the first of them to pack up and trade Connecticut in for Redemption, and it didn’t take long for him to decide to make the move to be closer to her. After all, she was the only family he was willing to claim, and vice versa. I followed after him when he offered me a raise that was impossible to turn down, and in doing so, had become fast friends with Poppy and Farah both.

What had started as a fake engagement between Jase and Poppy in order to prove to the board of his family’s company that he was serious enough to be put in control of a multibillion-dollar legacy had turned very real in no time. Now the two were married and nauseatingly in love.

I’d been in Tennessee for three years now. I’d built a life and made friends with people who were more like family, and in that short time, I had a front row seat as every single one of them settled down with the loves of their lives.

It didn’t used to faze me to see them all together, but that was because I’d fooled myself into thinking I’d been in a healthy, loving relationship of my own. I was one of them, just counting the days to my own happily ever after. Then I discovered my boyfriend of six years hadn’t been missing me the way I had been missing him, and instead of preparing to

move to Tennessee to be with me, like he'd promised, he was screwing the woman who lived in the apartment across the hall.

Walking in on the man you thought was the love of your life balls deep in another woman was enough to jade even the most romantic of hearts, and I wasn't any exception. After that, I told myself I was done with relationships. That had been four months ago, and I was still holding firm to that vow. But it still stung to watch everyone around me so blissfully in love. Don't get me wrong, I was happy for them, of course. They were my friends and I loved them like crazy. But I was only human, and the fact they were *all* settling down shined a big, bright spotlight on the fact that I was officially the last woman standing in our friend group.

The last holdout.

The sad, lonely spinster chick.

I might as well have bought a dozen cats and started hoarding ketchup packets and old newspapers to really lean into the shut-in stereotype.

My cell pinged, pulling me from my miserable thoughts. I pulled it from my back pocket and swiped my thumb across the screen, smiling at the message from my friend Gage.

Viking: *You finished with latest arts and crafts project yet? I'm starving.*

I breathed out a laugh and gave my head a tiny shake as my thumbs flew across the screen.

Me: *What a shocker. You're always starving.*

Viking: *You know me so well, Bits. Now move your ass.*

I let out a snort as I typed out my response.

Me: *Bossy.*

Viking: *Hungry. There's a difference. You know how I get.*

Oh, I knew all right. I could just picture his face as he typed that. If there was one thing that made Gage Langdon grouchy, it was hunger. I imagined his pronounced brows

pulling together and the way his lips always turned down when he pouted.

I let out snort as I wrote back.

Me: *Fine. I'm leaving in a few. Don't get your panties in a bunch.*

“Let me guess. Gage?”

I blinked and looked up, having momentarily forgotten Poppy was standing right next to me. “Huh?”

She tipped her head toward my phone with a wry grin and lifted brows. “Texting you. It’s Gage, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yeah. He’s just bitching about dinner is all.”

“I knew it,” she hissed. She squinted and circled her finger in front of my face. “You get this little smile on your face every time—”

I shook her arm off and dropped my head back on a dramatic groan. “God, not this again.” My friends had an annoying habit of teasing me about my friendship with Gage. “I’ve told you guys a million times, Gage and I are just friends. Besides, you know I’m never—”

Poppy interrupted me by blowing out a loud, obnoxious raspberry. “Yeah, yeah. You’re never dating another man as long as you live,” she said, adopting a sarcastic, mocking tone before switching back to her normal voice. “So you’ve said a million times.”

Just like Poppy and Farah, Gage was one of the people I’d grown closest to since my move to Redemption. He’d been new to town as well, having moved here to start a security company with his two Army buddies, Jensen Rose and Laeth Harker.

Jensen was married to my friend Shane, and Laeth was with my girl Deva, making it so Gage and I were the last two single people in our close circle. For all of my girlfriends, that obviously meant we were destined to be together.

“Maybe I’ll get lucky with one million and one, and you guys will get off my back.” I crossed my fingers teasingly.

She gave me an exaggerated pout. “You two would just be so cute together,” she whined.

“Well, of course we would,” I joked. “I’m adorable as hell. I’d look good with anyone.”

“You know what I mean,” she huffed.

“I do, but like I said, it’s not like that. He’s one of my best friends, just like you.” I arched a brow and changed the subject. “Now, didn’t you say Jase was waiting for you? You should probably get home to your man.”

Poppy held up her hands in surrender. “All right, I’ll drop it. But when the day finally comes, I’m going to be the first person to tell you I told you so.”

Not that the day would *ever* come, but I was pretty sure she’d have to fight off the rest of our friends for that coveted first spot in line. They were all anxiously waiting. It wouldn’t have surprised me if they had a bet going on what day Gage and I finally caved and ripped each other’s clothes off. I’d gotten so tired of trying to convince them it was never going to happen, that most of the time I acted like I didn’t hear a word they were saying. It was easier that way.

We said our goodbyes and I headed out, shooting a text to Gage to let him know I was on the way when my stomach let out a growl. I laughed as I pushed the button to unlock my car and slid in behind the wheel. Looked like Gage wasn’t the only one who was starving after all.

CHAPTER

Two

A LOW CHUCKLE rumbled through my chest as I read the text from Wynn that had popped up on my phone just after I threw my truck into park in front of my house and killed the engine. I'd been out of town on a job for the past few days, and I'd missed my tiny dynamo. She had a serious knack for making shit better. She'd been my very first text the moment I hit the town limits.

Bits: *Leaving now you big baby. Be there in about twenty.*

Perfect. That gave me enough time to hop in the shower and wash the long-ass drive off me before she got to my place with what I hoped to Christ was the largest pizza in existence. I wasn't lying about being hungry, and Wynn's teasing hadn't been too far off the mark. I was a straight-up asshole when I went too long between meals.

Every bone in my body groaned as I climbed out of the truck. I told myself it was from being stuck in that seat for hours on the drive home, but that was only so I could fool myself into believing I was still as young as I used to be. My body was letting me know on a daily basis that it didn't have the same get-up-and-go that it used to have. Hell, most mornings it seemed like I had a new creak or groan every time I tried to haul my ass out of bed.

As soon as my boots hit the gravel driveway, I twisted and arched my aching back, trying to loosen the stiffness in my spine. I'd been out of town on a job for the past three days, and now that I was finally home all I wanted to do was take a

hot shower, stuff my stomach full of pizza, and catch up with Wynn as we chilled in front of the television until I eventually passed out from exhaustion.

That sounded like the perfect night to me. Though, I wasn't exactly sure when I'd turned into *that guy*.

I used to be the guy who preferred to hit the bars a few nights a week to throw back a couple beers, shoot some pool while I hung with my buddies, and occasionally find a woman to take home if I had an itch that needed to be scratched. But lately I preferred to relax at home instead. Those random hookups had started to lose a bit of their luster as well.

For the first time in my life my DVR was at capacity with shows that Gage In His Twenties never had any interest in. Shit like DIY and cooking shows. I didn't even cook, for fuck's sake, but I would rather stay in with a cold beer, watching someone get *Chopped* or speculating with Wynn on who the next *Top Chef* would be instead of trolling the bars, looking to get laid.

I wasn't the settling-down type, that was for damn sure, but those one-night stands and casual hookups I'd been having for years didn't hold the same excitement as they had in the past. They used to be enough, now they were beginning to feel hollow. I blamed my friends for the shift in my behavior and way of thinking, especially my buddy Laeth.

Back in the Army I'd served with Laeth Harker and Jensen Rose, and as the years passed, the three of us had gotten really close. I wouldn't have hesitated to take a bullet for either of them and, needless to say, the feeling was mutual, a given. Jensen and Laeth were more than mere Army buddies, they were like brothers to me. Closer than blood.

A few years back, when it came time to decide whether to re-up or move on, Jensen had informed us he was done. He was going home. When he'd enlisted years earlier, he hadn't just left the woman who held his heart behind, but they'd had a kid together that he'd never met, and the time had come for him to return to Redemption, Tennessee so he could work his ass off in an effort to win his family back.

Laeth and I hadn't blinked at the idea of going with him. The three of us decided to go into business together, starting our own security firm, and I had no problem with basing it in Redemption, mainly because there was nothing left for me back in South Dakota, where I'd grown up and lived my whole life before the Army. There had been a time when I thought there was someone waiting for me, someone I would one day build a life with, but it turned out I was wrong.

So Tennessee it was.

Together, the three of us built a thriving business, and Jensen eventually won his girl, Shane, back . . . not that I ever had any doubt. Things had finally started to settle into place for me in Redemption, and I was more than content with the new life I'd created for myself. I had a job I loved where I got to be my own boss and utilize the skills I'd picked up during my time in the service. I had friends who were more like family. And it was no problem to find a bit of companionship when the need arose. All in all, life was good.

While Jensen had been the very definition of the marrying kind, there had been a sort of comfort in the knowledge that, like me, Laeth had sworn off relationships. Though his reasons for claiming eternal bachelorhood were different than mine, he tended to take his label a bit too far, spending the first couple years in our new town whoring his way through half the female population. But that all changed when he met Deva Kent about a year ago.

Now he was all about the monogamous life. He had a kid, a woman he was damn near obsessed with, and had gone from being a broody fucker to smiling like an idiot every time she walked into the room. All he was missing was the white picket fence and a membership to the local country club.

I didn't fault him or Jensen for being all about their families. In fact, I was thrilled they were both so goddamn happy, especially after some of the shit we'd seen during our years overseas. But it seemed like everyone I knew was taking the plunge and settling down, and I was starting to feel stuck on hold. If there was a soundtrack for my life, it would have been that godawful shit they played during slow-ass elevator

rides or while you sat on the line with the credit card company, waiting to talk to a living person.

The house was dead quiet as I pushed the door open, the air smelling slightly stale from sitting empty for the last few days. I tossed my keys on the table in the entryway and moved into the living room, opening the blinds and cracking a window to breathe life back into the place.

The fresh air started pouring in and the sounds from the dense woods surrounding my home filtered through the screen, making it not so starkly quiet. The breeze rustling the leaves on the large, old trees and occasional birdsong provided the perfect ambient white noise to help put me at ease.

That was one of the many reasons I'd put in an offer above asking price on this place the moment I saw it come on the market. The house sat on a few secluded acres on the outskirts of town, providing plenty of peace and quiet while only being a short drive from everything I needed. It was the best of both worlds.

The cabin had been updated a few years before I bought the place, turning it from a closed off, boxy space to open concept with amazing views from nearly every room while still maintaining its original rustic charm. The original hardwood floors, butcherblock counters, and warm wood paneling would have looked dated in any other house.

My boots clomped against the aged wood of the stairs, letting out low, random creaks as I made my way to my room on the second floor. I stripped naked, leaving my clothes in a trail on the floor as I headed into the attached bathroom. The whole master suite had been gutted and fully renovated, the previous owners putting in an entire wall of windows directly across from the doorway so the moment you stepped in, the first thing you saw was the lush forest outside. A fireplace on the wall separated the bedroom from the bathroom with plenty of extra space for me to add a small reading area in the corner nearby. The small table beside the chair was stacked with paperbacks, murder mysteries and thrillers I liked to read in my downtime to unwind.

The bathroom had a huge standing shower with two heads and an oversized clawfoot tub. It was probably the most modernized room in the house, and I didn't mind one bit. The heated marble floors were a lifesaver in the frigid winters.

I cranked the water on, turning it as hot as I could stand, creating a cloud of steam that fogged up the entire shower stall as I stood beneath the spray. I let it beat against my back and neck to loosen some of the lingering tension in my muscles.

I could have stayed there for an hour, but there would have been serious hell to pay if I made Wynn wait, especially after the shit I gave her about being hungry.

After making quick work of showering, I hurried to dry myself off before throwing on a pair of sweats and a T-shirt and heading downstairs.

Rounding the corner into the kitchen, I wasn't the least bit surprised to find Wynn already standing at the island, pouring herself a glass of wine. We hung out often enough that I always had at least two bottles of her favorite on hand.

I'd given her a key several months ago when a job for my company, Elite Investigations, had taken me out of town for a couple weeks. I'd asked her to look in on the place, pick up my mail, and water the few plants I had somehow managed to keep alive. I never bothered to ask her to return it and I had a key to her place now as well. It was simply more convenient for us to be able to let ourselves in to whichever house when we hung out together.

Her head came up, those unusual and extraordinary violet eyes of hers landing on me and doing a quick scan before they rolled back in her head. "Oh, come on!"

My forehead creased with confusion. "What?"

She jerked her chin in the general direction of my middle. "What is with you guys and gray sweatpants? Do they not make men's sweats in any other color? I mean, you *know* what they do. You have to. An entire gender can't be that oblivious." She waved her hand at my crotch. "All that

business just flinging and flopping around in there like a hairless cat trapped in a hammock or something.”

I'd just taken a pull from the beer she'd opened and left on the island for me and proceeded to choke.

I managed to clear my throat and drag air into my lungs, but it took a good thirty seconds to recover. “Quite the image you just painted there, Bits.” I looked down at my junk and shrugged a shoulder. “But I don't think I'd compare it to a hairless cat, for Christ's sake. Maybe a kielbasa?”

She let out a snort, a teasing smile pulling at her lips from behind her wineglass. “Says you.”

I moved farther into the kitchen, stopping at her side to lean *way* down and press a quick kiss to her temple. I was a big dude, standing a few inches above six feet, and Wynn was exceptionally small, hence her nickname, Bits, shortened from itsy bitsy.

“Never had any complaints in that department,” I said as I followed my nose to the two pizza boxes sitting in the center of the island. My stomach let out a grateful rumble as I flipped the lid back on the box on the right. That rumble turned from grateful to sour as I curled my lip in disgust at the sight that greeted me.

“Christ, Bits. That looks like vomit. I hope you don't expect me to eat that shit.”

She shot me a glare over her shoulder as she reached into a cabinet for a couple plates, having to stand on the tips of her toes in order to reach them. “It does *not* smell like vomit, jerk.” She set the plates down and flipped the second box open.

Thank God.

My shoulders lowered in relief at the sight of the steaming pepperoni pizza. “Here, you whiner. This one is just for you.” She pulled out two slices of her barf pizza and dropped them onto her plate. “And for your information, spinach Alfredo is a very popular pizza topping. Maybe you'd know that if you stepped out of your rigid comfort zone every once in a while.”

I doubled up, pulling out four slices of my *normal* pizza before grabbing both plates and heading for the living room as she followed behind with our drinks and napkins. It was a dance we'd done so often it was second nature to both of us by now. We spent at least two nights a week hanging out together, not to mention the meet-ups for coffee or the occasional lunch in town. Most weeks we saw each other almost every day, so we had a nice, steady rhythm to our friendship, a routine we each knew by heart, and that worked great for me.

I dropped onto one end of the couch, kicking my feet up on the coffee table and propping my plate on my stomach while she tucked herself into the opposite corner, crisscrossing her short legs in front of her before resting a throw pillow in her lap and using it as a makeshift table.

“So how was painting?” I asked before chomping off a huge bite. “You manage to make something halfway decent this time?”

It was a real bone of contention for Wynn that she wasn't the most artistic person in the world, and I always had fun giving her a hard time about it.

She let out a disgruntled huff and pointed the tip of her pizza slice toward the fireplace before taking a bite and speaking around it. “You tell me. It's yours now, by the way. Merry Christmas and Happy Birthday. Don't think for a second you're allowed to return or regift it either.”

I followed her line of sight, spotting a small canvas propped against the hearth. I wasn't sure if it was the distance that made the object in the very center difficult to make out, or if she was just *that bad*. But it looked like I was staring at an oversized turd.

“What the hell am I looking at, babe?”

She wiped a bit of Alfredo sauce from the corner of her mouth with her thumb. “It's a dog playing in a field,” she announced loftily, her chin held high, eyes narrowed like I was the idiot for not getting it.

“That's a dog?”

She nodded.

“And all that shit around it . . . that’s supposed to be a field?”

She gave me a sardonic look that screamed *well, duh*. “Of course it is. Can’t you see the trees and the grass?”

Okay, so she really was *that bad*. Deciding the best course of action would simply be to lie, I hummed around a bite of pizza and nodded my head. “Oh yeah. Now that you mention it, I totally see the tree. And that big white blob in the upper left corner is definitely a . . .” I trailed off, praying she’d fill in the blank.

“A cloud.”

“Yep. Definitely a cloud. You did great, Bits. I’ll put it beside the ashtray you gave me last month.”

She let out a noise of affront and dropped the pizza slice back onto her plate with a gooey *plop*. That was a fruit bowl, Gage, not an ashtray. God!”

“Okay, that makes a lot more sense. I couldn’t figure out why the hell you’d given me an ashtray when I don’t smoke.”

I had to bite back my laughter at the sour look on her face. “That’s it,” she declared loudly, throwing her hands up in defeat before taking another bite of pizza and speaking around the food she just stuffed in her mouth. “I give up. I’m officially done trying to be an artist.”

Thank Christ.

Now I just had to figure out a way to burn that painting without her ever finding out.

CHAPTER

Three

THE SUN WAS ALREADY high in the blue sky as I parked my truck outside Elite Security and shut off the engine. The clock had barely clicked over to eight in the morning, yet downtown Redemption was already fully awake. People moved down the sidewalks, each person I passed giving me a smile or a tip of their chin in acknowledgement. I returned more *good mornings* in the thirty seconds it took for me to climb out of my truck and make it to the door of our building than I would in a two-week period back in South Dakota.

That was small town living for you.

I might not have been born in Redemption, but I'd been here long enough that I was a part of the fabric now.

That hadn't always been the case. When I'd moved here with Jensen and Laeth a few years back, the greeting we'd received had been less than warm and fuzzy, to say the least. But that was mostly Jensen's fault.

The town had taken sides between him and his ex, Shane Hendrix, and after he'd bailed, leaving her alone and pregnant—no matter how noble his reason might have been at the time—it hadn't taken a genius to figure out most people had sided with her. It had taken some doing, but once he'd won Shane back and the two were living their fairy-tale ending, it was as if nothing had ever happened. The people of the town had forgiven, and at least pretended to forget. It had all been swept right under the rug. One day Laeth and I were public enemy

numbers two and three by association, then the next, we were officially brought into the fold.

That had worked just fine for me.

Until it didn't.

The biggest downside to small town living—in my opinion—was waiting for me the moment I stepped through the glass door into the building that housed Elite Security.

It took a second for my eyes to adjust from the bright, sunny morning to the darker interior. Exposed brick, concrete floors, and an open ceiling that displayed the pipes and ductwork as though they were art gave the space a badass industrial warehouse vibe, and that had been exactly what we'd been going for when we decided on this space. Back in the day, this place had been a steel mill . . . at least for all intents and purposes. But in reality it had been a front for the region's biggest bootlegging operation during prohibition. We'd even found a few old mason jars of moonshine while the place was being renovated.

The stuff tasted like pure gasoline, and I was pretty sure that more than one sip would render a person blind for life, but it was still cool as hell, and we hadn't wanted to change too much. We liked the idea of paying homage to the past.

Our receptionist, Willow, sat at the front desk that was placed smack dab in the middle of the spacious reception area. By herself, she was as soft as kitten fur. Sweet, unassuming, and quiet. Totally innocent. A woman who used to be so shy it was almost painful to witness, but she was damn good at her job, and there was no way in hell we'd have been able to stay in business without her. But when coupled with our office administrator, Lark Morrison, that meek and mild disappeared and the two of them morphed into one giant pain in the ass. And at that very moment, Lark just so happened to be standing at Willow's desk, the two of them chatting as I walked in.

“Good morning,” Willow greeted sweetly, but I wasn't buying it. I stopped short at the smile on Lark's face. It wasn't a normal, cheery, everyday smile. It screamed that she was up

to something. Not a stretch, seeing as the woman was *always* up to something.

“What’s happening right now? Why aren’t you in your office doing the work we pay you to do?”

Lark’s eyes went big, sparkling with an innocence I knew all too well was total bullshit. “What do you mean? Nothing’s happening. I just wanted to see how the job went, that’s all.”

There was a part of me that felt like an asshole for my immediate suspicion. A *small* part. Because I knew better. “It was fine. I’ll get you the receipts and paperwork once I settle in.”

I started in the direction of my office when she spoke again. “Oh, and I wanted to talk to you about this friend of mine. She’s really funny and sweet—”

Annnnd there it was. For fuck’s sake. What was it about a single man that had all his buddies’ wives and girlfriends desperate to play matchmaker?

I held up my hand to cut her off. “How many times do I have to say it? No, Lark, you *cannot* set me up on a date. I don’t care if your dental hygienist has a great smile or if the girl working the register at the grocery store seemed really nice or if the woman who did your nails has a sparkling personality. I’m not interested, so leave it alone.”

She threw her hands up in frustration, letting them fall back down with a slap against her outer thighs. “Oh come on!” she cried dramatically. “Has anyone ever told you you’re no fun?”

“Yeah. You. On a regular basis.” She crossed her arms over her chest, the look on her face part scowl and part pout. “Maybe one of these days you’ll get tired of reminding me and finally let it go.”

By the stubborn set of her jaw, I could tell that wasn’t something that would be happening any time soon.

“I just think you’d be happier if you had someone in your life, that’s all. Don’t you ever get lonely?”

God save me from stubborn-ass women.

I lifted the travel mug of coffee I'd been holding to my mouth and drank deeply. "You don't need to worry about me. I'm more than capable of finding myself some company if I ever get lonely."

She scrunched her face up. "Ew. I don't want to know that."

Willow spoke then. "Maybe he doesn't want to be set up because of Wynn."

My head whipped to her and I pinned her with a look that had her rolling her teeth between her lips to keep from smiling outright. It was times like this that I missed the quiet shy introvert we'd first hired a few years back.

If the women in my life weren't trying to fix me up, they were insinuating that there was more than friendship between Wynn and me. "Pretty sure we don't pay you guys for your matchmaking services. How about we get to work, yeah?"

Before they could say another thing, I turned on the heel of my scuffed boot and headed for my office. There was only so much bullshit I could deal with on a Monday morning. If it wasn't the women who worked for me, it was Jensen's and Laeth's women wanting to give me some Disney movie version of a happily ever after or some shit.

I was happy for my friends, and if there was anyone I hoped would make it, it was them. But it wasn't in the cards for me, I already knew that for a fact, whether the people in my life were willing to accept it or not. That was one of the reasons I was so close to Wynn, why her friendship meant so much to me. She understood. She'd been burned a lot more recently than I had and the very last thing she wanted was another relationship.

There was no pressure with her. When we were together everything was just . . . easy. And there sure as hell wasn't any talk of fixing me up or girlfriends or marriage. Truth was, she was the person I enjoyed spending my time with most. Jensen

and Laeth would always be like brothers to me, but like real family, they tended to get on my damn nerves.

Not Wynn, though. All I ever felt when I was with her was good. *Damn* good. What I had with her was the closest I would come to a committed relationship ever again.

I'd been down the relationship road before. Hell, the ring I'd bought to propose to Vanessa still sat in the back of my drawer beneath my socks and underwear. I knew my constant deployment had been tough on her, but she never once complained. Not even when I'd asked. I thought I'd been lucky enough to find a woman who understood, who supported me and my need to serve my country, to protect.

Up until the moment I got that goddamn Dear John letter while I was in the middle of the fucking desert, I had no clue she'd been unhappy.

The burn Vanessa inflicted was the kind a man didn't come back from. The kind that created scars that would linger for the rest of my life. I'd told myself never again. For the past five years I'd kept that promise to myself, and I had no intention of breaking it any time soon. Or ever.

I'd just gotten to my desk and booted up my computer when my cellphone dinged with an incoming text.

I grinned at the message that came through.

Bits: *I don't know about you, but I could use a bit of centering. Feel like going to yoga with me tonight?*

A chuckle rattled loose in my chest.

Me: *Not a chance in hell. If I need to center myself I'll have a drink and jerk off in the shower.*

I tossed the phone onto my desk and got down to work, putting together everything I needed to get to Lark to expense and complete the paperwork for the job I'd just been on. I'd been at it for less than five minutes when my cell rang.

I picked it up without looking at the screen and swiped my thumb to answer. "Bits, I already told you, it'll be a cold day in hell before you get me to do yoga."

The voice on the other end wasn't Wynn's. In fact, that voice belonged to the very last person I ever wanted to hear from.

"Oh . . . Wow. Hi. I-I didn't think you'd answer."

It was as if thinking about her had somehow conjured her up. Like the fucking Ghost of Exes Unwanted.

"Vanessa? What the fuck?" This had to have been some kind of nightmare. Every muscle in my body locked up. The blood in my veins ran cold. "Believe me, if I'd had a fucking clue it was you calling, I wouldn't have."

"Gage." She said my name on a breath. "It's so good to hear your voice."

I most definitely couldn't say the same.

"Why the hell are you calling me? Wait, you know what?" I gave my head a violent shake. "Don't answer that, because I don't give a shit. Lose this fucking number."

"Gage, wait, please—"

Her words spilled out in a rush of desperation, but I was already ending the call by mashing my thumb against the screen so hard it was a wonder I didn't break the phone.

My day had barely started and I was already over it.

Fucking Mondays.

CHAPTER

Four

I LET UP a silent prayer of gratitude when I walked into the breakroom and instantly smelled freshly brewed coffee. A few years back, when Jase had first relocated the headquarters for Hyland Steel to Tennessee, he and I had been the only two employees in our new building while we waited for the rest of the people preparing to make the move.

The peace and quiet might have been nice for a while, and it was easy to get my work done when people weren't stopping by my desk every fifteen minutes with a question, but it got old really fast. It was especially creepy being the only one in the building on the evenings I worked late. But the biggest downside was the coffee wasn't made unless I made it. The kitchen wasn't stocked unless I stocked it. The printers didn't have paper unless I filled them. It had gotten pretty damn tedious.

Now that the transfer was complete and the building was full, I could always count on a fresh pot of coffee in our breakroom every morning before I walked in.

Lori, the head of accounting, stood motionless by the counter, looking seriously worse for the wear. She held a steaming paper cup in her hand, but her eyes were closed and her breathing was audible, in through her nose and out through pursed lips.

I watched her cautiously as I pulled my mug down from the cabinet above the sink and moved to the coffee pot. "Hey, Lori. You good?" I asked as I filled my mug halfway, leaving

room for the heaping amount of creamer I always drank it with.

She let out a pained groan. “I *was*.” She peeled her eyelids open partway, squinting against the florescent lights as she glugged back her coffee. “Had a hell of a weekend. That’s the problem.”

I pulled out the oversized carton of creamer I kept stashed in the fridge and doctored my coffee to perfection. “Ah. I see.” Using a wooden stirrer, I pointed to another cabinet across the room. “There’s a bottle of ibuprofen up there, that should help with the hangover. Also, lots of water and a greasy breakfast, trust me. It’ll work.”

“Thanks, Wynn,” she offered blandly as she got out the bottle and shook a few capsules into her palm. She downed them with another swallow of coffee and started out of the breakroom, back to her department. I stopped her just before she made it out. “Go ahead and take the bottle. I think you could use it most of all, and I can replace it on my lunch break.”

Lori heaved a sigh, her smile a bit more genuine this time. “Bless you, woman. You’re a freaking angel.”

I laughed and gave my coffee a quick stir and took my first sip, letting out a contented breath as the sweetness of the creamer and slight bitterness of the coffee hit my tongue. That first sip was always perfection, and I liked to take a moment to really appreciate it before I got started with my day.

The tips of my high-heeled shoes let out a dull thud as I moved along the carpeted hallway, offering smiles and nods to those I passed along the way to my office. A couple years back, Jase had informed me he was promoting me from his assistant to some fancy new position with the words Executive, Vice, and President in the title. Considering I’d already been doing the work, the only real change was the fact that the numbers on my paycheck went up even more and I got myself a sweet corner office right across from the boss man’s that offered incredible views.

The red light on my phone blinked, alerting me to a new voicemail that must have come through while I was in the breakroom. Setting the mug down, I rounded my desk and sat down in the chair behind it, picking up the receiver and keying in the code for my voicemail box.

The instant I heard the voice on the other end of the line, my mood went to shit.

“Wynn timer, it’s me. We really need to talk.” I should have known my ex would start bothering me at work after I’d blocked him on my cell. It had been months, and the son of a bitch still hadn’t given up. He’d never been one to give up when he wanted his way. It was one of his many, *many* flaws I’d ignored when we’d been together. It was amazing the things you overlooked when you thought you were in love. Say, a bazillion red flags.

He huffed a frustrated breath across the line. “Look, you can’t keep ignoring me—”

“Watch me, asshole,” I muttered to myself before slamming the phone back into the cradle. It felt so good I did it again. And again, letting out a frustrated growl as I continued to bash the pieces of the phone together.

I knew exactly why he was still calling, even months after our breakup, and it had nothing to do with missing me or regretting how things ended between us.

After I caught him cheating—with a woman at least ten years older than me, no less—things got a little . . . out of hand, I guess you could say. To be honest, the whole thing was kind of a blur. There was yelling and cursing, things breaking all over the place, most of it by me. I made a scene to end all scenes, freaking the other woman out to the point she’d run out of Darrin’s apartment only half dressed—if that.

Once I was finished trashing his apartment and yelling until I was hoarse, I packed what little I had left behind before my move from Connecticut. I’d left those belongings for when I came to visit, some pieces of me I’d wanted him to have. I guess I was ignorant enough to think seeing them regularly

would make him miss me, and if he missed me, he'd stop finding excuses to delay his move to Tennessee.

Looking back, it was so easy to spot all the red flags, and I couldn't help but feel foolish for believing that lying, cheating piece of shit.

The only reason he was still calling me was because I'd managed to cram a few of his precious keepsakes in with my stuff before I left, some things that were worth a pretty penny, such as his lame-ass baseball card collection.

However, after a booze-fueled bonfire in my backyard—spurred on by my equally inebriated friends, we'd set fire to everything of his I'd taken back with me from Connecticut. Sure, I could have sold those cards and seriously added to the nice little nest egg I had going, but the feeling I got watching his treasures go up in flames was indescribable. I wouldn't have traded it for all the money in the world.

“Jesus. What did that phone ever do to you?”

I lifted my gaze at the question. Jase stood in my doorway, one brow cocked as he worked to hide a grin.

With my hissy fit interrupted, I gently returned the phone to its cradle and blew a huff of air past my pursed lips. “It owed me money,” I deadpanned. “Can I help you with something?”

He moved deeper into my office, not the least bit concerned by my outburst. After years of working together, he'd grown more than used to my moods. He snatched up the stress ball I kept on my desk and took a seat across from me, one ankle resting on the opposite knee. He was the picture of casual in a bespoke suit and Italian dress shoes that probably cost more than most people's mortgage, but for a man who ran a company worth billions, small-town living had taken a good bit of the starch out of his collar. Sure, he still liked nice things, but since moving to Redemption, he was no longer afraid to get his hands dirty.

It was a refreshing change from the unrepentant playboy he used to be, that was for damn sure. Jase had never been a

bad guy. Far from it. But trying to control him was like trying to wrangle a herd of cats that had gotten into a barrel of catnip. He'd calmed down significantly since taking control of his family's company. Then he met Poppy and gone was the man who reporters and paparazzi loved to follow around snapping pictures. He was well and truly a domesticated family man now, making my job a million times easier. It was an added bonus that his wife turned out to be so freaking awesome.

“You know you're responsible for any office equipment you break, right?”

I gave him a deadpan look. “You can take it out of the Christmas bonus you don't know you're giving me yet.” I arched a brow. “Just a heads-up, it's going to be twice as much as last year's.”

His grin said he wasn't concerned in the slightest, and I didn't have a single doubt that my bonus this year would actually be double, because that was the kind of boss he was. Not only boss, friend. “Just goes to show you're off your game if you didn't think I already knew I'd have to buy your affection and respect this holiday season. I've been squirreling money away since New Year's.”

I shot him a dark grin. “And they say you're nothing but a pretty face.”

He shook his head good-naturedly. “So, you going to tell me who pissed in your Cheerios this morning or just keep beating the hell out of the office equipment?”

Jase Hyland was like a dog with a freaking bone when he wanted to be, and considering how well we knew each other, he tended to behave like an overprotective older brother at times. Thankfully my computer dinged, a meeting reminder popping up in the corner of the screen.

“Sorry,” I said with a fake wince. “You've got that meeting with Scott Sutter from Sutter Industries in five minutes. You should probably get ready. In your own office. Away from mine.”

He arched a brow and tapped his chin while he studied me with a thoughtful, expression on his face. I didn't realize I'd been holding my breath until he let out a sigh and stood from his seat.

“All right. But you know I'm here if you ever need to talk, right?” The humor that had been in his eyes earlier was replaced with concern. Like I said, overprotective big brother.

I smiled with appreciation. “I know. But I'm good. Now get out of my office and go make us a ridiculous amount of money.”

The moment the door snicked shut behind him, I pulled my phone out and shot off a text.

Me: *I don't know about you, but I could use a bit of centering. Feel like going to yoga with me tonight?*

I chewed on my bottom lip, waiting for Gage to reply.

Viking: *Not a chance in hell. If I need to center myself I'll have a drink and jerk off in the shower.*

I blinked. All of a sudden the image of Gage standing naked under the spray of his shower as he pumped his dick in his fist popped into my head out of nowhere. For some inexplicable reason, that mental picture sent a bolt of electricity through my body, waking up parts that had been dormant in recent months.

I was well aware of just how attractive my friend was. I mean, you would have had to be completely blind not to notice his appeal.

After all, there was a very good reason my nickname for him was Viking. Apparently, years of serving our country had *seriously* done his body good. He had a penchant for faded jeans and T-shirts that hugged his muscular frame to perfection. Not only was he built like a brick shithouse, but he was *tall*. Something I appreciated. I was petite, at least a good two inches shorter than all my other girlfriends, so Gage towered over me. There was something about being around him that made me feel safe. Like he could protect me simply

by picking me up, tossing me over his shoulder, and carrying me to safety.

All of that, along with the messy dark blond hair that always looked like it was two weeks past needing a trim, the scruff that lined a square marble jaw, and distinctly masculine cheekbones and nose, made him look like he belonged at the front of a Viking longship, commanding his beefed-up horde of marauders to row their way out of a wicked thunderstorm in the middle of an angry sea.

And I might have been reading a bit too much of a very specific kind of romance recently.

But even though I knew he was attractive as hell, I'd never thought of him like *that* before. Since the start of our friendship, I'd been in a relationship, and even though it had been long distance, Darrin had still been the only one for me. Too bad my other half hadn't felt the same damn way.

After the breakup, I wasn't exactly in the headspace to think about other men. I'd been sad, then angry, then sad again, then determined to live my life as a spinster with a bazillion cats. I hadn't exactly been very pro-guy lately, so the extremely potent response my body was having right then was unexpected, to say the least.

A tingle stretched from my nipples all the way to between my thighs, and I had to clench my legs together against the dull pulsing beat in my core.

I shook my head, trying to rid it of the scene that had stretched from Gage in the shower to a dripping wet Gage walking naked to his bedroom. This feeling wasn't about him. It couldn't be. There was a logical explanation for why, after an embarrassingly long dry spell, I suddenly felt my libido wake up from hibernation and shift straight into overdrive.

I needed sex.

Simple as that.

I needed rough, raw, dirty sex, complete with hair pulling, spanking, and maybe a little light breath play if I was feeling particularly adventurous.

Crap. Thinking like that sure as hell wasn't doing anything to temper the heartbeat I was currently feeling down in my lady parts.

Geography had been a bit of a clam jammer over the past few years, even if that son of a bitch Darrin hadn't had the same issue. Then there was the aforementioned vow of celibacy over recent months. I counted back silently to the last time I'd gotten laid and winced *hard* once I'd passed the twelve-month mark.

Holy shit! I hadn't had sex in over a year?

God, that was pathetic. It was shocking things hadn't grown back down there.

On that sad thought, I picked up my mug and sipped, letting out a *blech* at the now cold coffee.

Freaking Mondays.

CHAPTER

Five

I WASN'T the least bit surprised to find Gage's truck sitting in front of my house when I pulled up later that evening. I'd gone to yoga as planned, hoping my friend Aurora's class would help to dull the edge on the arousal I'd been feeling since earlier that morning.

My girl had put the whole class through our paces. I'd built up a sweat, and by the time I walked out of there, my body was loose and limber, my muscles warm from exertion. The loud growl my stomach had let out during Shavasana had reminded me that I'd forgotten to eat lunch, so I stopped at the market on the way home.

I parked in the driveway and popped the trunk, hooking the straps of my reusable grocery totes over my forearms. I managed to wrestle the front door open only to be met by Gage's voice carrying through the house the moment I stepped across the threshold. "You're out of Snickers bars!" he called out accusingly.

I rolled my eyes, kicking the door shut behind me as I hefted the slipping bags back up before they spilled all over the place. "Check underneath the box of frozen salmon quiches."

I heard a low-pitched grumble, followed by my freezer drawer sliding closed. Gage had a very specific sweet tooth. He only liked Snickers, and he only liked them frozen. How he hadn't shattered all his teeth yet was beyond me, but I always made sure to stay stocked for moments such as this.

He popped up into view as I rounded the corner from the entryway into the open concept living and kitchen area and rounded the peninsula that separated the living room from the kitchen. The instant he saw the bags I was holding he divested me of the uncomfortable weight and spread them across my very limited counter space. My place was nowhere near as awesome as Gage's—this whole place could fit easily inside his kitchen—but it was enough. At least for now when it was just me. Truth was, I'd always planned for this place to be more of a starter home. A resting place until I was ready to move into my forever home with my partner. That plan had been blown to smithereens.

I went about unpacking the bags and putting things away as Gage ripped his candy bar open and gnawed off a bite, speaking around the frozen nougat and caramel as he said, "Frozen salmon quiches sound fucking disgusting. And this was the last Snickers. You're slacking on the job, Bits."

I yanked out the gargantuan package of king-sized candy bars and gave them a shake. "Cool your britches, Viking. I've already got you covered."

He snatched the package from me and used the tip of his boot to pull open the freezer drawer again, tossing them inside before coming back to help me with the rest of the groceries.

We moved as an effective team, with him as used to being at my house as I was to being at his. Only, this time, instead of moving on autopilot, I was more aware of his physical presence than I ever had been before. His aftershave smelled more potent, like leather and something spicy, like fennel. A spice that reminded me of licorice. His massive frame felt like it was dwarfing my tiny kitchen even more.

At one point, when he moved behind me to put a bag of chips in the pantry and placed his hand on my hip to gently scoot me out of the way, my stupid knees nearly buckled.

I needed to get my shit together.

Or more aptly, I needed to pull my vibrator out of its drawer and put it to use, because something told me this kind of tension wouldn't let up unless it was released.

I gave my head a sharp shake to clear it of those ridiculous thoughts and to rattle some sense into me.

With the last of the groceries put away, I folded the totes and stored them in the bottom of the pantry as Gage grabbed a beer from the pack I kept stocked for him in the fridge. He took a large swig before asking, “So you manage to center yourself or whatever?”

My cheeks instantly heated. I remembered his reply to that text from earlier today and my mind tried to return to the gutter it had been crashing in all day, but I refused to let it.

“If you’re asking about yoga, it was great. You really should have come with me. You missed out. How’s teriyaki chicken sound to you?”

He grunted and took another pull from his beer as I started gathering all the ingredients for dinner. On the nights we had dinner at his place, it was always takeout, but when we ate at my place I insisted on cooking. I’d always loved to cook, it was one of my favorite hobbies, so much so that I could get lost for hours watching cooking reels on social media. I was damn good at it but something about cooking for one took the fun out of it, so shortly after moving to Redemption I stopped. There’d been no point. Now that I had Gage in my life, I’d been able to return to something I loved to do, and it felt damn good to have someone enjoy the meals I prepared as much as he did.

Although, he didn’t seem to have the same enthusiasm for it tonight that he usually did. He thought he was hiding it, but I saw the tick in his jaw, the tension in his muscles causing him to hold himself stiffer. Small, practically infinitesimal tells that only came with knowing someone as well as Gage and I knew each other.

I dropped the package of chicken breasts onto the counter by the rest of the ingredients and started chopping my ginger, garlic, and green onions, all the while watching Gage from the corner of my eye. “Hey, you all right?”

His nostrils flared as he drained the rest of his beer and headed back to the fridge for a second, yanking the door open

with more force than necessary.

“Got a call today,” he said, all vague and ominous before guzzling back nearly a third of the beer he’d just opened.

“Okay. A call from who?” I asked when he didn’t expand any further.

I could practically hear his molars grinding together. “From Vanessa.”

The knife in my hand froze mid-chop. It was like a record scratched in my brain. “Vanessa?” The question was followed by a tiny growl. “As in your *ex* Vanessa? The bottom-feeding, soul-sucking despicable bitch? *That* Vanessa?”

I hated that woman more than I hated anyone, and I’d never even met her. I didn’t have to. I knew what she’d done to Gage, how she’d broken him nearly beyond repair when she ended their years-long relationship in a fucking letter she’d mailed to him during his deployment. He’d been defending our country and trying to stay alive and she broke his heart in a fucking *note*.

The corners of his mouth hitched slightly with a suppressed grin. “Christ, Bits. Don’t hold anything back. Why don’t you tell me what you really think?”

I returned to chopping, going to town on the green onions, not the best idea, given the sudden spike in my temper. “I don’t know how you could find this funny.” *Chop, chop, chop*. The knife in my hand was destroying the garlic that was supposed to go into our dinner. “What could that swamp-dwelling she-devil possibly have to say to you?” *Chop, chop, chop*. “And after all these years?” *Chop, chop, chop*.

Gage came up behind me, reaching over my shoulder to still my movements and take the knife out of my hand. “All right, killer. I think that’s enough of that. You’ve chopped that garlic into paste.”

Slamming my hands down on my hips, I spun around and hit him with a glare. “How can you be okay with that woman calling you?” I couldn’t imagine what she would have to say to Gage after what she’d done.

Gage did his best to never talk about Vanessa and how their relationship had ended. In fact, if you weren't a part of his immediate circle, you never would have known he'd had his heart crushed by the Wicked Witch of South Dakota. It was only after a healthy dose of whiskey—something he didn't drink often—and a pair of particularly loose lips that I managed to get the story out of him.

Gage reached up and took me by my forearms, dragging his large hands up and down in a comforting gesture, when the roles just then should have been reversed. It should have been *me* comforting *him*. “I'm not okay with it, believe me. It pissed me the fuck off, that's why—until two seconds ago when you got all adorably belligerent on my behalf—I was having a pretty shitty day.”

It sure felt nice to hear that I helped turn his shitty day around, but . . . “I am *not* adorably belligerent. I'm a stone-cold badass.”

He grinned, all straight white teeth and two dimples that only popped out when he smiled in a way he really meant. “Sure you are, Bits. All four-foot-eleven of you.”

I reached up and pinched the skin on the back of his upper arm, making him yelp. “I'm five-two. Don't you try and take those extra inches away from me. And I better never lay eyes on that river rat of a woman or she'll regret it.”

A chuckle rumbled through his chest. “I don't doubt that for a second, babe. And trust me, I'm not okay that she called when she's the last person whose voice I'd ever want to hear. But I came over here because you always manage to put me in a good mood. Why do you think I'm here right now? It's because you're my best friend, and you never fail to make things better.”

Okay, so that might have been one of the sweetest things I'd ever heard.

“You're my best friend too.” I blew out a gust of air, calming my rage as I resumed my dinner prep, this time without the violence. “So? What did Medusa want?”

Gage leaned against the opposite counter, crossing one booted foot over the other as he sipped his beer slower this time. “Don’t know. As soon as I realized it was her I told her to lose my number and hung up.”

I looked over at him, trying to read his expression. “You weren’t the least bit curious what she was calling about all these years later?”

One corner of his mouth quirked up in a tiny smirk before he popped the last of the frozen candy bar into his mouth. “Guys aren’t like that, Bits. When we’re done, we’re done. We don’t get curious or look for closure or any of that shit. When Vanessa ended us, that was it.”

That sounded a hell of a lot healthier than my mindset right after Darrin and I broke up. I’d spent weeks going over our relationship in my head, picking every microscopic detail apart with surgical precision, trying to discover a reason why it had ended the way it had. At least until Gage showed up on my doorstep, forced me into the shower, then dragged me to Bad Alibi, the local watering hole. He proceeded to get me shitfaced and let me vent *everything* with the understanding that once the night was over, it was done. Despite the bitch of a hangover I had the following morning, I woke up feeling a million times better than I had in weeks.

“I guess I’m worried you haven’t heard the last of her. A random call all these years later can’t just be a one-off. There has to be a reason.”

He shrugged like he didn’t care, but I didn’t miss the way the muscle in his jaw bulged as his teeth ground together. “Doesn’t matter because as soon as I hung up, I blocked her ass.”

That went a long way in making me feel better.

“Good,” I said as I flipped on a burner and started heating my pan. “Then there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Exactly.”

I pointed my knife in his direction. “But I stand by what I said earlier. If I ever lay eyes on that woman, it’s going down.”

He gave me those dimples, and I couldn't help but feel like they were a gift. "Trust me, you never have to worry about that. But I'll consider myself warned."

CHAPTER

Six

LADIES NIGHT at Bad Alibi used to mean half-off cocktails, but when they ran through nearly half their stock and the number of drunk and disorderly calls to the cops skyrocketed, the owners had to head back to the drawing board.

Buck and Darla then decided that Ladies' Night meant only the women got to pick what played on the jukebox that night. Bad Alibi strongly catered to the biker crowd and a whole night of Taylor Swift and Selena Gomez had done serious damage to the bottom line. Every penis-wielding town member went running for the hills when we all started singing along *loudly* to "Love You Like a Love Song". In our defense, Taylor and Selena have some of the best girl-power anthems to ever exist, especially when we're three sheets to the wind.

Darla thought it was hilarious.

Buck nearly lost his mind and declared never again.

Now Ladies' Night meant dollar drafts.

Beer wasn't exactly my drink of choice, but my friends and I were never ones to turn down a bargain, and dollar drafts were a freaking *steal*.

The bar was more crowded than usual when I pushed through the doors. Fortunately, my girls Farah and Shane worked as servers, so they'd reserved a couple tables for our ragtag group. I squeezed and scooted through the crowd toward the tables my friends were gathered around, heaving out a *whew* of relief once I finally made it.

“Hey, babe.” Lark leaned in to press a kiss to my cheek before pulling back and giving me a top to toe scan. “Look at you.”

I struck a quick pose to show off before hopping onto my stool. I’d come straight from work so I was still dressed in my nude patent leather heels, cream pencil skirt, and blush pink blouse. Aurora let out a whistle. “No joke. Your ass looks fantastic in that skirt.”

“Thanks! That’s why I bought one in every color,” I announced proudly.

Poppy swallowed the sip she’d just taken and pointed at me with the rim of her pint glass. “I do that whenever I find a perfect pair of jeans.”

Willow nodded vigorously. “Yes! It’s so hard to find jeans that fit just right.”

Murmurs of agreement circled through our group as Shane popped in beside me with her tray tucked beneath her arm.

She used her other to pull me into a sideways hug. “Hey, babe. Good to see you.”

“You too,” I returned once we separated. “How’s it going? You and Farah running your asses off tonight?”

Speaking of Farah, I did a quick scan of the bar until I located her. Like Shane, she had her tray tucked beneath her arm as she stood at the head of a long row of tables on the raised section of the bar that housed the pool tables. It might have been Ladies’ Night, but that didn’t mean my friends’ men weren’t in attendance. Cannon was holding court with his crew of bikers and the like that included Jensen Rose, Laeth Harker, Clay and Callum Morrison, Stone Hendrix, Gage, and several other buddies. No doubt Jase would show as well, but, unlike me, he probably stopped to change out of his suit first.

They were all wise enough to know that this little crew could get out of hand without supervision, but smart enough to give us space to do our own thing.

I raised my hand to catch Farah’s attention and got a wave and smile in return. As my eyes traveled back to my own

table, they stopped briefly on Gage, who was already looking in my direction. He shot me a wink of acknowledgment that made my tummy flutter for some insane reason. I gave him a smile in return before ripping my attention away, determined to pull myself out of this haze of lust I was mired in.

“It’s not so bad. You crazy women are loading up, but pulling drafts is a hell of a lot better than having to mix cocktails. Speaking of, you want to start a tab?”

“You know it. Got anything Belgian on tap tonight?”

“Sure do. I’ll get that to you in two shakes.”

She took off and I settled back in, taking in our table. It seemed the whole group was here tonight. All but one person.

I looked to Deva, whose face was already flushed and glowy from her beer—the precious lightweight. “Hey, where’s Lyric? I thought she was coming to Ladies’ Night.”

Like I’d conjured her out of thin air, the sweet, sassy librarian appeared at our table. “Sorry I’m late,” she panted, clearly out of breath.

Every single one of us fell silent at the sight of her. Her curly blonde hair was mussed, her cheeks were flushed in a way that had nothing to do with makeup application, and her lips were swollen.

“Holt and I were just—”

“Bumping uglies?” Lark asked with a quirked brow.

“Playing hide the sausage?” Poppy offered.

“Pretending he was a hot doctor and you were his sexy nurse?” Aurora threw in.

Deva and Willow, the quieter shy ones of our group, didn’t have anything to add, so everyone looked at me as if it were my turn.

I chose to be more direct.

“Fucking in the back of his truck like teenagers?”

My girls broke into laughter. Aurora slapped her palm against the table and Lark held her beer mug up in salute. “As always, our lovely Wynn cuts right to the chase.”

I gave a tiny bow before turning my attention back to Lyric who was smiling from ear to ear. “We were ... spending some quality time together.” She stressed those last words as her cheeks burned bright red.

A sly grin pulled at my lips. “So I was right. You *did* fuck in the back of his truck.”

Her head fell back on a deep belly laugh. “Oh hell yeah. And when we get home later tonight, he’ll get drunk sex as well.”

“Ah, the honeymoon phase bangathon.” Aurora gave a cheeky smirk. “I remember those days.”

Willow let out a dreamy sigh. “Me too.”

My gaze traveled around my crew to see each of them were wearing similar expressions. I rolled my eyes so hard it was a wonder they didn’t pop out onto the table. “All right, that’s enough of that,” I declared, clapping my hands loudly to snap them out of that shit. “I get it. You’re all getting laid on the regular. Congratulations,” I said sarcastically before my mouth pulled into a pout. “It’s not like my own hoo ha is turning into a dusty, wrinkled old prune.”

Deva’s face pinched in like she’d just taken a sniff out of a carton of month-old Chinese food, sticking her tongue out on a *blech*. “I pictured it!” she cried, throwing her hands up over her eyes. “I pictured it and I can’t un-picture it.”

Lyric reaching over and patted her back. “It’s okay. Just think about something else. Like a beautiful meadow full of puppies and kittens.”

Deva closed her eyes and let out a breath.

Shane returned with Farah at her side, and placed a full pint in front of me. “What’s going on? I feel like we missed something.”

“Wynn was lamenting about her dusty, wrinkly vagina,” Lark answered.

“Oh no. Not again,” Deva groaned and snapped her eyes closed again, returning to her happy place full of cute furry little animals.

Farah’s perfectly arched brows winged up into her hairline. “I’m sorry?”

I let out a heavy breath and began explaining. “I started doing the math a few days ago and realized I haven’t had sex in over a year.” I bugged my eyes out for dramatic effect and stressed, “*A year!*”

Shane let out a snort of laughter and threw her arm around my shoulders. “Will you relax, crazy? This isn’t one of those situations where if you don’t use it, you lose it.”

I threw her a grumpy look. “You don’t know that.”

She didn’t look the least bit sympathetic. “Did you forget I got knocked up then spent the next handful of years raising a kid on my own before Jensen pulled his head out of his ass?”

When they were younger, Shane and Jensen had been high school sweethearts. He’d grown up in a home that was the very definition of dysfunctional, and she was raised by her aunt and uncle after her waste-of-air mother had bailed on her and her brother, Stone, when they were kids. They’d fallen hard and fast for each other, and eventually, Shane ended up pregnant at barely twenty years old. Back then, Jensen had been a bit of a hothead and was known for letting his temper get the best of him. One night, things had gone too far, and a bar fight got out of hand.

Thinking he didn’t deserve Shane and the baby she was carrying, that they’d be better off without him in their lives, he’d gone off and enlisted in the Army without telling her. He’d been gone for years, but he never stopped loving her. When he came back, it hadn’t been an easy road, but he’d eventually earned her trust. Now they were sickeningly in love and living their own happily ever after just like the rest of my friends.

“You think there weren’t a few sex-free years in there? You try getting laid when you’re raising a baby all by yourself. Even if I’d wanted to find someone to have sex with, I was too damn tired to go out and do it.”

I held up my hand in surrender. “Okay, point taken.”

“You know, you wouldn’t have any problem finding a guy if you really wanted to,” Farah stated. “You’re the total package. Young, gorgeous, funny, smart. If you put yourself out there, men would be lining up at your door for a moment of your time.”

Man, I really did have the best friends in the universe.

“She’s right,” Willow agreed. “What about . . .” She stopped to look around the bar, spotting a guy playing darts with his buddies. “Ooh, what about him? He’s really cute.”

I glanced in the direction she was looking and crinkled my brows. The dude had so much gel in his hair he looked like a real-life Ken doll. “He’s too manicured. I prefer my guys more rugged.”

Lark jerked her chin in another guy’s direction. “Okay, so what about him?”

I made a gagging noise when I spotted the man sitting on a stool at the curve of the bar. “Oh come on! When I said I liked rugged guys, I didn’t mean ones who lacked all basic hygiene.”

She hit me with a flat stare. “He’s not that bad and you know it. His beard’s just a little . . . unkempt.”

“He looks like Chewbacca tried to shave and gave up a quarter of the way through.”

“Then how about that guy?” Lyric pointed as discreetly as possible to a guy sitting a few tables away.

I studied the guy for a beat before tipping my head side to side. “Meh. He’s just . . . blah.”

The fourth guy had a weird forehead. The fifth’s nose was too big. The sixth had serial killer eyes. It was starting to feel like there were no good, single dudes left in Redemption.

“She’ll find something wrong with all of them,” Aurora said knowingly.

Everyone stopped and turned to look at her, and I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Aurora looked around at the group. “Oh, come on. Like I’m the only one thinking it.” When no one said anything else, she rolled her eyes and threw her arms up in exasperation. “She’s not going to have any interest in some random guy, because she and Gage are totally into each other, whether they’re willing to admit it or not.”

A chorus of agreeable noises came from all of my friends as I rolled my eyes. They were never going to let this go.

We were just friends! There wasn’t anything romantic between Gage and me.

Except maybe for the teeny-tiny fact that I couldn’t stop picturing him naked.

CHAPTER

Seven

I BLINKED OUT OF A DEEP, dreamless sleep, unsure for a moment what had woken me until I felt it again. That dull ache deep in my core. An ache that throbbed in the most exquisite way. It pulsed within me again, expelling the breath from my lungs.

“Oh my god,” I panted as a bolt of pleasure shot through me so damn strong my back arched right off the bed.

I looked down just as Gage lifted his head from between my spread thighs, his full lips glistening with my arousal. “About damn time. I was starting to think you were going to sleep through the whole damn thing.”

His tongue came out and dragged through my slit then circled my clit, making me whimper.

“W-what are you doing?” My voice shook as tremors wracked my body.

He let out the most deliciously deep, rumbly hum as he lightly sank his teeth into the skin of my inner thigh. “What I’ve dreamed of doing to you for years.”

He fed on my pussy like he was a dead man walking and this was his last meal. I felt myself getting impossibly wetter, my orgasm so close I thought I was going to pass out. But before I could get there, Gage pulled back, resting back on his haunches and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

There was something so primal about the crude gesture that made me even hotter than I already was. He leaned in,

bracing his palms on the mattress on either side of me and slowly crawled up my body, coming to hover over me. I could feel his heat seeping into me like an electric blanket, and I wanted nothing more than to feel his weight pressing me down into the bed as he fed his cock inside me.

“You have no fucking clue how long I’ve wanted this,” he rasped, that deep baritone voice of his driving me crazy. “I’ve wanted you since the moment I saw you. I was watching you at the bar earlier, and I couldn’t take it anymore. I need you, Bits. So goddamn bad I can’t breathe. Tell me you feel the same way.”

I couldn’t remember a time in my life when I needed anything more than I needed him inside me at that very moment. I was so ready, so needy and desperate, I knew the moment he thrust inside, I’d come. And I couldn’t wait.

“Please, Gage,” I panted, feeling lightheaded. “I need you so bad. *Please.*”

On a growl, he hooked my leg over his arm, pressing my knee back toward my shoulder just as he lined the blunt head of his cock up with my opening. Then he—

My eyes popped open on a sharp inhale. The bedspread was clutched in my fingers so tight it was a miracle my nails hadn’t shredded the material. The sheets were knotted around my legs.

And there was no Gage in sight.

However, unlike the sex I’d just been dreaming about, the throb in my core was very real. Only, the emptiness that accompanied it left me unsatisfied and cranky.

“Son of a bitch,” I whispered into the darkness of my empty room. Because I knew right then and there that I was in *big* trouble.

“EARTH TO BITS.” I was jolted back into reality by Gage’s elbow jabbing me in the side of my arm. “Hey, you okay?”

I blinked back into the present, back into the middle of Hot Java where Gage and I had been waiting in line for our morning pick-me-up.

His heavy brow was dipped in a V as he stared at me with concern written all over his face.

God, how had I never stopped to pay attention to how attractive he was?

I mean, I knew he was good-looking. We couldn’t go out in public without women nearly tripping over themselves to get in front of him, for a chance at his attention. But he’d always just been . . . Gage. Viking. My best bud who I could confide in about anything.

Only ever since that dream the other night, I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about him in a very *un*-friend-like kind of way.

God, I really needed to get laid. This was getting ridiculous. That sex dream had screwed me up so damn bad I was having trouble looking Gage in the eye without blushing furiously.

He guided me forward, the line having moved while I was in my daze. “You good? I said your name six times and nothing. You were totally spaced.”

“Oh, uh . . . sorry.”

He lifted his hand, tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear. It was a move he’d done countless times, only as his fingers dragged across the thin skin of my jaw and neck, a million tiny electric spark came to life, making the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck stand on end.

“Nothing to apologize for. But you’ve been off the past two days.” He arched a single brow, taking that rugged masculinity he exuded from every pore up a thousand notches. “Is there something going on you aren’t telling me?”

Oh, you mean aside from the fact I can't stop wondering what your penis looks like and if you use it as well as I've been imagining?

I shook that thought right out of my head. “Nope,” I lied, the one word coming out a little too forcefully. I cleared my throat and tried again. “I haven’t been sleeping well the past couple nights. That’s all.”

It wasn’t a *complete* lie. I had been sleeping like shit, because I couldn’t stop picturing Gage naked. Every time I closed my eyes, I’d see him hovering over me, large and hard and . . . ready. But I left that little—or not so little—detail out.

He placed his palm against the small of my back, a simple gesture meant to gently guide me forward toward the register, but that touch was enough to make my nipples stand up and salute. Most days I cursed the evil bastard—who *had to* be a man—that created the padded bra, but in that moment I was grateful. The torture device was preventing me from having a full-blown headlight situation in the middle of a packed coffee shop.

Jeez, this was seriously getting out of hand.

We made it to the register and placed our orders before moving out of the way of the other patrons as we waited. I fidgeted the whole time, shifting from foot to foot and squeezing my thighs together against the pulsing heartbeat I’d been feeling constantly for the past two days.

I could feel Gage’s curious gaze on me as I tried my best to play it cool, but I knew without having to be told I was failing miserably. Fortunately, our coffees came, giving my hands something to do. I held the warm paper to-go cup between my palms, letting the heat soak in. We made our way out of Hot Java and onto the sidewalk of downtown Redemption. The sun was bright, the sky a perfect blue dotted with white cotton candy puffs of clouds.

Gage leaned in close, his scent, that warm leather and spice, invaded my senses as we walked at a slow, leisurely pace. “All right, there’s definitely something going on with you. Start talking.”

I let out a weary sigh, taking in the window displays of the shops and restaurants that lined the streets. Autumn had touched down in the foothills of Tennessee, and people were excited to kick the season off. Pumpkins, hay bales, and scarecrows were out in force, decorating the streets. Windows were painted with trees, the leaves in vibrant fall colors. It was my favorite time of year, and usually I'd enjoy taking in everyone's creativity, but my mind was currently occupied with . . . other things.

"What's the longest you've ever gone without . . . you know?" I lowered my voice to a whisper. "Sex."

He choked on the coffee he'd just sipped. I lifted my hand to pat his back as he hacked up a lung in the middle of the sidewalk. Once he was finally able to breathe, he cut his gaze to me. "Jesus, Bits. Warn a guy next time."

"Hey, you asked, Viking," I snapped back with a defensive frown. "In fact, you kept pushing."

He scrubbed a hand over his face, his palm scraping over the stubble on his jaw from not shaving that morning and causing a raspy sound that hit me right in the belly.

He let out a mumbled curse, his chest rising on a deep inhale. "All right. Okay. We can talk about this."

I rolled my eyes. "Well, I would hope so, given that we're both adults here." He cleared his throat and continued walking. I jogged to catch up, his tree-trunk legs so much longer than mine. "So?" I asked once I fell in step beside him. "Are you going to answer my question?"

"About the longest I've gone without sex?"

I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth and bit down on it as I looked up at him and nodded. "Christ, Wynn. I don't know. Maybe . . . six months?"

My eyes bulged out and I choked on my own spit. "Six months?" I croaked, suddenly regretting that I'd asked.

"Yeah. Something like that." He glanced down at me as we continued our stroll. "Why? How long has it been for you?"

I gulped back my coffee, ignoring the fact it was still too hot to drink so quickly and faced forward as I picked up the pace, looking anywhere but at him. “Um. You know what? I don’t think I want to play this game anymore.”

With a deep, rumbling chuckle, he grabbed my forearm and pulled me to a stop, forcing me to turn around and face him. “Uh-uh. That’s not how this works. I fessed up, now it’s your turn. There’s obviously a reason you asked, so just get to it already.”

“Fine,” I huffed, throwing up the arm that wasn’t holding my coffee. “I did the math and it looks like, well, that’s it’s been . . . over a year.”

His heels dug in deep, bringing us both to an abrupt stop. “A *year*?” he boomed, that baritone of his catching the attention of the young mom across the street pushing her baby in a stroller.

“Jeez, will you keep it down?” I hissed, digging my fingers into his forearm and giving it a yank to get him moving again. “I’m not going to tell you stuff anymore if you’re going to announce it to the world.”

“Sorry. I’m sorry. I just can’t believe—” He stopped and gave his head a shake. “A year? Really?”

Well, *over* a year. But I wasn’t going to point out that distinction a second time.

“You say that like it’s something I should be ashamed of,” I said quietly, the burn in my cheeks unpleasant. The coffee I’d been drinking now sat in my stomach like a rock.

“Hey. No. Stop that.” He took my chin between his thumb and forefinger, forcing my face up to his. “Don’t talk like that, sweetheart,” he said in a low, husky voice dripping with tenderness. “There’s nothing in this world that you should ever be ashamed of. You hear me? Not you. Not ever.”

Even with things being as strained as they had been the past couple days, this man still had a gift for making everything in my world better.

One corner of my mouth curled upward. “Thanks, Viking.”

He draped his arm over my shoulders and pulled me into his side as he started us moving once more. “So, is this why you’ve been acting weird lately? Because you’ve been having a dry spell?”

“Um, yeah,” I said, my voice pitching high. “Yep. That’s why. It’s been a strange time for me.” I cleared my throat and did my best to regulate my tone. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s time for me to find someone to take the edge off, you know?”

I might have been fantasizing about Gage, but I wasn’t foolish enough to believe that would *ever* happen. He was too important to me. Too special. And I wouldn’t do anything to ruin our friendship.

I felt his arm around me flex, the muscles in his bicep and impressive forearm tightening and bunching up. “You mean dating?”

I looked up curiously, seeing the muscle ticking in his jaw. “God no,” I scoffed. “You know better than to ask that. After Darrin, I’m still firmly anti-relationship.”

His heavy arm dropped from my shoulders, falling down to his side. “So, what? You’re just going to go out looking for some random guy to take home for a night?”

I lifted my brows in disbelief. “Are you judging me right now?”

“No, of course not.”

I propped my coffee-free hand on my hip and hit Gage with a hard look. “Good. Because it would be really hypocritical of you if you were. In the years I’ve known you, random hookups have been your MO.”

His chest heaved on a heavy exhale, like he was expelling all the air from his lungs in one go. “I know. Not a damn thing wrong with random hookups when it’s consensual for both parties, but that’s . . . that’s just not you, Bits. It’s not in your nature.”

I wish he wasn’t right. It would have made things so much easier. “Then what am I supposed to do, huh?” I asked with exasperation. “Just spend the rest of my life celibate? Die an

old, dried up spinster who gets her face eaten off by her cats when she dies? That's not fair!" I stomped my foot on the ground like a bratty teenager.

"I don't know!" He reached up and raked a hand through his hair anxiously. "Christ, can we please change the subject? Please, God. Let's just talk about anything else."

I suddenly felt a little disheartened. Deflated. "Works for me." This whole conversation had devolved beyond what I was comfortable with anyway. I looked his way and arched a wry brow. "Heard from your ex lately?"

He gave me a flat look. "Smartass."

CHAPTER

Eight

SHE WANTED to find some random asshole off the streets to take back to her bed. To break her dry spell.

Fuck me, just thinking about that conversation from earlier made my teeth grind so hard I was going to wear my molars into dust, but I couldn't seem to stop no matter how hard I tried. It was running on a damn near constant loop in my head.

That conversation had consumed me to the point I was struggling to concentrate on my work.

“For fuck’s sake, are you catatonic or something?”

Laeth’s tone yanked me back into the present, back to the conference room where I’d been sitting for our weekly team meeting. I hadn’t realized I’d zoned out.

“Sorry. What?”

My partners looked at me like I’d grown a second head. Lark’s lips were pinched between her teeth to hide a smile and Willow looked curious.

“What the hell’s going on with you, man?” Jensen asked with a frown, more out of concern than anything else. It wasn’t like me to lose focus. It was something that had been beaten into us during our years in the Army. Losing focus could cost you your life or someone else’s. “You’ve been spacing the whole damn meeting.”

Fuck me.

“Sorry. I’m good. Promise. Keep going.”

His eyes narrowed but he let it go and got back down to business while I did my best to stay in the present. I managed not to drift for the rest of the meeting, and as soon as it was over, I shot to my feet and started toward my office. It should have been my sanctuary, but almost as soon as I shut the door behind me those assholes were shoving it open again and storming in like my office was a free-for-all.

“Jesus. Ever heard of knocking?”

Neither of them bothered to acknowledge my question as they took the chairs placed in front of my desk for guests or clients or people I actually wanted to talk to, which neither of them were.

Jensen rested back, kicking one of his feet up to rest an ankle on the opposite knee while Laeth kicked his booted feet on my desk.

“You mind, dickwad?” I asked as I walked past, knocking them off before taking a seat in my chair.

Jensen dove right in the instant my ass hit the chair. “Start talking,” he ordered like we were still in the Army and he was leading a mission. “It’s obvious something’s on your mind. It’s not like you to space when you’re supposed to be focused on something.”

I huffed out a breath and scrubbed at my face. The stubble on my chin was longer than I usually let it get. “It’s nothing,” I assured them, seeing by the looks on their faces they weren’t buying it for a second. “Well, nothing important, at least.” If I couldn’t get away with lying, the least I could do was put their minds at ease about that.

Laeth got serious all of a sudden, leaning forward and bracing his forearms on his knees. “We’re here, man,” he stated bluntly. “If you need to talk about anything. We’ve got you. Believe me, I know what it’s like to hold on to something by yourself. If you need to talk shit out—”

“I appreciate it, really. But I’m good. It’s nothing like that.”

Laeth had struggled a little harder than the rest of us when we got back stateside. He'd tried hiding that shit from us for years, drowning himself in nameless, faceless women and way too much booze. It was a drunken one-night stand that landed him firmly in the parent category, and if it weren't for that kid, I wasn't sure he'd have put himself back on the straight and narrow so easily.

His demons had been eating him up, the nightmares almost too much for him to handle. Those of us who were close to him felt helpless to pull him out of the downward spiral he'd been in. It was his son, Cash, and Deva, the woman he'd hired as their nanny, who managed to guide him back into the light. I appreciated him looking out for me more than he'd probably ever know.

"I'm straight, brother," I reassured, infusing my tone with earnestness. "It's not about the past. It's just . . ." I let out another deep, weighted sigh as I tried to massage the tension from the back of my neck. "It's stupid, really. Just some shit with Wynn."

The worry faded from my friends' faces, quickly replaced with pure interest. For Christ's sake. These assholes were worse than gossiping women.

"Oh?" Jensen started, eyebrows winging up high on his forehead. "Do tell."

I hit him with a flat look. "So you can run back to your women and start spreading shit around? Not a fucking chance. Now get the hell out of my office."

Although . . . it would have been nice to get someone else's perspective on the uncomfortable conversation we'd had that morning. But I didn't trust my partners to keep their mouths shut.

"Oh come on!" Laeth sat up tall, offense chiseling into his features. "We don't run to tell them *everything*."

I arched a brow and remained silent.

"Okay, so maybe we do," Jensen finally relented. "But we swear we won't this time. How's that? Cone of trust?"

Laeth nodded. “Yeah. Cone of trust.”

I couldn’t believe I was actually considering this. It wasn’t like our whole crew didn’t give me and Wynn shit on a regular basis about hooking up. They were like rabid dogs fighting over a bone. If something like this leaked, they’d salivate over it for years.

But it had been half a freaking day, and I wanted to find this bastard—who didn’t even exist, mind you—and beat him into the ground. I couldn’t remember the last time I felt this . . . unhinged.

“It’s something she said this morning. She’s—” I had to stop and force down the venomous burn crawling up my throat. I hadn’t even said the words out loud and they’d already left an acrid taste in my mouth. “She was talking about finding some random dude to . . . you know.” Christ, what was I, a fucking prepubescent kid?

Laeth and Jensen looked at me like they were waiting for more.

“*You know,*” I repeated, those words a harsh whisper, like saying them twice might get through to them.

Jensen shook his head, brows furrowed. “No. Clearly I don’t know. A guy to what? Do her taxes?”

“Please tell me you aren’t expecting us to read your goddamn mind. I get enough of that shit at home. Deva got pissed at me the other night because I didn’t miraculously guess she was in the mood for Italian for dinner.” He scoffed and threw his hands up. “I can’t deal with that shit here too.”

These fucking guys. “She’s looking for a guy to”—I swallowed audibly—“take care of her needs.” I circled my wrist when they remained silent and tacked on. “Like in bed?”

“Oh!” Jensen slapped his knee, the lightbulb finally going off. “Okay, I see. She’s looking to get laid.”

My stomach pitched and twisted like I was at the front of the rollercoaster ride from hell. “Jesus, don’t say it out loud,” I hissed. Why did I suddenly feel the need to cover my ears?

This was ridiculous. I *felt* ridiculous.

Laeth looked around the room before shifting his attention back to me like I'd lost my damn mind. It kind of felt like I had. "What? You afraid if you say it out loud Bloody Mary or the Boogeyman or something's gonna pop out and get you?"

Sometimes I hated my friends.

"It's not that," I muttered grumpily. "I just . . . don't like it." Could I have sounded any more childish? "I mean, what the hell is she thinking? She can't just find some random asshole to hook up with. What if he turns out to be a psychopath? It's dangerous." I raked a hand through my hair, the frustration and anxiety churning in my gut getting worse by the second.

Jensen let out a short laugh. "Holy shit. You're jealous."

I jerked back so hard the chair creaked and rocked backward. "What? You're crazy! I'm not jealous. I'm just concerned." I didn't get jealous. Not ever. It wasn't in my nature. Not even when I was with Vanessa.

That was actually something she used to get pissed about. When we'd go out for drinks, she'd try to get a rise out of me by being flirty with some of the other guys in the bars. But I knew who she was going home with, so I never felt the need to take the bait. I chalked it up to her being young and kind of immature. She wouldn't really do anything.

Or so I thought.

When I didn't make the scene she wanted, she'd get pissy and throw a tantrum that would inevitably end up with her giving me the silent treatment for a couple days before she got over it. It was childish and annoying, but I was the kind of guy who could go with the flow easily enough, who could let shit roll off my back. When you had the job I had, saw the shit I saw, it was easy to put the petty stuff in perspective, and jealousy wasn't an emotion I had time for.

At least not until now, apparently.

Christ. If this was what jealousy felt like, I didn't want any part of it. I felt like I was coming out of my skin, and she

hadn't even decided for sure if she was going to find a random hookup to take the edge off.

What if I was the guy who did that for her? I tiny voice in the deepest recesses of my mind said, and as soon as that seed was planted, it sprouted like Jack's magic fucking beans.

I'd have been lying or just plain stupid if I said I didn't notice how beautiful Wynn Klein actually was. With that blond hair so pale it was nearly white, all that creamy, smooth, unblemished skin, and those exotic violet eyes, she had the kind of beauty that was damn near impossible to look away from. It wasn't an obvious, smack-you-in-the-face-with-it kind of beauty, but much subtler. However, the moment you locked eyes with her and noticed, there was no escaping it ever again.

I wasn't blind to the kind of male attention she drew when we were out in public together. The way men stared like they couldn't help themselves. Of course I'd noticed. And oddly enough, unlike with Vanessa, it bothered me that those assholes couldn't rip their eyes away from her. For the past three years I told myself it was because it was disrespectful. They were gawking like she was a piece of meat, and she deserved better. But now I was starting to question everything.

Was it really those asshole's obviousness that bothered me, or was it jealousy?

I let out a groan and massaged at the ache that had formed behind my temples.

"Ah, look at that," Laeth drawled, a teasing lilt to his words. "His head's finally extracting itself from his ass."

Jensen chuckled. "We're witnessing a real-life lightbulb moment. Soak it in."

"Get fucked," I grunted as I shot them a death glare. "And get the hell out of my office. I have shit to do."

"Yeah, like stew over the fact that your girl's looking to get plowed by a stranger when you could just man up and take what you've wanted all this time."

I shot to my feet, ready to plow my fist into Laeth's face, but those two pricks took off in a run, bolting out of my office

before I could pummel them into the ground.

All the better, because he wasn't too far off the mark. I had a strong suspicion my mind was going to be consumed with a tiny little firecracker of a blonde for the foreseeable future.

CHAPTER

Nine

THERE WAS something wrong with me. Like, seriously wrong.

My brain was broken. My brain or my vagina, I wasn't sure which. Or which was worse.

For the past three days I'd been able to think of little else other than finally breaking this damn dry spell. If I kept having sex dreams about my best friend, things were bound to get awkward in a way there would be no coming back from, and I couldn't risk losing Gage. He was too important to me.

That was why I currently found myself slowly pushing a cart through the aisles of the local market while I scoped out my surroundings, or more importantly, the men with bare ring fingers.

I'd been caught ogling more than once already and for every interested look I got in return, I'd also received a wary glance. If I didn't learn to be more inconspicuous, I was going to be asked to leave the store.

I could just imagine the rumors that would start flying after that. *Crazy supermarket stalker kicked out of the Shop and Save for making male patrons uncomfortable.*

I'd never live it down.

But I couldn't help feeling like I was running out of options. I'd tried hitting up Bad Alibi the night before to see if anyone there turned my head and came out with a big, fat

nothing. I'd even downloaded a couple dating apps on my phone, but hadn't had the guts to post my profile.

I rounded the corner into the produce section and spotted a guy with dark hair standing in front of the display of leafy greens. His back was to me, so I didn't have much to go on other than he had a decent build and a nice enough ass.

I was so busy trying to get a better look that I wasn't paying attention and crashed my cart into someone else's.

I jerked my head around to face the tall, statuesque brunette I'd just plowed into. "Shit. I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

I'd never seen the woman before in my life, but the way she looked at me as she yanked at her cart to untangle it from mine was like I'd insulted her mother or kicked her puppy.

"Yeah, well, maybe watch where you're going and you won't crash into people." Her face would have been pretty if it wasn't scrunched up in such an ugly, unhappy way. "Ever consider that?"

My chin jerked back at her attitude. It was just so un-Redemption. The people in this town were nice, or forgiving at the very least. I couldn't remember the last time I'd encountered someone so rude.

I held my hands up in surrender. "Hey lady, I said I was sorry. It was an accident. No need to be nasty about it."

If it was possible, her features scrunched up even more as she blew a huff out of her nose, tipped her chin obnoxiously high, and turned on her heel without a backward glance.

Yeah, this chick definitely had to be new, because we didn't treat people like that in this small town.

The skin on the back of my neck began to tingle as my stomach did a little dip, like it was trying to communicate something to me. This woman was a complete stranger, but I knew from the vibe I was getting that we were never going to be bestest buds. Or even the loosest of acquaintances. I could only hope she was passing through and not the latest permanent fixture.

By the time I got my head together and looked back to the produce section, the guy I'd been trying to check out was long gone. I let out a sigh and shook my head. It was probably for the best anyway. Decent ass or not, it was the same problem with produce guy as there had been with every man I'd laid eyes on the past few days.

I felt nothing.

Not a damn thing. Not a spark or an itch or a tingle.

It was like my libido had dried up and blown away like dust in the freaking wind. Well . . . with every man except one. The one I had absolutely no business being attracted to. That was a line not to be crossed. Logically, I knew that. At least my head did. My body, well, that was a different story.

My phone rang, startling me out of the foul mood I'd been sinking in that had only gotten worse since my run-in with that snooty brat of a woman.

I pulled it out of my purse and read the screen, blowing out a heavy breath. Guilt gnawed at me. I'd been blowing Gage off lately, responding to texts with curt one-liners and letting calls go to voicemail, making up bullshit excuses about being busy or tired. That wasn't me. That wasn't *us*. We were best friends, and I felt like an asshole for avoiding him.

I swiped my thumb to answer. "Hey."

"Well shit. She lives," he started, his voice full of sarcasm. "I was starting to worry."

That damn guilt was liable to chew a hole right through my stomach. "I'm really sorry. Things at work have been crazy." The lie tasted horrible on my tongue, but I excused it away by silently promising I'd never do it again. "But it's all back to normal now."

His hum rumbled through the line. "So what are you up to?"

I looked down at my empty shopping cart. Jeez, I really hadn't been very stealthy, had I? "Grocery shopping."

“Okay. I’ll let you get back to it. I just wanted to make sure you weren’t lying in a ditch somewhere.”

Man, he could really land a blow. “I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he said on a sigh. “You can make it up to me by not skipping out on coffee tomorrow morning. Sound good?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Yeah, Viking. Sounds great. And to make it up to you, it’s on me.”

He chuckled, the sound spreading warmth in my chest. “You know that’s not how I work, Bits.” Oh, I knew, all right. In all the years Gage and I had been friends, I didn’t think there had been a single time where I’d been able to pick up the check. Even on the evenings when I was the one to stop and grab dinner, he’d already called ahead and pre-paid. “My momma didn’t raise me that way. I let you pay for something, she’d know and show up on my doorstep, ready to cuff me upside the head. No thanks.”

I let out a little laugh, able to picture that in my mind with perfect clarity. I’d met Marcia Langdon a handful of times over the years when she’d come to visit her son, always with her own mother, Gage’s grandma, in tow. The woman had been single since Gage’s waste-of-oxygen father took off on them when he was ten years old. It had just been Marcia with the help of Grandma Buttons—as she adorably liked to be called—raising the rambunctious boy since then.

Between those two wonderful ladies, they’d instilled manners and a sense of chivalry in him that would make whatever woman he ended up with happy as a pig in shit.

“Okay, you pay, and I’ll tell you all about my run-in I just had with a bitchy woman.”

“Sounds entertaining,” he replied, humor carrying through the line. “You didn’t knock her out, did you? I’m really comfortable right now, kicked back, enjoying a beer, and watching the game. I’d hate to have to get up to come bail your ass out of jail.”

I let out a snort and rolled my eyes as I continued to push my empty cart through the store one-handed. “First off, if I had hit her, which I didn’t, she would have totally deserved it. That’s how nasty she was. And second, it would never happen anyway. You think for a second Lyric would let her man lock up any of her friends?” I blew a raspberry past my lips. “There are some serious perks to small-town living, and one of them happens to be being besties with the local cop’s fiancée.”

That earned me another laugh, and I could picture the way his dimples were probably pressing deep right then. They didn’t come out often, but when they did, they only made him that much hotter. “Sound logic, Bits. Still, try not to get into any trouble, yeah? If for no reason other than my peace of mind.”

I let out a sound of disappointment. “Fine. For you. But that sure sounds boring.”

“Finish your shopping and I’ll see you in the morning.”

“See you then, Viking.”

I hung up and tossed my phone back into my purse, feeling better after one conversation with Gage than I had in the past three days.

I decided to put my man hunt to rest and actually shop for groceries. Maybe instead of trying to find someone to help me break my dry spell, I’d go online and stock up on some new toys.

CHAPTER

Ten

I PUSHED through the door of Hot Java and pulled in a deep breath, the smell of fresh coffee beans a much-needed hit to my system.

It wasn't the only coffee shop in town, or even the one closest to my place, but the worm in our crew had all but blackballed French Press, the bougier, more expensive place in town. The coffee at Hot Java was superior and reasonably priced, but the convenience of being only a few blocks from French Press made it the place I frequented most often. However, the owner, a bitchy pinch-faced woman, had been harboring a crush on my buddy Clay for years. When his now-wife Lark had returned after being gone for years, the chick had gone out of her way to try to make Lark's life so miserable she'd leave town again. All because she was threatened that her return would mean she'd lose her shot with Clay, something she was too stubborn to realize she'd lost long before Lark came home.

After witnessing the woman shooting her venom at Lark, the rest of the ladies put a lifetime ban on the place, and if any of us guys were to step foot inside, they'd take it as a personal affront. Probably would have made voodoo dolls of each of us to stick pins in all day long. As far as I was concerned, I was better off relenting, even if I didn't give much of a damn about drama that didn't involve me.

I'd once made the mistake of saying as much to Wynn, and there had been a few seconds I'd worried she was going to knee me in the balls.

Not worth it. So I started driving the extra miles to Hot Java in order to keep the peace.

But also because of Wynn.

I'd been doing a lot of thinking over the last few days, and I'd come to realize some truths that had always been there, but that I refused to let myself see. Mainly, that there wasn't much I *wouldn't* do for that woman.

She hadn't arrived yet, so I went to the counter and ordered for both of us. An Americano for me and something overly sweet, beige in color, and topped with whipped cream for her. As always, I felt fucking ridiculous carrying her sugary confection around in front of people, but I sucked it up and did it anyway.

I'd just moved to the side of the register to wait for my order, pulling out my phone to shoot off a text asking Wynn how much longer she thought she was going to be, when a voice spoke my name, instantly sending a chill down my back.

“Gage.”

My thumb hovered over the screen, unable to move, as I woodenly lifted my head and locked onto a pair of eyes I'd sworn I would never see again.

Vanessa stood less than five feet in front of me, looking exactly how I remembered her. All that long dark hair hung in perfect, loose curls, spilling over her shoulders. It was barely eight o'clock on a Saturday morning, and she was already sporting a full face of makeup with the shiny pink gloss she had favored back when we'd been dating. I'd hated that shit. Every time we kissed I felt like I had to wipe off a thick coat of quick-drying glue.

Back when we dated she'd said she'd never be caught dead out in public in workout clothes or sweats. Apparently that was still a hard and fast rule, because she was currently dressed in a pair of designer jeans and a silk blouse that made her stand out in this small town coffee shop like a sore thumb in need of amputation.

“God, it’s good to see you,” she said on a breath, her smile that same practiced, fake bullshit pageant smile she’d learned from her pageant mom. “You look amazing.” She stepped in, arms lifting like she was preparing to hug me.

I shot backward a foot, keeping that distance between us as I tried to wrap my brain around the fact that she was here, in my town, standing right in front of me.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

“This is just a lucky coincidence. I’m staying at some little inn not too far away, and all that place has is a single cup coffee maker. I needed something stronger so . . .” She held up her hands. “Here I am.”

“Not what I meant,” I gritted out. “What are you doing *here*. In Tennessee.”

She batted her eyelashes, tilting her chin down to look up at me through the fringe, and that clued me in that I really wasn’t going to like what she said next. “I’m here for you.”

That sentence was a record scratch in my brain. “What?”

“I—”

I held up my hand to stop her talking. “I heard what you said. I don’t need you to repeat it. What I need is for you to explain why the fuck, after five *years*, you’ve shown up in my town. Is this some kind of joke?”

“It’s not a joke.” She moved in again, her expression almost pleading. “I’ve really missed you.” Her hands came up to rest on my chest, but I grabbed her by the wrists to stop her before she could make contact.

“You don’t get to touch me,” I said, my words dripping with warning that had eyes going wide.

“Why?” She actually had the nerve to look up at me like I’d wounded her. “Are—are you seeing someone?”

I opened my mouth to tell her it was none of her goddamn business when I heard Wynn’s voice, like a lifeline thrown just as I was starting to drown.

“Sorry I’m late. I set my alarm but forgot to turn the damn thing off silent.”

I released Vanessa’s wrists and jerked around, taking in all that was Wynn. My best friend, a firecracker of a woman.

The differences between her and the woman I’d turned my back on couldn’t have been more stark. Where Vanessa was polished and perfectly put together, Wynn looked like she’d just rolled out of bed and made a mad dash here, which, knowing her, was exactly what had happened. Years of training had left me no choice but to become a morning person.

Wynn, not so much. She’d bitch about the early hours and still drag her ass out of bed to meet up with me. But she wouldn’t take the time to do her hair and squeeze herself into painted-on jeans.

This morning, that waterfall of white blonde hair was pulled up into a pile on the top of her head more out of convenience than style. Her face was a blank canvas free of makeup, giving me a perfect view of the freckles dotted across the bridge of her nose. She was dressed in a simple pair of black leggings, an overly large, slouchy sweater that hung off one shoulder, and her running shoes she bought because she thought they were cute, *not* because she planned on ever running.

I preferred all of that, all that was my tiny dynamo, over the made up and fake that was Vanessa. Every day of the week.

“I blame you for being such a damn early bird. Are you—”

I blamed what happened next on that fight or flight instinct kicking in. It wasn’t like me to act impulsively, but Vanessa had thrown me off, her presence causing my world to spin right off its axis. That was the only logical reason I could come up with for what I did in that moment.

As soon as she was close enough, I looped my arm around her waist and yanked her into me, holding her in a way I never

had before. Leaning in close enough that my lips brushed her ear, I whispered, “Just go with it.”

Then I slammed my lips down on hers.

Wynn

“**SORRY I’M LATE,**” I panted, out of breath from having to rush from my car where I parked a block and a half away. I was already running late, and by the time I made it to Hot Java, the popular coffee shop was already hopping, even early on a Saturday morning, so parking had been difficult. “I set the alarm on my phone but forgot to turn the damn thing off silent. I blame you for being such a damn early bird,” I teased as I closed in on him. Just as I got close, he whipped around, the look on his face pulling me up short. He looked . . . panicked, “Are you—”

He grabbed me by the waist and pulled me so close my feet barely touched the ground, the very tips of my tennis shoes scraping against the tile floor. A shiver shot up my spine as his lips grazed the shell of my ear. A gasp wrenched from my throat, the stubble on his jaw abrading the sensitive skin of my neck, as he whispered, “Just go with it.”

Before I had a chance to ask what he was talking about, he shocked the ever-loving hell out of me by crashing his mouth down on mine.

A surprised squeak worked its way past my lips, forcing them to part, and the moment they did, Gage dove in, kissing me like it was his sole purpose on this planet. I’d wrapped my arms around his neck on instinct when he’d grabbed me, holding myself upright. But with that first tantalizing swipe of his tongue, I gripped tighter for a whole new reason. My nails scratched across short hair at the back of his neck as I fell into the kiss, losing myself completely. Because, *damn*, was he good at this!

My brain short-circuited, everything else around us disappeared, and all I was capable of thinking was *more* and *wow* and *holy shit, I don't ever want this to stop*.

But it did. It had to. The need to breathe dictated that. And by the time he lifted his head from mine, breaking what had to have been the best kiss of my entire freaking life, we were both breathing like we spent the past twenty years smoking a pack and a half a day.

I blinked, trying to clear my hazy vision. I couldn't recall ever being as affected by a kiss as I was just then. The man had kissed me stupid. Literally. And all I could do was gape up at him, part of me wondering what the hell happened while the other part tried desperately to figure out how to make it happen again.

I was still in a lust-drunk daze—brought on by my best friend, of all people—when he shifted me around like a ragdoll, tucking me against his side and throwing a heavy arm around my shoulders.

“Vanessa, this is my girl, Wynn.”

I blinked again, reality suddenly crashed into me like a bullet train. The coffee shop had gone deathly quiet in the middle of the mad morning rush, and I could feel everyone's eyes on Gage and me, their gazes burrowing into my skin. But I only had enough capacity in my brain at that moment to focus on one thing.

Vanessa?

I whipped my head around and way up to look at Gage with wide, bewildered eyes. He met my gaze, silently communicating with only a simple look. And just like that, the haze of lust that had been coursing through me dried up faster than a single drop of water on a burning hot cast iron skillet. In its place was a white-hot rage that narrowed my focus, tunnel vision setting in on the woman standing in front of us. The one who clearly woke up earlier than necessary in order to doll herself up for a simple coffee run.

Ridiculous.

I recognized her then. Gage's ex was the nasty, bitchy woman from the grocery store the night before.

It might have taken me a moment to get with the game, for that request to *just go with it* to fully sink in, but I was here now, and I was *ready to play*. I looped my arm around Gage's waist and tucked my hand firmly in the back pocket of his well-worn jeans while I twisted and pressed deeper into him, placing my other hand on his stomach. I felt some of the tension melt away from his body as soon as I snuggled into him.

I blamed what I said next on the rage still running hard and fast through my veins like a mountain stream after a thaw. I couldn't believe this bitch had the audacity to invade Gage's home. It made me want to leap forward and claw her eyes out, but that wasn't an option, so I decided the next best thing was to lean into my role.

"I'd say I'm a lot more than just *your girl*, Viking. Wouldn't you? I mean, we are engaged, after all."

CHAPTER

Eleven

WELL, I'd really stepped in it this time.

I paced back and forth across Gage's living room as I tried to wrap my head around what I'd done.

As soon as I blurted out that he and I were engaged, the coffee shop exploded into a flurry of activity. Gage and I were pulled into hugs from all sides, being passed around like a collection plate on Sunday morning for well wishes and congratulations. People muttered "*I knew it*" and "*Just a matter of time*" while others pulled out their phones and started making calls.

Vanessa had all but been forgotten in the melee, and as soon as there was a break in the crowd, Gage had snatched up our coffees and pulled me out the door. Now we were at his house, the safest place to be—on the outskirts of town—as news of our impending nuptials blew the fuck up.

Freaking small towns. It was only a matter of time before this juicy bit of gossip worked its way through the grapevine. I knew it had already made it to our friends because my phone had started blowing up on the drive here and had yet to stop.

I paused in my pacing and looked toward my purse on the kitchen counter when it began to ring for the millionth time. I waited for whichever friend it was to hang up or leave another voicemail before turning to Gage, sitting at the end of his couch. He had one booted ankle resting on his opposite knee, and a long, strong arm stretched across the back. He braced his chin in his other hand, his index finger dragging back and

forth across his bottom lip in thought as he watched me closely, like he was waiting for me to detonate or something.

“How can you be so casual right now?” I snapped shrilly, throwing my arms up at my sides in a dramatic arc.

“I just figured you were frantic enough for both of us. Figured I’d let you take the spotlight for a few more minutes.”

I jabbed a finger at him accusingly. “This is your fault, you know. You blew my freaking mind to smithereens with that kiss. Also, you’re the one who said I wasn’t allowed to beat her ass. When you hobble me like that, crazy shit happens,” I squeaked manically. “If I’d been allowed to punch Bitchy Barbie in the face, this wouldn’t have happened—and why are you smiling?”

The jerk had the nerve to chuckle just then. “So that kiss blew your mind, huh?”

Oh for the love of— I slammed my hands down on my hips and hit him with my most vicious glare. “That’s what you took away out of everything I just said?”

Gage held his hands up in surrender, not even bothering to try to hide his shit-eating grin. “Hey, I’m a dude. We tend to have one-track minds most of the time. So on a scale from one to ten, how would you have rated that kiss?”

It was a twenty, easily. But I wasn’t about to admit that. Instead, I snatched up one of the throw pillows on his couch—one I’d bought for him because I felt like his place needed a little life—and smacked him in the face with it. Just as my phone started to ring again.

I pointed in the direction of my purse. “You know those are our friends blowing up my phone right now.”

On a sigh, he dropped his foot to the ground and leaned forward, hands clasped together with his forearms braced on his thigh. “Just do what I did and put it on silent. Or, hell, turn it off. At least until we figure out how we’re going to play this.”

My feet rooted to the ground. “How we’re going to play this?”

He scooted to the very edge of the couch so he could reach out and grab me by my wrist. My skin lit up at the simple touch, electricity crackling beneath my skin and fizzing through my blood as he guided me to the couch so I was sitting down. “First off, just take a moment to breathe. You haven’t had much of a chance since you got to the coffee shop.”

I did as he said, sucking in a breath and heaving it out. Then I remembered my coffee he’d ordered. Snatching it off the coffee table, I gripped it with both hands and drank deep. It had gone lukewarm during my freak-out, but it still tasted delicious. And the jolt of caffeine was just what I needed.

I took three big gulps and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand before meeting Gage’s intent gaze.

He raised a single brow as he studied me. “Feel better?”

“Getting there. Be better if there was bourbon in here, though.”

His face wrinkled up in disgust. “Not sure how good that would taste mixed with that melted down cup of sugar you got there.”

I grinned at him over the lid of my cup and took another gulp before letting out an obnoxious, “*Ah*. Delicious.”

He chuckled, the sound of it warming my belly and, with the help of the coffee, calming my frayed nerves. “All right, so about what happened this morning. You were right. It was my fault for blindsiding you the way I did. And even though that was the best kiss of your life—”

I smacked a hand over his mouth. “I never said anything about it being the best of my life.” *Even though it was*, I added mentally.

His eyes danced as he looked at me. The normally steel gray was a kaleidoscope of different colors: blues mixed with a hint of green silver to make a real thing of beauty. I pulled my hand away when I felt his smile form against my palm, wanting to see if it was dimple worthy. Sure enough, my belly

fluttered at the sight of those two tiny divots that bracketed his gorgeous grin.

“As I was saying,” he continued, blowing off my argument, “seeing Vanessa like that threw me. I was standing, there, waiting for our coffees, and she just appeared out of thin fucking air. When she kept trying to touch me—”

The rage that caused me to make those stupid decisions in the first place came rushing back with such force it was a wonder steam didn’t shoot out of my ears. “She tried to touch you?” I gritted out, my jaw clenched so tight I worried I might crack a molar.

“Look, I don’t know why she’s here, but my gut’s telling me I’m not going to like the reason. I’m sorry I put you in the position I did earlier. I just . . . reacted. If you want to tell everyone the truth, I’m totally fine with that. What I did to you wasn’t okay.” A smirk tugged at his lips again as he shot me a wink. “Even if that kiss fried your brain.”

I blew out a raspberry and rolled my eyes to deflect from the heat building in my cheeks, because he wasn’t wrong. That was one hell of a kiss. It hadn’t only fried my brain, it had rocked my damn world. “Please. If it was the best kiss of anyone’s life, it was yours, and don’t bother lying about it.”

“I’ve never lied to you, Bits, and I’m sure as hell not going to start now.” I’d been teasing . . . mostly. But the way he answered and the earnestness in his voice stole the air right out of my lungs.

“The last thing I want is to put you in a situation that makes you uncomfortable. I’ll deal with whatever shit Vanessa’s here to throw at my life another way.”

“No.” I let that impulsive voice inside my head take the lead. Gage was the more controlled one of the two of us. “I’m in this.” I held my hand up and shook my head when I saw where the gears turning in his head were taking him. “Not because you forced me or pressured me into anything, but because I want to be.” I lifted my shoulder in a casual shrug, a wry grin spreading across my face. “Besides, I already didn’t like her because of what she’d done to you, but she’s also that

nasty bitch from the grocery store last night that I told you about. If you aren't going to let me scratch her face off—”

“Which I'm not. Mainly because it would be a felony.”

I scoffed. “You're no fun. Anyway, if I can't kick her ass, this is the next best thing.” Something dawned on me and I sat up straight, jabbing my finger in his face. “But while I'm playing the role of your fiancée, I have the right to smack a bitch down if she tries to put her hands on you again. You are mine, after all. Right?”

At my question, his nostrils flared and his pupils blew, swallowing up all that beautiful steely gray. The air between us suddenly felt like it was crackling, and the energy in Gage's living room had shifted, like it was dancing with electric current.

The way he was looking at me made my breathing short and choppy. The heat in my cheeks grew more intense, traveling down to my chest and taking the pink stain with it. When my tongue peeked out to swipe over my bottom lip, his gaze darted down to my mouth, and for a second, I swear I thought he was going to kiss me again.

I cleared my throat, causing him to blink, and just as quickly as the sudden shift had happened he switched back. His back shot straight. He shifted a few inches away as he reached up to scrub a hand over his face. I'd been so lost in the strange moment we'd been having that I hadn't even realized we'd closed the distance between us.

Needing something to do with my hands, I snatched my coffee cup up and held it in a death grip. “Um, so . . . we should probably discuss how we're going to do this, right? I mean, we kind of dropped a very public bomb this morning.”

He scratched at his chin as he thought, the dark blond stubble rasping against the blunt tips of his fingers and drawing my attention. God, how had I never noticed how long his fingers were? How thick they were. I bet they'd feel amazing if he were to reach down—

Jeez, Wynn. Get your freaking head out of the damn gutter.

He spoke then, pulling me out of the haze of horny I seemed to keep slipping into. That damn kiss sure as hell didn't help things either. "I've been thinking about that." He gave me a knowing look. "We could tell our friends the truth, but what do you think they'd do if they found out we were only faking at being engaged."

I let out a bark of humorless laughter. "Oh, you know exactly what they'd do. They already try to push us together at every turn."

He snapped, those dimples pressing back into his cheeks. "Exactly. So the way I figure, this will spare us from that pressure for a while, and when the time comes, we can say we gave it a try and it didn't work out."

Hearing that sat in my stomach like a lead weight, but I pushed the sour feeling down and grinned through it. "Smart." It really was, and I told myself that when that time eventually came, I'd be as on board as he would. I pushed the conversation forward, refusing to dwell. "So, next steps."

He resumed his earlier position, the picture of relaxation. "What do you have in mind?"

"Well, first, you need to get me a ring." I lifted my brows and reached over to poke him in the arm. "And don't cheap out. Our friends know me; they know I'd rake you over the coals if you got me some piece of junk. It doesn't have to be huge, just not junk."

His head fell back on a laugh, that cord in his thick neck straining, his Adam's apple bobbing with the sound. Who knew a freaking Adam's apple could be so sexy? "A nice ring. Got it. What else?"

"I think we should put something on social media. A post on Facebook or maybe some pictures on Instagram. Make it look more legit, you know?"

"So, a ring and social media. I think we can make that work." He reached out, looping his arm around my waist.

I jolted and pulled back. "What are you doing?"

His brow furrowed as his head cocked to the side in confusion. “You said you wanted to take some pictures.”

“Oh. Right. Um . . .” Why the hell was I suddenly so jumpy? “I—I need my phone first.” I pushed to my feet, moving woodenly across the living room toward the kitchen where my purse was.

I felt jittery, my stomach suddenly full of butterflies as I turned back around. Gage was on his feet, watching me closely. He was regarding me like a person might a skittish horse, and as much as I didn’t like it, it didn’t feel too off the mark.

“What?” I asked, breaking the silence in the room that was beginning to feel overwhelming. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. It’s just . . . we aren’t going to be able to sell this if you freak out and go all Tin Man every time I touch you.”

I let out a sound somewhere between an indignant scoff and a snort. “I’m not doing that!”

He gave me a look that said he knew I was full of shit. “Oh no?” He leapt into action then, taking the phone from my hand and hooking his arm around my waist. The moment our chests collided, I felt my entire body lock up tight. His gaze held mine so captive that I didn’t realize he was sneaking pictures with his other hand until I heard the shutter of my phone’s camera.

“What are you—?”

He shoved the phone at me. “Look at these and tell me it doesn’t look fake as hell.”

I glared up at him as I snatched the phone away, but the ire coursing through me dried up as I scrolled through the pictures he’d just snapped. In each one, my chin was tucked into my neck, my back was arched like I was trying to stay as far away from his face as possible, and the only way to describe my expression was . . . well, painfully constipated. It didn’t look good.

“Oh god. These are terrible.”

He yanked the phone from my hand again. “Yep. Exactly. You need to try and relax.”

I blew out a huff that turned into a bewildered laugh. “And how do you suppose I do that, huh? This isn’t exactly in my wheelhouse, Gage. I’ve never been someone’s fake fiancée before.”

“You need to remember who we are to each other,” he said as if it was the easiest thing in the world. “Forget about the whole fake fiancée shit. This is just you and me. It’s like any other day when we’re hanging out at my place. Stop focusing on the details.”

What he said made sense. I was too in my own head at the moment. I closed my eyes and pulled in a deep breath. I could do this. We could make this work. Hell, there was a reason our friends were all gunning for us to be together—other than the fact we were the only two single ones left. We meshed well, played off each other as perfectly as couples who’d been in a years-long relationship.

I was still psyching myself up when I felt his hand land on my waist.

“Relax,” he coaxed in a low, gentle voice that sounded like smooth velvet sliding over rough gravel. “It’s just me and you.”

I felt my body melt. My eyes opened to find him smiling down at me, and I couldn’t help but smile back. We could *totally* do this.

The camera started clicking away, then he moved us into another position, holding me so his chest was pressed against my back. He rested his chin on my shoulder and extended his arm holding my phone high and angled it down. He grinned up at the screen while I turned toward him and let out a giggle.

I hadn’t seen the photos yet, but I wasn’t worried.

Because this was just us. And as long as I remembered that, everything would work out fine.

CHAPTER

Twelve

I HAD JUST GOTTEN to the really freaking good part of a dream that featured a very naked, very *hard* Gage Langdon, when some asshole started beating on my front door, ripping me out of dreamland and into reality—which wasn't nearly as fun.

I still had no idea what Gage's dick looked like in real life, but the images my subconscious created were damn good, and at least five times a day I caught myself wondering if the real thing would live up to my imagination. Not that I'd ever find out. Even though Gage and I had worked it all out the day before, the truth was, this whole engagement thing was fake. There was no reason for me to see my fake fiancé naked. No matter how badly the slutty little part of my brain might have wanted to.

I buried my head under my pillow, hoping the jackass who was knocking on my door *way too freaking early* on a Sunday morning would go the hell away so I could get back to my dream.

I wasn't that lucky.

I let out a growl when the doorbell started going off. Throwing the covers back, I shot out of bed and stomped toward the front door. "So help me," I started loudly, threatening the person on the other side. "If you're banging on my front door so you can ask me about my relationship with Jesus, you're the one who's going to need divine intervention!"

I whipped the door open to a laughing Gage. Only, the moment his eyes landed on me, the laughter ended abruptly, followed by a loud gulp that made his throat bob. His face changed in that way it did the day before when I'd joked about him being mine. Same flared nostrils, same dilated pupils. There was an undercurrent of savagery to him just then, something almost dangerous. But it didn't scare me.

“Jesus Christ, Bits. Is that what you sleep in?”

I'd been in such a rush to rip whoever was at my door a new asshole that I'd forgotten to grab a robe to cover up like I normally would, not that I was showing all that much. My pajamas were shorts and a camisole made of pale pink jersey with dove gray lace straps, neckline, and the hem of the shorts. They were cute as hell and made me feel all feminine and girly.

I slammed my hands down on my hips and glowered. “What the hell is wrong with it?”

He sputtered like his brain was trying to reengage. “It—it's indecent! I can almost see your—” He swallowed again, pointing at my chest. I could give him that. The neckline was low, giving me some pretty nice cleavage, and the material was thin, showing the effect that the brisk morning air was currently having. I crossed my arms over my chest to hide the headlight situation.

“And those shorts barely cover your ass!”

I let out a small growl. Mad that he'd ruined my dream before I could get to the good part—even if he was the one starring in it. Mad that this was the second morning in a row I wasn't going to get to sleep in because my stupid best friend was such an early bird. And mad at him for insulting my frilly pajamas. When it came to my underwear and sleepwear, I didn't play. I loved me some lacy, silky, beautiful undergarments. Unless it was that time of the month or laundry day, it was a guarantee that I had on a sexy bra with equally sexy matching panties. Even if I was lounging around in my sweats, the girly garments made me feel feminine and sexy. Same with what I slept in.

“Well, thanks for the wakeup call, dickhead. You can go now.”

His boot came out, blocking the way as I tried to slam the door shut in his face. “Sorry, Bits. No can do,” he said as he shoved his way into my house. At least he had knocked instead of using his key. If I’d woken up and padded out of my room to find him chilling in my living room or kitchen I probably would have had a heart attack. “We have things to do today, so get ready. Here.”

He shoved a coffee from Hot Java at me before grasping my shoulders and spinning me around, giving my ass a smack to get me moving.

I let out a yelp and threw an arm backward, backhanding him in return. “What do we possibly have to do today? I don’t want to go anywhere. I want to be lazy and lie around all day watching *the Great British Bake Off*.”

He sucked back some coffee from his own cup. “Later. Right now we have to go get you an engagement ring.”

That got my attention and worked wonders in changing my mood. “My ring?” I asked with a little squeal I couldn’t quite contain. “We’re going to get me a ring?”

Gage grinned and shot me a wink that made my belly summersault. “Only if you move your ass.”

I didn’t have to be told twice. I practically skipped to my room in excitement at the prospect of combining two of my favorite things into one trip. Shopping and jewelry.

“Give me ten!” I shouted as I skidded into my room and slammed my door shut. No time to be fussy about what I was going to wear, my fiancé was taking me shopping for a ring!

I STOOD ROOTED to the floor in front of the jewelry case, unable to move. Or speak. Or even breathe as

Gage and the little man of indeterminate age went through a selection of diamond engagement rings.

I'd been joking when I told him to make sure it was nice. Well, *mostly* joking. But the rings he'd pointed out to the jeweler to pull out for closer inspection were just, well, ridiculous!

The panic had initially started when we pulled up to the store two towns over from Redemption. I knew the place well. Most women did. It had a reputation for being high-end, expensive, and very exclusive. I was talking can-only-shop-if-you-book-an-appointment exclusive.

Gage hummed thoughtfully, his finger tapping against his lips as he examined the selection like he might find the answer to what the meaning of life was etched into one of the massive rocks. Hell, there was definitely room on some of them.

"I don't know. They're good quality, but are they her?" he asked like I wasn't standing right there beside him. In his defense, I'd basically been struck mute the moment we stepped foot inside the building, giving him a whole lot of nothing. He'd tried coaxing an opinion out of me, but every time I opened my mouth the only thing that came out was a gust of air, so he'd given up.

I was currently living my very own *Sweet Home Alabama* moment, like when Patrick Dempsey had taken Reese Witherspoon to Tiffany's to pick out an engagement ring. Only this was better because Gage was more like the Josh Lucas dude in that film, and it was *me* getting to play dress-up with all the pretty diamonds. If only I could get over the shellshock and actually enjoy it.

"Well, sir, if it's style you're looking for, might I suggest a few pieces we've only recently gotten in. A few antique rings from right around the turn of the twentieth century."

"Perfect. I think antique is the way to go."

"Very good, sir. If you'll just wait a moment, I'll retrieve those pieces from the back."

I swallowed, then swallowed again when the first one didn't help to move the knot that had formed in my throat. My tongue came out to swipe my lower lip, but instead of wetting it, it felt like I'd dragged sandpaper across it.

I tugged at the collar of my shirt, looking around for a water cooler or something. "How does this place not have a water-cooler? You'd think with the amount people pay when they come here, they'd have offered us bottled water or something. God, my mouth is dry. Is your mouth dry?"

Gage cut off my rambling by taking my shoulders and spinning me to face him. He crouched down low enough that his penetrating gaze snared mine, those gunmetal eyes holding me captive. "Bits, I'm gonna need you to pull your shit together. We've been here thirty minutes and all you've managed to do is wheeze and laugh awkwardly."

I lifted my shoulders in a shrug. "I thought he was teasing when he told you the price of that princess cut solitaire," I defended on a hissed whisper. "I thought it was a joke, so I laughed."

Spoiler alert, it hadn't been.

"What's got you in a tizzy right now, huh? You were stoked about this before we got here."

My jaw nearly hit the ground as I gaped at him. "Is that a serious question?"

He grinned—but not enough for those dimples to come out and play—as he lifted his eyebrows toward his hairline. "I asked it, didn't I?"

I looked around to make sure the jeweler dude—who happened to remind me a lot of Leslie Jordan—wasn't within listening distance. I didn't see him, but that didn't mean he wasn't lurking somewhere, or that this room wasn't bugged. It wouldn't be surprising, given the amount of money I was surrounded by.

Moving closer, I lowered my voice and spoke. "This place is outrageous, Gage. I was only messing with you about a nice ring. I thought maybe you'd get me a plain gold band or

something. I can't let you spend this kind of money on a ring for a *fake* fiancée."

I didn't miss the way his jaw ticked or the narrowing of his eyes. For a moment, he almost looked pissed, but as quickly as it had overtaken his features, it was gone, and the cool and collected guy I knew was back.

"Bits, that isn't something you need to worry about."

A choking noise clawed its way up my throat. "How can you say that? It's so much money."

"Don't think about the cost, okay? Just pick a ring you like. Me and you, remember?"

"But—"

A frustrated noise worked its way up from his chest as he tossed his head back. "For Christ's sake," he complained to the ceiling before looking at me. "I said not to worry about the cost, because I can cover it without any issue."

My brows pinched together in a frown of confusion, and when I didn't say anything he sighed, scrubbing at the back of his neck before explaining, "I'm loaded, all right?"

"You . . . *Huh?*"

"My grandpop left me a small inheritance after he passed, and instead of blowing it on bullshit, I hired an advisor to help me invest the money wisely." He lifted his shoulder in a casual shrug. "That investment paid off, so we made another. Then another. I paid cash for my house and truck, and the business is doing really well. I don't exactly live a flashy lifestyle, so there's not more going out than I have coming in. I can afford it." He took me by my arms and held on, his eyes pleading. "Let me do this for you. I know it's not real, but I want you to have a nice ring, okay? So just . . . let me do this."

I sputtered, my mouth opening and closing like a guppy as I tried to wrap my brain around what he'd said. "So, like, you have Wall Street money?"

"I was lucky," he amended. "I was lucky with my investments and I was lucky when it came to deciding when to

cash out. I have money in some CDs, a retirement fund, stuff like that.” The corners of his mouth wobbled with a barely-suppressed smile. “But yes, I have Wall Street money.”

I blinked, my brain clicking back online after that bombshell. “Okay,” I relented. “I’ll pick a ring.”

Tennessee’s Leslie Jordan came walking back out with a tray containing three antique rings on it. He placed it on the gleaming glass case in front of us, and the second my eyes homed in on the middle ring, all the air whooshed from my lungs.

I was rendered speechless once again, but this time it was because the beauty of the ring in front of me had struck me momentarily stupid.

The ring was art deco, a perfectly round center diamond with two rows of smaller ones clustered around it to look like flower petals, all set in a white gold band. It was a showstopper, not because of the size, but because of the sheer beauty. And it was so *me*.

I stared, entranced, as I lifted my hand and slowly reached forward but stopped myself once my hand hovered in the air above the tray.

“That one,” Gage spoke, his voice jolting me out of my stupor. I turned to look at him and found his eyes on me, something sparkling in their metal depths before he turned his focus back to the jeweler. “The one is the middle. Can she try it on?”

The man cast a knowing smile in my direction. “Of course.”

Before he had a chance to, Gage’s hand shot out and he picked the ring up himself. It looked so delicate between his big fingers, but even with his size and strength, he handled the ring with care as he turned to me and lifted my left hand up. His eyes locked onto mine as he slowly slid the cool metal over my finger. I inhaled deeply the second it rested at the base, and we both looked down.

“Whoa,” I said on a breath.

“Perfect fit,” Gage pointed out, pride ringing in his voice.

“It’s as if that ring were made for you, ma’am,” the jeweler said.

Gage smiled then, those dimples flashing. “That’s exactly what I was thinking,” he murmured quietly. “We’ll take it.”

For this being a fake engagement, things just got *very* real.

CHAPTER

Thirteen

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN something was up when I walked into work the following Monday to an empty, quiet reception area. Stupidly, I thought I could make it back to my office and lock myself inside for some privacy before the rest of the crew arrived. Only my plan was thwarted the moment I stepped over the threshold and found all four of them had already made themselves comfortable.

Lark and Willow were sitting comfortably on the couch that stretched across the back wall of exposed brick. Laeth, the fucker, was kicked back with his feet up on my desk a-fucking-gain. And Jensen was standing, his shoulders propped against the wall of glass that faced out to the hallway.

I knocked Laeth's feet down, dropped my keys and phone onto my desk, and took a seat. "All right. You have three minutes. Get it out now because this is the last time I'm talking about this shit with you guys."

Lark grinned smugly. "That's fine. The other girls are already heading to the city to get the real dirt from Wynn."

Of course they were. Should have known they'd divide and conquer. I wouldn't expect any less. That was why I'd insisted on taking her to get a ring yesterday. We'd managed to avoid our friends for two days, but even that had been pushing it. I was surprised they hadn't beaten down our doors before now. Still, with that ring sitting firmly at the base of Wynn's finger, I felt a hell of a lot better about everything.

And, fuck me, but that ring had been all Wynn. I knew before I even saw her face that it was the one for her, and I didn't care how damn much it cost. Everything about that ring, the class, the delicacy, the way it grabbed your attention and refused to let go . . . that was all Wynn. I couldn't have done better if I'd had a ring designed specifically for her. It was as if it had been waiting all these years for its perfect owner. The fact that it fit absolutely perfectly only drove that point home.

“So it's true?” Jensen asked, brows raised. “You two are engaged?”

I rolled my tongue in my mouth before nodding. “Yep. We're engaged,” I answered, testing the words out to someone other than Wynn for the first time, and I would have been lying if I said they didn't feel great to say. Even better to hear.

When she'd pulled that little number, tucking her hand into the back pocket of my jeans in the middle of Hot Java, my entire goddamn body lit up like the Fourth of July. Having her pressed against me like that, tucked under my arm where she fit perfectly, felt so right. And the moment she opened her mouth and announced our engagement, a plan had formed in my head.

I knew that had been an impulsive gut reaction to seeing Vanessa standing there, but I had every intention of capitalizing on my best friend's tendency to react before thinking things through.

I hadn't been able to get that shit about her breaking that damn dry spell out of my head, and the seed planted by my friends about me being the one to do it for her had grown out of control. The truth was, I couldn't stand around and watch her flirt with other guys on the chance of them taking her home. Just the thought of that made me ballistic. I didn't want to think what *seeing* it would have done. I'd get my ass locked up for beating some asshole bloody. It was a guarantee.

For more than two years this woman had been under my skin, whether I'd been willing to admit it to myself or not. But she'd been safe. With that douchebag boyfriend back in Connecticut, she'd been off limits. I was able to draw a line

between friendship and what I really wanted with her while still holding on to my vow of never committing to another woman ever again.

Because the one I'd gone and committed myself to in the safest way possible was with someone else.

Wynn and I could claim to be friends and keep going about our lives, sharing meals, binging shows together, basically spending every free minute with each other. Christ, we'd been in a serious goddamn relationship for three years now. We'd both been too blind to realize it.

I might have reacted rashly to Vanessa's sudden appearance, but if I really stopped to think about it, I hadn't kissed Wynn in the middle of a crowded coffee shop, claiming her in front of everyone, because I wanted to stick it to my ex. Well, not *just* because of that. But I'd seen my in and I'd taken it. And when she pushed that door open even further, I went ahead and busted it down.

She was gun shy. After what that fucker had done to her, she was leery about new relationships. And I knew her well enough to know she'd never in a million years risk our friendship when she wasn't certain we'd end up solid.

Luckily, I was sure enough for both of us. I grabbed her by the hand and jumped, giving her no other choice but to take the plunge with me. I only needed a chance to prove to her that this was right. That we were it. Full stop. And this so-called "fake engagement" was the way to do it.

Willow began hopping in her seat with a yelp, her whole face lighting up. "Oh my God. This is so romantic," she expressed, eyes shining so bright I worried she might start crying.

Lark, on the other hand, slapped her palm down on the dark leather of the couch. "It's about damn time. Damn it," she snapped her fingers as though just remembering something. "I was so freaking close." She looked back to me hopefully. "I don't suppose you guys would be willing to break up and get back together in say . . . a month and a half?"

My chin jerked back in shock. “What?”

Laeth spun in his seat, jabbing his finger in our office manager’s direction. “No way. You lost. You can’t try and cheat just because you bet on the wrong date.”

My gaze bounced between them like I was watching a ping-pong game. “You’re only saying that because it’s down to you and Poppy and you want the money.”

He let out a bark. “Damn right I do. Speaking of . . .” He turned back to me and leaned forward, one hand braced on the arm of the chair. “What’s the *exact* date that you and Wynn got together? Think carefully. This is really important.”

My mouth hung open. “You assholes have been betting on us all this time?”

Murmurs went up throughout the room from everyone, all of them basically adding up to the same thing: *No freaking shit.*

It was official. Our friends were the worst.

“Get the hell out. I’ve got shit to do.”

They all started toward the door. Lark and Willow were the first to exit, no doubt heading off to call and harass Wynn. I could have texted her to give her a heads-up, but where was the fun in that?

Jensen stopped just inside the door and turned back to me. “Didn’t think this would be the way things played out when I got on your case about being jealous, but if you’re happy, we’re happy. You know that, right?”

I jerked my chin up. “I know, man. Thanks.”

Laeth spoke next. “But seriously, man. What’s the date?”

I grabbed a pen and chucked it at him at the same time Jensen smacked him in the back of the head and shoved him through the door.

I wasn’t sure how productive I’d be, how I’d be able to focus with all these new revelations floating around in my head about Wynn and me, but somehow I managed to buckle

down and get shit done. I'd just finished drafting an outline of what our work would entail to present to a potential client when the intercom on my phone went off.

I rubbed at my eyes that had gotten tired from staring at the screen for too long and jabbed the button. "Yeah."

Willow's voice came through the line, quite full of hesitation like she didn't want someone nearby to hear. "Uh, yes. There's a woman here who's insisting on seeing you. She said she's an old friend. There's nothing on your calendar. Do you want me to send her back?"

My gut churned unpleasantly. I had a sneaking suspicion I knew who this "old friend" was, and she was the very last person I wanted to see. I'd been in such a good mood. Leave it to fucking Vanessa to pop up like a goddamn cold sore on prom night and ruin everything.

"Do *not* send her back," I growled through the line. "I'm coming out to handle it."

"Oh . . . okay."

I slammed the phone down in the cradle and shot to my feet. Sure enough, when I reached the mouth of the hall, Vanessa was standing at the ledge of Willow's desk, staring down her nose at our receptionist.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing here?"

The way my voice sounded made both women jump. Willow whipped around in her chair, her eyes the size of salad plates. This outburst wasn't something she'd be comfortable with. I'd have to make it up to her later.

Vanessa's perfectly coiffed hair swung like a curtain as she spun to look at me. The second our eyes met, she pasted that pageant smile on her face. "Gage, hi. I know this is probably a bad time, but, well . . . do you think we could talk?" She cast a sideways glance at Willow. "In private?"

I braced my arms shoulder width apart and crossed my arms over my chest. "Not a fucking chance. How did you even know where I work?"

“I asked around.” She shrugged, chewing on her glossed bottom lip in a way I was sure she thought came off both innocent and seductive. Christ, just like back when we’d been together, she was always playing games. Back then it had been annoying, but now, at our age when we should have known better, it was pathetic. “It’s not that big a town. Wasn’t hard to find out about this place.” She looked around the open area. “This is great, Gage. I’m really happy for you.”

“Don’t give a shit. You know where the door is. Use it.”

I turned on my heel and started to walk away when her hand wrapped around my arm. “Gage please,” she begged loud enough to draw attention, tugging in order to get me to stop. “Please, just hear me out.”

“Everything good in here?”

Sure enough, Jensen and Laeth had come out of their offices, and as if that wasn’t bad enough, Lark was there as a witness as well. That meant it was only a matter of time before this got back to Wynn, and I had no doubt she was going to blow a gasket when she found out.

I looked to Jensen who’d asked the question, ready to tell him Vanessa was leaving, but Laeth spoke first. “Who’s this, and why’s she look familiar?”

“You’re probably remembering the picture I kept with me when we were deployed.”

At my answer, his eyes flared before going murderous. “You heard him,” he hissed at Vanessa. “Get the fuck out.”

“I’m not here to talk to you,” she threw back, unwisely. “I need to talk to Gage and I’m not leaving until I speak with him in private.”

“Already told you, that’s not going to happen, and I’m not a big fan of repeating myself.”

Jensen stared her down for a beat. “Maybe you should put anything you have to say in a letter,” he gritted before looking at Willow. “Do me a favor, Will, call the cops, would you? We have a trespasser, and I don’t make a habit of putting my hands women. No matter how toxic they might be.”

I couldn't have stopped the grin that stretched across my face if I'd wanted to, which I didn't.

Vanessa's eyes went wide. "You—you're going to call the cops on me?" She whipped her gaze to mine, bewilderment in her eyes. "Gage, please. You can't let them do that."

"Oh, that's where you're wrong. I absolutely can. And I am." I turned to Willow, schooling my features and calming my tone. "From here on out, she shows her face, your first call is the cops. She's not welcome, and if I have to take a restraining order out on her, that's exactly what I'll do."

She nodded once. "You got it."

With that, I turned and walked back down the hall to my office. If this had been a few days ago, that whole scene probably would have left me reeling, but after the weekend I had, my ex was nothing more than a niggling annoyance in the back of my mind. Like a gnat. It might take some time and effort, but eventually I'd smack her away for good.

CHAPTER

Fourteen

Wynn

I WALKED into work Monday morning, not knowing what to expect, and found Jase already waiting for me in my office.

“I heard congratulations are in order.”

I quirked a brow as I rounded my desk and set my purse on top of it. I crossed my arms, propping my hip against the edge. “Is that a sincere congratulations? I can’t tell by the tone of your voice.”

He tilted his head from side to side as he hummed. “Let’s call it hesitant sincerity, at least for the time being.”

That took me aback. “Oh? And why the hesitancy?”

He studied me in that way he did whenever he was seeing more than I thought I was giving away. He pushed to his feet and stepped closer, his silent way of showing me he was serious. “I’m not being an asshole,” he assured me. “You know I’m only looking out for you. What happened with your douchebag ex left a serious mark. I want to make sure you aren’t jumping into something without thinking.”

I lifted my brows. “So you think I got engaged without thinking it through?”

It was ironic of me to even ask that, given the fact that was exactly what had happened.

“Gage seems like a good guy. When Poppy was in trouble, he and his partners didn’t hesitate to wade in. Shit would have gone down very differently if they hadn’t stepped in to help.”

I remembered the time he was referring to. His and Farah’s mom and dad weren’t just bad parents, they were straight up sociopaths. If it wasn’t for their driver, Bennett, who was more like a father to them than their own flesh and blood, they probably would have grown up with no moral compass at all. When Jase had succeeded in wresting his family’s company from his criminal father, instead of handling it with grace and simply moving on, they’d contracted a hitman to abduct Poppy so they could hold her for ransom to get back the money they felt they rightly deserved. Gage, Jensen, and Laeth had been instrumental in finding her and bringing her home safely.

“I like him. I think of him as a friend. But that doesn’t mean I won’t use my money and connections to destroy his world if he hurts you.”

“He won’t,” I said instantly with one hundred percent certainty. “He would never do anything to hurt me.” As soon as I finished saying it I knew, without a doubt, those were the truest words I had ever spoken. We might have been in a strange predicament at the moment, but Gage had proven time and time again he’d have my back no matter what, he’d protect me from anything. If there was one person on the planet I could trust with absolutely anything, it was Gage Langdon. “That’s not something you have to worry about Jase. I promise.”

He breathed deeply, his gaze pounding into me. “Okay. But if that ever changes, I’m here. I want you to know you can always come to me.” Suddenly I knew exactly how Farah felt. I always teased that he acted like a pain-in-the-ass big brother, but this proved that I was more than his assistant; I was family.

I battled the burn behind my eyes and launched myself at him, rising on the tiptoes of my pencil-thin heels to wrap my arms around his neck in a tight hug. “I know,” I whispered past the emotion swelling in my throat. “Thank you.”

His arms came around me for a brief squeeze before we pulled apart. Jase cleared his throat and adjusted his silk tie while I carefully dabbed at my eyes to prevent mascara smudging.

The motion put my ring front and center, causing Jase's eyes to nearly bug out of his skull. "Holy fucking God. Now that's a fucking ring."

I held my hand out, twisting and turning my wrist so the sunlight filtering through the window of my office could catch on the clusters of diamonds. The light caught and refracted off, sparkling like glitter. I smiled at the beautiful flower sitting on the base of my ring finger. "It is, isn't it?"

"And very you." My gaze came up to find my boss and friend smiling down at me, genuinely happy for me now, the hesitation all but gone. "Your man did good. That ring fits."

I sniffled loudly; this morning was turning out to be a hell of a lot more emotional than I'd expected. "Okay, that's all the mushy I can take before coffee. You need to go before you make me cry."

He chuckled and stepped back toward my door, but stopped before exiting. "I have just the trick to clear those tears right up."

I arched a questioning brow and Jase gave me a Cheshire cat grin. "Farah and some of your other girls are on their way in to corner you. I figure you've got about"—he glanced at his watch—"five minutes before the inquisition starts." He knocked his knuckles against the doorframe and walked out, calling, "Best of luck to you," over his shoulder.

Damn it! He hadn't given me *any* time to prepare, and I knew that was done on purpose.

"I take back anything nice I ever said about you!" I shouted back at him, earning a deep laugh that carried all the way from his office to mine.

"Poppy said this is what you get for ghosting them all weekend. And don't bother running. That'll only make it worse."

Son of a bitch.

If Gage wasn't getting the third degree this morning, I was going to be pissed.

FARAH'S EYES were bright with unshed tears as she clutched my left hand, having fawned over the ring Gage bought me the day before. "Oh my God, it's really happening. I'm so happy for you!" she cried, yanking me into a hug so tight it made my ribs creak. "I knew you two were perfect for each other. You just needed to get out of your own way to see it."

The scone I'd managed to scarf down before my friends invaded sat like a rock in my stomach, guilt petrifying it and causing it to fester. When Gage and I had decided how we were going to play this whole fake engagement thing, I didn't stop to think about how it would feel to lie to my friends. It made me feel like shit. I didn't like it one bit, but just as I was sure down to my very bones that Gage would do anything for me, there wasn't anything I wouldn't do for him either. If we needed to keep this up for however long to keep that vulture of an ex far away from him, I would gladly do it. Knowing that took a bit of the sting out of deceiving the women I was closest to.

Aurora moved in, hip-checking an overly emotional Farah out of the way. She'd been getting weepy at the drop of a hat for some time now. We all knew why, but had sat back and quietly waited for her and Cannon to share their news. Sure enough, a few weeks back, they told us they were having a baby. Farah was normally a bright ball of sunshine, and she still was, but she also cried at the most random things now. Like the broken twig she came across on the sidewalk, because—and this was a direct quote—"We don't really know if trees feel pain. They are living things, after all, so wouldn't it make sense? And now that little twig won't get to live out his destiny of becoming a mighty oak."

It was a stick from a pine tree, not an oak, and the damn thing was dead, hence why it was broken on the sidewalk. Probably snapped off in a stiff breeze.

“Okay, move over, Cindy Cries-a-Lot. The rest of us want a gander at our girl’s rock.”

Along with Aurora and Farah, Poppy, Shane, Deva, and Lyric had come for this not-so-surprise visit. They took turns oohing and aahing over the beautiful ring Gage had given me before making themselves comfortable, seating themselves on the couch and chairs in front of my desk, clearly settling in for the long haul.

I let out a breath, leaning my hips back against the ledge of my desk and crossing my arms over my chest, ready to get this show on the road. “Okay, ladies. Hit me with it. I know you’re dying to ask a million questions.” I held my hands up to silence them when they all started talking at once. “Jeez, take a breath. How about we do this one at a time, huh?”

Aurora’s hand shot up in the air. “Me first!”

Something told me I was going to regret that. I pulled in a breath, hesitating for a beat before giving in. “Okay.”

“What’s his dick look like.”

Yep. Knew it.

I looked around at the other ladies. “Next.”

Poppy asked the first legitimate question. “How did this happen? Don’t get me wrong, I’m freaking thrilled. But the last you told me, told any of us I think, was that you and Gage were just friends and that was all you’d ever be.”

“Yeah, what Poppy said,” Shane echoed. “What made you guys finally pull your heads out of your asses?”

It wasn’t like I hadn’t been expecting that question. But in that moment, I was pissed at myself—and Gage, because why not—for not sitting down yesterday after ring shopping so we could get our stories straight.

I stalled by taking a long, slow gulp of the coffee I’d managed to make in the breakroom before this probing began.

“I don’t know how to explain it.” No truer words had ever been spoken. I was *floundering*. “It just sort of happened.”

Jeez, talk about *lame*!

I lifted my shoulders and smiled, trying my best to come off dreamy-eyed and newly in love. “It just happened naturally. It’s like you guys have been saying for years. We fit.”

I held my breath, hoping my vague-ass answer would be enough to placate my nosey yet well-intentioned group of friends. It took so long my lungs began to burn and my face started getting hot. I feared I might actually pass out.

Fortunately, Deva broke the silence with a happy little squeal! “I knew it! I knew all it would take was you guys waking up one day and realizing you were perfect for each other. I’m so happy for you.”

Annnnd there’s that guilt again.

I forced my smile even though my cheeks felt stiff and brittle. Keeping up this ruse was going to be so much harder than I’d anticipated. But I kept telling myself it was for Gage.

It was for Gage.

Besides, it wasn’t like this was the kind of lie that could hurt anyone. When all was said and done, our friends would be none the wiser when we inevitably faked our breakup.

It was on that thought—especially the part about breaking up—that my stomach twisted. I forced the discomfort down and faked it best I could.

“Thanks, babe. I really appreciate that.”

Farah spoke next. “Well, since you’ve been out of pocket the past couple days since this all went down, I took it upon myself to start planning your engagement party.”

My eyes went wide. “Uh, you really didn’t need to do that.” My palms grew clammy and I had to rub them on the front of my black cigarette pants to get them dry. “Gage and I weren’t looking to do anything special.”

She waved me off, and alarm bells started to go off inside my skull, alerting me that shit was about to hit the fan. “Of course it was. Awesome news like this deserves a party.”

“And you know how much she loves throwing parties,” Poppy tacked on, not helping *at all*.

Farah pointed in her direction with a laugh. “Very true. Anyway, Cannon and I are hosting at our place—well, more like *I’m* hosting it and he’s planning to come downstairs once everyone starts arriving. You know, since the Victorian is big enough to host everyone who’s been invited.”

Those bells turned into full-blown sirens. “You’ve already sent out invites?”

Seeing the panic on my face and reading it *very* wrong, she leaned in to pat my hand reassuringly. “Don’t worry, I knew you wouldn’t want to celebrate a milestone like this without your parents, so I got their email from Jase. I’m just waiting to hear back.”

My head whipped in the direction of my boss’s office, and through the glass walls that separated mine from his, I saw he was already looking in my direction, a shit-eating grin on his face as he threw me a salute.

That son of a bitch.

I knew we’d had a touching moment and all, so it really was a shame I was now going to have to burn this building down with him inside.

CHAPTER

Fifteen

MY TIRES SKIDDED into Gage's drive, spitting gravel in their wake as I came to a grinding stop in front of his house. I was in such a panicked rush I barely remembered to throw the damn thing into park and kill the ignition. And I *did* forget to undo my seatbelt, nearly choking myself when I attempted to leap from the car.

"Mother fu—" I grumbled as I fought with the stubborn harness. In its attempt to keep me safe, it had locked up completely. I finally got it unlatched and vaulted out of the car. I practically ran up Gage's walkway and barreled through the front door like the hounds of hell were nipping at my heels.

"Gage!" I shouted, out of breath from sprinting in four-inch heels. Damn me and my complete disdain for cardio. I slipped on the sleek tile and nearly took a header into his entryway table before wising up and kicking my heels off. "Gage, we have a serious problem!"

Gage came rushing down the hallway, totally bare-chested and still pulling a pair of sweats into place. His eyes were wide with panic, darting all around like he was trying to find the potential danger. "Jesus Christ." He jerked to a stop right in front of me, hands grabbing me by the arms as he tried to assess where any potential damage might be. "Are you okay? What the fuck happened? Are you hurt?"

I brushed his roaming hands away. "What? No. No, I'm not hurt."

He stood tall, his brows winging high on his forehead as he threw his arms wide, causing his biceps to flex. I was momentarily caught off guard by all that tanned, smooth skin stretched across chiseled, sexy abs. That defined V at his hips dipped into the waistband of his sweats—black this time, thank God—pointing like an arrow to what lay beneath. Teasing me.

Gage cleared his throat, yanking me from my ogling. *Damn it.* “What the fuck, Bits?” he snapped indignantly. “You come running in here like you’re in fear for your goddamn life, scaring the holy hell out of me. You better be near death, ’cause your ass just took years off my life I was really looking forward to living.”

I curled my lips between my teeth to hide my smile and keep from laughing. “Sorry. I really didn’t mean to freak you out. I wasn’t thinking.”

He crossed his arms over his chest, the action making all those big muscles flex and bulge even more. And *dayum*. This view was yet another that was going to make those freaking dreams I had every night even worse.

“So what’s so damn important you came in here like your ass was on fire?”

Panic came back in full force. “Farah and the rest of the girls are throwing us *an engagement party*,” I stressed, gesturing wildly with my hands.

He stood there watching me, waiting for more.

I rolled my eyes and pursed my lips, blowing out a frustrated raspberry. “They emailed my parents, inviting them.”

Still nothing.

“Gage, they don’t know about any of this! The only saving grace is they’re currently on an Alaskan cruise so they won’t see it for another couple days, but if the first they hear about me being engaged is by email, they’re gonna *flip!*”

He shrugged before turning on his bare feet and starting out of the entryway. “So tell them before they can get the

email,” he called over his shoulder, like that was the simplest thing in the world.

I followed on his heels to the kitchen. He moved to the fridge for a beer as I stopped on the other side of the island and slapped my hands down on the counter. “You heard the part where I said Alaskan cruise, right? The service on that trip is shit. But . . . a party? This was Farah’s idea. You know what that means. It means she’s invited the whole town. Everyone we know is coming to this thing.” I reached up and dragged my fingers through my hair, gathering it at the nape of my neck to hold the weight for a bit before letting it tumble down again. “Honestly, we really didn’t think this through.”

His throat worked on a swallow of his beer before he slowly lowered it to the counter. Tension crackled between us as the muscles in his body grew tight and strained before my eyes.

“Are you—” His Adam’s apple worked on a hard, audible gulp. “Are you having second thoughts?” The way he looked at me, I could have sworn I saw pain in his eyes mixed with worry, like he wasn’t scared I was backing out, but that the idea actually hurt him. That look slammed right into my chest.

“What? No. Of course not. I told you. I’m in this, and I meant it, I swear. But it’s hitting me all of a sudden that we did a really shitty job of getting everything straight. When the girls came by the office this morning, they wanted to know how this”—I waved a hand between us—“happened. It’s a totally logical question. I wasn’t prepared for it so I had to give some vague explanation that was basically a non-answer answer. We should have planned for that. Now we have this party happening—a party my parents will most likely be at—and we’re going to get bombarded from all sides.”

He rounded the kitchen island and stopped in front of me. I expected him to take my arms or rest his hands on my shoulders—both moves that he’d done a million times over the years. But he surprised me when his warm, comforting palms came up to rest on either side of my neck. The way he held me felt intimate, almost seductive. I certainly didn’t hate it, that was for damn sure, and when his thumbs slid across my

jawline, back and forth, back and forth, a shiver traveled through my body.

He lowered his face toward mine and my breath stalled. The only time we'd shared this kind of affection was right before he'd kissed the ever-living crap out of me, and that voice in the back of my head had come to life, chirping with excitement at the thought of being kissed like that again.

But to my utter disappointment, he didn't kiss me. "Then we'll prepare," he said in a low tone meant to be reassuring, but all he was managing to do was work me up in a very big way. "We'll consider everything our friends could ask us and come up with answers we know they'll believe. We'll figure it all out. Don't worry. And as for the party . . ." He arched a brow and grinned down at me. That grin, coupled with the way his thumbs were still stroking my chin, made my lady parts want to stand up and sing. "When have you ever *not* wanted a party where you're the focus of attention? Especially when there's an open bar?"

Okay, so he wasn't exactly wrong. I did love a good party. And I loved it even more if I was the center of it. One of the reasons I adored my friends so damn much was because they not only knew this about me, but they accepted it without question. Every year on my birthday, they surprised me with a big bash full of friends and loved ones from my new town.

I pinched my lips to the side in consideration. "I might not have stopped to consider that."

Gage chuckled, and to my dismay, released my neck and moved back around the kitchen to where he'd left his beer, picking it up and bringing it to his lips for a deep draw. "Uh-huh. That's why I'm here, to help you see reason and to talk you off the ledge whenever you're close to losing it. It's why we make such a great team."

He wasn't wrong about that. We were a great team. Had been from the moment we became friends. We balanced each other out. With the exception of the whole public kiss and declaration that I was his girl, the man didn't have an impulsive bone in his body. That was reserved for me. I was

known to be a bit wild, to act without much thought if what I wanted to do would be fun. He was the levelheaded one, the one who planned things out. I tended to let my emotions run amok and he'd be there to balance me. It was as if we were two sides of the same coin. One needed the other in order to be complete.

His reassurance alone was enough to quell the panic that had been bubbling inside me all day long, making it damn near impossible to get anything done.

"Okay." I nodded, all of a sudden feeling an easy calm wash over me. "We'll figure it out," I echoed his earlier sentiment, believing it because he'd been so sure of himself when he said it.

"You didn't flinch."

My head cocked to the side in confusion at the shift in topic. "Huh?"

"When I touched you just now. You didn't flinch." He looked almost proud.

"Oh." I turned my head away from him as heat flooded my cheeks. He was right. I hadn't flinched. Mainly because I was silently praying he would kiss me again. To hide the furious burn in my cheeks, I moved to the cabinet and pulled out a wineglass, opening the bottle on the island and pouring myself a healthy amount. "Yeah. I guess I didn't think about it."

"That's good. It means this whole thing will be a lot easier to believe." I turned around and sucked in a startled gasp when I found him standing *right* behind me. A man his size shouldn't have been able to move so quietly. I hadn't heard him come close, but Gage had always been stealthy like a freaking fox. His voice dropped a few octaves when he spoke next, his words taking on that velvet-over-gravel cadence that I loved so damn much. "So if I were to do this, it wouldn't make you tense up?" He reached up and thumbed a lock of my hair before tucking it behind my ear. Heat prickled my skin where his fingertips softly drifted over my temple and down past my jawline, skating across the delicate skin at the side of my neck.

He worded it like a question, but it felt more like a test. A challenge.

The air left my lungs in a sharp gust as every inch of my body began to prickle with awareness. His palm continued its journey around to the nape of my neck. He applied pressure, giving me no choice but to lean in.

His fingers tangled with my hair as he formed a fist, pulling it just enough to tip my face back. His eyes took on that darkness, his pupils dilating as his gaze traveled down to my mouth and he moved in even closer.

Oh God. He was going to kiss me again. And I couldn't flipping *wait!* My nipples hardened into tight peaks. Hot arousal flooded between my thighs like my body was preparing itself.

He was all I could see, all I could focus on. That spice and leather cologne wrapped around me, making the blood course through my veins like whitewater rapids. My heart began to beat wildly, knocking against my sternum so hard I could hear it.

Wait.

The knocking sounded again. I sucked in a gasp as the connection broke, the bubble that had formed around us popping like it had been poked with a stick. It wasn't my heart. It was the front door.

My head whipped around in that direction at the same time Gage let out a low, scary growl.

"Are you expecting anyone?" I asked, slightly breathless as I turned to look back at him.

"No," he clipped curtly. His hand slid off my neck and out of my hair, and I instantly missed his touch, silently yearning to have it back, but that damn persistent knock started again. I didn't have the first clue who was standing on Gage's front porch, but I hated them. "But whoever it is obviously has a death wish."

He stormed out of the kitchen, leaving me shaken and needy, my body so primed that a gentle breeze would have

been enough to get me off.

I tugged at the collar of my blouse, desperate to cool my overly-heated skin. He'd barely touched me, yet that had to have been one of the hottest encounters I'd had in a really long time. God, how sad was that?

I was in the middle of worrying how I was going to take my libido back to a normal level when I heard voices from Gage's entryway that worked to snuff that fire in my core out like sand being kicked on a campfire.

"Gage! Oh my God, I can't believe my baby boy is getting married! Get over here and give your mother a hug."

CHAPTER

Sixteen

I STOMPED to the front door, ready to murder the hell out of whoever had just interrupted the moment Wynn and I were about to have. Annoyance coursed through what little blood wasn't currently gathered in my dick, making it painfully hard. I reached into my sweats and adjusted my stiff, throbbing dick before reaching for the knob, ready to lay out the asshole.

Only, the moment I yanked the damn thing open, the sight on the other side stopped me short—and my erection deflated like a cartoon blimp.

“Gage!” My mom shoved past my grandma and across the threshold, arms outstretched and wide open. Pure, unadulterated joy lit up her entire face and shot from her pores. “Oh my God, I can't believe my baby boy is getting married! Get over here and give your mother a hug.”

Before I had a chance to figure out what the hell was happening, I was yanked into a bone-crushing embrace. For a small woman, Marcia Langdon didn't mess around when it came to her hugs. It didn't matter who it was—me, my friends, the door-to-door salesman trying to get you to buy solar panels—she was a hugger, and each one bore the brunt of her surprising strength.

I let out an *oof* as my bones clanked and scraped together when she held on tight and swayed us back and forth until I started to get seasick.

“Good God, Marcia, let the poor boy go before you turn his spine into a sack of loose nickels,” my grandmother chided, all but shoving her daughter out of the way. Francis Langdon—more fondly known as Grandma Buttons by everyone she ever met—smiled up at me so brightly the weathered skin on her face creased, the laugh lines running deep thanks to a life well lived.

After my father had bailed on Mom and me and it became clear he wasn't coming back, my mother had sat me down and asked if I wanted to keep his last name. She explained that she was going back to her maiden name, the name she and her mother shared, but if I wanted to continue to use his, I was more than welcome to. I didn't want anything to do with that man, so when Mom returned to being a Langdon, I joined her and hadn't regretted it for a single moment. I'd been named after the two most important women in my life, the ones who'd raised me, made me the man I was today. I carried that name with pride.

“There's my handsome man,” she said affectionately, grabbing me by the sides of my face and jerking me down a good several inches so she could plant a kiss on my cheek. “Still as handsome as ever.” She gave my cheek a smacking pat. “Though you could use a shave. Don't want to cover that sweet girl of yours with beard burn, now do you?” She winked and my eyes nearly bugged out of their sockets, disgust making my whole body tremor.

“Jesus, Gram! Can you not make jokes about my sex life?”

I wasn't sure how scarred a person had to be from half a lifetime of his grandmother's innuendo, but it was a goddamn miracle I could even get an erection without medicinal help, thanks to this little old lady. She might have looked innocent, but she was far from it.

She gave me another smacking pat, harder this time. “Ah, don't be such a prude. Get our bags, would you? And where's my future granddaughter?”

As if she'd been summoned, Wynn crept around the corner. I could tell she'd been hoping to peek without being

spotted but couldn't know my mom and grandmother were like bloodhounds. They probably scented her the moment they stepped in.

“There she is!” my mother crowed, then the damn woman practically body-checked me out of the way and rushed in to get to her.

I caught the way Wynn's eyes widened with surprise—and maybe a tiny bit of fear—before Mom collided with her and wrapped her in that famous hug, made worse by her level of excitement. I thought Wynn's eyeballs were going to pop out of her skull from the force of the squeeze.

Mom pulled back and cupped Wynn's cheeks affectionately, smooshing them together until she had duck lips. “I'm so happy I could spit!”

I let out a small breath of relief when Wynn laughed, taking my mother's wrists and removing her hands but keeping an affectionate hold on them. “Hi, Marcia. It's great to see you again.” To drive that point forward, she leaned in and placed a kiss on Mom's cheek.

“You as well, honey. Especially under such wonderful circumstances.” She clapped her hands together. “*Engaged!* I couldn't have asked for a more perfect daughter-in-law if I'd picked one out myself.”

My grandmother shouldered up to hug her as well. “Hello, sweetheart.”

“Hi, Grandma Buttons,” Wynn greeted with a smile.

My grandmother pulled in a deep breath. “I always hoped the two of you would get the lead out and realize how good you'd be together. Makes my old heart happy that day came while I was still around to see it. Should go without saying, but I'll say it anyway. “Welcome to the family, my sweet girl.”

My eyes met Wynn's over Gram's shoulder when she pulled her in for another hug, and I saw, clear as day, the conflict swimming in those deep violet depths. She loved my mom and grandma as much as they loved her, and I could see her guilt for lying to them.

I hated seeing that look in her eyes, but I stayed strong, telling myself it was only a matter of time before we were on the same page with what we were doing. I simply had to get her on board when it came to making this relationship very real in every way. Then there'd be no need for guilt.

It didn't surprise me that they were both so happy to see my fiancée. They'd gotten to know Wynn really well over the past few years when they'd visited. Each year they came for my birthday, then again at Thanksgiving and stayed until the day after Christmas. Considering how close Wynn and I had been, she'd become a main fixture during those visits and had won my ladies over in no time, without having to try.

Vanessa never had that kind of connection with either of them. They'd kept it to themselves, not wanting to put me in a bad position, but after the breakup, Mom and Gram had confessed they'd never cared for Vanessa. They'd never felt they could let their guard down with her. Wynn, on the other hand, had become their favorite person within the first five minutes of meeting them. All because she'd been herself.

I looked at the pile of suitcases on the porch. "Uh . . ." I looked back to the trio of women. "Not that I'm not happy to see you guys, but . . . what the hell are you doing here?" I pointed at the pile of suitcases. "And why do you have so much luggage?"

My ladies looked at me like I'd asked the dumbest question in the history of dumb questions.

"We saw the pictures you posted Insta," Mom stated.

I blinked, then shook my head to clear it. I lifted my finger. "First, don't ever call it *Insta*. Second, when the hell did you join Instagram?"

She waved me off. "Doesn't matter. What matters is when we saw the photos"—she looked back to Wynn and smiled lovingly—"and you looked beautiful by the way, we hopped on the first flight. Now, what *I'd* like to know is why I had to find out that my son, my only child, the flesh and blood I birthed for thirty long, grueling hours—"

“Just get to it, Marcia,” Gram said with a dramatic roll of her eyes.

“Why did we have to find out about this momentous occasion on social media instead of from you?”

“Jesus, Mom.”

Her finger came up in the air, immediately silencing me. Her face went stern in that way it did when I was a kid and had done something to earn her ire, like breaking the living room window with a rouge baseball or getting caught in the back seat of her car with Cindy Brinkley my junior year of high school.

“Sorry. It’s only been three days. I wasn’t trying to keep this secret. I was planning to call.”

What Wynn did next was unexpected, to say the least. She separated from my mom and grandmother and moved to me, nudging her way beneath my arm and giving me no choice but to loop it around her shoulders. She pressed into my side much like she had that morning at Hot Java, and the moment I felt those soft, round tits press against my ribs, I had to fight getting hard right there in front of my fucking family.

She’d given me shit about the sweatpants before, but now I was seriously regretting changing into them after getting home from work. Still, I couldn’t help but tighten my grip on her and tuck her in closer. She was such a tiny little thing, my Bits, but no one had fit as perfectly as she did. Like she was made for me.

“Don’t blame him, Marcia. It’s just as much my fault. We . . . kind of got sidetracked.” She looked up at me, giving me a smile that was meant to be teasing and a bit secretive. I knew it was all for show, that she was trying to save my ass with my mom and grandmother, but I was a man on a mission. I was going to do whatever I had to in order to make her realize what my grandmother said was true. We really were *perfect* together.

Pressing my advantage, I lowered my head and gently teased her lips with my own. Her intake of breath and

momentary stiffening was the only signs of shock, but in the blink of an eye, she was melting against me, lifting up ever so slightly to deepen the kiss. That was all her, and I wanted to pound my chest in triumph.

I pulled back, grinning at the little grumble of disappointment she let out and the way she rose up to try and chase my lips for more. I'd gladly give it to her. Once we didn't have company.

But goddamn did it feel good to know I wasn't the only one feeling something between us. I only hoped what she was feeling was as strong as what I was. Because I had a hunch there was no coming back from what we were doing. And losing her wasn't an option.

"Oh, Mom, would you look at them?" my mother cooed. I forced my focus from Wynn to look back at her. Sure enough, she was watching us with misty eyes and the biggest smile stretched across her face. My grandmother, on the other hand, had a wry look about her, as though she knew all along this was going to happen. If I could read minds, I was willing to bet the thought running through hers was *it's about damn time*.

"Young love," she said, looking as happy as Mom, only in a more reserved kind of way. "This moment needs to be celebrated," she insisted. "I say we head into the kitchen and crack open a nice bottle of wine. Gage, honey, grab the bags and put them in the guest rooms, would you? We would have booked somewhere else to stay so we wouldn't be in your hair, but it was so last minute we couldn't get a reservation."

"It's fine, Gran. You know you're always welcome here." It was part of the reason I'd gotten a house the size I had. With a study, a master, and two guest rooms, there was plenty of room for family when they came to visit. At least for the time being.

After everything that went down with Vanessa, any plans to start a family of my own had gone up in smoke. But now, thanks to Wynn, I was starting to rethink everything I thought the future held.

My mother spoke next. “Yes, but young couples shouldn’t have your mom and grandmother underfoot when you’re settling in.”

“Oh, I don’t live here,” Wynn said quickly. I looked down at her and saw the way her eyes flared. She hadn’t meant to say that out loud and quickly started to back pedal. “I mean, not right now. Or not yet, that is. I don’t live here *yet*. Um . . .” She looked up at me, silently willing me to help her dig herself out of the hole she’d just fallen into. But I was enjoying watching her flounder too damn much. “We thought maybe we’d wait. You know, get closer to the wedding. Besides, I’m renting and my lease isn’t up for a while.”

“Nonsense,” Gran stated with finality. I’d heard that tone time and time again growing up. It was her *my word is law* voice, and when you heard it, you’d be wise not to argue. “All that money month after month.” She waved her hand. “It’s a waste. Gage has more money than he knows what to do with. No need for you to keep paying for your own place. We’ll talk to your landlord. I’m sure he’ll be more than understanding.” She nodded like that was all there was to it. Plain and simple.

Wynn’s gaze returned to me, that same pleading glimmer in them as before. I bit down on the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing but didn’t put up a single argument. Because as far as I was concerned, my grandmother was a fucking genius.

CHAPTER

Seventeen

I STOOD in the middle of my living room, trying to wrap my head around what had happened over the past five days, and there was only one real answer. Grandma Buttons—sweet, hilarious, sassy Grandma Buttons—had run roughshod over me.

That was the only explanation for why my living room was full of moving boxes by the freaking bundle, just waiting to be unfolded and filled with all my belongings.

I still couldn't believe this was happening. It didn't make any damn sense! This was supposed to be a fake engagement. A way to stick it to his bitch of an ex—who was still lurking around town somewhere—and get our friends off our backs for a while. But now I was moving in with my fake fiancé, attending an engagement party our friends were throwing us in two weeks' time, and waiting with bated breath for a call from my parents losing their ever-loving shit when they find out—through email no less—that their precious baby girl is getting married.

Shit was spiraling out of control.

And Grandma Buttons was right there in the middle of it, stirring the pot when things finally seemed to be slowing down. For an unassuming little old lady, she'd strong-armed my landlord into letting me out of my lease with all the zeal and charm of a mobster threatening someone that he'd sleep with the freaking fishes if he didn't do what she wanted. The

poor man was never going to rent to me again when all this was over.

Laeth came walking around the corner, hefting a bundle of boxes over his shoulder before looking at me. “You want us to get started in the kitchen?”

I looked at him and blinked. My brain had been off-line since the majority of our friends showed up on my doorstep at the earlier hours of Saturday morning on Grandma Button’s orders to help me pack up my entire life.

So I could move in with Gage as, in her words, *we had discussed*. Only I didn’t remember any such discussion.

Laeth was still standing in front of me, waiting for instruction, when Gage came up beside me. “The kitchen’s great, man. Thanks.”

“No problem.” He gave me one last curious look before taking off.

Gage turned to look at me. “Why don’t you step outside with me and get some air, huh?”

I nodded woodenly, letting him take me by the hand and lead me out onto the front porch.

As soon as the door shut behind us, closing us off from everyone else, he turned to me and closed the distance between us. His hands came up on either side of my neck, an action that had seemed to become commonplace in the past few days, and one I didn’t mind in the slightest. Truth be told, when he touched me like that it had this strange way of centering me, grounding me back in reality when I was on the cusp of losing my shit. I hadn’t realized what a tactile man Gage was. It was almost a compulsion of some sort. Since we started this whole ruse, he never let a chance to touch me pass him by.

He bent his knees slightly, crouching down and bringing his face closer to mine. “You okay, Bits?”

I felt myself press deeper into his touch as I pulled in a deep breath before letting it out. “How did this happen?”

He smiled, those dimples pressing deeper into his cheeks than I'd seen in days. "Ah, I see what's wrong."

I lifted my brows high on my forehead. "You do? Please, clue me in then, because I feel like I'm losing my mind."

"It's the Grandma Buttons effect. She comes off sweet and unassuming, but really, the woman's more cunning than a fox. She manages to work you like a piece on a chess board until you end up giving her what she wants without even knowing you're doing it. Once the realization sinks in, it can throw you off balance. You'll need a couple days to get your sea legs back."

I reached up to grasp his wrists, not to push him away, but to hold on to him. "But . . . this is a lot, right? I mean, moving in together?" My chest started to get tight and my lungs felt like they were being squeezed and twisted into balloons.

His fingers pressed deeper into my skin. "Hey, just breathe, babe. It's all going to be okay."

I didn't realize I'd been holding my breath until he coaxed me to breathe. My chest rattled on the shaky inhale, and I turned all my focus on him, pushing the panic to the back of my mind. It was easy enough to do when he was looking at me the way he was. The deep, stormy gray of his eyes was flashing silver, glittering in the sunlight. They danced and glinted with affection so strong my toes curled inside my shoes.

"I know this wasn't what we planned, but you've always gone on about how much you love my house, right?"

He might have a point there. His kitchen was the stuff of dreams for anyone who liked to cook as much as I did. And his bathroom . . . *God*. It was a thing of beauty. I would have been lying if I said I hadn't fantasized more than once about drawing a nice, hot bubble bath and lying in there for hours with a book and a glass of wine.

I pursed my lips in consideration. "Does this mean . . ." I trailed off, knowing he'd understand exactly where I was going.

“My bathroom’s yours as often as you want.”

I squealed and did a little hop in place that drew a chuckle from deep in his chest as his hands glided down my neck and shoulders until they eventually stopped at my hands. The way he threaded his fingers through mine and held on set off a riot of butterflies deep in my belly. I was quickly becoming addicted to how he touched me.

“Thank you,” I said softly, pouring every ounce of sincerity I felt into those two words in the hope he heard it.

“For what?”

“For talking me down. You always manage to do that, you know. Every time I see that ledge coming into sight, you’re right there to pull me back from it.”

He used his hold on my hands to pull me closer, bringing us chest to chest. My nipples tightened as they pressed against the hard, rigid planes of his chest. He was so . . . big. I never felt safer than when he held me like this. Like I was precious.

“There won’t ever come a time when I won’t pull you back, Wynn. No matter how, no matter when. Even without all this, it’s you and me. I will always have your back.”

I was two seconds away from lifting up and slamming my lips against his in the kiss I’d been craving like a junkie in need of a fix since that little tease he gave me the evening his mom and grandmother arrived. I was so desperate for more of that—or just *more*—it was like a living, growing thing beneath my skin, crawling and itching and niggling at me until I could barely stand it.

However, as I was about to act, the door was thrown open and the moment was shattered.

A harried Farah popped her head out. “Uh, Gage. I think you should get in here. Jensen and Laeth are betting on who can lift the heaviest box, and I’m worried someone’s going to rupture a spleen or pop a hernia.”

It was quiet, but I didn’t miss the low, frustrated growl that rumbled deep in his chest as he dropped his head back.

“Goddamn it,” he grumbled up at the sky. “All right. Be right there. Make sure they don’t kill themselves in the meantime.”

Farah threw him a sassy salute and closed the door. His focus returned to me and all the frustration melted away. His gaze went soft, downright tender, as he took me in.

“You good?” he asked, determined to make sure I was back to one hundred percent before walking away. Even if it meant a potential hospital trip for one of his partners.

A smile stretched my lips as I took a step closer, unable to help myself. “I’m good, honey,” I said softly, the words pouring out. That was an endearment I’d never used with him before, but with the way his entire face lit up, those dimples in their full glory, I could see he really freaking liked it.

He headed back inside after rocking my world in the most unexpected way. And as I took a moment for myself out on the porch, I realized there wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do to make him look at me like that again.

CHAPTER

Eighteen

I LET OUT a sigh and closed my eyes as I slid farther into the tub. The air in the bathroom was thick with humidity and the tips of my fingers were wrinkled worse than a silk blouse that had been sitting in the dryer for a week. But the water was still warm and the bubbles that filled the tub were still at least an inch thick, thanks to how much of my bubble bath Gage had squeezed into the water.

It had been a long, exhausting day, but thanks to all my friends and Gage's authoritarian family, I was officially moved in. The furniture and kitchen appliances that didn't fit in his house had been put in storage. Drawers had been emptied for my clothes and the minimal items Gage had hanging in his closet had been shoved into one tiny corner, making room for my more extensive wardrobe. The art and photos that had been hanging in my old place were currently resting propped against walls, waiting for me to decide where I wanted to put them. Same with my decorations.

My dishes and silverware mingled with his, which worked, seeing as he only had place settings for four people. We managed to find a place for nearly everything, which was good on one hand, but on the other, it was going to be a pain in the ass to separate everything again once this was over and it was time for me to find my own place.

It was on that thought that the serenity I'd found in Gage's show-stopper of a bathroom faded, leaving an unpleasant feeling in its wake. It happened every time I thought about this

ruse finally coming to an end. Like a dark cloud that popped up out of nowhere to ruin a perfectly sunny day.

On a groan, I sank all the way into the water, trying to drown out those ugly thoughts. I wasn't going to think about the end, not now. I was going to take this one day at a time. And today, I was luxuriating in the best bathroom in existence.

From beneath the water, I heard a muffled knock on the bathroom door, followed by Gage's voice.

"You good in there?"

I popped my head above the surface and wiped the soapy bubbles from my face. "Yep! All good. Just about to finish up."

I dried myself off as the bathtub drained, made quick work of my nighttime routine, and twisted my damp hair into a bun on top of my head. It was going to look like something rats nested in come morning, but I was too damn tired to deal with it tonight.

The pajamas I'd pulled from my newly acquired drawer and brought in here with me sat on the vanity Gage had designated as mine. It was the longest and had a little place for a bench to tuck into so I could sit and do my makeup. I'd stood by, silently watching as he'd gathered up all his toiletries earlier and moved them over to the sink across the bathroom, the one with less counter space, so I could have more room.

The sleep shorts and camisole I'd grabbed were the most modest sleepwear I owned—which really wasn't saying much since pretty much all of it was tiny and revealing. It didn't show quite as much skin as the pair Gage had seen me in the day we went ring shopping, but it was still far from chaste.

I slid the clothes on and stared at myself in the mirror. There was no hiding the fact that my nipples had decided they wanted to misbehave and were currently standing at full attention while the shorts barely covered my behind.

Usually, I wouldn't have thought anything of what I planned to sleep in, but that was before it became clear Gage and I were going to be sharing a room for the foreseeable

future. This whole situation might have been more comfortable if I'd been able to crash in one of the guest rooms, but with Marcia and Grandma Boots still comfy and cozy under the same roof, Gage and I had no choice but to bunk up if we wanted to maintain our cover.

I couldn't remember the last time I was this nervous about walking out of the bathroom in my PJs in front of a guy. I felt like a virgin on prom night, for crying out loud. It wasn't like anything was going to happen, yet it was a wonder I hadn't taken flight, thanks to the millions of hummingbirds flapping around in my belly.

"Jesus, get your shit together, Wynn," I scolded myself quietly. "It's just Gage. He's your best friend and this is nothing but another night of hanging out."

Lifting my chin and steeling my spine, I grabbed the knob and opened the door, stepping out into Gage's massive master bedroom. The first thing I noticed, which was impossible *not* to notice, was the darkness against the huge wall of windows across the room. When I'd gone into that bathroom earlier, the sun had just started to lower, but now the sky outside was inky black and the moon was casting a silvery-white light on the surrounding forest. It really was a spectacular view, and normally it would have been a struggle to look away, but it wasn't the only incredible view in the room. In fact, out of the top two, it fell into second place.

First went to Gage, who was currently sitting in a large, cozy chair by the fireplace. The lamp beside him cast a golden glow over his broad, bare chest. That alone would have been sexy enough, but the book he held open in his hands and the *freaking reading glasses on his face* were enough to explode any woman's ovaries. Seeing him sitting there like that was damn near pornographic.

"Oh come on!" I cried, throwing my hands in the air as I called out to the heavens at the injustice.

He lifted a hand and pulled the sexy-as-fuck glasses off. "What's the matter?"

“You!” I shouted, jabbing a finger in his direction. “It’s bad enough you look like . . . *that*. All muscular and manly, but now I know you read? *And* wear reading glasses?”

He arched a brow. “You’ve always known I like to read.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, my stupid nipples hard enough to cut glass. “Yeah, but I haven’t actually seen it before. And I didn’t know about the glasses. First the gray sweats. Now this,” I threw out accusingly. “It’s not fair. No human being should be *that* perfect.”

He smirked, far too proud of himself. “So what you’re saying is you think I’m hot.”

I rolled my eyes and scoffed. “Oh please. You know you’re hot. You don’t need me to stroke your ego.”

Those quicksilver eyes of his grew dark as they raked down my body, oh so slowly. The distance between us felt like nothing, his gaze a physical touch. “Not sure you should be talking about it not being fair when you’re standing here looking like that.” His voice was rough and husky. If a voice could sound like sex, that was exactly what Gage Langdon’s sounded like.

I tightened my arms over my chest, trying in vain to hide what he was doing to me. If we didn’t get back on even footing, I might need to change my panties before the night was over.

Shaking off the lingering effects of his attention, I moved past him to the windows overlooking his property. “This really is the most beautiful view,” I said quietly, getting lost in the way the trees danced in the breeze, that silver glow bouncing off the leaves.

“Don’t I know it,” he replied gruffly. I didn’t turn around, knowing what I’d find if I did. I could feel his eyes boring into me from behind. If I were to look, I knew I’d find his eyes on me instead of the view beyond the glass.

I heard the book close, the sound reverberating through the room like a gunshot, followed by Gage clearing his throat. “How was your bath?”

I smiled at the glass before turning to face him. “Relaxing.” At least until it was time for me to come out of the bathroom. “Just the right amount of bubbles. Thanks for that.”

“You’re very welcome.” He placed the book he’d been reading on the small table beside his chair and pushed to standing. “So, I figured you could have the bed and I’ll take the floor. At least until Gram and Mom leave. That is, if it works for you. I know this isn’t exactly what you had in mind when you agreed to all of this, and I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“No way. Gage, you can’t sleep on the floor.”

He grabbed a pillow from the bed and tossed it on the stretch of floor between the bed and the windows. “It’s fine, trust me. I’d take the couch, but I don’t want to chance it if one of them gets up in the middle of the night.” He lifted his brows teasingly. “Don’t know if you’ve noticed, but Gram can be kind of a bloodhound.”

I let out a loud snort. “Yeah, no shit. I’ve figured that out. But still, you aren’t sleeping on the floor.” My eyes momentarily fell to his abs before shooting back up. “I know you’re still in pretty, well, *excellent* shape. But you’re not as young as you used to be. One night down there and you won’t be able to walk for a week.” I looked at the bed, a massive king that had more than enough room for two people. “We’re both adults. There’s no reason we can’t share a bed, right?”

He gave me that tender smile again and it about made me swoon. “Right.”

My heart started beating faster. “Okay then.”

“Okay.”

I couldn’t seem to make my legs work. “So . . .”

“Bits,” Gage said with a laugh.

“Yeah?”

“Get in the bed already.”

I lunged for the covers, yanking them back with more force than necessary and dove into the bed. It wasn’t until I

had the sheet and comforter pulled up and tucked tightly beneath my chin that I found the nerve to look back at Gage. Sure enough, he was chuckling and shaking his head at my ridiculousness.

“Get comfortable. I’m gonna lock everything up. Be back in a few.”

I had a feeling that a man as diligent and protective as Gage had already locked everything up for the night, especially when he had me and his family all under one roof, so I knew what this was. This was him going out of his way—a-freaking-gain—to make me comfortable. To give me the few minutes I might need to get my bearings. Looking out for me. Like he always did.

As he did his walk-through one last time, I snuggled deeper into the mattress. The only word I could use to describe Gage’s bed was *heaven*. The mattress felt like cuddling into a cloud. I didn’t know what the hell the sheets were made of, but they felt almost silky without the annoyance of slipping and sliding all around that came with actual silk sheets. The pillows were down and fluffy as hell, and I was pretty sure his bed had ruined me for all other beds for the rest of my life. My own bed sure didn’t live up to this kind of luxury, and I knew when the time came for me to go back to it, I was going to mourn the bazillion thread count sheets and heavenly mattress. Along with several other things, I was sure.

The bedroom door opened, and Gage walked in just as I started making snow angels—well, sheet angels, more accurately—in the center of the bed.

He stopped a few feet inside the bedroom, looking at me like I’d lost my damn mind. “What in the world are you doing?”

I flung my arms and legs out a couple more times for the fun of it. “These sheets are *awesome*. What are they made of, magic?”

“Bamboo,” he answered, humor laced through his words before he flipped off the bedroom light. “Glad you approve.”

“I more than approve,” I said, wriggling around a little more as the outline of his large, powerful body in the moonlight cut through the room, coming closer. “I think I might just live in this bed the rest of my life. Jase will give me shit for a while, but eventually he’ll come on board with me working remotely. The man can’t say no to me.”

His deep, rumbly chuckle filled the dark room, making my belly flutter as the covers on his side of the bed pulled back and the mattress dipped under his weight. All of a sudden things got very real when Gage climbed in beside me. My heartrate kicked into the danger zone and my body was very aware of him in every way. We weren’t touching. A good few inches of space were between the two of us, but I could have sworn I could still feel his heat seeping into the covers and traveling my way, wrapping around me like a heated blanket.

“Goodnight, Wynn,” he said softly, his voice barely more than a whisper in the dark.

“Goodnight, Gage.”

As silence enveloped us, the little voice inside my head chimed in, insisting I scooch those last few inches and press up against him.

I did my best to snuff her out, rolling to my side so I faced the window with my back to the man who was making me feel tingly all over. The last thought I remembered having was there was no chance I was getting any sleep tonight, not with Gage so close. But the comfort of his bed and the security that came with being near my fake fiancé won out, and I passed out in less than a handful of minutes.

CHAPTER

Nineteen

MY BREATH SNAGGED in my lungs as fire spread through my entire body. My core clenched around nothing, desperate to be filled. My breasts felt heavy. My skin tingled. I was so primed it felt like electricity was about to shoot from the tips of my fingers and toes.

Every single night for weeks, the dream of Gage made my needy body ache. But this was the worst one yet. The ache had never been this intense, this persistent. It drove through me, sending a flood of arousal to my center, drenching my panties.

I blinked into consciousness, my fuzzy surroundings slowly coming into focus in the darkness. I didn't recognize anything at first. It took a few moments for my brain to engage and remember where I was. And more specifically, who I was with.

That pulsing throb echoed through my body again, which didn't make sense. Usually when I woke up, the dream ended. My body might have still felt the tremors, but they usually ended after a few seconds.

I tried to turn over but was stopped by Gage's long, heavy arm draped over my waist. The hand cupping my breast squeezed tighter, his palm abrading my diamond-hard nipple beneath the barely-there fabric of my camisole.

My lips parted on a stuttered inhale when he moved in his sleep, letting out a raspy groan as he drove his hips against me, his very large and very *hard* erection digging into my ass and probing between my thighs from behind.

Dear lord, the man was *big*. Even trapped beneath the layers of his sleep pants and underwear I could feel it well enough to know it was fact.

My mouth went dry and my heart began to bang against my ribs like a xylophone. He let out another deep, gravelly sound in his sleep as his arm clenched around me and his grip on my breast tightened.

I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from whimpering out loud. The man was dead asleep, yet what he was doing to me—unconscious or not—was better than the few pathetic attempts at foreplay Darrin had bothered with. I wasn't sure I'd ever been so wet.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I worked to calm my breathing, trying to wind down from the high Gage was unknowingly causing. It wasn't working; in fact, when I felt his nose slide along the crook of my neck, I couldn't help myself.

Curling my lips between my teeth, I arched my back just a bit, pressing my ass backward into that steel pole in Gage's pants. He groaned again, and I couldn't help but do a little wiggle against him.

God, what would it feel like to have all that hot, hard length inside me?

I wondered if I'd be able to take all of it. But *damn*, I wanted to try.

I wasn't sure if I was testing the waters or just torturing myself, but I did it again, pressing even harder against his erection.

Instead of the groan I'd been receiving, I got a hard grunt. I felt it the moment awareness washed over him, when sleep faded away and he shot awake. His entire body locked tight. His hand on my breast clenched, his fingers pressing so hard I knew they'd leave marks—and why the hell did the thought of him marking me turn me on so freaking much?

The breaths that had been dusting along the back of my neck and creating goosebumps only moments ago stalled

completely. *Damn it.* He'd woken up to me grinding against his dick.

The only thing I could think to do was fake sleep. I regulated my breathing and slammed my eyes closed. It was a struggle, but I managed to keep my body loose as I felt him move behind me.

The room was dark and my eyes were shut, so I couldn't see a thing, but I'd never been more aware of another person in my life. His arm stayed fully around me, his grip on my breast not moving, but I knew he'd lifted up on his elbow in order to look down at me.

I did my best to keep a serene expression on my face as I felt his eyes burning a hole in the side of my face. It took everything I had not to gasp when he let go of my boob and used that hand to trail a feather light touch across the rise of my cheekbone and the curve of my jaw, like he was trying to memorize the planes of my face. I felt his breath across the delicate column of my neck. A moment later he ran the tip of his nose along the cord at the side of my throat before pressing a kiss against my pulse.

My heart squeezed and my belly did somersaults at the tender, affectionate action. I felt the well of tears behind my eyelids as he tucked himself against my back once more. He looped his arm around my waist again, but his hand remained on my stomach this time as he let out a sigh that sounded almost content and drifted back off to sleep.

In that short span of time, I'd felt more cherished, more adored than I ever had. Darrin had never made me feel like that in the entire span of our relationship.

The problem was, none of it was real.

GAGE SHIFTED BEHIND ME, coming
awake in the early morning hours. I blinked, my lids like
sandpaper against my dry eyes. After Gage's kiss on my neck

in the dead of night, I would have spent the entire night tossing and turning had it not been for him holding on to me all night long. I hadn't been able to get back to sleep, and it was the big behemoth's fault.

He let out a groan as he stretched his legs and rolled onto his back with an obnoxiously loud yawn.

"Morning, baby," he greeted in a sleep-rasped voice that would have set my blood on fire if my brain hadn't been in an exhausted fog. "Damn, I slept like a fucking rock. How about you?"

I wanted to snap at him for keeping me up all hours of the night, to tell him to shut the hell up and stop being such a freaking morning person. But if I did any of those things, I'd give myself away. He'd know I was faking being asleep when he'd given me that private, intimate kiss. He'd start asking questions, worrying about how he could make things better, and I'd end up having to tell him that I'd slept like shit because he made me horny as fuck. And that was absolutely not a road I was ready to go down at the moment.

I rolled onto my back and turned my head to look at him. God, he really was beautiful. Even all sleep-rumpled and hooded-eyed.

"Mm-hmm," I hummed, stretching my own limbs. I'd held myself so stiff all night long, worried if I moved or shifted he might let me go. Pulling the covers over my mouth—morning breath—I said, "But I need coffee. STAT." Where his voice had come out all morning-sexy and smoky, I sounded like I needed to hack up a furball.

He grinned down at me, dimples and all. "I think I can handle that."

I jolted when he leaned in faster than anyone had any business moving at such an ungodly hour and pressed a kiss to my forehead before rolling out of bed.

It was chaste and nowhere near as tender as the one on my neck in the night, but it still packed one hell of a wallop. I lay

there, stunned into immobility, as he grabbed a shirt and pulled it on before heading out the door.

It took me a few moments to get with the program, but eventually, the call for caffeine after a long, sleepless night became too strong to ignore. I forced myself to climb out of the world's most comfortable bed and padded to the bathroom as I rubbed at my tired, scratchy eyes. A quick glance in the mirror at the state of my hair forced a yelp from my throat. Sure enough, the wet bun had been a mistake. I had frizzy little fly-aways all over the place, and the part that had come loose was matted and crimped at the same time. I pulled out the elastic holding it all in place and flipped my head over, running my fingers through the tangled mess.

It took me a good few minutes, but I eventually tamed it into a slightly less crazy top knot. I brushed my teeth and scrubbed my face clean, slathering on moisturizer and tinted SPF in lieu of makeup. After putting on leggings and a plain white tee, I added a flannel of Gage's from the closet, rolling up the sleeves and knotting the hem so it fit better.

The soft, over-washed cotton felt buttery soft, and when I lifted the collar to my face and sniffed, I got a hit that was all Gage. Even if the shirt had made me look like a sloppy wreck, I would have worn it for the smell alone.

Luckily, it looked kind of cute.

"There she is!" Marcia greeted as I entered the kitchen. She and Grandma Buttons were sitting on the barstools, cups of steaming coffee in front of them. Gage closed the door to the fridge at my arrival, a bottle of creamer that happened to be my favorite in his hand. The grin he pointed my way froze on his face as his eyes raked over me, coming to a stop on the flannel. I knew he recognized it by the way his Adam's apple bobbed on a thick gulp and his pupils dilated. He seemed momentarily stunned as his mother waved me over for a sideways hug. "Morning, sweetheart. Hope you had a good night's sleep."

I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and sank into her affectionate embrace. "Thanks, Marsh. You too," I said, but

my gaze remained riveted to Gage the entire time. I couldn't look away if I tried.

There was only one word for what we were doing. We were eye-fucking the shit out of each other right there in his kitchen, in front of his mom and grandmother, and I couldn't find it in me to care. Or to stop.

His eyes were more star-shine than gunmetal, reminding me of the dark speckled sky outside his bedroom window the night before. The corners of his mouth trembled as he poured a fresh mug of coffee and doctored it with a heaping dose of my creamer before bringing it to me.

"Here you go, baby." His voice held a richer than normal timbre that made me shiver as I reached out and took the mug.

"Thanks, honey."

I got the same reaction from him as I did the first time I used that endearment, and I instantly craved more. When he leaned in for a short kiss on my lips, it wasn't nearly enough, but it would do. For now, at least.

Grandma Buttons spoke up, her words like a bucket of ice on my heated libido. "I don't know about you three, but I'm not in the mood to cook breakfast. I say we head out. How's that sound?"

"I could eat," I replied from behind my coffee cup as I forced my gaze off of Gage's. *Man*, that dude was potent.

"Then it's settled," she declared. "We'll hit the diner in town. On Gage."

He let out a snort, bringing his coffee to his lips and taking a sip before saying, "Works for me. Let me change real quick and we'll get going."

He moved to the sink, dumping the last of his coffee before placing the mug in the dishwasher. He never was one to leave things in the sink, after all.

As he headed out of the kitchen, he stopped beside me and leaned in, his breath sending a shiver down my spine and straight to my core as he whispered, "Nice shirt, Bits. Looks

fucking incredible on you. Help yourself to anything on my side of the closet from here on out.”

Oh my.

CHAPTER

Twenty

I COULDN'T IMAGINE WANTING to do anything or be anywhere other than sitting in a booth at the local diner with Wynn, my mom, and my grandmother like I was at that very moment. As far as I was concerned, the past twenty-four hours had to have been some of the best in my life.

I wasn't sure I'd ever slept as hard as I had the night before, with Wynn's warm, soft body in my arms and her sweet, intoxicating smell on my sheets and in the air, filling my lungs.

I hadn't meant to grope the shit out of her and rut against her like a goddamn animal in my sleep. I blamed my subconscious for acting on all the things my conscious mind wanted to do. But there was something that soothed me the moment I woke up in the middle of the night and felt her warmth wrapped around me like a blanket. A calm washed over me and I was able to go back to sleep with a smile on my face because I was holding my reason for existing in my arms.

I woke up this morning feeling more rested than ever . . . and grateful she was in my house, under my roof, and most especially, in my bed for the foreseeable future. Normally my mom and grandmother being under the same roof would have put a serious cramp in my style, but their presence ensured that I had a chance to get even closer to Wynn, to work my way behind the walls she'd put up since Shithead Darrin had broken her trust and faith in men.

When she came out of my—*our*—room this morning dressed in my shirt, it took everything in me not to throw her over my shoulder and haul her back in there so I could strip her of everything but that old-ass flannel and do all the things I'd been wanting to do to her for weeks and weeks now.

I was losing more of my sanity every day that I couldn't have her the way I truly wanted, but if there was any person on the face of the earth worth waiting for, it was Wynn Klein. My Bits. My firecracker.

I was in such a good mood I didn't give a shit my mom and grandmother were currently telling stories about me from my childhood meant to embarrass the hell out of me.

"You should have seen him," my mom cackled as she used the side of her fork to cut into her stack of pancakes, "sitting in the corner, crying his little eyes out, nose bleeding, absolutely crushed."

Okay, so maybe I gave a little bit of a damn.

"He was positively beside himself when I showed up at the daycare to pick him up. His first heartbreak. I wasn't sure he'd ever survive it."

Wynn's head fell back on a loud laugh, the thin wisps of hair at the back of her neck that didn't fit into her messy bun brushing against the arm I had stretched along the booth behind her. "Oh, poor Gage." She looked at me with an exaggerated pout. "Did that mean girl pick on you?"

"Jesus Christ. I was four years old. How was I supposed to know Katie Burbaker would take my attempt to kiss her so personally? I wanted her to be my girlfriend. I thought that was how you got girls to be your girlfriend back then. You walked right up and kissed them. I didn't expect her to whack me in the face with her Barbie lunchbox."

That only made Wynn laugh harder.

"Ah, it's okay, babe. Katie Burbaker's loss is my gain." She placed her hand on my thigh. The move was absentminded to her, but it meant fucking *everything* to me. That touch, that *babe*, along with choosing to wear my shirt of

her own accord, all meant I was getting in there. I was beneath her skin.

Her ring caught my attention, and I looked down to see the diamonds sparkle. Unable to help myself, I grabbed her hand and lifted it, bringing it to my lips so I could place a kiss on her knuckle above it before flipping it around and kissing the pulse point on the inside of her wrist. Her chest hitched with a stuttered breath, and there was no missing the way her violet eyes danced with need. I put her hand back on my thigh, needing her touch there as I toyed with the strands of her hair and used them to pull her face closer to mine.

“Does that mean you’d let me kiss you whenever I want?”

Her breath was a gust against my lips. Her eyes took on this glassy, almost dazed quality as she looked down at my mouth. “You betcha,” she murmured dreamily.

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. She looked so goddamn cute. I wasn’t thinking about where we were or who we were with. When I leaned in and kissed her lips, it wasn’t for show. It was real. Every kiss I’d given her since we started this whole thing, every touch . . . was all real.

Hell, I didn’t even remember who we were sitting across from until my mom let out an obnoxious, “Awwww!” effectively killing the moment. “You kids are so stinking cute!” Her voice sounded watery, and I could almost picture her eyes getting all misty.

“Good God, Marcia. Keep it together, would you? No one needs to see you blubbering in public.”

Wynn snorted out a laugh, heat infusing her neck and cheeks as she giggled, pulling from the kiss and lowering her face so her forehead rested on my chest. That laugh was the most beautiful melody I’d ever heard.

“Well excuse me for being happy my boy’s finally found the love of his life,” Mom continued, doing what she and Gram did best: arguing. “Wasn’t sure this day was every going to come. I mean, he’s not exactly young, you know.”

I let out a pained groan and dropped my head back, squeezing my eyes closed, and Wynn laughed even harder. I was so lost in that sound that I didn't hear the abrupt end to the arguing or the sharp intake of breath across the table.

It wasn't until my grandmother all but growled, "Please tell me someone slipped something in my drink and I'm hallucinating right now. Because I *cannot* be seeing who I think I'm seeing right now."

I lifted my head and looked across at my ladies. My mom's face had gone blood red, and she looked like she was moments from spitting fire. Both of them looked downright murderous as they glared at something over my shoulder.

"What in the world's got you all—" The question died on my tongue when I twisted my neck and saw Vanessa had just walked into the diner. "Oh. Shit."

"Oh shit?" My mom's gaze whipped back to me. "That's all you have to say?"

Gram narrowed her eyes and pointed a finger at my face. "You don't look surprised, boy. Why on earth don't you look surprised?"

Wynn twisted back around in her seat, facing forward and putting her back to Vanessa. "Because he's not," she said casually before crunching into another strip of bacon. She washed it down with orange juice, not a care in the damn world, while my ladies looked on, flabbergasted. "She showed up a little while ago, casting a shadow over the town."

Mom's mouth fell open. "You're kidding me."

I drank back more of my coffee, my breakfast sitting like a rock in my stomach now that my ex had shown up. "Wish she was. Believe me."

Multiple things happened so fast I didn't have time to react to any of it. I heard Vanessa's voice, that overly-cheery, fake-as-hell voice. "Francis, Marcia. Hi. It's so good—"

Wynn moved like the tiny dynamo she was, shooting out of the booth and whipping around to face Vanessa. "No," she chipped with so much ferocity Vanessa jolted back and the

entire diner fell silent. “You don’t get to address them.” Wynn jabbed her tiny finger at her. She stood at least four inches shorter than my ex, but the fire in her raged so hot she might as well have been ten feet tall. “You especially don’t get to tell them how nice it is to see them because the feeling sure as shit isn’t mutual.”

Vanessa’s cheeks heated pink, her eyelids narrowing in a way I was all too familiar with. She wasn’t anything like Wynn. There wasn’t a scrappy bone in her body like my Bits, so when she felt threatened or insulted, she fought dirty. Downright ugly. And I’d be damned if I let that happen to Wynn.

I shoved out of the booth and stepped up behind my girl, placing a hand on her shoulders. “Wynn, baby. It’s fine. You don’t need to—”

Her head whipped around, her violet eyes spitting white hot fire. “Yes, I do. Because you’re mine and this nasty, pathetic woman has basically been stalking you.”

It took everything I had to fight my dick going hard in front of half the town and my family at Wynn’s declaration that I was hers.

“I’m not—”

She spun back around, holding her hand up only a few inches from Vanessa’s face to shut her up. “No one wants to hear a damn word you have to say. You came into *my* town and have been harassing *my* man. Now you have the audacity to come up to the women who are about to be *my* family?”

Fuck, but this woman was something else. That fire burning bright in her made it impossible not to crave her.

“You need to leave. There’s nothing for you here. Unlike you, I know what I have. I know exactly how lucky I am to have the man standing behind me. I’d never do anything to lose him.” Her lips curled up in disgust. “And I’m sure as hell not stupid enough to throw him away.” To drive her message home, she lifted her left hand and placed it on the one I had resting against her shoulder, putting that ring on full display.

Given its size and the way the light hit all those precious stones, there was no way in hell Vanessa would have been able to miss it.

Her eyes flared, the color leeching from them as soon as she spotted it, and I had to duck my head, resting it on Wynn's shoulder to hide the smirk that forced its way across my face.

"He went for badass over basic, so why don't you just accept defeat and get the hell out of our town?"

I looked up just in time to see Vanessa about-facing on her ridiculous heels and storm out of the diner. I wasn't surprised, really. She never did well with public confrontation, at least not when the person she was going up against wasn't cowering in fear before her. She couldn't handle the embarrassment, so she ran. Then she'd wait and prepare for a reengagement on her turf, where she was most comfortable.

Only that wouldn't work with Wynn. She was stronger, fiercer. When something or someone mattered to her, she refused to stop fighting for them. She'd eat Vanessa alive, no matter whose turf she was on. Which was why I loved her so goddamn much.

Months ago, that realization might have scared the shit out of me. It might have sent me running for the hills. I'd been so sure I never wanted to feel this way for another woman again. What I felt for Wynn, though, was so much more than anything I might have had or wanted with Vanessa. What I *thought* I felt back then paled in comparison to the intense, blood-stirring, world-rocking love I felt for the woman I was currently holding on to.

Using my hold on her shoulders, I turned her around to face me, letting loose the smile I'd been trying to fight during her little tirade. "Badass over basic?" I asked, my eyebrows lifting high on my forehead as my chest shook on a chuckle.

She smiled unrepentantly, lifting her shoulders in a careless shrug. "I figured I'd get through to her easier if I spoke her language. She strikes me as the kind of woman who calls others basic bitches and speaks in acronyms."

My head fell back on a laugh from deep in my gut as I pulled her against me and wrapped my arms around her, holding her to me. Right where she belonged.

She returned the embrace, wrapping her arms around my waist and burrowing her face into my chest, creating a warmth inside of me that grew and spread like vines.

“That’s it,” I heard my grandmother say. “I’m putting that girl in my will.”

CHAPTER

Twenty-One

THE WORDS on the computer screen in front of me began to blur as my eyelids drooped, feeling like they had weights attached to them, pulling them down. I dozed for a second, my chin falling out of the hand I had it propped in and jerking me awake.

“Shit,” I hissed as I shook my head, trying to shake away the exhaustion clinging to me. Despite Gage’s freaking perfect bed, I hadn’t been sleeping for shit. It wasn’t that I didn’t like sharing a bed with him. I liked it too damn much. Every time he climbed beneath the sheets beside me, my whole body lit up, electricity arching through me like a live wire.

It had been three nights. Three restless, exhausting nights. Three nights of sexual tension building until it became damn near unbearable. I wasn’t sure I’d ever been this horny in my life. My insides felt like a can of soda that had been shaken, roiling and churning with no way to release the pressure.

I was starting to worry that if there wasn’t some kind of relief, the back of my head was literally going to blow off.

I picked up the energy drink I’d been sipping all morning—coffee wasn’t cutting it—and took a deep pull, wincing at the acrid taste of it when my office phone rang.

“This is Wynn Klein.”

“Well, apparently not Klein for long, huh?”

I shot up straight in my chair, all thoughts of exhaustion disappearing at the deep, craggy voice on the other end of the

line. “Daddy, hi!” I squeaked, adrenaline dumping into my bloodstream. “How was your cruise?”

A huff of disapproval rang in my ear, causing me to curl my lips between my teeth and bite down hard. I’d heard of Mom Guilt from most of my friends, I’d even seen it up close and in person with Marcia and Gage over the past week and a half. But in the Klein family, Dad Guilt coursed through us. Maybe because, for as long as I could remember, I’d been the very definition of a daddy’s girl. I adored my mother, and truth be told, I got most of my sass from her, but there was something extra special about the bond he and I had. Most of the time I had the strict, stoic man wrapped around my little finger. But on the rare occasion when I disappointed him, well . . . that was a hard-ass pill to swallow.

I’d called every day since Farah told me the email went out, hoping to catch them so I could give them the news of my surprise engagement myself, but it seemed I missed the mark.

“How was the cruise? That’s what you have to say to me? How about an explanation as to why your mom and I have an email invite to our only daughter’s engagement party, when we didn’t have the first damn clue she was even seeing anyone?”

He was using the very same tone that he’d used back in high school when my best friend, Lizzy, and I were picked up for joyriding in her mom’s car without permission. When I showed up on the doorstep with a police escort, I thought my old man was going to have a coronary.

Hearing that same level of disappointment in his voice was a shot to the gut.

“Look, Dad, I can explain.”

His derisive snort echoed through the line. “I certainly hope so, young lady.”

Oh shit. He’d “young lady’d” me. That was *not* good.

“It’s Gage, Dad,” I explained quickly. My folks had been to Redemption for a handful of visits over the years I’d lived there, and in that time they’d gotten to know the man I was fake-engaged to. Not well, but enough that my mom liked him

and my dad respected him. I was hoping that news would be enough to sway my father into a better mood, but it was a crapshoot when it came to my love life. He'd never liked a single boy I brought home to meet them. *Especially* Darrin. It could have been that my taste in men was that shitty, but I suspected no one would be good enough for Greg Klein's baby girl.

"I know this is a pretty big deal, and I had every intention of telling you and Mom personally. Farah got overly excited. I didn't know she was sending that email. I swear. It just . . . kind of happened. I pinched the bridge of my nose as I trudged through my sluggish brain to find a lie that might pacify my dad.

"We hadn't been seeing each other very long, but you know how it's been. He's my best friend. When we finally decided we wanted to be together . . . I guess it took us both by surprise. He proposed while you guys were on your cruise. I was going to tell you as soon as you got back."

He let out a grunt I'd heard a hundred times. That grunt meant he wasn't exactly happy, but as much as he didn't want to accept my excuse, he didn't have much choice. But he'd still find a way to bitch about it.

"What kind of man asks a woman to marry him without coming to her father for permission first?"

Like that.

My back went stiff and a cloud of red covered my vision. "The kind of man who knows me well enough to know I don't belong to any damn body. Permission doesn't need to be granted from anyone but me," I clipped, my tone hard. "Or have you forgotten the kind of daughter you raised?"

"Now, punk, I didn't mean—"

I cut him off. "Oh, I know what you meant, all right. And you really put your foot in it this time. You know me better than to think I'd ever settle for a man who had such archaic views as to act like women were some sort of property. Gage

didn't ask your permission because he damn well knows better. Besides, it's not yours to give."

My voice rose higher and higher the more heated I got. My father knew good and well my feelings on that bullshit ritual. He hadn't said what he did because he believed it. He was butt-hurt that his daughter had gotten engaged without his knowledge and he was lashing out.

"I'm sorry, pumpkin," he ground out. Greg Klein also wasn't the kind of man to be wrong often—at least not with anyone but his wife—so apologizing was a blow to his ego. "I was out of line."

"Damn straight you were. And so you know, I'm telling Mom what you said. It serves you right."

"Ah, Christ," he grumbled, and I could picture him pinching the bridge of his nose. I couldn't help but smile, knowing my mother was going to rip my father a new one for that. I was bummed I wouldn't be there to witness it.

"Now, are you done being mad at me so I can tell you I really miss you guys and I hope I'll see you at the party?"

And just like that, my dad's voice lost all disappointment and went soft as he said, "Missed you too, punk. And of course we'll be there. Wouldn't miss it."

I smiled brightly. "Good. Now tell me all about the cruise. But skip past the hanky-panky parts. There are some things a child shouldn't know about her parents."

I WALKED into the bedroom I shared with Gage later that evening, feeling so damn tired my bones practically ached.

Gage sat in his reading chair by the fireplace crackling with bright orange flames, reading another one of his books, but I was too exhausted to enjoy the view of a sexy man in sexy glasses, sexily reading a thriller.

Instead, I moved straight to the bed and faceplanted in the center of it.

“Long day?” Gage asked, humor dripping from his words.

I let out a groan and twisted my neck so my face pointed in his direction. “Got a call from my dad.”

He snapped his book shut at that and placed it on the little side table. “Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh.”

“So . . . I take it that didn’t go well?”

As difficult as it was, I managed to move my arms and push up on my elbows to see him better. “It started a little rough, but ended okay, I guess.” I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth and bit down in thought. “They’ll be here for the engagement party.”

Gage pushed out of the chair and walked over to the bed, sitting down beside me. My eyes slid closed as he reached out to brush my hair to the side, his fingertips sliding gently over the exposed skin of my neck.

“That’s a good thing, right?”

I let out an appreciative groan as his hands moved to my shoulders and began working the knots that had taken up residence there. “Oh, that’s nice,” I said on a breath as I let my head fall back down to the bed. “And it could be a good thing. Or it could mean he’s planning a sneaky, painful way to make you suffer.”

His hand stopped moving, making my poor, tired muscles cry out. “Uh, babe, do I need to worry?”

I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth and bit down as I gave his question some thought. “I don’t think so?”

I felt his frame jerk back and turned to look over my shoulder. “You don’t *think so?*”

“He’s really protective of me. He’s never liked any of my boyfriends.”

He let out a grunt and went back to massaging. “That doesn’t really say much, Bits. I mean, Darrin was a fucking moron. Even before that dumbass cheated on you.”

I faked a scowl and shot it at him. “Are you saying I pick shitty boyfriends?”

His answer was to lift a single brow. “Fortunately for you, you seem to have broken that streak with me.”

He winked, causing my cheeks to flood with heat I had to hide by burying my face in the comforter. All this man had to do to turn me on was breathe, for crying out loud.

“I’m not worried,” he announced seconds later as he continued to work the muscles in my back and shoulders loose.

“You aren’t?”

“Nope. As soon as your dad sees us together, he’ll see what you mean to me, and he’ll know he’s got nothing to worry about.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling like a lunatic, because this man kept getting better and better.

But as soon as that thought crossed my mind, another one popped up, casting a shadow on my light, happy mood.

What did it say about me that the only man who’d treated me halfway decent was the one I was *fake* engaged to?

CHAPTER

Twenty-Two

JESUS CHRIST. Farah had really gone all out for this party. I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting when Wynn told me she had offered—insisted—to throw us an engagement party, but it sure as hell hadn't been *this*.

She'd transformed their backyard with picnic tables, string lights, paper lanterns, and tables practically groaning under the weight of all the food. It wouldn't surprise me if Redemption was a ghost town tonight, with everything shut down, because it looked like the entire goddamn town had turned out for the party.

Buck and Darla, the owners of Bad Alibi were kicked back, talking to my mom and Gran and Annabelle. Cannon's dad, Banks, was on the outskirts of the yard with his crew of old-school biker buds, Scooter, Danno, and Fletch, cutting up over a couple beers.

Everyone we knew was here. Including Wynn's mom and dad. They'd arrived earlier that day and checked in at the Inn before heading over to see their girl. I'd always liked Greg and Annabelle, but the relationship had definitely changed from when I was simply Wynn's friend to now. At least with her old man.

Her mom had been as pleasant as always, pulling me in for a hug and kiss on the cheek before rushing to her girl. The two of them embraced and squealed like best friends from high school. Then Wynn had shown her mom the ring, and Annabelle nearly lost it.

Greg, on the other hand, had spent his entire time in Redemption scowling at me from a distance, like he was silently contemplating the best way to murder me and dispose of my body so it would never be found.

“How you holding up, man?” Cannon asked as he stopped at my side, lifting the beer bottle he was holding so I could clink mine against it.

“I’m great. A little surprised by all this.” I waved my arm out to encompass the backyard. “But otherwise pretty damn great.”

He let out a chuckle as he shook his head. “That’s my woman for you. She gets it in her head she wants to do something, it’s balls to the wall. Especially when she wants to have a party.” He took a swig of his beer. “I’ve learned to let her do her thing and stay the hell out of the way.”

I grinned, my chest feeling light because I suddenly got it, got where he was coming from. After years of insisting I didn’t want what he or any of my other friends had, I looked at Wynn and I just *got it*. If there was something she really wanted to do, something she was passionate about, I would gladly sit back and let her do it. It was why I currently had a fruit bowl that looked like an ashtray sitting on my kitchen island with a bunch of bananas in it and a painting of a dog that looks like a turd hanging in my office. Her attempts at anything artistic were, well, horrifying, but they were hers, so I displayed them proudly.

“I get that, man.”

He turned to look at me, one corner of his mouth kicking upward. “I see you do. And I’m damn happy for you, brother.” His gaze cast over my shoulder and that smirk stretched into a full grin. “Incoming. Future father-in-law coming up on your six.”

Ah fuck.

“I’ll leave you to it,” he said as he started backing away.

“Fucking coward,” I grumbled under my breath.

He saluted me with his beer bottle and let out a bark of laughter. “Damn straight. May the odds be ever in your favor, man.”

With that, he took off and Greg took his place only seconds later.

“Gage,” he greeted on grunt and a tip of his chin.

I returned the gesture. “Greg. Wynn and I are really glad you and Annabelle were able to make it to town. I know Wynn’s been missing you guys something fierce.”

He looked out across the expansive backyard, taking in the partygoers before finally settling on his daughter who was standing with Farah, Poppy, Lark, and Willow. His expression went soft as she threw her head back on a laugh, that melodic sound carrying across the yard like tinkling wind chimes.

“I know the feeling.”

“You know, you guys are welcome at our place whenever the mood strikes. I know things are a bit crowded with my family in town as well, but I’ve been thinking of expanding a bit. Maybe building a guest house or something on the property.”

Until that moment, it had only been a random thought I’d given a few minutes of consideration to, but now that I’d said it out loud, I actually liked the idea. Once I got Wynn on board with making us a permanent thing, we’d need to make room for both our families. And if she wanted to have kids, we’d need even more space. I had plenty of land to build on, so if that was something she was down with, I’d get right on it.

“What are your intentions with my baby girl?” he asked, getting right down to brass tacks.

I turned to face him, giving him all my attention. “To make her happy, Greg,” I answered. It was probably the most honest thing I’d ever spoken aloud. “I intend to make her happy. That’s all.”

He studied me so closely I felt like a specimen under a microscope. “And what makes you think you’re more qualified to do that than any of the other guys she’s dated?”

I arched a single brow. “You mean besides the fact they’re all fucking morons for losing her?” At my question, that mask he’d been wearing cracked for the first time. His mouth wiggled under the pressure of keeping his smile at bay. “I think I’ve gotten to know your daughter pretty well, sir. Most days it feels like I know what she’s thinking better than I know what’s going on in my own head. The two of us are a team. She makes me better in every single way, and I only hope I give her even half of that back. But mostly, I think I’m better qualified than all the assholes that came before me because I know what I have, and I don’t intend to lose it. I’d cut off my own arm before I ever did anything to hurt her. If it came down to my life or hers, it’s hers. Every. Single. Time.”

Silence enveloped us, the sounds of the party beyond muffling as I waited, breath stalled, to see how he’d react.

Finally, he put me out of my misery. With a grin, he clapped me on my shoulder, hard enough to jostle me and show his strength—just to be on the safe side. “You’re a good man, Gage. Thought so since the moment I first met you, and I’m glad my daughter picked you.”

She hadn’t, at least not fully. At least not yet. But I would get her there. So help me God.

“And you’re right. The rest of those guys were losers.” He curled his top lip in disgust. “Especially that last one.”

“Only reason I didn’t destroy that fucker’s life after what he did to her was because she asked me not to waste my time. Still regret telling her my plans and letting her talk me out of it, though. It would have been damn fun to take everything from that son of a bitch.”

Wynn joined us as her father’s head fell back on a deep, rumbling belly laugh. “Uh, everything okay over here, guys?”

Greg reached out and looped his arm around his daughter’s shoulders, pulling her into him for a sideways hug. Her face lit up like a Christmas tree when he bent to place a kiss on her forehead. She really did miss her parents, and that look on her face sealed my decision to build on to what we already had so our families could visit whenever they wanted to. I pictured

big family holidays full of laughter and sass from Wynn and her mom, as well as Gran. It would be a hell of a lot of fun.

“Everything over here is great, punk,” he assured her. “I’m having a heart-to-heart with your fella.” He gave her another squeeze, looking down at her with so much affection it made my heart swell. “You picked good, sweetheart. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks, Daddy,” she said quietly, her violet eyes growing glassy.

He gave her one last hug before letting her go. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll go see what your mom’s up to.”

“Oh, she and Grandma Buttons are talking about starting a conga line. She’s trying to find out who’s in charge of the music so she can get them to play Quad City DJ’s ‘C’Mon ’N Ride It.”

I was in the middle of laughing as Greg’s head fell back. “Dear Lord, deliver me from my crazy-ass wife,” he lamented to the darkened night sky before walking away.

Wynn giggled as she watched him go. When he reached Annabelle’s side, hooking his arm around his wife’s waist affectionately, my girl pulled her gaze from them and looked up at me, her smile so goddamn brilliant it lit up the night.

“My folks are crazy.”

“Sure as hell are,” I agreed teasingly. “But my family’s pretty nuts too, so we all fit.”

She blinked, her lids only going to half-mast when she opened them, that beautiful deep purple going a bit hazy as her gaze traveled down to my mouth. My dick started to swell behind my fly as her tongue peeked out and swiped across her lips, making the dampness shine beneath the Edison bulbs hanging all around us.

“Um . . .” She blinked herself out of the haze she’d fallen into, but I was still fighting a very hard, very *public* erection. “You sure everything’s good with my dad? I can go over there and give him an earful if he hurt your feelings.” She grinned teasingly, and I couldn’t keep myself from doing what I

wanted to do and leaned down to kiss her. I hadn't meant for it to get so heated, for it to turn so damn hungry, but I'd been walking around in a constant state of arousal since that very first kiss in the coffee shop, and I couldn't fucking take it anymore. Having her in my bed the past two weeks and not being able to touch her the way I wanted had been a battle of wills, and the moment my lips came down on hers, I officially lost.

Her needy whimper was like fuel thrown on the fire raging inside me. With one arm I held her to me so tightly not even light could get between us, and with the other, I tangled my fingers in her hair, forcing her head back so I had better access to her mouth. Her lips parted on a gasp, and I dove in, unable to wait another goddamn second to taste her. My tongue plundered, devoured, tangled with hers in a kiss that blew my fucking mind and rocked my world right off its axis.

Her nails dug into my shoulders, clinging to me as she lifted up on her toes to get closer. She met me, stroke for stroke, greedily taking what I was giving. I was so lost in her, in taking this little piece that only drove me to crave more, that I'd completely lost track of where we were and who we were with.

That was, until our friends and family started catcalling and wolf whistling like crazy.

Wynn pulled back on a sharp gasp. She lowered onto her feet, her eyes wide and glazed over. Her lips were swollen, her cheeks flushed. And I couldn't stand it for another goddamn second.

A growl worked its way from my chest before I clipped, "Fuck it." Then I grabbed her hand, locking my grip around her delicate fingers, and started inside Farah and Cannon's house.

I was officially done with this game.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Three

GAGE LOOKED DOWN at me like he was about to breathe fire. I'd been kissed stupid by the man I couldn't seem to get enough of, and he looked like he was ready to take someone's head off.

"Fuck it," he hissed on a vicious growl before grabbing my hand and jerking me off the back deck and into the house.

I had to jog to keep up, my heart threatening to pound right out of my chest. "Gage? What's wrong?" My voice came out in a pant, my lungs still trying to fill after that freaking kiss.

He didn't say a word. The back door slammed shut behind us as he yanked me through the kitchen and past the living area and up the stairs.

"You're kind of starting to freak me out here. Are you"—I swallowed audibly—"are you mad at me?"

He didn't answer. He didn't stop either. What he did was continue to pull me up the stairs. As soon as he hit the landing, he made a sharp left down the hall. The second door on the right was open. One quick glance inside and he used his grip on my hand to propel me over the threshold. He followed me in a second later and shut the door firmly behind him.

I whipped around, my hands on my hips and murder in my eyes. "Damn it, Viking. If you don't start talking, I'm going to —"

He lunged at me, taking my face in his hands and crashing his mouth down on mine. An electric current rushed through

my body. The only thing in my head was *more, more, more*. I leaned into him, demanding he take the kiss deeper as I placed my hands on his chest and dragged them upward, feeling all those hot, hard muscles beneath my palms that had been pressed against my back night after night.

It was as if a dam had broken inside me. I couldn't get close enough. My arms looped around his neck, and I used the hold to hoist up so I could get closer to that sinful mouth.

He was quick to get with the program, grabbing me by my waist and lifting me until my legs wrapped around his hips. He turned, walking forward until my back collided with the wall behind me. He pulled away from my lips to trail his across my jaw and down my neck. I writhed against him, feeling that hard steel behind his jeans pressing against my center.

“Oh God,” I panted as a rushing of arousal flooded between my thighs. “Gage, what are we doing?”

Shut up, the little voice in the back of my head screamed. This wasn't the moment for clarity or reason. Not when he'd been slowly driving me out of my freaking mind for weeks.

He kissed his way across my collarbone, down the center of my chest where he dragged his tongue through my cleavage. “What we should have been doing this whole goddamn time.”

“But . . . this—this isn't real.” He flexed his hips against me, his hard erection sliding across my most sensitive parts and making any further objection die on my tongue. Even with all the clothes between us, I was embarrassingly close to getting off. But who could blame me after weeks-long foreplay?

His head came up, those thundercloud eyes of his nearly black with need. Need for *me*. “This feel fake to you?” he asked through gritted teeth, thrusting against me again. “Does it feel fake every time I touch you? Every time I kiss you?”

My brain sputtered, my chest trembling on a shaky inhale as I stared into those fathomless eyes. “No,” I breathed, clutching him even tighter with my arms and legs, desperate to

keep him close. I couldn't help but worry that if I let go, he might slip right out of my hands, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to survive that.

He leaned in, dragging his nose against the column of my throat. I tipped my head to the side, giving him better access as he breathed me in, literally. "Let me taste you," he pleaded, dragging his teeth against the sensitive skin of my neck. "I need to get you off more than I need my next fucking breath, Wynn." He pulled back, his expression solemn. "Say I can."

I couldn't have denied him if I wanted to. My head bobbed a frantic nod. "Yes, Gage," I whispered, my words coming out in a rush. "God. *Please* do it. Please get me off."

His smile was positively wicked, dimples and all, as he dropped me to my feet. Before I could ask him what he was doing, he dropped to his knees right in front of me.

"Oh shit," I wheezed, all the air leaving my lungs at the sight of this big, powerful man on his knees in front of me. A flood of arousal soaked my panties.

"Christ, baby. I can smell you," he groaned, leaning forward and pressing his face against my stomach before dragging it down to my core. He inhaled deeply, a growl rattling his chest as he let it out. His eyes came back up to mine as he fisted the hem of my skirt and started sliding it up.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

He licked his lips, his gaze almost manic. "What's it look like I'm doing, Wynn? You said I could taste you."

My cheeks flooded with heat. "I don't—I mean, I'm not —" I clamped my mouth shut and shook my head, trying to rattle my thoughts together. "I can't come. Like this," I admitted, my humiliation nearly enough to snuff out the desire that was burning inside me like an inferno. This was more embarrassing than when I'd admitted how long it had been since I'd been laid. But the last thing I wanted was for him to get down there and put in a serious effort, only for it not to pay off. The few times Darrin had gone down on me in our relationship had been so stressful it wasn't even fun. It was too

much pressure. Darrin always got frustrated when it took too long, so eventually, he stopped doing it.

His brows lifted. “You’ve never gotten off like this?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think I can.”

For some reason, that statement made him smile. “Oh, you can, baby. I promise. Those assholes from your past didn’t know what the fuck they were doing. That’s not an issue you’ll ever have with me.”

He seemed so sure I almost believed him.

He continued his journey, raising my skirt past my hips. “You smell like heaven, Bits,” he rasped as my drenched pale pink thong came into his view. “I bet you taste even better.”

He dove in then, catching me completely off-guard as he swiped his tongue over the silk covering my center. “Fuck yeah,” he grunted at that first wicked taste of me.

“Gage, please,” I whimpered, my teeth clamping down hard on my bottom lip. “I need more. I’m losing my mind here.”

His chuckle was dark and dangerous. “Now you know how you’ve been making me feel all this time.” He took another swipe, but it wasn’t nearly enough. “You want me to eat you until you come all over my mouth, baby?”

God, yes. More than anything, I thought, but I couldn’t seem to form words just then. All I could do was nod.

“Then you might want to bite your tongue to keep from yelling my name when I make you come harder than you ever have before.”

Without a word of warning, he pulled my panties out of the way and dove in. My head fell back against the wall with a thud as he speared his tongue inside me, fucking me with it in a way that made my knees weak. A small, desperate noise pushed itself past my lips as I gripped his hair to keep him right where he was.

His deep chuckle reverberated through my damp folds, the vibrations like a million tiny electric shocks that only made me

needier. Just when I thought my knees were going to give out, he grabbed me behind my knee and threw my right leg over his shoulder, opening me up even more.

Stars began to dance before my eyes as he alternated between tasting inside me and sucking on my sensitized clit. The breath sawed in and out of my lungs. My chest strained against the fabric of my top as something deep inside me cranked tighter and tighter, like a spring being pushed to the max. He was right. All those assholes before were morons, and Gage Langdon was the king of eating pussy. I was close. In no time at all my body shook with the need to come, and it was taking everything I had not to scream.

I was coming completely undone under his ministrations. When he drove two fingers inside me and dragged them across my G-spot, my eyes nearly rolled back in my head. I bit down on the inside of my cheek so hard I tasted blood, but the little hit of pain was so worth it.

Gage growled against my folds, turning his head to nip at my inner thigh as he continued to fuck me with his fingers. “Jesus, fuck. I can feel you, Wynn. You’re so goddamn close already.”

“Holy shit,” I panted, my grip on his hair tightening even more. “Don’t stop, Gage. Please. Don’t fucking stop.”

“Would even think about it,” he grunted. “Now give it to me, Bits. Flood my fucking mouth.”

On that order, he curled his fingers, pressing hard on that most perfect spot at the same time he sucked my clit between his teeth and flicked it hard with the tip of his tongue.

I went off like a bottle rocket, detonating into a thousand pieces as the most intense, most mind-boggling orgasm of my life ripped through me. I had to clamp my free hand over my mouth to muffle the noises that refused to be held in as wave after wave crashed into me.

Gage stayed with me through the whole thing, his mouth and fingers drawing out every single bit of my release until there was absolutely nothing left. When he finally finished, he

looked up at me with smug satisfaction etched across the planes of his gorgeous face. “Told you,” he said arrogantly.

I chuckled, feeling completely wrung out in the very best way as he carefully lowered my leg off his shoulder. His touch was tender and caring as he slipped my panties back into place and righted my skirt.

When he rose to his feet, coming to tower over me, I could see the proof of his arousal pushing at his jeans insistently.

“What about you?” I asked. My mouth watered as I reached out to feel him, but he stopped me, his fingers wrapping around my wrist. “This was all about you, baby. I wanted to make you feel good. When I get off, I want to take my time. I want to be able to worship every single inch of you for hours before I finally drive my cock into your tight, wet pussy. And when I come, it’s going to be inside you, not on your hand or down your throat or on your tits.”

My throat worked on a thick swallow. All of a sudden I wanted *all* of that.

He placed his fingers beneath my chin, tilting my face up and bringing his mouth down on mine for a deep, hungry kiss. I could still taste myself there, and it ramped me back up after the best release I’d ever had.

“Now tell me something, baby. Does what just happened feel real enough for you, or do you need me to feast on that pussy again until your cum is running down my chin to prove my point?”

“I think I got it,” I said quietly, only half lying. The truth was, I didn’t know what the hell this meant for us. It didn’t feel like this relationship was fake any longer, but I wasn’t sure exactly what that made us.

But I did know one thing for absolutely certain.

When Gage wanted to make a point he went *all out*.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Four

THE REST of the engagement party had been damn near excruciating. Every time my dick started to go flaccid I'd catch a whiff of Wynn's perfume or lick my lips and get the faintest hint of her taste and all the blood in my body would travel south. It didn't matter that we were surrounded by friends and family. The goddamn thing wouldn't go away. It wasn't going to be happy until it felt Wynn's hot cunt squeezing it tight as my balls drained inside her tempting little body. I was in physical pain by the time we headed home.

The party was still raging on when Wynn looked at me and whispered she was tired and ready to go. Mom and Gran had opted to stay behind to tie on another few, and Greg had offered to drive them back to my place on his way to the inn, so we'd left everyone behind and headed out.

After what had gone down in that room, I was grateful for the privacy. It was the first little bit of alone time Wynn and I had gotten since we started this whole engagement thing, and I was looking forward to having a few hours where it was only the two of us.

The car ride home was silent, but that was okay. We didn't need to talk. After going down on her, that last barrier she'd kept between us had crumbled. Where I'd been the one to initiate most physical contact, she'd spent the remainder of the evening leaning into me as we talked with friends, her arm slipping around my waist and that dainty little hand tucking into my back pocket. I kept looking at her to see if she noticed

what she was doing, but from what I could tell, all those touches and cuddles were done absentmindedly.

I was in. I knew that for sure when we climbed into my truck and she reached across the console to rest her delicate hand on my thigh. It wasn't meant to arouse or tease, just her way of staying close, and fuck me, but I loved that.

We got home and she headed straight to the bedroom. She pulled out a pair of those pajamas that had been doing my fucking head in for the past two weeks and headed into the bathroom, quietly saying she'd be out in a few minutes.

She went through her million-step nighttime routine of brushing her teeth and washing her face then slathering it in creams and liquids and gunk that did . . . fuck if I knew. I changed out of my clothes, tossing them in the general direction of the hamper, and climbed into bed, pulling the covers up to my waist to hide the way my body was still reacting to her all these hours later.

Letting out a weary sigh, I scrubbed my hands over my face. I was fucking exhausted, so I knew she had to be as well. These past couple weeks of having her so close but not being able to do what I wanted, what I *dreamed* of, to her body was keeping me up at night. But now that I'd heard her cry out and tasted her release, I was hoping I'd finally be able to sleep.

That hope was shattered completely when the bathroom door creaked open and I dropped my hands to see the woman who consumed every part of me standing in the doorway wearing the shortest, skimpiest, sexiest fucking nightie I'd ever seen.

My chest rattled as a moan worked its way up my throat. "Jesus Christ," I grunted as my cock pulsed beneath the sheets. "What the hell are you trying to do to me, baby?"

She bit down on the corner of her lip, a seductive little smirk teasing her lush pink mouth. "If you don't know, maybe I'm not doing it right."

Oh, she was doing it right, that was for damn sure. "I told you, tonight was all about you. I'm not expecting anything in

return, Bits.”

She padded toward me on bare feet, the very picture of temptation. “I know.” Her voice was low, throatier than usual. That tantalizing purple of her irises had darkened as she moved closer. “Which only makes me want to do this even more.” Her hips swayed with each step, sending the hem of her nightie swinging, inching up those creamy thighs enough to tease, but not enough to see what lay beneath. “You’re always taking care of me,” she said as she reached the side of the bed and climbed up on her knees. “Always looking out for me.” Her head quirked to the side as she studied me. “You’d do anything I asked, wouldn’t you?”

Unable to help myself, I reached out and grabbed her hips, not hard enough to guide her, this was her show. She was running it; I was only here for the ride. But touching her kept me grounded, and I needed it then or I was going to lose my mind. “Baby, haven’t you learned by now?”

She lifted a brow in question.

“There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you.”

Oh, she really fucking liked that answer. Her cheeks flushed, that faint pink on the apples of her cheeks as her expression took on an almost shy quality was enough to make the blood racing in my veins turn to molten lava.

“Then let me do this for you,” she whispered as she walked across the mattress on her knees. As soon as she reached my side, she grasped the covers in her hands and pulled them down past my waist, revealing the rock-hard boner beneath my boxer briefs.

She stared down at it, her eyes glazing over as she took it in. Her tongue came out to swipe across her bottom lip, making it shine in the soft lamp light.

My breath stalled in my lungs when her tiny hands came into play, reaching up and grabbing hold of the waistband of my underwear. She carefully worked them over my aching cock, her eyes widening when it bounced free of its confines. The crown was a deep, angry purple from being hard all

goddamn night, pre-cum beading at the tip like it was weeping for relief.

I lifted my hips, biting down on my cheek to keep from groaning as she worked my underwear all the way off, leaving me sitting there naked, and tossed them over her shoulder onto the floor.

My throat worked on an audible swallow when her hand hesitantly reached for it, pausing in midair.

“What’s the matter?”

“You’re . . . really big.” My chest nearly swelled, and the urge to beat my fists against it was a very real thing. Nothing could make a man revert back to his caveman instincts like being told he had a big dick. “Bigger than I imagined.”

An uncontrollable smirk curled my lips. “You been imagining my cock, Bits?”

She gave me a flat look as if to say *well no shit*. “I . . . I don’t know if it’s going to . . .”

“I was made for you, baby. And you were made for me. It will fit, trust me,” I assured her.

She blinked, looking up at me with those big doe eyes so full of fascination. “May I taste you?” she asked, her voice almost timid.

My head fell back, thumping against the headboard as a groan ripped from my chest. “God, yes, Wynn. You can do anything you want to me. You don’t ever have to ask.”

When her long, delicate fingers wrapped around the base of my shaft, I nearly lost it. Every muscle in my body tensed, locking down to keep from blowing my load before this even started.

I wanted her too goddamn badly.

“Ah, fuck!” I barked so loud Wynn jumped, her hand flying off my dick and coming up to cover her mouth.

“Oh God, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“No. No, Bits. It wasn’t you. You didn’t hurt me.” I ground my teeth together. “It felt good. Fucking incredible. I’ve wanted you for so long I’ve been going out of my head. That one touch shot through me like a bolt of lightning.”

She bit down on her lip. “So . . . it was good?”

“Beyond,” I panted, my chest rising and falling like I’d swum a million laps. “Please don’t stop.”

That was all the urging she needed. She fisted me at the root once more and bent forward at the waist. Her plump lips surrounded the head of my cock, the heat of her mouth damn near scorching.

“Fuck yes,” I grunted, dropping my head back again. “Jesus, your mouth feels so good, baby.”

She let out a little hum as her tongue swirled around the crown before she bobbed lower. Her lush lips were stretched round my girth and my shaft glistened with her saliva as she began to suck me off, her mouth meeting the hand she was using near the base to jack me at the same time her hot mouth worked me into a frenzy. Never in my life had I had a more spectacular blowjob. When she batted her eyes and looked up at me through the fan of her lashes, that deep violet darkened with need, it took everything I had not to blow down her fucking throat.

The muscles in my stomach tensed and strained to hold back as that tingle in my spine grew more insistent.

“Stop. Baby, you have to stop or I’m gonna come.”

Her mouth slid off with a pop, her lips red and swollen as she wiped the saliva from the corner of her mouth. “But I want you to.”

“And I will. Another time. Right now I need to feel that tight pussy surrounding my cock as you ride me.”

She released a shaky breath as her lids fell to half-mast. With a greedy little moan, she shifted farther up the bed, throwing one leg over my hips to straddle me.

“Jesus, fuck,” I hissed as soon as I felt her wet heat slick across my cock. I fisted the material of her nightie and lifted it up, revealing that pretty pink pussy. “You haven’t been wearing any panties this whole time?”

She grinned and wagged her brows. “Figured they’d get in the way.”

Anything else I had to say died on my tongue when she lowered herself, her lips spreading around the underside of my cock. She thrust her hips forward, sliding along my length, her arousal drenching me.

“Was it sucking me off that made you this wet, Wynn?” I asked, my hands finding her hips. My fingers pressed deep into her skin as she continued her slip and slide along my dick.

Her eyelids fluttered and her body began to tremble, that tempting bottom lip catching between her teeth. “Yes.”

She was fucking perfection. One of the straps of her nightie fell off her shoulder. I released her hip and grabbed hold of both of them, jerking them low until her tits fell free of the sexy material. Her nipples stood at attention, the blush pink tips hard enough to cut glass. Cupping one in my hand, I leaned forward and sucked it between my lips, groaning at the softness, the sweetness of her skin.

Her head fell back on a sharp cry, another gush of arousal drenching her slit as I scraped my teeth across the sensitive peak before switching to the other. I sucked and nipped, licked and bit, until her perfect tits were red from my ministrations.

“Gage,” she whimpered, her tiny hands tangling in my hair, “I need more.”

“You want me to fuck you, Wynn?” I ground out, the tip of my cock leaking pre-cum like a broken faucet.

“Yes. *Please*. I need you so bad.”

I fisted her hair and gave it a slight jerk, earning a gasp from her. “What did I tell you earlier?”

“Th-there isn’t anything you wouldn’t do for me.”

“Damn straight. You want my cock, all you have to do is take it.”

“I . . .” Her throat worked on a swallow. “I’m on the pill. And I’m clean.”

My heart nearly beat out of my chest. “You saying I get to feel you bare, Bits?”

“If that’s what you wa—”

I cut her off with a growl, my spine shooting straight as I used my hold on her hair to bring her face closer to mine. “That’s the only way I want you. Nothing between us *ever*. Now climb on and ride me until you come. I want to feel you flood my cock.”

She lifted up and reached between us with her left hand, the ring I’d put on her finger glinting in the light. There was something about seeing my ring on her finger as she fisted my dick, ready to sink down on me that caused a surge of something primal to crash through me.

Her nightie was just long enough to hide what she was doing so it looked downright naughty. I felt the moment she notched the head of me into place. She sank down on the first few inches, ripping a moan from deep in my chest as she cried out.

“So goddamn tight,” I gritted out, grinding my teeth so hard it was a wonder they hadn’t crumbled into dust.

“Holy shit,” she panted. “Oh God, Gage. I’m so full.”

I brushed the hair from her face, tucking the strands behind her ear. “You have more to take, baby.”

“I-I can’t—”

“Shh,” I started soothingly. “You can. Remember what I said? We were made for each other. Our bodies exist to fit together perfectly. Just breathe. Try to relax. I’ve got you.”

She pulled in a wobbly inhale as she worked to loosen her body to take the rest of me. “Kiss me,” she pleaded, knowing what she needed to make this work.

I didn't need her to ask twice. In an instant, I sealed our mouths together, driving my tongue past her lips the same way I wanted to drive my cock into her. Her pussy was like a vise, gripping me from all sides, so damn hot I could barely see straight.

As I deepened the kiss, I felt her pussy start to loosen and slide down farther, inch by inch, until she was fully seated. She swallowed down the grunt I let loose at the feel of her surrounding every inch of me.

"You okay?" I asked, breathing hard, like I'd just run a 5K at a full sprint. "Am I hurting you?"

"No," she panted, her tits heaving with her frantic breaths. "No. God, I'm so full. You feel so good, Viking. I have to move."

Rising and lowering on my length, she swiveled her hips at the end of each downward thrust so she could tease her clit on the base of my erection. Her pussy was molten hot, perfect in every way, and it was taking everything I had not to come before she was able to get hers. My balls drew up tight to my body as she began to move faster, the room filling with the sounds of pleasure as I began to drive my hips upward, plunging myself impossibly deeper.

I felt her begin to tighten around me, her walls fluttering as she got closer. "Yes, Gage. Yes. *Yes*. So good. You feel incredible."

Her head fell back as she rode me with abandon. I leaned forward, latching onto that sensitive part of her throat and sucking as I reached between us and pressed hard on her clit with my thumb.

She clamped down, her walls gripping me in an iron fist as every muscle in her body coiled tight before springing. She shouted my name so loud it echoed around the room, bouncing off the walls. I couldn't take it for another second.

She was still coming when I grabbed hold of her and flipped us around, taking her to her back so I could pound into her, hard and brutal, over and over. Her eyes widened as a new

wave of release crashed into her, or maybe it prolonged the first one. Either way, I fucked her with everything I had, the bedframe rattling violently, until her cunt latched down and milked me dry, forcing my release from deep in my balls.

A feral bellow ripped from my throat as that first hot spurt shot from my cock. Then I couldn't stop it. Ribbon after ribbon of my release coated her walls as I came hard. By the time I finished, I could barely breathe. My muscles had turned to jelly, and I collapsed on top of her, barely having the strength to roll us so I didn't crush her.

That had to have been the most intense, most earth-shattering experience of my entire life. Wynn Klein had officially ruined me for all other woman *forever*. Not that it mattered, because she was it for me. She was my end game. And now that I'd had her, there wasn't a chance in hell I was ever letting her go.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Five

I STOOD beneath the hot spray of the waterfall shower head in Gage's luxurious shower, my body humming with life and awareness as the water worked to soothe the muscles I'd used the night before. Muscles that hadn't been used in an incredibly long time.

A smile stretched across my face when I turned to grab the body wash from the ledge carved into the tile and I felt a dull twinge between my thighs.

I felt *amazing*. After that first round, Gage had headed into the bathroom for a damn rag to clean me up, but I'd passed out before he returned, sleeping like the dead until he woke me up hours later with his fingers teasing my sensitive folds. We'd gone at each other like we were both starved for it. He'd fucked me from behind fast, hard, and dirty until I came all over him, burying my face in the pillows so I could scream with a release that was even bigger than the one before.

The next time I woke up, the sun had crested over the trees dotted all around Gage's property, pouring in through the wall of windows.

Gage had still been fast asleep so I'd scooted out of bed carefully and headed for the bathroom, and that's where I'd been for the past half hour, luxuriating in the shower that had the most perfect water pressure ever.

I hummed a soft, nameless tune as I grabbed my shower puff and poured Gage's body wash onto it. I had my own, of course, something tropical with coconut and pineapple. But I

wanted his more masculine one this morning. The scent of forest and bergamot filled the shower stall as I began to scrub my body, taking time to massage all the places that ached the most.

I jolted when the glass door clicked open, letting cold air in to mix with the steam, but a smile pulled at my lips when I turned as a very naked, very *sexy* Gage stepped in to join me, closing us in together.

He moved in behind me, placing his hands on my shoulders and sliding them down my soapy arms as he bent to kiss the side of my neck. I let out a happy hum as I tilted my head to the side, giving him better access.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning back at you,” he said, his voice still raspy with sleep as he moved to the other side of my neck, paying it the same attention. His arms came up, banding around my waist in a gentle embrace that pulled my back flush to his chest. “How’d you sleep?”

“Mm, like a log.” I smiled dreamily as he continued to touch me like he couldn’t get enough. “Best sleep I’ve had in forever.”

I felt him grin against my skin before his tongue came out to swipe at the beads of water slipping down my shoulder. “I know what you mean. Slept like the damn dead. But when I woke up, you weren’t there.”

I spun around in his hold, lifting my finger to rub at the crease that had formed between his brows, smoothing it out. “I’m sorry. You looked so peaceful I didn’t want to wake you.”

He ran his hands up my back then back down over my spine, gently massaging along the way. “Always wake me,” he ordered in a low yet firm tone.

“But—”

“Wynn, baby. *Always wake me.*”

My chest trembled on an inhale at the earnestness in those gunmetal eyes. “Why?”

What he said next left me utterly speechless. “Because I’ve wanted this for so long that I’m having a little trouble believing it’s really happening.”

My breath left me on a whoosh. “Gage,” I whispered, emotion expanding in my throat.

“I want to go to bed with you every night, but I also want to wake up every morning with you being the first thing I see. I can’t do that if I’m in the bed alone.”

“Okay,” I said quietly, my heart swelling so big in my chest there wasn’t room for much else. “I’ll wake you up from here on out.”

He smiled, those dimples doing crazy things to my insides. My heart felt like it was beating double-time in my chest. Every second of every day those lines between us, the ones that kept a firm understanding between friends and something more, were blurring beyond recognition. I was falling for this man harder than I’d ever fallen for anyone, and that scared the shit out of me. After Darrin I’d told myself I was done with men. I didn’t want to give anyone the power to hurt me the way he had.

But what I was feeling for Gage was so much stronger, so much more potent than anything I ever felt for my ex. So much so it made me question whether or not what I’d felt for Darrin had been love in the first place.

Still, that relationship ending hurt more than I’d ever expected. If I were to lose Gage, I wasn’t sure I’d survive. He was such a crucial part of my life, I couldn’t imagine not having him in it, not seeing him every day.

“Thank you, baby,” he said quietly, leaning in to kiss me, slow and soft and deep.

As much as I wanted to sink into this kiss, to press harder against the erection that was currently digging into my stomach, I needed some answers first.

“Gage,” I wheezed out, breaking the kiss, even as my entire body screamed in protest. “What are we doing here? I

mean, besides the earth-shaking sex. What is this?" I waved a hand between us. "*Us?*"

His hands came up on either side of my neck, his thumbs brushing along my jaw in that way I loved so much.

"*This* is whatever you want it to be, Bits. Besides the earth-shaking sex." He grinned wickedly.

"Whatever *I* want it to be? What about you?"

He pulled me tighter against him. "I just want you, Wynn. Any way I can have you."

It wasn't quite the answer I'd been hoping for, but I told myself it was enough, at least for now. I wanted him too, after all, more than might have been healthy or wise, but I was done denying myself.

I told myself I was done worrying about the long term. I was going to concentrate on the here and now.

And hope like hell it didn't blow up in my face.

MARCIA AND GRANDMA Buttons were already in the kitchen by the time Gage and I headed out of the sanctuary of our bedroom.

Apparently they'd been up for a while, because there was an entire breakfast buffet spread across the kitchen counter.

Gage jerked to a stop just inside the kitchen. "Holy God. What did you two do? Buy out the entire grocery store?"

Marcia ignored him. "Good morning, sleepyheads," she greeted, a knowing grin on her face that had me blushing like crazy.

"Mom, don't start," Gage warned. "And wipe that smile off your face like you know some sort of secret. It's creepy, and I'd rather you not run my girl off the morning after our engagement party."

I let out a giggle as Grandma Buttons waved a hand towel at him. “Oh, hush, you,” she scolded before turning to me. “Sit down and eat, sweetheart. You’ll need your energy. It’s going to be a busy day.”

I paused part way onto the stool I’d been preparing to sit on, more than ready to dive into the delicious smelling food. After the workout Gage and I had put ourselves through the night before, then earlier in the shower, I’d worked up quite an appetite. But her words had given me pause. “Um. Sorry. A busy day with what?”

“We’re going wedding dress shopping!” Marcia exclaimed excitedly. “We’re picking your mother up at the inn in an hour, then we’re making a day of it.”

The piece of sausage I’d just stabbed onto the tines of my fork froze halfway to my mouth. “What?”

“Now I know you said you guys were planning to wait and all that, but Gran and I have to head home soon, and we’d love the chance to do this with you. If you don’t find anything today, that’s fine. I still want to spend the day getting to know my future daughter better.”

I looked to Gage, my eyes going wide, silently begging him to intervene, but all the asshole did was smile.

“Oh, um . . . that sounds great. Really. But I think Gage had said something about having plans today?”

“Nope, nothing I can think of,” he said as he forked up a bite of French toast. “I think dress shopping is a great idea. You ladies are going to have a blast.”

“Great,” Grandma Buttons said with that definitive clap of hers. “Then it’s settled.”

I shot Gage my nastiest glare, willing the skin to melt off his face. I didn’t know what the hell he was playing at, all but forcing me to buy an expensive-as-hell wedding dress, but if he wasn’t going to help a girl out, I was going to take him down with me.

“Okay, sounds fun. I’ll need your credit card, Viking.” That sure as hell got his attention. “Remember, you said to

spare no expense, that you had more than enough to pay for my dream wedding.”

I held out my hand and waited.

“That’s right,” he ground out as he shifted on his stool, reaching into his back pocket to pull out his wallet. “I did say that, didn’t I?”

I looked to the two women across the kitchen, smiling serenely. “I really lucked out landing such a good man.”

I was going to get the most expensive monstrosity in that damn store. As payback.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Six

AS IT TURNED OUT, wedding dress shopping with my mom and Gage's family was a mistake I couldn't have possibly anticipated.

Trying on all those pretty dresses when I didn't actually know where Gage and I stood made me . . . sad. With each dress I put on, the desire to have a legitimate reason to buy one grew.

After Darrin, I'd been anti-guy, hardcore, but standing on a pedestal in front of a million mirrors while my mom, Marcia, and Francis oohed and aahed over every one of them, I wanted it. More than I ever had.

This is whatever you want it to be, is what he had said, but if I told him I wanted to be engaged for real, to get married for real, I honestly didn't know what he would say.

Vanessa had messed him up royally and he'd sworn he was never going to get married. When he said he wanted me, did he mean in bed? Just for the time being. Or did he want me forever?

I spent hours hustled in and out of a curtained-off dressing room that wasn't nearly big enough to house the acres of satin and silk—and at times, taffeta—being zipped, buttoned, pinned, and clipped into every style of wedding gown that had ever been made. The majority of them were ridiculous princess numbers that I wouldn't be caught dead in, but there was one that made my belly flip the moment I stood in front of the mirrors.

It had a modest sweetheart neckline that pushed my girls up perfectly, offering a hint of cleavage. The beautiful champagne color looked great against my skin and highlighted my hair and eyes. The bodice had visible boning stitched over with the most delicate lace appliqués trailing down onto the long, flowy tulle skirt. A slit ran high up my thigh, giving the classic elegance a hint of spice, and the dainty swag sleeves draping across my upper arms made me feel like a Hollywood starlet from the 1920's.

The dress brought tears to my eyes, it was so perfect.

I wasn't the only one, either. My mom had burst into sobs while Marcia got misty-eyed. It had been a nightmare trying to convince the three of them I was still uncertain and wanted to keep looking so I didn't have to buy the wedding gown of my dreams for a wedding that most likely was never going to happen.

We left the bridal shop empty-handed, and a little heavy-hearted, but I pasted on a sunny disposition for their benefit, not wanting to worry them or have them start asking questions.

By the time we finished, I was ready for a break. And a couple drinks, for sure.

“How about we stop for a late lunch,” I suggested, cutting off any mention of hitting up another boutique. “I'm in the mood for a mimosa, and I know a great little café around the corner.”

Marcia hooked her arm through mine, leaning into me with a loving smile. “Ooh, that sounds delightful.”

I grinned at her as we strolled arm in arm to the café. The place was pretty busy for a Sunday and the church crowds were enjoying a nice meal after their services, so we sat on the patio, which was fine with me. Though fall was touching down in the Smokies, it wasn't cool enough to be unpleasant. There was the perfect amount of nip in the air to enhance the excitement that always came this time of year.

Halloween was right around the corner, and for many—myself included—it was the start of the holiday season.

Autumn had always been my favorite time of year, but back in Connecticut it was cut short by the first blast of frigid cold. Down here, I got to enjoy it much longer, and there was nothing like watching the foothills turn from waves of the deepest, darkest green to a sea of fire as the leaves on the trees changed.

We huddled up to our table, conveniently located by an outdoor heater, and took a few minutes to peruse the menu before ordering. While we waited, Marcia sat back in her chair and gazed across the sidewalk, watching people come and go. Most of the faces were familiar and smiled and waved as they passed by.

“You know, I really do love this town,” she said in a wistful tone. “Every time we come to visit, it gets harder and harder to leave.”

“Not to mention it’s nice not being buried under feet of snow when we come down for the holidays,” Grandma Buttons added.

Marcia nodded in agreement. “There is that. I tell you, I’m getting too damn old to shovel the sidewalks after a blizzard’s come through and dumped a mountain of powder on us.”

A switch flipped in my head and I leaned forward, resting my chin in my hand. “Then why don’t you two move here? I know I’m not speaking out of turn when I say Gage would love to have you guys closer. He talks about it all the time.”

She smiled, the love and affection on her face at the mention of her son warming my heart.

The waitress appeared and conversation paused as she dropped off our mimosas.

Marcia picked hers up and took a hearty sip. “It’s definitely something to consider.”

Grandma Buttons lifted her glass in cheers. “Damn straight it is.”

My mother set her glass on the table, more than three quarters of the liquid inside already gone. I gave her a wide-eyed look that she ignored. “You know, Greg and I have been

talking. He's starting to feel like it's about time for him to retire, and we've been considering doing that here."

My heart flipped as I shot up straight, a smile so wide it made my cheeks hurt stretching across my face. "Really?" I asked on a squeal. "Oh, Mom, I'd *love* that." We hugged each other tight, clinging to one another as excitement clung to us.

"You know, I'm so happy you and Gage managed to get over that whole friendship thing and see what's been right in front of you all this time," Marcia said, catching me off guard.

Emotion swelled in my throat, making it hard to speak. "Thank you," I managed to croak out as my heart expanded to the side of my chest.

"There was a time I was scared out of my wits he'd never find someone. That Vanessa," she said with a snarl, shaking her head as her whole face pinched up unpleasantly. "She really did a number on him. I know it's not polite to say you don't like someone—"

"But that woman's the nastiest piece of trash on the planet," Grandma Buttons finished, never one to mince words. "You may not think it's polite to say, but I don't give a single damn. I hate that girl, and I hope karma comes around sooner or later."

I had a feeling karma had already stepped in, and that was why she was here, so desperate to seek Gage out.

I shook my head in disgust. My thoughts aligned with Grandma Buttons when it came to Gage's ex. "What kind of woman ends a relationship in a freaking letter while her man is overseas fighting for our country?"

My mom's eyes went wide, not having heard this story before. "Oh, that's terrible. You're right, Francis. She's a piece of garbage."

"Well, yeah, that. But it's also who she left him for."

My head jerked around to Marcia. "Wait. What?"

"It wasn't just how she broke up with my boy, she'd been cheating on him with his best friend. That's who she left my

Gage for. I think that might have been what crushed him the most. He and John grew up together. He looked at him like a brother. I know it takes two to tango and all that, and I certainly hold him accountable, but she knew she was destroying a lifelong friendship when she pursued John. He didn't only lose the woman he thought he was going to marry. He lost a brother as well."

My heart skipped a couple beats before kickstarting back up. "He was going to marry her?" That sure as hell was news to me. I knew he'd been in love with her, but he'd never mentioned marriage.

"Oh, yeah. Bought a ring and everything. Was planning to give it to her when he got home. In fact, he carried that ring with him when he deployed. Kept it on him at all times, like some kind of lucky charm."

A sour taste coated my tongue, making the mimosa I'd been so desperate for unpalatable. Apparently he'd downplayed his relationship with Vanessa the few times he'd opened up to me and talked about her.

I couldn't help but feel inferior all of a sudden, now that I knew the whole truth.

Marcia continued, oblivious to the storm of raging emotions swirling around inside of me. "But now he has you, and you make my boy so happy." She reached over and placed her hand on top of mine, giving it a squeeze. "I've never seen him look at another woman the way he looks at you. Not even when he and that vile woman were at their best."

Well that helped ease the new wound opened inside of me. At least a little bit.

"And if you don't end up buying that last dress you tried on today, I'll be beside myself."

"Yes, definitely," my mom added. "Oh, sweetheart, you looked so beautiful in that gown."

Grandma Buttons smiled at me. "Classic beauty . . . like the woman who was wearing it."

Okay, these women were really stinking good for my ego.
Even if they'd dropped a bomb that left my world shaking.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Seven

THE PAST FEW days had been emotional for me. First my parents had headed back to Connecticut so my dad could get back to work, and as usual, I ended up getting teary when it was time to say goodbye. My folks and I had always been close so every time they had to head back after a visit, it was like a knife to the chest. All I could hope was that Dad decided to retire sooner rather than later, and Redemption was where they chose to make their new home.

Just as I'd gotten over that blow, the next came when Marcia and Grandma Buttons went home to South Dakota. I'd gotten even closer to the two women this time around, with them considering me family and all, so when they packed up to leave, I was emotional all over again. I loved the life I'd built for myself here in Redemption, and I wouldn't give it up for anything, but I missed my family. And after the past few weeks, Gage's mom and grandmother now fell firmly in that category too.

Gage had been wonderful while I'd taken a day to be moopy and sad, holding me when I got weepy and kissing my tears away. Making me fall even deeper in love with him.

I wasn't sure what to expect once his family left, but he hadn't said a word about me moving into one of the guest rooms or anything like that. It was as though he was content to keep living as an engaged couple like we had been for weeks now. But I was still struggling with what Marcia had told me.

I knew what it felt like to be cheated on. Though hindsight had proven what I *thought* I'd felt for Darrin hadn't been the real thing, the fact he'd slept with someone else while he was with me was still a bitter pill to swallow. I couldn't imagine what it felt like to be betrayed not only by the person you loved, but by the best friend you'd had your entire life.

It was no wonder Gage was so broken.

I'd tried many times to bring it up, to ask if he still felt as strongly for his ex as he had back then, but each time I worked myself up to it, something happened and I chickened out.

I'd decided the only thing I could do for the time being was live in ignorant bliss. If I didn't ask about Vanessa, I wouldn't run the risk of getting an answer that would end up crushing my heart.

With all of that going on, it was safe to say I'd been a bit of an emotional wreck. At least that was the excuse I intended to use when Gage eventually found out what I'd done.

I twisted the lock and opened the front door slowly, peeking my head inside and looking around. "Gage?" I called, even though I hadn't seen his truck in the driveway. I didn't want to risk stumbling upon him before I figured out what I was going to say. "Honey? You home?"

My question was greeted with silence. I quickly threw the door open, plastic bags hanging off one arm while I carried my new yappy, squirmy puppy in the other.

On my way home from work I'd stopped for gas and saw a person on the side of the road selling puppies out of the back of their car. They were mutts of indistinguishable breed and hadn't had any of their shots, but the moment I'd locked eyes with this little guy, I'd been hooked. I couldn't *not* take him home with me. Not when he'd climbed out of the box he'd been in with his brothers and sisters and tried jumping out of the bed of the truck to get to me. That was fate, right? It felt like this little guy and I were meant to be.

His whole body jerked in my hold, the little hellion desperate to get free so he could run amok like he had in my

car. Thanks to him I had a hole in the upholstery of my back seat and a half-eaten headrest. For such a little thing he was destructive as hell . . . and quick as lightning when he was doing it.

“Okay, you need to quit squirming, you little monster. Your daddy’s going to be home any minute and you need to be on your best behavior or we’re *both* going to be in the dog house.”

He let out a little yip and stretched to give my chin a lick before he tried to eat it.

I laughed, nuzzling into his downy coat as I hurried to the bedroom and tossed the bags of new pet supplies on the bed. I didn’t have a clue what I was going to do with them, or the dog for that matter, while I tried to talk Gage around to letting me keep a pet in his house.

I held the puppy out in front of me, staring into his big chocolate eyes as I said, “You have to be extra sweet to win Daddy over, okay? We don’t want to give him any reason to send you back, right?”

The dog answered by biting at the air around him like he was trying to eat my words. Okay, so maybe he wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed, but I was praying his cuteness would override everything else.

I heard Gage’s truck tires crunching along the gravel driveway. “Shit,” I hissed as I jerked my head around toward the front of the house. The puppy let out another yip like he was mimicking my curse.

“Shh! None of that.” I carried him to the bathroom and put him on the floor, using my foot to scooch him back when he tried to make a break for it. “I need you to be extra quiet while I try to sweet talk the big man, okay? Remember what we talked about. Best behavior.”

He plopped his butt on the floor and cocked his head to the side, one ear flopping over as he looked at me like I was a moron. He wasn’t too far off the mark. I was talking to a dog,

after all, expecting him to follow the rules with no training whatsoever.

I pulled the bathroom door closed as Gage's voice called out, "Bits?"

"Uh . . ." My gaze landed on the bed and I made a mad dash, shoving the bags onto the floor on the other side, away from the door. "In the bedroom."

His boots clomped against the hardwood as he got closer, and I held my breath, hoping the little monster in the bathroom would stay quiet a little while longer. Gage's large frame appeared in the doorway, his dimpled smile firmly in place the moment he spotted me.

"Hey, baby," he greeted, coming over to place a kiss on my lips, as he'd done every day when he got home from work. "You have a good day?"

I fidgeted in place. My eyes kept springing between him and the bathroom door while he moved about the room, emptying his pockets and dumping his wallet, keys, and loose change on the dresser. "Yeah," I answered as he sat on the edge of the bed to unlace his boots. "It was good. Kind of emotional. I missed my family more than usual. Yours too."

"Aw, babe." He reached out, taking me by my hips and guiding me to stand between his spread legs. I placed my hands on his shoulders as he ran his up and down my ribs, his touch soothing as always. "I'm sorry you had a rough day. What can I do to make it better?"

God, he really was something else. Unable to help myself, I bent forward and brushed my lips across his, teasing him a bit before I sealed my mouth over his and dragged my tongue across the seam of his lips, silently requesting entrance. He didn't make me wait, opening for me as he fisted my hair to hold me to him as he took the kiss deeper. Like always, the moment our lips touched, I grew wet and needy. I couldn't seem to get enough of him. I'd had more sex in the past few days that I had in *years*, and it still wasn't enough. If anything, it made my craving for him that much stronger.

He blinked up at me when I broke the kiss, needing to pull air into my lungs. “I wasn’t exactly thinking that when I asked what I could do, but if that’s where your mind is going, I’m more than game, baby.”

I let out a laugh just as a sharp, high pitched bark came from the bathroom.

Gage’s head jerked in that direction. “What was that?”

Ah hell. “What was what?”

He looked back at me, brows raised in confusion. “You didn’t hear that? It sounded like a bark.”

I’d already opted for playing dumb, might as well lean into it. “Huh. That’s weird. Nope, I didn’t hear anything.”

The damn dog barked again, as if it was calling me a liar.

Gage narrowed his eyes at me as he rose to his feet, keeping me locked in his hold. “Now I *know* you heard that.”

“Um . . .” I curled my lips between my teeth and tangled my fingers together. “So, you know how you asked how you could make my rough day better? I think I might have an idea.”

He stomped to the bathroom door and threw it open. As soon as there was enough clearance, the little demon dog came rushing out like his tail was on fire. His attention darted between me and Gage like he couldn’t decide who he wanted to give all his attention to. He finally settled on Gage and loped over to him, rising up on his hind legs so he could scratch at Gage’s pants as he barked, begging for attention.

Gage’s head slowly lifted, one brow cocked as he gave me a look I could only describe as scolding.

I held my hands up in surrender. “Okay, before you get mad, I can explain.”

He crossed his arms over his chest, his biceps bulging, testing the limits of his sleeves. He ignored the puppy who gave up on him and moved over to me. I bent down and scooped him up, snuggling into his soft fur as he tried to eat my ear off. “Oh, I can’t wait to hear this. Please, explain.”

“Well, um . . .” I fiddled with the sleeves of my blouse. “You see, I was having a really emotional day. Like I said. I was on my way home and stopped for gas, and there was this guy there, giving away all these puppies.”

“Ah hell.”

“Anyway, I happened to look over there, and this little guy spotted me and nearly jumped right out of the back of the truck.” I hefted him higher in my arms and stuck my bottom lip out in an exaggerated pout. “How could I deny this wittle face?”

Gage’s eyes rolled, but I didn’t miss the way the corners of his mouth wobbled as he struggled to keep from grinning.

I was getting to him. I brought the pup up in front of my face and adopted a really bad Oliver Twist voice. “Please, Daddy, can I stay?”

“Jesus,” he said on a grunted chuckle.

“I promise I’ll be good. Pretty please?”

Gage took the dog from my arms and brought him up to get a better look. “What kind of dog is he supposed to be?”

“Uh, no one really knows. He’s your classic mutt.”

He hummed thoughtfully. “He’s not a bad-looking mutt. What’s his name?”

I smiled wide, knowing I’d won him over. “I haven’t decided yet. I thought that was something we could do together.”

His gaze jerked around to me, his eyes taking on the darkness that always happened right before he was about to pounce on me like I was his next meal. “You want my input?”

I suddenly understood why he liked that so much. This was something we could do together, and he really loved that. “Of course I do,” I answered quietly.

He didn’t bother giving any name suggestions, but put the little guy on the ground, looped an arm around my waist, and pulled me into him for a scorching kiss.

I blinked hazy eyes when he pulled back several seconds later. “I take it you’re okay with me keeping the puppy?”

He grinned. “On one condition,” he stated, his voice husky and deep with lust. “You call me Daddy again, but you do it when I’m inside you, and not in that fucking baby voice.”

Oh, that was a condition I could *definitely* get down with.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Eight

I HELD on to the headboard with a white-knuckled grip as pleasure washed through me, so intense it stole the breath from my lungs. My thighs trembled and every muscle in my body quaked as I glanced at Gage's head between my thighs, all that dirty blond hair mussed from my fingers as he held my hips. He'd demanded I ride his face until I came, and now that the aftershocks of a world-class orgasm were petering out, my bones felt like mush.

But before I could collapse onto the mattress, Gage moved. He flipped me onto my back and hovered over me, his hips falling between my spread thighs. He drove his cock into me, stretching me wide as he ripped a sharp cry from deep in my chest.

"God *damn*," he grunted as he pulled nearly all the way out and slammed back in. "So fucking good. Every single time."

"More," I pleaded, desperate to come again now that I felt another orgasm building inside me. His long, thick cock slid back and forth across my G-spot as he fucked me hard and fast, his grunts mingling with my whimpers and moans filling the room, along with the sound of skin slapping against skin. "I need more, Viking."

"Anything you need, Bits," he ground out between clenched teeth. "You know that."

He pulled all the way out, flipping me over and hoisting my hips up so I was on my knees as he impaled me on his

rock-hard length again, going even deeper than, before thanks to the new angle.

My head flew back. “Yes,” I breathed. “Just like that. Fuck me, Gage. Don’t stop.”

“Never,” he grunted as he powered in and out, his thrusts so hard the headboard banged against the bedroom wall. My pussy started to flutter around him, the release building up in me stronger than before.

“Jesus, I can feel you. You close, Wynn?”

“Yes. Don’t stop,” I pleaded, feeling desperate for what was about to happen.

Gage picked up speed as his hand came down on my ass with a loud *crack*. The sting in my ass cheek flared through my entire body. That tiny bite of pain mixed with the pleasure he was giving me and set me off like a ball shooting from a cannon. I screamed into the pillows as he slapped my ass again, causing my inner walls to clamp down around him like a vise.

“Fuck yeah, Bits. That’s it. Milk my cock until my balls drain dry.” That first hot spurt coated my walls, drawing out my release as he poured into me. Over and over, he shot into my body until there was nothing left.

It felt like an eternity, but we finally collapsed onto the bed, sated and wrung dry.

With his length still burrowed inside me, he shifted us so we lay on our sides, his chest pressing against my back as his arms came around me, holding me to him. He buried his face in my hair from behind and inhaled, like he was trying to pull me into his lungs and keep me with him forever. And just like that, I fell a little more in love with him. If it kept going at this rate, there’d be nothing left of me.

“I’ll never get enough of this, baby. Never get enough of you,” he whispered against the back of my neck, his voice heavy with exhaustion.

I squeezed my eyes closed and inhaled deeply, holding it in my lungs until they began to burn and I had no choice but to

push it out. I willed sleep to find me, and the last thought I had before falling under was that I hoped what he said was true. Because I wasn't sure I'd survive it if it wasn't.

“COME HERE YOU LITTLE SHIT,” I cried out as I chased my new puppy around the bedroom and down the hall.

The damn thing—while cute as a stinking button, especially when he was in the mood to cuddle—was a storm of destruction and chaos. Which was why Gage and I had decided to name the little bastard Tornado. It seemed like everywhere he went, he left devastation in his wake.

We'd only had him a week, and in that short time Gage and I learned if I liked something and wanted to keep it, it couldn't be left on the floor. Tornado viewed anything left on the floor as fair game and gave his best effort in destroying it. Shoes, blankets, throw pillows, clothing, purse straps . . . you name it, he'd eaten it. It was a freaking miracle we hadn't had to rush him to the vet to have things removed from his tiny stomach. The little shithead had destroyed some of my favorite bra and panty sets all because I'd forgotten to gather them up after Gage ripped them off my body before sex. He'd lost quite a few pairs of underwear too, but mine were prettier and *way* more expensive.

This morning he'd darted into the closet before I had a chance to catch him and, faster than a bolt of lightning, had absconded with one of my designer heels.

I chased him all through the house, his little tail whipping around like a fan with excitement as he dragged my heel along with him.

“Get over here, you little rat! That shoe cost more than your life. Don't make me take your ass to the vet to get your balls snipped off.”

As if he understood exactly what I said, he dropped the shoe and plopped his butt down beside it, looking up at me with his head cocked to the side and his tongue happily lolling out the side of his mouth.

“Uh-huh, that’s what I thought. A man always listens when his balls are threatened.” I snatched the shoe up and pointed it at him. “You’d do well to remember that next time you want to go after Mommy’s Manolos. Come on. We’ll get you a nice sock from Daddy’s drawer to chew on instead, yeah?”

He followed after me, ears bouncing, tail wagging, and his tiny, sharp-as-hell claws click-clacking on the wooden floors like he was tap dancing. Back in the bedroom, my shoes safe for the time being, I headed for the drawer where Gage kept his socks and underwear.

Tornado yipped, and I turned to look at him as I yanked the drawer open. “It’ll be fine,” I assured him. “We’ll get a ratty old pair of socks he never wears anymore. He won’t even care. Trust me.”

I dug around toward the back of the drawer before stumbling on a pair of black socks that had been washed so many times they were gray and fuzzy. There was a hole in the heel and the elastic was all busted. “Oh, for crying out loud. Why would he even keep these? They’re straight garbage.”

I yanked them out, but in doing so, I jostled something underneath them. “Huh.” With a furrowed brow, I reached back in the drawer and felt around, my fingers brushing against something that felt almost fuzzy. I grabbed it and pulled it out, my lungs stalling mid-inhale when I looked down at the black velvet ring box in my hand.

I sent up a silent prayer that this wasn’t what I thought it was, that he hadn’t kept it tucked away all these years, but deep down, I knew it was pointless to hope. My heart began to race as I stared at it, a whirlwind of emotions swirling inside of me. I flipped it open and my heart sank to my feet.

Pillowed in the cushions of the box sat a shiny solitaire ring. The round diamond winked in the overhead light like it was mocking me as Marcia’s words came flooding back.

This was the ring he'd kept with him at all times during that deployment. The one that acted as a good luck charm. The very ring he intended to give to Vanessa before she broke his heart.

It had meant everything to him back then, and apparently, it still meant something to him now. Why else would he have kept it all these years?

"Shit," I hissed out, my chest trembling on a shaky inhale as the backs of my eyes began to burn. I blinked, trying to will the tears away, but it was no use, the image of the ring grew blurry as my eyes flooded.

Tornado yipped, and I thought I could almost hear concern in his little doggy voice as I collapsed onto the edge of the bed with a snuffle, unable to look away from that freaking ring.

I'd never hated a piece of jewelry more in my entire life. Sure, it was pretty, but it had nothing on the ring Gage has slid on my finger. The difference was, although the diamonds might have been real, the engagement itself wasn't. Gage might not have had the opportunity to give this ring to Vanessa before they broke up, but when he bought it, he had every intention of spending the rest of his life with her. It was what he wanted.

I was never going to be anything more than the runner-up, the filler girl he'd used to make his ex jealous then banged because it was convenient.

My chest started to ache. I snapped the box closed and tossed it onto the bed, rubbing at my sternum right above my heart. "Shit, shit shit."

Man, that hurt. And I had no one to blame but myself. I knew the risks, I knew the likely outcome, yet I'd gone and fallen in love with my best friend anyway. And all along, he'd been pining after another woman.

I'd been right. The pain Darrin had caused didn't come close to what I was feeling at that very moment.

I couldn't do this on my own. The secrets I'd been keeping all this time had finally caught up to me. I needed to talk to

someone, to get everything I was feeling *out* before it had a chance to fester and rot.

Tossing the ratty old socks onto the floor to keep Tornado entertained, I marched out of the bedroom and down the hall. I snagged my purse and keys and started for my car. I knew exactly where I was going. She'd give me a ration of shit for lying all this time, but eventually, she'd help talk me through it.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Nine

“I CAN’T BELIEVE you’ve been keeping this to yourself all this time.”

I sat at Poppy’s kitchen table, spinning one of her delicate teacups around in its saucer, staring at the hazy amber liquid inside. I wasn’t much of a tea drinker. I preferred coffee with a heaping helping of sugar, but Poppy was always about the tea, and if she found a reason to put the kettle on, she didn’t hesitate. She found that reason the moment she opened her front door to me, standing on her porch with glassy, red-rimmed eyes.

I spent the better part of half an hour telling her everything. From Gage’s relationship with his ex, to her showing up unexpectedly and him kissing me as a result, to finding the ring in his drawer that morning, and everything in between. I might have left out a few personal details, but now she knew it all. She knew I’d gone into this fake relationship in order to help my best friend, we were sleeping together, and I’d fallen for him even though I’d warned myself not to.

My confession came like a geyser, spewing out of me over tea that had gone tepid as I spoke.

“I know. I’m sorry. It started because I thought I was doing the right thing, then it all kind of spiraled out of control.” I shook my head and wiped my nose with the back of my hand. I’d managed not to cry as I recounted everything, but only because I was a hell of a lot more stubborn than my tears and managed to fight them back. The effects were still there,

though. My nose was both runny and stuffy, something that happened every time I cried. My eyes felt swollen and scratchy, and there was a lump in my throat that wouldn't stop growing, causing my voice to come out all croaky and painful. I sounded like Kermit the Frog after a week-long bender.

"I hated keeping it from you guys, believe me. The guilt ate at me."

She let out a sigh, dragging a hand through her long, glossy red hair as she lifted her teacup to her lips and drank. She swore there wasn't anything tea couldn't cure, so I lifted my cup and sipped, hoping the blend in my cup worked miraculously on heartbreak.

I wasn't so lucky.

My face pinched up in disgust as my chin jerked back into my neck. "*Blech*. This is awful! It tastes like watered-down dirt."

She let out a little giggle and moved to her dedicated tea cabinet. She returned a minute later with a new china cup and a fresh tea bag. She filled the mug with steaming hot water before sitting down across from me once more. "Try that one instead. It's hibiscus tea, much more subtle. If it's still not good, you can put a sugar cube in it."

I looked at her with an arched brow. "You've been hoarding the sugar all this time?" I asked accusingly.

She rolled her eyes and propped her chin in her hand. "Just try it."

I lifted it to my lips and blew to cool it before taking a sip. My eyes rounded. "Okay, I like this one a lot."

She grinned, too damn pleased with herself. "See? No sugar necessary."

I drank more, and while I enjoyed the flavor, it didn't miraculously heal my damaged heart. Placing the cup on the table, I let out a weary sigh and stared out Poppy's kitchen window.

"I really stepped in it this time, didn't I?"

There was a brief pause before she answered. “It’s nothing you can’t come back from.”

I looked back at her, my vision fuzzing over again as I fought another torrent of tears. “I really am sorry for lying. I’m an asshole, but I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

She waved me off. “Don’t worry about that. I’m not mad. Not about the lying at least. If you recall, Jase and I didn’t exactly start out normally. Hell, I agreed to marry him basically so he could stage a hostile takeover and push his father right out of the company. I barely knew the man when I agreed to his insane plan, and look at us now.” She held her arms out and grinned wide. “I didn’t think I stood a chance; now the man’s basically obsessed with me.”

I let out a small laugh because she wasn’t wrong. Poppy and Jase’s engagement might have started out fake, but in his eyes, his wife basically can do no wrong. The man would walk through fire for her, something he’d been forced to prove, unfortunately. But luckily, it all worked out in the end.

“What I *am* pissed at you about is letting me give that nasty bitch of a woman a room all this time and not saying anything.”

I lifted a single shoulder in a shrug and bit down on my bottom lip. “She was a paying customer. I didn’t want to screw with your business.”

Poppy’s expression grew dark. “She’s a pain in the ass customer is what she is, and I’m going to be more than happy to kick her ass out after this.” She shook her head in disgust, letting out a grunt. “I don’t think I’ve had a ruder client in all the years I’ve run this place. There’s absolutely no pleasing her.”

My lips pulled into a wince. “Sorry about that. She is pretty terrible, isn’t she?”

Poppy’s blue eyes went wide. “The absolute *worst*. Which is why I know Gage couldn’t possibly still have feelings for her.”

Almost as if he'd felt us discussing him, my phone rang. I pulled it out of my back pocket and placed it on the table as his name flashed across the screen.

"You going to answer that?" Poppy asked with a curious lift of her brows.

"Not yet," I whispered, emotion expanding in my throat. "I'm not ready yet." I collapsed back into my chair on a heavy exhale. "I don't know, Poppy. If what you're saying is true, why has he kept the ring all this time, huh?"

She shook her head, sympathy washing over her expression. "I don't know, babe. That's something you're going to have to ask him."

I wasn't sure I was brave enough for that. Which only pissed me off because I wasn't a big fan of taking the coward's way out. It wasn't in my nature. But Gage had me all twisted up. I was doing things totally out of character.

My phone signaled an incoming message from Gage, but I couldn't bring myself to read it.

"You should have heard his mom, Pop. To hear her tell it, he'd been wrecked. And if anyone would *really* know, it would be her, right? And for as long as I've known him, he's always sworn up and down that he was never going to get married. Hell, he didn't even want a steady, committed relationship. That's how bad she screwed him up. What kind of shot do I have against that?"

She gave me a knowing look over the rim of her mug as she drank more of her dirt tea. "If I remember correctly, you swore off the entire male gender after what happened with Darrin. Looking back on that relationship, do you still feel that way?"

I rolled my eyes and blew out an obnoxious raspberry. "Obviously not. I mean, I'm in love with Gage. That should answer your question."

She jabbed a finger in my direction. "*Exactly*," she exclaimed so loudly I jerked in my chair, nearly spilling tea in my lap. "Now that you've had time to look back and gained a

little perspective, what you felt for Darrin wasn't nearly as strong as you originally thought, right?"

"Well . . . yeah."

"Then who's to say that isn't the case with Gage? I mean, the guy moved you into his house, for crying out loud."

"That was his grandmother and mom," I argued. "They basically strong-armed me into breaking my lease and moving in with him."

Her look said *how dumb do you think I am?* "Oh please. We both know Gage Langdon isn't the kind of man to do anything he doesn't want to do." She threw a challenging look my way. "Tell me I'm wrong."

"No," I said hesitantly. "I mean, not really."

"He's not," she said definitively then leaned across the table to rest her hand on mine. "Wynn, honey. You should see the way the man looks at you. Even when you aren't looking."

My heart stuck in my throat, making it hard to swallow. "H-how does he look at me?" I asked, my voice watery.

"Like you hung the moon and stars, babe. Like making you happy is the very reason he was put on this earth." Her hand squeezed mine tight as a single tear broke free and slipped down my cheek. "It's how he's looked at you every single day for the past three years, and it's only gotten more intense since he slid that ring on your finger."

I lifted my left hand off the table, tilting it from side to side so the sunlight coming through the window caught on the stones. I thought back to the moment the jeweler placed the tray with my ring in front of him. I'd been gobsmacked, unable to say a word, but Gage knew. He knew this was *the one* and he didn't hesitate to buy it, even when the price tag gave me heart palpitations.

My phone rang again, the loud, shrill chime sounding almost insistent.

Poppy's gaze darted from the phone to me and back again. I could see in her eyes she wanted to say something, but she

curled her lips between her teeth to stop herself. We remained silent for a minute that felt like it stretched on for an eternity before she finally spoke again.

“Honey, the truth is, you’re not going to know the answer to all your questions unless you ask him.”

“But I did that once already,” I insisted. “I asked him what we were supposed to be, and he said we were whatever I wanted.” I threw my arms up in frustration as Gage’s second unanswered call was followed by another text. “What kind of bullshit copout answer is that?”

Poppy laughed like that was the funniest thing in the world. How she could laugh at that was beyond me, but she went at it until there were tears in her eyes and she was wheezing uncontrollably.

I sat across from her, my arms crossed over my chest as I glared daggers in her direction. “So glad I could amuse you,” I said dryly once she got ahold of herself.

“I’m not laughing at you,” she said on as giggle. “I’m laughing because that’s such a *man* answer.”

“What?”

“Honey, that wasn’t a copout. I’d be willing to bet he thought that answer was a great one. He thought he was giving you what you wanted. If you could decide what you wanted the two of you to be, you’d be happy. He wasn’t trying to hurt you, Wynn. He’s just a dumb boy.” Her shoulders rose in a shrug. “They all are. I read somewhere it’s coded in their DNA to be dumbasses.”

I blinked. “You really think so?”

“Absolutely,” she answered, jerking her chin down at my phone. “But you know what you have to do if you want to be certain.”

Damn her, being all rational and wise.

I picked up the phone and tapped the screen, bringing it to life. There were two voicemails from Gage, but I scrolled to the texts first.

Viking: *Baby, is something going on? Why aren't you answering my calls?*

Viking: *I just talked to Jase. I know you aren't at work. Where are you, Bits? I'm starting to freak out.*

I looked up at Poppy and let out a breath as she nodded in encouragement.

My fingers flew across the screen as I typed.

Me: *I'm at Poppy's. I think we need to talk.*

His response came instantly.

Viking: *I'm on my way.*

CHAPTER

Thirty

I'D BEEN at work for an hour when I realized I'd left my phone at home and headed back to grab it. When I walked in the house, Tornado was lying on the floor of the entryway tearing something to shreds.

“Christ,” I grunted the moment I saw him. The little demon dog had a fucking knack for destroying everything in his path. If I didn't love Wynn so goddamn much, the little bastard would have been living outside. But the first time I'd made a comment alluding to that, she sucked in a gasp like I'd suggested we dump him in an alley and leave him to fend for himself or die. “Gage,” she'd breathed in affront, “you can't leave him outside. That's just cruel!” She'd picked up the damn dog and snuggled him to her chest. “It's getting cold outside. He'll freeze.”

I'd lifted a brow and crossed my arms. “It's not *that* cold, and his fur would prevent him from freezing.”

She'd skewered me with a look that had my balls drawing up into my body. She'd become completely irrational when it came to the mutt. Now he was lying on the floor devouring yet another non-edible item he'd taken from God knew where.

“What the hell did you get into this time?” I hit him with a stern look that had no effect whatsoever. Instead of feeling fear, he rolled over to his back, showing me his rounded belly, the cloth item still between his jaws and flopped over his snout.

“You might have your momma fooled, but I don’t think you’re cute.” Okay, that was a lie. He was a pain in the ass all day every day, but the little fucker was still cute as hell.

I bent down to take the article from him. He must have mistaken the move for a tug-of-war, because he flipped over fast as lightning and clamped down on the opposite end. “I’m not trying to play right now,” I scolded as he dropped low on his front legs, his ass end still high in the air, tail whipping back and forth as he let out a tiny little growl and shook his head.

“Knock it off, would you? I need to get back to work and you’re wasting time.” I finally yanked the piece of cloth free and held it up to inspect it. It looked like a sock. An old, ratty one with a hole in the heel and the elastic snapped from wear and age. “Where the hell did you get this?”

Tornado yipped in answer, and I shook my head before tossing the ruined sock back at him. It wasn’t any good to me, so he might as well get some enjoyment out of it before it inevitably wound up in the trash.

I started down the hall toward the bedroom where I’d left my phone and jerked to a stop when I stepped across the threshold and spotted the small black box in the middle of the bed. Suddenly the sock made a whole lot of sense.

I crossed the room and picked up the box, flipping it open to reveal the ring that, until that moment, I’d forgotten all about. My gut twisted and sank like a stone tossed into the ocean. There was only one person in this house who could have found that damn box.

Wynn must have gone rummaging for an old sock to keep Tornado entertained and stumbled upon it in the back of my drawer.

“Son of a bitch,” I hissed as I dragged a hand through my hair. I snapped the box closed and tossed it aside before snagging my phone off the bedside table. I found Wynn’s name in my contacts and hit the green button to call, bringing the phone to my ear. My heart felt like it was going to beat out

of my chest as I listened to it ring before finally clicking over to voicemail.

“Damn it,” I snapped as I jabbed the button to disconnect. I tried her office line at work but got nothing.

A sudden burst of panic dumped into my bloodstream as I pulled up my text messages and quickly typed one off.

Me: *Baby, is something going on? Why aren't you answering my calls?*

I stood immobile, staring at the screen and willing it to switch from *delivered* to *read*. When it didn't I dialed another number.

The call connected on the second ring. “Jase Hyland.”

“Jase, hey. It's Gage.”

“Oh, hey man. How's Wynn doing?”

A record scratched in my brain. “What?”

“Is she okay? I think this morning was the first time she's ever called in sick. Must be feeling like shit.”

“Oh, um, yeah.” I stumbled over my words as I began pacing the room. First I was frozen in place, now all of a sudden I couldn't stand still. “She'll be fine. Thanks for asking.”

There was a brief pause on the other end of the call. “Was there something you needed?”

“Uh, you know what? I think I figured it out on my own. Sorry for wasting your time.”

I quickly hung up and called Wynn again. “Pick up,” I pleaded quietly. “Pick up, pick up, pick up.”

“Hi, you've reached Wynn. Try texting next time and maybe I'll get back to you.”

“Goddamn it!” I shouted as I ended the call.

Me: *I just talked to Jase. I know you aren't at work. Where are you, Bits. I'm starting to freak out.*

That was the understatement of the fucking century. I was going out of my mind, and if I didn't hear from her in the next two minutes I was getting in my truck and driving around every mile of this town until I found her.

I was just about to come out of my skin when my phone chimed with a message, giving me such a start it was a wonder I didn't go into cardiac arrest.

Bits: *I'm at Poppy's. I think we need to talk.*

Jesus, that couldn't be good. No happy conversation ever started with *we need to talk*. But I shoved my fear down and bolted out of the room, typing my response as I raced to my truck.

Me: *I'm on my way.*

I SPOTTED her the second Poppy's sprawling white house came into view. She was sitting on the porch swing, one leg curled beneath her as she used the opposite foot to slowly push the swing into motion.

I hit the brake a little harder than necessary and killed the engine, throwing the door open and launching myself out, closing the distance between us in record time.

I hopped up the porch steps and bolted to her. The second I was close enough, I crouched down in front of her, placing my hands on either side of her neck. I used my thumbs beneath her jaw to lift her face to mine, slowing dragging the pads back and forth in a soothing motion. It wasn't until I saw her, touched her, that I was able to pull in my first real breath since I spotted the fucking ring box on our bed.

Her eyes were rimmed red and swollen. Her smile was small and heartbroken. She looked so damn sad it was like a stab to my chest. "Hi," she whispered, her eyes growing glassy with unshed tears.

“Baby,” I said on a pained grunt. “Talk to me, please,” I begged. “What happened?”

“I found the ring.”

I pulled in a fortifying breath, working hard to calm my nerves as I nodded. “I know. I saw it on the bed.” She sniffled and tried lowering her face, hiding behind the curtain of her hair, but I wouldn’t let her. “Wynn, tell me what’s going on in your head right now, because I can see from the sadness in your eyes that whatever it is, it’s very fucking wrong. Talk to me so I can fix it.”

“Do you still love her?”

I rocked back like she’d just punched me. Hell, an actual physical blow might have been less shocking than that question. “What?”

“Do you still love her?” she repeated.

“Jesus, no,” I exclaimed. “No fucking way.”

She reached up and wiped at a single tear with the back of her hand. “Your mom told me everything,” she confessed, her voice still quiet. “She told me about Vanessa and John. About you carrying that ring around as a good luck charm. How you were going to ask her to marry you.”

“I see.” I let out a gust of air and moved to sit on the swing beside her, understanding finally dawning. I suddenly felt mentally exhausted as I scrubbed a hand over my face. “So you heard a story from my mom, and instead of talking to me about it, you let it eat at you. Is that about right?”

Her head shot around in my direction, those pretty violet eyes narrowing in a glare. It relieved me to see the spark of fire in her eyes. She was still in there; I could still get to her.

“I wouldn’t put it like that, exactly,” she clipped, raising her chin haughtily.

I couldn’t stop the chuckle that rose from deep in my chest as I gave my head a shake and twisted on the swing to face her, draping one of my arms over the back of the seat. “Bits, I don’t still love her. There isn’t a single piece of me that still

harbors any feelings for that woman, because every single part of me is madly in love with you.”

Christ, but it felt good to say that out loud for the first time. I loved her. I fucking *loved her*, and now she knew, beyond a shadow of doubt.

Her lips parted, a tiny gust of air brushing past as her eyes dried up and widened. “You-you love me?”

I smiled. She was so goddamn adorable when she was flustered. “Baby, how could you not have figured that out by now?” I reached out, taking her left hand in mine and lifting it up. “*This* is the only ring I’ve ever had that’s meant anything, and that’s only because it rests on your finger.”

She shook her head like she was trying to shake her thoughts into place. “Then . . . why do you still have the other one, after all this time?”

“Truthfully?” She nodded. “Because I forgot it was there.” I held my hand up to stop her when I sensed she was about to argue. “Yes, there was a time in my life when that ring meant something, but that time ended before you came into my life. I put it in the back of the drawer and completely forgot about it because it stopped mattering a long time ago.”

I could see the doubt still lingering, so I gave her the rest of it. “Yeah, when Vanessa ended it, I was crushed. But when I look back on it now, I think it hurt so much because I lost two relationships that had meant something to me all at once. If you talked to my mom then you know how close John and I had been.”

She nodded, biting down on her plump bottom lip.

“I think maybe I hated losing him more than losing her.”

Wynn’s face pinched up with anger. “You shouldn’t,” she gritted. “He was a shitty friend for doing what he did.”

I let out a bark of laughter. “Agreed. But there’d been a time when I thought we were brothers. I was going to ask him to be my best man. Losing that friendship was harder than losing Vanessa. Looking back on it now, I can’t say I’d change anything, because it led me here. To this town full of our

crazy-ass friends. But most importantly, it led me to you, Bits. I can't possibly love anyone else, because my heart belongs to you completely."

She sniffled again, her eyes watering over as she gave me the first genuine smile I'd seen on her beautiful face since this morning. "You really do love me?"

"Of course I do. You're the other half of me." I looped my arm around her shoulders and pulled her into my side, burying my face in her hair and inhaling her intoxicating scent. "We're a perfect team, remember?"

I felt her body melt as she inhaled deeply. "Gage?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"I love you too," she whispered, but those four words ricocheted through my head like a pinball, echoing over and over again.

"Thank Christ," I grunted, my arm squeezing her tighter before letting go long enough to pull her onto my lap so her thighs were straddling mine.

"You asked me a while back what I wanted us to be." I took her left hand and dragged my thumb across her ring. "I want us to be exactly what we've always been. Fucking perfect for each other. I want you to wear this ring every single day for the rest of our lives, and I want to put another one beneath it when the day comes that you finally take my name. I want my house to be *ours*, and I want to build on to it so we have room for our family to stay with us on holidays, even once we start having kids. But mostly, I want to spend the rest of my life making you happy."

She giggled, taking my cheeks in her hands as she bent forward to kiss me. "I want that too. And I also want the wedding dress I fell in love with when I went with our ladies before they left."

"Then it's yours," I assured her. "There's nothing you could ever want that I won't give you, baby."

She kissed me breathless, making my dick stir to life before jerking back with wide eyes and a sharp gasp. "What

are we going to do about Vanessa? She's still here."

I smiled, feeling my dimples cave in deep. "Already taken care of." She lifted a quizzical brow. "I had my suspicions when she showed up out of the blue, so I called John." I let out a grunt of frustration. "Hadn't talked to that fucker in a long time, and certainly don't feel the need to ever do it again, but I wanted to know what she was up to. Turned out, he divorced her."

Her jaw dropped. "You're kidding!"

I shook my head. "Wish I was. Apparently, as soon as the ink on the divorce papers dried, she hopped a plane to Tennessee. It took me a while to get all the information I needed, but that call with John tied things up. I went to the courthouse the other day to file a restraining order." A wry grin pulled at my face. "Holt should be serving her soon enough. My guess, she's out of our town and our lives by the end of this week."

I hadn't realized the window nearby was open until Poppy's voice rang out from inside the house. "Does that mean I'm free to kick her ass out of my inn?"

Wynn's head fell back on a belly laugh as I turned my head and answered, "Knock yourself out. Please make sure Wynn and I have a front row seat when you hand her the walking papers."

"Deal!" she shouted with way too much glee for a woman who was about to lose out on a room rental. But having known Vanessa, I had a feeling the loss of income was more than worth it.

Hurried footsteps scurried through her house, then a second later, the back door banged shut. Seemed she wasn't in the mood to hesitate.

"So," Wynn breathed, bringing my attention back to her. "You want to marry me, huh?"

I groaned as I trailed my hands up her delectable curves and pulled her chest against mine. "Bits, when it comes to you, I want *everything*."

On that declaration, she sealed her lips against mine and proceeded to give me even more.

Epilogue

SOMETIME *later*

ISAT at the table in the middle of Bad Alibi, surrounded by my girls. It was Ladies' Night once again, so we were hanging close to the bar, laughing and cutting up while we enjoyed a few drinks. Our men hung by the pool tables, giving us space but keeping an eye to make sure we didn't get into too much trouble.

I looked toward the raised platform where my husband sat, my eyes trailing over my friends' husbands until they landed on the man I was searching out.

My man.

It was as if he felt me looking and abruptly turned away from the conversation he was having with Jensen and Jase to look my way. The instant our eyes met, he gave me that dimpled smile I loved so much.

To say I was living my happily ever after was an understatement. Life wasn't merely happy, it was downright perfect.

I'd had a dream wedding, marrying the love of my life in the most perfect wedding gown in existence. Not long after, Marcia and Grandma Buttons had packed up their belongings and made the move from South Dakota to Redemption where every winter they counted their blessings when they didn't have to face a single blizzard.

My father had put in for his retirement recently, and he and my mom were making plans to fly down and go house hunting soon.

Like I said, life was *perfect*.

I returned his grin with one of my own before lowering my chin and gazing at him through the fan of my lashes, my eyes conveying the promise of what was to come later that night.

“Oh, gross!” Aurora cried.

I saw her staring at me in disgust as the rest of my girls laughed and grinned. “You’re blatantly eye-fucking your husband in a public place,” she teased. “At least have some class and do that shit in private where we don’t all have to see it.”

I let out a laugh and drained the last of my drink, setting the glass on the table with a *thunk*. “You know what? I think that’s a brilliant idea.” I pulled a few bills out of my wallet and tossed them on the table. “It’s been real, ladies, but I have enough of a buzz going to let Gage do some very wicked things to me. See you later.”

I turned around on a mixture of groans of disgust and laughter, walking right into the rock hard chest of my man.

I looked up and lost my breath. He’d read my look loud and clear. Not surprising in the least since we were a perfect match in every way. That gunmetal had gone nearly black with desire. “Hey, Bits.”

I rested my hands on his chest and grinned up at him. “Hey, Viking.”

“You ready to go home?”

His question held the kind of promise that made me tingle from the ends of my hair all the way down to the tips of my toes. “Oh yeah, honey. More than ready.”

With a low, throaty growl, he grabbed my hand and all but dragged me out of the bar.

Oh yeah, I thought as I skipped to keep up with him. *Life gets more perfect every day.*

The End.

Thank you so much for reading!

*Keep watch for more news on the **ASHLAND SERIES**, featuring
Pope and his Wraiths, coming soon!*

A Note from the Author

Well, that's it. Our time in Redemption has finally come to an end. Everyone has had their HEA and are living their best lives.

This is the bittersweet part for me, because while I'm so thrilled with how I sent these guys off, saying goodbye is never easy. We've been on this journey since the start of 2020. Can you believe it? But you know me, I'm not one to stay gone for too long.

This town and these people mean so much to me, and I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciate that you guys have fallen in love with the world I've created in Tennessee.

Now, before you get sad that it's time to say goodbye, let me assure you, you'll see some of your favorites again. Because in 2024, we're moving one town over to Ashland to cover Pope and his guys, as well as a few others that you're going to love!

So as they say, when one door closes, another opens. You've been asking for Pope and the rest of the Wraiths, and their time is just around the corner!

Thank you so much for reading my words and sticking with me all these years. I love you guys like crazy!

-Jess.

Check Out More from Redemption



Having grown up trapped in a gilded cage, the events of one tragic night changed everything.

Farah Highland was raised with more money than most people could ever dream of, but with that wealth and privilege came cold indifference and cruelty. Determined to start living for herself, Farah cut ties with everything and everyone she'd ever known for the chance at starting over in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains.

Notorious town playboy, Cannon Banks grew up living the good life. He had it all, loving parents, good friends, and a face and body that drove women wild. Love and commitment were the last things on his mind ... until he locked eyes with a woman across a crowded bar, and everything changed in a heartbeat.

There's just one problem. Bad Alibi's newest waitress wants nothing to do with him. But he's nothing if not determined.

Cannon and Farah are about to enter into a battle of wills.

May the best man ... or woman, win.



Their marriage was nothing more than a business transaction. Or at least that was what they told themselves.

Poppy Weston had been burned enough times by undeserving men to know her heart was best left under lock and key. She was content with her life, even with the lack of romance. Then Jase Hyland walked into Redbud Inn and offered her something she couldn't refuse. In return, all she had to do was marry him.

Jase had seen firsthand the kind of damage relationships caused, and he wanted nothing to do with it. He'd been taught from a young age that the only things that should matter to a man were wealth and power. However, all it took was a series of events to lead him down a path he never expected to travel.

It was supposed to be simple. No feelings, no emotions, just two friends entering into a mutually beneficial arrangement.

He thought he had it all figured out ... until he went and fell for his wife.



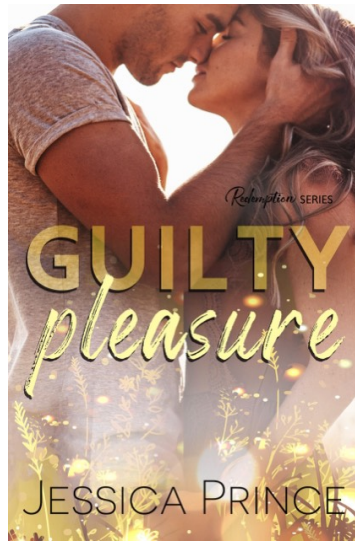
She thought he was just a cocky, spoiled rich kid. She had it so very wrong.

Shane Hendrix had a hundred-foot reinforced steel wall around her heart to keep people out, so when she first laid eyes on Jensen Rose, she wanted nothing to do with him. But what started as disdain quickly grew into something so much more. He went from being the boy she hated to the man she loved with all her heart. Then he left without so much as a goodbye, leaving her shattered.

Jensen Rose didn't have much good in his life. That was until he stumbled on a ray of light standing in the middle of his bedroom. He had to have her, and once he did, he loved her with every single piece of himself. But when his past threatened to rip them apart, he did the only thing he could think to protect her. He walked away.

When he returned to Redemption, Tennessee, it was with every intention of winning back the love of his life. But she's not giving in without a fight.

And this is a battle he intends to win



The only thing worse than living in a town where everyone hates you is having to work for the man who broke your heart.

Redemption, Tennessee held nothing but painful memories that Lark Ashton had no desire to rehash. After the only man she's ever loved crush her soul and spirit, and all her friends turned their backs on her, she swore to herself she'd never go back. But when her aunt calls, asking a favor she can't possibly refuse, Lark finds herself public enemy number one ... again.

Clay Morrison has spent seven years trying to convince himself he's no longer in love with Lark Ashton. But when the woman he thinks betrayed him and his family returns, she brings with her a whole slew of feelings he's worked hard to ignore. Now he can't get the bane of his existence out of his head.

She's in desperate need of a job. He can't resist the chance to have her at his mercy.

And they're both about to discover what happens when the most intense passion they've ever felt is with a person they hate.



She'd spent her entire life as a wallflower, hiding from the rest of the world.

Willow Thorne had gotten really good at blending in with the wallpaper. The shy, quiet little mouse was more comfortable spending her days in her protective little bubble. Then she met a big, burly mechanic who looked really good on a motorcycle and made her feel things she'd never felt before.

Gavin "Stone" Hendrix didn't do commitment, and love was completely out of the question. After spending the first half of his life taking care of everyone else, he was done being the responsible one. Then he met a shy, nervous brunette who knocked him off his feet and made him question everything he thought he believed.

Willow brought out his protective instincts. Stone made her want to step out of her shell.

No one in a million years expected the hard-as-stone biker to fall for the wallflower, but the small town of Redemption was in for a major surprise.



There was absolutely no way she was falling for her neighbor. No matter how gorgeous he was.

Aurora Keller thought she'd lucked out when she decided to put down roots in Redemption, Tennessee. She had a new business, new friends, and a picture-perfect little house. There was just one problem, and it came in the form of her six-foot-three tattooed, muscle-bound neighbor from hell, who just so happened to be her best friend's future brother-in-law. It really wasn't fair that Satan's offspring was so nice to look at.

Callum Morrison wasn't a good man. Or at least that was what he'd convinced himself. After a series of bad decisions that had resulted in the worst years of his life, all he was looking for was peace and quiet. Too bad he bought a house right next door to the one woman he wanted but could *never* have. That was enough to make any man grumpy.

What had started as a war against two neighbors turned into something so much more.

And if they aren't careful, the fallout could destroy them both.



When she started on the path to her new life, she never could have guessed where it would lead her.

Deva Kent spent most of her life dreaming of escaping. She hated being forced to live among the Fellowship of the Enlightened, the small community closed off from the rest of the world, and was desperate to spread her wings and discover something new. When she applied to be a nanny for a single father and his two-year-old son, the Fellowship wasn't happy, but she knew that was her fresh start. However, she never thought she'd end up falling for the man with more baggage than he could carry and storm clouds in his eyes.

Laeth Harker's world fell off its axis the morning a past one-night-stand showed up on his doorstep with a son he knew nothing about in tow. He barely had his own life together and didn't know the first thing about caring for a child. But after spending most of his life screwing everything up, he was determined to do right by his own flesh and blood. He just didn't know where to start.

When Laeth hired Deva on as his son's nanny, she was supposed to make his life easier. But the way he felt about her was the very definition of complicated.

Their feelings might have started off at a slow burn, but once it catches, it's hot enough to set the world on fire.



He was the town's golden boy, their all-American hero. But there was a side of him he'd only shown her.

When Lyric Jackson stopped for gas in Redemption, Tennessee, she wasn't sure what to think of the small town nestled in the middle of the Smoky Mountains. Then she got one look at Holton Clarke, saw that charming smile, and fell instantly. One night with the man in uniform sparked an ember of hope, but things didn't quite end how she'd expected.

All Holton Clarke ever wanted to do was protect the people he cares about. He thought he'd be able to do that better as a deputy for his hometown, but one call turned his whole world and everything he thought he knew upside down. Including what he'd hoped for his future with a certain sassy librarian.

But when danger from Lyric's past comes calling, Holton has to put his fears and insecurities to the side in order to save the woman who has gotten under his skin, but she refuses to make it easy, or give him a second chance. Now she's under his roof, sharing his bed, and throwing him attitude and dirty looks every chance she gets.

She might claim that nothing is ever going to happen between them, but that one night they'd shared was his favorite mistake ever, and he has every intention of repeating it for the rest of his life.

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About Jessica



Born and raised around Houston, Jessica is a self proclaimed caffeine addict, connoisseur of inexpensive wine, and the worst driver in the state of Texas. In addition to being all of these things, she's first and foremost a wife and mom.

Growing up, she shared her mom and grandmother's love of reading. But where they leaned toward murder mysteries, Jessica was obsessed with all things romance.

When she's not nose deep in her next manuscript, you can usually find her with her kindle in hand.

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