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L.K NIGHT

The Temptation

KINGS OF RUIN BOOK 4

L KNIGHT

The Temptation
Kings of Ruin Book Four
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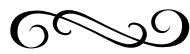
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Ryker



“PLEASE, AUD? WE CAN GO GET LUNCH OR STOP BY AND terrorize that little weasel who tried to grab your ass at the bar the other night?”

Audrey gave me her haughtiest glare and I knew I’d lost. There wasn’t a lot I wouldn’t do for my friends and Audrey Kennedy was one of my best friends.

“If I wanted to toy with that little asshole I would, and I don’t need you to hold my hand while I do it. I want to broaden my horizons and learn a new skill.”

That was the fucking truth. Audrey terrified most people but to those of us lucky enough to call her friend, she was family. If that meant I had to go paint some half-naked dude for a life drawing class, then so be it. “Fine, but you owe me.”

Audrey waved her hand away and I chuckled as I slung my arm around her shoulders. A man gave her the once over as I held the door open for her to walk in ahead of me. His eyes were all over her ass but to me she was like a sister. I held the door because my mom taught me better and would kick my ass if I didn’t.

“Dude, put your eyes back in their sockets. You’re embarrassing yourself.”

The man jumped and turned away; his face beet red as I followed Audrey to the registration desk. The swanky gallery that was holding the class was light and airy with high ceilings and lots of natural light coming in from huge glass skylights. It

was an impressive structure and, even though art wasn't really my thing, I did appreciate beauty.

“Good morning, Miss Kennedy. It's nice to see you again.” The receptionist's eyes raked over me from head to toe before a slow smile spread. “And who do we have here?”

The man behind the reception desk had short bleached-blond hair with pink tips, black lipstick, and was wearing a ladies' Chanel pantsuit. He was also rocking a pair of striped heels that would give any of the girls working the top floor of Club Ruin a run for their money.

“Ryker Cabot.” I offered my hand and a grin because I was a friendly guy and the man almost expired.

Fanning his face and batting his ridiculously long lashes, he smiled. “Well, aren't you just a delight?”

“Candy, stop flirting with him. His head is big enough.” Audrey rolled her eyes but I could see she was enjoying this.

“I bet that's not all that's big on him, hey handsome?”

Getting hit on was something I was used to. I wasn't an ugly guy, I worked out hard and it didn't hurt that I had so many zeroes on my bank balance. People in this town could sniff out money like a bloodhound.

“Okay, Candy, take it down a notch. We're here for the life drawing class.” I could hear the humor in my friend's voice but others who didn't know her wouldn't be able to read her so well. Candy blushed, a pout on his black lips, and started typing away on his computer as I busied myself with my phone, which had begun vibrating against my hip.

I checked the notification and saw a DM from my Instagram. I got a few hundred of these a week and some I read and respond to, others I delete. There were some crazy ass people around, but I was a pretty good judge of character. An image of a huge pair of breasts popped up and I blinked and chuckled before hitting delete. Call me old fashioned but that was a bit too forward for me. I liked a little bit of a chase, so I felt like I'd worked for it a bit. The next message was from a woman asking if she could have a picture of my feet.

I was as broad-minded as the next guy, probably even more so. I owned a part share of a fucking sex club for God's sake, and a very exclusive one at that. I had no problem with whatever the fuck people wanted to do as long as it was consensual, but requests for pics of my feet so she could do God knew what, was a hard pass.

“Okay, so you're all booked in. Everything you need is set up. We have one minor change. Horse couldn't make it today so we have another model in with you. Let me tell you, you won't be disappointed in the least.”

I'd only been half listening until Candy told us that Horse was unavailable. “I'm sorry, did you say Horse?”

Candy smiled, showing his bright white teeth. “Yes, he's very popular in the life drawing class because he has very impressive equipment.”

I closed my eyes. Fuck me! “Are you telling me you signed me up to draw some guy's junk, Aud?”

I took her elbow and led her away in the direction Candy indicated and she shrugged me off.

“Oh, calm down. It's the human body and you've seen more than your fair share of naked people, plus it's art.”

“It was some guy called Horse, by the way, and his junk.”

“You seem pretty hung up on the size of his Johnson, Ryk. Feeling a little intimidated?”

I snorted as I shed my hooded leather jacket and dropped it on the floor beside an easel and paints. Five were set up and the other three people were already gowned up and waiting. A stage was set up with a chaise lounge, draped in red velvet with floral scarves scattered around the floor. It looked like that scene from Titanic where the woman, I forget her name, asked him to paint her like one of his French girls. I couldn't help the huff of derision or the roll of my eyes at the setup.

I picked the easel closest to the door so I could escape if I got the chance and turned to Audrey. “I'll have you know that my dick is very impressive, thank you very much.”

I felt the door swish behind me and then a low voice mutter, “Someone sounds like he’s protesting a bit too much.”

Affronted, I spun to defend my manhood and saw the back of a woman in a silk robe walk toward the chaise. Without turning, she let the robe drop and I felt all the air leave my chest. My tongue felt like it was too big in my mouth. Her naked back was toned, her shoulders straight and confident. I let my eyes take in her long wavy blonde hair as it draped down her back and came to a stop at the sexiest heart-shaped ass I’d ever seen, with two dimples at the base of her spine. Dimples were my weakness. I don’t know what it was about them, but I found them a real fucking turn-on.

I watched entranced as she gracefully settled herself on the chaise on her side facing away from us, her head propped in her hand, and I’d have given away half my fortune for her to turn around and show me what I knew would be spectacular tits. Her skin was creamy and flawless, with not a blemish to be seen, except for the huge flower tattoo that covered her right thigh and ended a couple inches above her knee. She couldn’t be more than five feet three and I guessed mid-twenties, and she was a fucking knockout. My dick was like an eager puppy as I looked at her and I had to discreetly adjust my jeans as I stared at the beauty who’d just insulted my manhood.

“Close your mouth, Midas, you’re drooling.”

I snapped out of whatever pussy drunk spell this woman had put on me and glared at Audrey. My friends called me Midas as a joke because I had a talent for computers that meant I’d struck gold with my social media platform. Now I had more money than I could spend in ten lifetimes. If anyone saw my apartment, they’d never believe it though, because I lived pretty frugally. Yes, I liked nice things, but I kept those at my office where I spent much of my time.

I looked at my canvas as I tried to mix the paints so they resembled something that looked like the color of her skin, but I’m not sure even the best artist in the world would be able to capture that exact shade. I angled my brush as I attempted to get the curve of her body just right and frowned before looking

up at her again. She was perfectly still and, if I hadn't seen her walk in, I'd wonder if a creature like her was even real.

“You have a little drool right there on your chin, Ryk.”

I gave Audrey a withering glare. “I am *not* drooling. She said something under her breath, which is damn rude, and now I'm trying to concentrate.”

Audrey lifted a brow at me, and I held her gaze. If I showed any weakness, she'd never let me live this down. I was never pussy drunk, and I wasn't going to start now. I liked women. Fuck, I had hook ups on speed dial based on my mood, and every single one of them loved me because I was a nice guy who gave out orgasms and fun and made no promises of anything else. I wasn't drooling or obsessing about this model, even if I was considering asking for a private lesson just so I could stand and watch her again. I was intrigued and that was different. Maybe I'd been too quick to dismiss this class before.

“Can we keep the chatter to a low drone, please?”

We both looked over at the tall man at the end who was wearing a full artist's smock and a fucking beret at a jaunty angle on his head. His nasal voice was pitched high, and I think he fancied himself a bit of a renaissance man. A laugh slipped from Audrey, and she motioned at his blank canvas.

I rolled my eyes; this wasn't how I planned to spend my Friday evening, but with all our other friends in Lovesville, I was Audrey's only option. I focused on the woman who'd draped a hand on her hip, the other propping her head up, giving the barest glimpse of side boob. My dick was like steel in my pants, and I willed that fucker to stand down as I tried to transfer what my eyes were seeing onto the canvas.

Art wasn't my strong suit. I was a coder at heart, numbers and streams of code were my happy place and, although I spend more than my fair share of hours in the office these days, code would always be my first love. Java, SQL, HTML, Python, I loved them all and they came to me easily, my brain picking them up as easy as pie. It was why I loved what I did.

I frowned as I thought of the compliance officer I had to meet with on Monday. We'd had a data breach and were dealing with the fallout. For some that would mean nothing, but for a company of our size and under such scrutiny, it was a big deal. I prided myself on the security of my sites, so nobody was more pissed than me and it had fuck all to do with the hefty fine. It was a fuck-up and I didn't make mistakes.

I almost jumped out of my skin and shrieked when a voice spoke close to my ear.

“Well, I'm not sure if I should be offended or impressed by this abstract piece.”

I blinked and looked down into the most beautiful blue eyes I'd ever seen. They were almost a cross between violet and navy, and I could see the humor in them now as she considered my painting, if it could even be called that. More an abomination than art. Nothing like the stunner in front of me.

Her lips were a rosy pink and full, with a perfect cupid's bow that begged for my teeth and, fuck me, she had a dimple in her cheek when she smiled. Blondie was fucking stunning, and I let my attraction show as I cocked my head and smirked at her. How I'd missed her getting up and slipping that robe on and managing to walk over without me noticing was a testament to how much my mind was consumed with work.

This woman was quite possibly the most beautiful creature on the planet. “I tried to capture the mood.”

She laughed and it was light with a snort at the end, which was endearing and made me want to make her laugh again so I could hear it.

“Is the mood third-grade art attack?”

She grinned up at me as she spoke, and I was enchanted. “No, and it's rude to be unkind about someone's expression.”

Her dainty hand covered her lips and all I could think about was how it would look gripping the base of my cock as those pretty plump lips took my cock as far as she could.

“I'm sorry. You're right. Good effort.”

“Hey, don’t placate me. It’s not a masterpiece but I was distracted.”

“Ah, yes, by your micro dick problem.”

My jaw hardened as I folded my arms across my chest, knowing it would make the grey sweater I was wearing pull across my biceps. Her eyes flickered to my chest and I bit my lip to stop my grin. “I have a huge cock, thank you very much.”

Her eyes twinkled and she patted my arm. “Course you do, buddy.”

She slipped past me and walked around to Audrey, who’d been watching the interaction with interest. Fuck, I’m surprised she hadn’t got popcorn out, she looked so delighted.

“Nice, I approve. I like the way you caught the shadow under my breast here.”

Blondie smiled at Audrey who beamed under her scrutiny. “Thank you. I thought you were the model, but you seem to have an awful lot of knowledge about art.”

“I am, but I did an Art minor in college. This is a side gig.”

Now I wanted to know what she did for her major. This woman who barely came to my chest was sassy and sexy and apparently smart, and she’d just patted my arm like I was a five-year-old looking for praise from his teacher. Women didn’t touch me like that and they sure as shit didn’t tease me about my skills, even if she was right about my art being, let’s be honest, an insult to the word art.

I sulked as I took my phone out and saw another ten DMs waiting. I flicked through them, trying to ignore the woman who was currently talking to Mr. Smock who was eating out of her hand.

“She’s so much more fun than Horse.”

I huffed and tried to pretend I wasn’t affected by the blonde in the corner. The class wrapped up and we were told we could collect our artwork tomorrow if we wished once it had time to dry.

“Ready to go? I think I owe you wings and beer at Monty’s after tonight.”

“You owe me ribs too after that torture.”

Audrey crossed her arms. “Oh please, are you trying to tell me looking at the gorgeous naked woman was torture for you? I’m straight and even I’d bang her.”

This kind of talk wasn’t unusual between me and Audrey. We were open like bros but hearing her talk about blondie like that made my hackles rise and I had to force the instinct away to snap at her about it. “Give me a second, will ya?”

Audrey smirked knowingly and I sometimes hated that my friends knew me so well. I pointed a finger at her. “Don’t start.”

She laughed as she walked out with the others with a wave. “I’ll be talking to Candy.”

I waited for the door to close and then walked over to blondie, as I was now calling her, who was clearing away the acrylic paints. “Hey, you got a sec?”

She crossed her arms and looked up at me, head cocked, and it drew my gaze to her tits which I knew were as bare as the rest of her under that robe. It made my dick harden further in my jeans and I cursed my body’s reaction to her. I quickly looked away as I fought this intense need to touch her when I didn’t even know her name. I’d never follow through on it because I wasn’t a man who went around mauling women without their consent or interest. Yet something about this fiery sprite intrigued me and I wanted to know more. Buy her dinner, maybe take her home for the night, rock her world, and send her on her way with a smile like all the others.

“Can I buy you a drink?”

“No, thank you.”

I was taken aback by her swift refusal. “Did I offend you in some way?”

Her laugh came again and even though it was aimed at me I liked hearing it. “So, you assume because I said no you

offended me in some way?”

I shrugged and gave her my most charming grin. It worked every single time, women couldn't seem to resist it and I wasn't opposed to using what I had at my disposal to get my way. “Well, yeah. Women don't generally turn me down.”

She pointed at me and smiled, and I noticed she had dimples on both sides not just the one. “And that right there is why I said no. I don't date men like you.”

She moved to go around me, and I hurried to catch up before she slipped out the door. “What does that mean? Men like me.”

“Oh, you know, rich, entitled, playboys who forget your name the second they get inside you. Who promise you one thing and then, when they get what they want, they leave you high and dry or worse.”

Her face was animated, and her words were coming out angrily. I wished I could deny any of those accusations and for the first time ever I felt a little ashamed of how I behaved. What was worse was that I suspected someone like me had hurt this girl and I hated the thought of it. She looked like she radiated sunlight and joy but wouldn't think twice about calling you out on your shit.

“Wow, shots fired, blondie.”

“Just the truth.”

“So that's a hard no, then?”

I gave her an impish grin and she huffed out a smile. “Listen, you seem sweet, but I'm not in the market for a broken heart. See you around.”

Before I could stop her, she slipped away, and I was left feeling all kinds of disappointed. I shook it off and headed out to find Audrey, who definitely owed me beer and ribs after that.

“Hey, we still eating?”

Audrey fell into step beside me as I headed for the main door. “Yep.”

I could feel her looking at me as I huddled into my jacket against the cold wind that was announcing fall had arrived.

“Oh my God, you struck out.”

“I didn’t strike out. She’s just busy.”

Audrey belted out a laugh and grabbed my arm, holding on as she cried laughing at my expense. We reached the bar and I grabbed the door and looked at her. “Are you done?”

Audrey wiped her eyes and hiccupped before giving me a somewhat straight face. “Yes, but I might have questions later.”

“No.”

“Oh, come on.”

“I said no. Now can we please talk about something else, like maybe why you hate Hudson?”

I saw her humor die instantly and felt slightly bad, but not enough to turn the focus back on me.

“Fine, I’ll shut it but we’re not talking about that man.”

I chuckled as we headed inside, and the rest of the night was two friends having fun. No doubt everyone thought we were a couple, but we’d never been like that. Audrey was the sister I never had and the sibling I wished I’d had. In any case, I didn’t care what people thought of me, except maybe the cute little life model. For some reason, her words stayed with me all weekend. By Monday though, I was ready to go in and slay the person sent to straighten out my company.

Eden



I SLIPPED INTO THE RESTROOM OF THE LOCAL DINER AND HOPED the owner didn't notice me. I hadn't purchased anything because my meager budget wouldn't even extend to a cup of coffee, but the smells were making my stomach grumble in hunger. Last night's ramen hadn't filled the hole and I'd give my left arm for pancakes and bacon dripping in syrup, but this life wasn't forever, and this job would get me back on my feet. That was the mantra that kept me going when all I wanted to do was fall apart most days, but that wasn't a luxury I could afford.

I sighed, pushing the thoughts aside and applying the last coat of mascara to my eyes in the cracked mirror of the diner bathroom. I looked a little pale, but I was naturally very fair so hopefully, the little blush I applied would be enough of a disguise. The fitted grey dress I wore had a tiny red belt around the middle and I'd paired it with black pumps. I looked good, or at least as good as you could when you were living out of your car.

The last few months had been horrendous and if I let myself think about it for too long, I'd crumble, but this job was my way out, my new beginning and it would be all my own doing. I'd meet with the CEO today and work my magic and finally put my degree to good use, by helping them identify potential data risks. Giving myself one more glance over, I smoothed my hair into a sleek ponytail, blew out a breath, and headed out.

I left my car in the empty lot at the park and hoped it didn't get towed or stolen because then I'd have no choice but to crawl home and admit my life was a fucking disaster. Not something I relished the idea of, considering my parents and brother were all such high achievers.

They all loved me and I knew they'd help. My brother Travis would lose his mind if he found out I was living in my car, which is why I'd never tell him. He'd hated my ex and if he found out all that he'd done, how he'd fucked me over and left me homeless and penniless, he'd go apeshit.

Thankfully he was living and working in Japan for a big finance company so I could dodge his questions easily enough. My parents, though, were another matter. They checked in daily, and I loved how much they loved me but it could be stifling. They ran a garage restoring motorbikes, both had been free-loving hippies that shared a love of bikes and made it into a very successful living. The waitlist for the shop was nearly two years long and they lived for it.

How my brother and I had ended up with such corporate jobs always shocked them both but they supported us in whatever we did, and I loved and missed them but I needed to find my feet and figure out my future for myself. My life was a mess but I'd fix it because I wasn't the gold-digging, weak little thing my ex accused me of. It was laughable really to think that he'd accused me and had then promptly stolen all my savings and changed my rental contract into his name so I ended up homeless when he was the one cheating. If it wasn't for modeling, I wouldn't even have enough money to eat, but it sure as heck didn't cover a deposit on an apartment or even a motel. So, for now, my only option was to slay this job and put the past behind me, including that lowlife.

In hindsight, the best thing about him had been his parents. They were warm and kind and how they'd managed to make him I had no idea, but they seemed to make allowances like most parents did, and perhaps they were just blind to it all.

I took the subway into Manhattan, relishing the hustle and bustle of commuter traffic, and made my way to CabMedia. I looked up at the building, admiring the architecture before

heading inside. People moved all about me as I approached security and handed over my letter with my details of employment.

“Good morning, Miss Sager.”

“Good morning.” I smiled at the older gentleman who was losing the battle with his comb-over but had the brightest smile I’d seen today.

“Take the elevator to the top floor and Mandy will meet you there.”

I glance at his name tag and make a mental note. “Thank you, George. You have a good day.”

“You too, Miss Sager.”

The ride to the top was long with people getting on and off different floors and I could feel myself beginning to sweat. I gave myself a discreet sniff to ensure my deodorant was holding up and was relieved to find it was. I eventually arrived at the top floor and stepped off into a sleek modern reception area with the CabMedia logo behind the glass desk. Everything was white with flashes of green from the plants all around, softening all the harsh white and making it feel fresh.

A woman around Mom’s age smiled at me from behind her desk. “Good morning. You must be Miss Sager.”

I couldn’t help but smile back, everyone here seemed so friendly. “I am, and you must be Mandy. And, please, call me Eden.”

The woman laughed and shook her head, making her red curls bounce. “Oh no, I’m definitely not Mandy. I’m Sally. Mandy is Mr. Cabot’s PA and you’ll definitely know when you meet her.”

I leaned forward as if we were fast friends sharing a secret rather than strangers who met a minute ago. I was a naturally friendly person despite my recent misjudgments. “That sounds ominous.”

“Let’s just say Mandy has her eye on the prize and she won’t like someone as pretty as you coming on to her turf.”

I was a little confused. “And what’s the prize?”

Sally laughed. “Mr. Cabot, of course.”

I straightened and laughed. “Well, she can rest assured I’m not interested in becoming a notch on a billionaire’s bedpost. In fact, I’m on a hiatus from men in general so Mandy has no need to worry. I just want to do my job and go home.”

She had no idea how much I wanted that or the truth behind wanting to go someplace that would be a home for me, that didn’t involve me waking all night at the slightest noise. A night sleeping without worry of being attacked or murdered by some nutjob sounded like heaven to me and it was something I knew I’d never take for granted again.

“Well, then, let’s take you back.” Sally stood and came around the desk to me, surprising me as she linked her arm through mine. “I like you, Eden. I think we’re going to be fast friends.”

“Well, I like you too, Sally, and friends sounds good to me.”

“Now, just a few tips. Mandy thinks she’s auditioning for the title of Mrs. Cabot as I said before, but is currently wearing the crown of Queen Bitch so watch out for her. Mr. Cabot is a darling. He’s a good man to work for but has exacting standards and takes his company very seriously, but, oh my, is he easy on the eye.”

I laughed again because so far everyone at CabMedia had been a dream. My confidence had been knocked after what my ex-asshole had done. I never thought about him in terms of a person anymore, just a nameless asshole who had taught me some big lessons, including to stay away from rich men who thought the world loved them.

We rounded the corner and I saw the room open out into wide open spaces with desks spread out. On the left side were offices, but even those had glass panels rather than solid walls, so everything felt open. We walked toward the end and passed a seating area with couches and beanbags, and a break area with a pool table and a games console with bowls of snacks on

a low table. I was in awe. This place was fantastic and the more people we passed the more smiling faces I saw. People looked genuinely happy to be here and were friendly.

“Sally, you brought any more of those brownies?” A young man with floppy red hair asked cheekily.

“I’ll bring some on Friday, Alistair.”

“You’re the best.”

“I know. This is Eden Sager, she’s here to help with the data breach issue.”

Sally said the last part like it was a dirty word and I got it, nobody liked to think they’d been breached but it paid my bills, and I loved finding fixes and bugs.

“Pleasure to meet you, Eden. I’m Alistair and I’m the network guy. Good to have you here.”

I took his hand and he gave it a firm but friendly shake. “Nice to meet you too. Is everyone so friendly here?”

He smirked and he was kinda cute but not my type in any way, but a nice guy. He chuckled and rubbed his beard. “Mostly friendly except for the praying mantis.”

I frowned as I looked at Sally. “Mandy, dear.”

“Ah, I see. Well, she certainly has a reputation.”

“She’s the worst, but don’t let her bother you. Everyone else is friendly. I’ll be setting up your system so I’ll catch you in a bit.”

We carried on going as Sally chatted away and I had a good feeling about this place. It felt like a great place to work.

At the bottom of the space, it split into left and right; to the left were banks of desks with computers and men and women tapping away like it was their life because, for some of them, coding and tech probably was. That was the thing about nerds, they lived and breathed it, and I could respect that. I was pulled right and more offices came into view with a large L-shaped desk outside the one at the end.

A woman with blonde hair looked up from reapplying her lipstick and the friendliness ended. She gave me a blatant once-over from head to toe and then sneered. So this was Mandy. I'd met her type a hundred times over the years so whatever she threw at me I knew I could handle.

Sally leaned into me. "Don't let her get to you."

"Who are you?"

Her voice was pitched high, and I could hear the ice in it, but I was a professional and I could play nice. I stepped forward and offered my hand and she looked at it like I might give her some deadly disease. "I'm Eden Sager. Nice to meet you."

Mandy kept looking at me before she touched my fingers and then pulled away like I was an annoying bug she had to deal with. "That dress is a little short, don't you think?"

I blinked and looked at my dress and it hit just above my knee and was perfectly appropriate for work.

"Mandy!" a deep voice snapped, and I felt someone behind me.

Mandy's eyes widened and it was almost comical to see the change in her. "Yes, Mr. Cabot?"

Holy shit, she almost simpered and her voice was all throaty and sexy and it made me want to laugh but I was holding it back because I was focused on the sound of that voice.

"Apologize to Miss Sager for being so rude, right now."

Mandy glared at me. "I'm sorry. Your dress is very nice."

I didn't want to turn around, but I knew I had no choice, so I slowly turned and came face to chest with the hot playboy from the life painting class because, of course, that was my luck. My new boss had seen me naked already and if the huge grin on his face was any indication, he hadn't missed that fact.

He rocked back on his heels with a grin that was movie-poster-worthy. "Blondie, I almost didn't recognize you with your clothes on."

Kill. Me. Now!

Ryker



“BLONDIE, I ALMOST DIDN’T RECOGNIZE YOU WITH YOUR clothes on.” Not my best opening line but it came out without me thinking because my brain was currently short-circuiting. I’d been thinking about this woman all weekend, and more than a few fantasies had ended with my dick in my hand and now here she was in front of me.

“Excuse me?”

Her voice had a snap to it, and she looked rightly outraged. I held up my hand. “I apologize. Ryker Cabot. Miss Sager, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

She took my hand and hers felt small and soft, and all sorts of inappropriate images went through my brain and I couldn’t act on them. She was here to make sure we complied with the new rules and to ensure no more data breaches happened.

“Shall we?”

I held my hand for her to precede me into my office and kept my eyes firmly on the back of her head. I paused to look back at Sally, who was grinning at me, and Mandy, who looked annoyed but I didn’t care. She’d been rude and I wouldn’t tolerate that from my employees.

I closed the door and watched as Eden Sager looked around my office. It was big and open with amazing views. I had my own bathroom, a couch area with a coffee table, a fully stocked bar, and my desk that had three monitors on it in front of the window. I spent most of my time here or at the club, so I’d made sure it fit my needs.

“Very impressive.”

“That’s what she said.” My joke fell flat as Eden looked at me with no emotion.

Wow, tough crowd, but I was being unprofessional, and she was right to ice me out. This was her job. My company bore my name and more blood, sweat, and tears than I could even think about. I owed it to her to be respectful.

“Is this where you fire me?”

I frowned because it was the furthest thing from my mind. She’d come highly recommended, and her references were impeccable. “What? No, of course not. Look, I apologize. We got off on the wrong foot so let’s get the elephant in the room out of the way.”

She crossed her arms bringing her bag in front of her like a shield and I felt like a piece of shit for making her feel defensive.

“Okay.”

“I’ve seen you naked and I asked you out. While I don’t regret either, I’m a professional and you have nothing to worry about from me.”

“I wasn’t worried.”

She was lying but I didn’t call her out on it. “Good. My company means the world to me, and we’ll be working together closely over the next few months to make sure we have no more fuck ups, and I’d like it to be drama free.”

“I agree. Let’s pretend we’re meeting for the first time.”

I’m not sure what I was feeling but her quick capitulation wasn’t sitting right, and I wasn’t sure why. Maybe because when she smiled, I remembered the dimples at the base of her spine matched the ones on her cheeks.

“Okay. Miss Sager, I’m Ryker Cabot, CEO, and I’m truly happy to have you on board so we can set things straight with my company.”

“My pleasure. Now where would you like me?”

Her intense blue eyes looked up at me and I curbed my instinctive response to say bent over my desk. I wasn't the man who fucked his employees, and God knows I'd had the chance.

"The office next door is almost ready for you. Alistair from IT there setting up your computer and Joan from HR will be in shortly to go through everything else with you. She can show you where the break room is and answer any questions."

"Sounds good."

She walked to the door where I was still standing like an idiot as I stepped aside to give her some space. Her floral scent hit me, and it was sweet like jasmine but had a hint of orange that made it addictive. It made me want to step forward and sniff her neck to see if it was more intense there, which led to thoughts of how she might taste. My dick was hard as nails and would likely have teeth marks in it from my zipper.

"How about I come and find you after lunch and we can go over what we need to do over the coming months and form a plan?"

"I think that's a good idea."

I opened her door and saw Mandy jump back behind her desk as if she'd been listening in to our conversation. Eden rolled her lips between her teeth, and I could see her trying not to smile. I frowned as I walked beside Eden to her office and Mandy called my name, but I ignored her.

I introduced Eden to Alistair, but they'd already met, and I could tell he was already a big fan of Eden Sager's. I scowled as he flirted with her, but he wasn't crossing any lines and she seemed to be friendly back so I had no reason to feel all territorial like I was. Alistair was our Systems Engineer and great at his job, but fashion was more of an afterthought. As evidenced by his usual green combat shorts and a Deadpool hoodie. All my employees that weren't front-facing could wear what they wanted. I knew nerds and stick them in a suit and tie and they'd die inside, which meant I wouldn't get the best out of them.

While Eden was chatting with Alistair, I stepped out and made a call to Joan and asked her to come up to my office immediately. HR sat on the floor below and while my setup was unusual, it worked for me. I liked having my office close to the creative side, with the admin, HR, and marketing departments on a different floor. Even my senior management were on the floor below me because I fit better here in the hub. And no creative team worked well with Human Resources or management breathing down their neck.

I left my office door open as I waited for my HR manager to appear. Joan Peters was a fifty-five-year-old woman with short grey hair, bright red glasses, and a slightly hippie style but she was shit hot at her job and I respected the hell out of her.

She knocked on my open door and poked her head in. “You wanted to see me?”

“Yes, come on in and close the door.” I waved her in and motioned for her to take a seat. She settled in the chair opposite and regarded me closely. This was why I liked her, she missed nothing.

“Well?”

“So, our new Data Compliance Officer.”

Joan cocked her head and pursed her lips. “What?”

“I might have seen her naked.” I hurried to explain before Joan could have a conniption and saw her shoulders relax.

“Well, we don’t have any rules about fraternization, and you haven’t broken any laws. So as long as you’re respectful going forward, I can’t see a problem.”

“Good. I don’t want a lawsuit on my hands.”

“No, you don’t but telling me was sensible and I’ll document this conversation for evidence in case we ever need it.”

I felt like an asshole for even thinking this about the woman who now occupied the office next to mine but I’d been a target before and my wealth made me a target for some very

unscrupulous people, some of whom I'd known all my life. Now I was the jaded asshole who covered his ass. "I honestly don't think she's like that, but...." I let my words trail off because Joan understood.

"Speaking of which, when are we firing the harpy?"

"Well, she's about to get a warning for her behavior toward Miss Sager but other than that and some overzealous flirting, she does her job, which makes it tricky to fire her."

"As I said before, document everything because I don't trust that one as far as I can throw her, and I was shot-put county champion in college."

I lifted my brows. "Really?"

Joan smiled. "Yep."

"Well, I never. You're a dark horse."

"I always say it was my shot-put skills that Lorrie fell in love with."

I laughed, Lorrie was Joan's wife of sixteen years and was the exact opposite of Joan. She baked cookies and knitted and looked after their eleven-year-old son full-time. She was also fighting stage three lung cancer. "How is she doing?"

I watched Joan blow out a breath. "Okay. Her last round of chemo is next week and then we wait and see if it's made any difference before we face whatever's next."

"Well, if you need time off or anything at all, you just ask, and I'll make sure it happens."

Joan stood and gave me a genuine smile, which she reserved for very few people. "Thank you, Ryker, you're a good man, and with the level of health insurance you provide here, we're covered completely."

"The least I can do. Health care should never be something a person has to worry about."

"Well, thanks to you, your employees don't."

I didn't take compliments well, so I just gave her a nod and watched her leave the room.

I spent the rest of the morning working on emails, including signing off the employee schedule for Club Ruin, which we'd finally convinced Harrison to move to a database online. His penchant for pen and paper ended when he realized it took time away from his beloved wife and son.

Just before lunch, I called through to Mandy and asked her to meet me in the conference room. It was all glass and had cameras for added security, as did my office but I turned them off when I was in, and the conference room was a safer option for this conversation. It was there that I gave her a final warning for her unprofessional behavior and made it clear I wouldn't tolerate her attitude again. She was very apologetic and contrite and promised she wouldn't do it again. I didn't believe it for a second, but I let it go this time and headed to find Eden Sager. She was in her office, deep in thought, when I knocked on her open door. She looked up and gave me a wide smile that made my body react like it was on speed, everything tingled.

"Is it lunchtime already?"

"Sure is. I thought we could eat with the team and then go over a plan?"

"Sounds good to me. I'm starving."

"We provide lunch here, so you won't go hungry."

I saw a funny look move across her face before she covered it with a smile.

"Good to know."

I introduced her to the team, and by that I meant my developers, as we ate lunch and watched Sydney whip Chris's ass at Mortal Combat on the Xbox. Eden had a solid appetite and got through two wraps and a piece of lemon drizzle cake before we headed back to work. I took her down to the floor below and introduced her to my senior team and answered any questions she had, before we came back up and took over the conference room as we made a plan to make sure CabMedia never had a breach again. I could have used my office, but I liked to be seen by my team and, honestly, the open glass

concept ensured I wasn't tempted to cross any lines with the delightful Miss Sager. Eden was smart and insightful and had some great ideas, which I told her to put together and email over. She was also funny and easy to be around, and I felt certain we'd work well together if I could just stop thinking about her naked. She was still in her office at seven when I got up to leave.

"Hey, no need to burn out on the first day. Get yourself home and get a good night's sleep. You covered a lot of ground today."

"Yeah, I will. I just want to send this last email then I'm heading out."

"Make sure George walks you to your car."

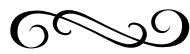
"Yeah, uh, sure. Will do."

I knocked on the door frame wanting to stay but having no reason to. "Goodnight, Eden."

"Night, Ryker."

I headed to Lincoln's house because Lottie was cooking. She knew I loved her chicken parmesan and, while I spent the evening with my friends, my mind was on the blonde goddess in my office.

Eden



I'D SLEPT AWFULLY LAST NIGHT, THOUGHTS OF A CERTAIN handsome, boss man keeping me awake as I replayed every interaction and then got mad with myself. I'd recite that I wasn't interested in Ryker Cabot over and over when I knew I was a little liar, but Ryker was off limits. He represented everything I didn't want, and he was my boss. I wouldn't be a cliché. If he'd been an average guy working a mediocre job, then I might have been tempted but he was so far out of my league it wasn't funny. My vow to stick to my own lane was going to keep me from ending up here again.

I'd stayed as long as I could at the office last night before I'd headed back to my car for the night. I'd considered spending the night on the couch in my office but didn't want to risk getting caught on my first day at the job. The people were just lovely, from what I'd seen, except Mandy who'd given me death stares all day but I could ignore her easily enough.

I headed to the diner to get ready but I was met by the manager refusing me entry. Apparently, I wasn't allowed to use the facilities if I wasn't a customer. So, I went back to my car and did the best I could, pulling on black fitted pants and a pink sweater with a big bow on the collar. I looked even more tired than normal but at least it hadn't been hunger that kept me up all night. The free food at work was possibly my favorite thing about my new job. It meant I could save food money and get a place to live faster. Although it would still be a couple of months, I had to stay positive. In the grand scheme of things, a few months was nothing.

The building was quiet when I arrived at seven and I waved at George who gave me a smiley greeting.

“Morning, Miss Sager.”

“Morning, George. Have a good day.”

“You, too.”

I rode the elevator up, feeling more positive now I was here. I had a busy day planned workwise but I liked that. My job was where I felt happy and confident. I didn't doubt my worth or ability when it came to how I did my work. The rest of my life for sure, but this was my mini kingdom.

I stepped out and made my way to the kitchen to make coffee and saw a fresh pot already on. The reception area was empty. I knew most people didn't come in this early but it was warm, and my office had a small couch. The weather was getting colder and, before long, living in my car would be impossibly hard and I might have to cave and spend a few nights on that couch.

I sipped the warm fragrant brew and ignored my rumbling stomach; I could grab something at lunch. I headed for my office and settled in, finishing off my proposal for Ryker on a way forward and the new rules coming in around data compliance and transparency.

“Knock, knock.”

I looked up with a smile to see the man in question leaning against my door frame with his arms crossed. “Hey, boss man.”

He looked like a damn snack standing there with his hair slightly damp and a warm sexy smile on his face. “You're in early.”

“I wanted to finish this proposal before I meet with the dev team.”

“Okay. Shout if you need anything.”

“I will, thank you.”

He paused like he wanted to say something but must have changed his mind because he pushed off the door with his shoulder and walked back to his office, the scent of his shower gel or cologne lingering on the air and doing all sorts of delicious things to my body.

God, when was the last time I'd had an orgasm? Living in a glass box didn't give one privacy for such luxuries and the ex-dickhead had been very lacking in that department. He was all about the show, but he never got the job done, always busy chasing his own pleasure.

I shook the thoughts away and got back to work until my meeting with the developers. They were a good mix of men and women, which was unusual because it was male-dominated industry, like most things. They were insightful and friendly, and I ended up being invited for drinks Friday night with them. I'd had to make an excuse as to why I couldn't go because drinks were definitely not in my budget and getting ready for a night out in your car was impossible. I did promise to play pool at lunchtime though, and that seemed to score me brownie points.

Sally joined me for lunch, and I tried to curb my instinct to gobble all the food while I could and look like a normal person. I had a chicken wrap and the biggest slice of chocolate cake I could find. I knew it probably wasn't enough calories to sustain me for long. If I could just do it short term, I could find a place that was warm and safe and that was more of a priority than maintaining my curves right now.

“So, tell me all about yourself.”

I cocked my head as Sally sipped her coffee like we were just two girlfriends at a coffee shop, catching up. “Not a lot to tell. My brother lives in Japan and works for a bank. My parents live in California, where I'm from, and run a bike shop.”

“No boyfriend?”

“God no. My ex did a number on me so I'm on a self-inflicted hiatus from all things male.”

“What did he do?”

“More like what didn’t he do.”

Alistair and Freddie had joined us now and looked intrigued, but I had nothing to hide. This shouldn’t be my shame, but I’d leave out me sleeping in my car. “He cheated on me, he stole from me, and then had my apartment lease changed so I was the one who had to leave when I caught him fucking women in my apartment.”

“What a dick.”

“Did you go to the police?”

I looked up at the deep voice from the door and found Ryker watching me. I blushed, not wanting him to know my shame, and shook my head. “No, it wouldn’t have helped, and I just wanted to put it behind me.”

“Damn, Eden, he sounds like a piece of work. If you ever need a shoulder to cry on, you know where to find me. I’d never treat a girl like you like that.”

I smiled at Freddie, who was only twenty-one to my twenty-six, but it felt like more, perhaps because of our life experience. Freddie still lived at home and lived the life of a boy and I’d grown up quick, especially in the last six months.

“Okay, back to work.”

I looked at Ryker who wore a grumpy, annoyed look on his face and I wondered if I’d overshared. I stood to throw my trash in the trash can and move past him, but he stopped me with a hand on my forearm. It was innocent and didn’t warrant the goosebumps that ran over my skin. He pulled his hand away quickly and I looked up at him. Even in heels, he towered over me.

“Not you. I want to talk to you.”

“Okay, your office or the conference room?”

“My office.”

He spun on his heel, and I watched as he marched away, head up, hands shoved in the pockets of his perfectly tailored

navy pants. His white shirt had the top button undone, his tie loosened, and his sleeves rolled up, showcasing perfectly sculpted forearms with just the perfect amount of muscle and veins to make a girl melt on the spot. And don't get me started on his tight ass or the powerful thighs.

I walked past Mandy.

“Do you have an appointment?”

I stopped and looked at her as Ryker moved to his desk. “He literally asked me to come to his office just now.”

She fluffed her hair and pouted. “Well, it's not on his calendar and I know all of Ryker's movements.”

I shook my head and moved into the office. “Take it up with him then.”

“Door open or closed?” I asked him.

“Closed. Take a seat.”

I did, moving slowly, trying to gauge his mood as I sat in the chair facing him. “Everything okay?”

“Yes, I wanted to go over this proposal.”

I let air whoosh from me and let out a small laugh. “Thank goodness.”

Ryker leaned back in his seat and pinched his bottom lip between his thumb and forefinger, and it was sexy as fuck, making his arm muscle ripple. He wore a gold watch with a brown leather strap and the way it emphasized his big strong hands made me wonder what it would feel like to have them on my body.

“Do I make you nervous, Eden?”

My shoulders stiffened. “No, of course not. Why?”

“You seem on edge.”

“No, you just called me in here unexpectedly and I wasn't sure why. You could have been about to fire me for all I knew.”

“I have no intention of firing you, Eden. If you do your job and act like a professional, then I see no reason to.”

“Well, that’s good, and I’m always professional.”

“Good. Because Freddie is young and I wouldn’t like to see any drama stirred up if you break his heart.”

Now my hackles were up, and I tried to curb my response because I needed this job almost as much as I needed air, but I promised myself I’d never let a man make me a doormat again.

“I have no intention of dating Freddie or anyone else. Not that it’s your business. Believe me, I have more than enough going on in my life without adding a fragile male ego to the roster.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

He looked as pissed off as me now and I could see he wanted to know what I was referring to, but I’d die before I’d tell this gorgeous arrogant man how dire my situation was. Yet he still managed to make my pulse race even looking all broody and grumpy. I’d bet everything I owned that my micro dick comment was so far from the truth it was comical. A man who looked like him and held himself as Ryker Cabot did knew his way around a woman’s body. It only reminded me again how long it had been since I’d felt that sweet release.

“Shall we?”

“Shall we what?”

“Go over the proposal.”

I huffed, hoping like hell that he couldn’t read my thoughts because they were far from safe for work. “Sure.”

We spend the next hour going through and making changes based on his knowledge and my experience until we had a plan I felt confident would work. It was going to cost a lot of money but it would be worth every cent long term.

I managed to control any impulse to crawl into his lap or imagine his head between my legs, at least during the meeting, and was happy to have the second day under my belt.

I avoided being alone with Ryker the rest of the week, but I felt his eyes on me, watching me, and wondered if this pull between us would result in disaster. He commanded a room with just his presence, and he was smart and knew everything about his business and seemed to genuinely care about it and the people who worked here. He was well-liked and people were easy around him, even teasing him but they still knew he was the boss and didn't cross the invisible line in the sand.

He laughed often and I'd even seen him bring boxes of doughnuts in and leave them in the kitchen. He wasn't who I thought he was. It was a problem because I was attracted to him a lot, but he was my boss. He'd made it clear he needed me to be professional and he'd done nothing to make me think he liked me in that way. Plus, I had enough to deal with.

Thankfully it was Friday, and I'd have the weekend to reset my defenses against him. Unfortunately, that also meant no free food or a warm place to hang out. I could go to the library for a bit, and I had a life painting class tomorrow afternoon but other than that, I was out of luck.

I left my office and headed to the ladies' room. I had taken care of business and was washing my hands when Mandy strutted inside. I almost rolled my eyes when she sidled up next to me.

"I don't know what your little game is, but Ryker would never be interested in a pale little tramp like you."

I shook my hands to get rid of excess water. "Is that so?"

"Yes. Ryker is mine so keep your skanky little hands off him."

"I'm pretty sure he's not yours but if you want him then go for it. I'm not interested. I just want to do my job."

She folded her arms over her voluminous breasts and cocked her hip as I dried my hands.

“Good, because this,” she waved her hand over me in blatant disgust, “is just so last season.”

“Good to know.”

I couldn't give a flying fuck if my dress was last season, but she'd never know that.

“You might want to wash your hair and invest in some make-up, too.”

With that parting shot, she sashayed out of the bathroom. I turned to look in the mirror and saw she was right. I might hate the toxic little cow but she wasn't wrong. My hair was lank and the bags under my eyes were big enough for a two-week vacation. I needed a shower and a full night's sleep and possibly a trowel full of concealer. Tears pricked my eyes and I let myself have one minute of feeling sorry for myself before I pulled it all back in and shoved it down deep. I was losing weight faster than I anticipated so today I'd snuck some bags of nuts into my bag to help tide me over. I could also head to the soup kitchen after my class tomorrow.

I wiped under my eyes and pinched my cheeks for some color before painting on a smile and heading back to my office for the last hour.

“Eden.”

I switched direction when I heard Ryker call my name. He looked gorgeous as usual; his hair had that sexy messy look and his blue eyes twinkled as I approached the conference room. His smile fell when I stepped in, and he walked toward me, concern written all over his face.

He gripped my shoulders and bent his knees to get eye-level with me. “Have you been crying?”

Tears once again caught me off guard as emotion and exhaustion flayed me open. I blinked wildly and smiled brighter, but my lip wobbled, and the next thing I knew I was surrounded by a strong pair of arms. His clean woodsy scent surrounded me, and his warm hard chest felt good against my cheek. His hand stroked my hair, and I gripped his shirt.

“Talk to me. You're killing me here, blonde.”

He hadn't called me that since our first encounter and I hadn't realized how much I'd missed it, which was silly because I hardly knew him and yet he made me feel safe.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry, just tell me what I can do to fix these tears."

I laughed and pulled out of his arms. Just that tiny breakdown was enough of an outlet and more than I ever should have allowed at work. "It's nothing. I'm not sleeping well, and no sleep makes me emotional."

He handed me a tissue and I wiped my eyes as he watched with concern. "How come you aren't sleeping?"

I shrugged because what could I say. I'd had to move my car and now it was in an even worse place than before with the sounds of drug dealers and prostitutes working the corner keeping me up.

"Come on, talk to me. We're friends, right?"

I was shredding the tissue in my hands when I looked up at where he was now leaning his pert ass against the long glass conference room table.

"Are we friends?"

"I think we could be friends."

"Have you seen all your friends naked?"

He smirked and I don't even know why I brought it up except I was feeling vulnerable and wanted anything to make me feel less invisible right now.

"You'd be surprised."

I didn't know what that meant but he rushed on before I could ask.

"Listen, we'll be working closely together, and you've seen my disastrous drawing abilities, so I think that makes us friends."

"Fine, we're friends. How will that help me sleep?"

He slung an arm around me and I leaned against him, soaking in his strength, and closing my eyes as I let his scent waft over me.

“I can sing you a bedtime lullaby. Just call me when you can’t sleep, and I’ll impress you with my deep baritone.”

I laughed because he was ridiculous, but he did make me feel better.

“See, I made you smile.”

“You did.”

“Good, now get yourself home and get some sleep and call me if you need my exceptional singing voice to lull you into sweet dreams.”

“It won’t work.”

“Well, as we’re friends and you already rejected me once, I can’t exactly offer you my usual method.”

I knew I shouldn’t ask, and I knew it was crossing a line I shouldn’t cross but I asked anyway. “And that is?”

He dipped his head, so his lips were close to my ear. “That I bury my head between those sweet thighs and eat that sweet pussy until all you can think about is the pleasure my tongue on your clit is giving you.”

My thighs clenched, my clit pulsing from his dirty words as I tried and failed to keep my breathing under control, but my vision was blurred from imagining his dirty blond head between my legs as I rode his face to climax.

“Or, you know, Nyquil.”

He pulled away with a chuckle, but I could tell by the bulge in his pants that he was turned on too. “I’m gonna go finish up before I head home.”

“Don’t stay late, Eden.”

“I won’t.”

I hurried away and closed my office door before sinking against it. My heart was racing, and I wanted more than

anything to be a normal woman whose only thought was if she could resist the sexy boss whose filthy mouth had soaked her panties, but I wasn't. I was a woman who needed to figure out how to get a shower and some food and not freeze to death.

Living was my priority right now, not some sexy tryst with my boss who I knew would give me a mind-blowing orgasm. But maybe if I stayed late, I could take advantage of the shower in Ryker's office and deal with at least two of my problems. I could leave and return later. I had full access now that all my background checks had come back, and it would be empty. I'd overheard Ryker saying he was going to some club this weekend, and everyone left early on Fridays.

I could shower and eat and maybe grab a couple of hours on my couch before heading back to my car for the rest of the night. Deciding on a plan, I left the office and rushed back to my car, excited to grab some clean clothes that I'd managed to get done at the laundromat.

A hot shower with privacy sounded like heaven and I wasn't going to feel the least bit guilty about it.

Ryker



I KNEW BEFORE I'D EVEN SET FOOT IN THE CLUB THAT I wasn't in the mood for this tonight. Lincoln, Beck, Harrison, Audrey, and I formed Club Ruin nearly six years ago. We were a bunch of rich twenty-somethings who knew nothing of this scene, and it started out as just a normal club, a place to drink, dance, and meet people. It was a passion project for people who had too much money and a lot of ambition.

Then almost three years ago it became so much more. Audrey suggested we make use of the third floor and turn it into a sex club. We'd been cautious, wary of the way it would be received, but she'd been right.

Audrey was probably the savviest businessperson I knew, and I knew a lot of heavily influential players in this city. Fuck, in the world. She also wasn't someone you said no to, so we'd gone with it, backing her and putting our trust in her. The money had come flooding into our already-loaded pockets.

Now running on three floors, Club Ruin offered something for everyone.

The first floor is a dance club for partygoers who just want to dance and have fun. Only the best-looking people get into Club Ruin. We're elitist and, honestly, we don't give a fuck who it offends. We have a brand and if people don't like it, they can fuck off someplace else. We're not here to cater to the snowflakes and hand them a tissue for their tears. We have a very strict dress code. Our social media page is always on fire with pictures and tags from the rich fuckers that come and spend their hard-earned cash at the bar, just to be seen. The

queue that goes around the block suggests we're on to something too, because human nature suggests that if you make it elite, it drives desire which only adds to the popularity.

That's not what makes us our money, though, or gives us our exclusivity. That's the top two floors where the real fun happens. The second floor is the VIP section, with waitress and waiter service only. The girls and guys serving drinks are all smoking hot, with a very different uniform from the bar staff on the first floor. Normal bar staff wear tight black t-shirts with the Ruin logo and black denim skirts or jeans. VIP girls wear short black dresses and are required to have more on show to entice the customers to spend their hard-earned cash. As most of the second floor is hired out by the very rich and famous, it's a good move. Those people think nothing of dropping thirty grand on liquor at the bar, shelling out for the best champagne that can be bought. It's not sexist though, as the ratio for rich women is climbing daily and they get to enjoy the men wearing black slacks and no shirt except for a black bow tie. It's pretentious but it works, and that's all we care about.

Club Ruin is dark with black walls and a high vaulted ceiling that goes right up to the roof four stories higher. It allows for the long statement lighting and the mezzanine from the second floor to overlook the club below it. Audrey and Harrison designed it, and they did an amazing job, taking each of our ideas and fusing them into something that we're all proud of.

As I reach the bottom stair for the third floor, I see six more security members near the door. It's discreet up there, just black walls and black, soundproof doors. We offer our patrons on this floor full discretion and privacy. It's why the third floor is successful. We don't take that shit for granted and every member is vetted to within an inch of their lives. It doesn't matter who you are, if our team finds something shady in the background check and our team determines you wouldn't be a good fit, then you're not given membership.

I love this club but I couldn't get the image from last week, of Eden crying, out of my head. Seeing her beautiful red-

rimmed eyes with the look of complete exhaustion on her face had done something to me. I'd wanted to punch something and hold her and make promises that I had no business making.

She was such a mystery in so many ways. She was amazing at her job. I knew she liked art, and drank her coffee with cream and sugar, and ate like it was her last meal, and I loved that. I loved seeing a woman enjoy food and yet she seemed to get thinner every day.

She'd been working at the company for a week now and everyone loved her. She'd struck up a true friendship with Sally, and Freddie panted after her like a puppy and she made everyone feel special. She remembered things, even asking about their families and how their weekends had been. She was sweet and yet she kept herself locked away like some big, invisible no entry sign was hung around her neck.

The feel of her small frame sobbing in my arms brought out a protective streak in me that had me wanting to slay dragons for her. I laughed at the thought because I could charm the birds from the trees, but I wasn't possessive or protective about the women I slept with. It was purely an exchange of pleasure, but everything with Eden was different.

I was consumed by her. I'd even taken to imagining her scent in my office on occasion. Every night when I gripped my cock in my hand, it was to fantasies of her on her knees taking my cock in her sweet mouth or riding me slowly, my hands on her thighs, my lips and tongue tracing every line of her body. It was fucking with my ability to think straight, which is why I'd come to the club, but the second I walked in, I knew it wouldn't work.

I groaned internally as I saw who was on shift tonight.

“Hi, Ryker.”

I walked past Monica, the second-floor hostess, and gave her a smile out of habit rather than interest. Been there, done that, and had no intention of going back, ever. The woman was a stage five clinger and I had no interest in getting my dick wet there again. “Monica.”

She sidled up beside me, all smiles and flirty looks that did absolutely nothing for me as I carried on walking to the main office I shared with my partners. Audrey, Harrison, Beck, Lincoln, and I had met in college and somehow formed a tight bond. Lincoln and Audrey were cousins but the rest of us had just forged this friendship.

We were all driven and smart and some would think it would lead to us being competitive with each other. In some ways we were but we also celebrated each other's wins. I knew for sure I wouldn't be where I was today without them, and I'd always saddle up and be their 'ride or die' for any of them, and that included their partners.

Her hand on my shirtsleeve annoyed me because, for some reason, she thought because we'd fucked, she had the right to maul me whenever she wanted. I lifted her hand away and let it drop to her side, irritation clear as day on my face. "Let's not look desperate, Monica."

Her eyes squinted and she looked pissed, but she quickly recovered. "I just wondered if you wanted to hook up later?"

"No, thanks. I'm busy."

"What about tomorrow?"

God, couldn't the woman take a hint? "Busy then, too."

She pressed against me, rubbing her tits against my arm. "I'll take it up the ass and let you share me."

Now I was getting pissed. "Take a fucking hint and stop embarrassing yourself. I'm not interested."

I didn't wait for her reaction but kept going to the office. I pushed the door a little harder than I intended, and Beck and Harrison looked up in surprise.

"What?"

Beck smirked. "Nothing. Just checking the door is still on its hinges."

"Yeah, sorry."

Harrison got up and poured himself and Beck a drink before lifting the bottle in my direction.

“Please.” I took the drink and slumped back onto the couch as Beck kicked his feet up onto the desk.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing.”

I saw Beck and Harrison look at each other and exchange a silent smile.

“What was that look for, fuckers?”

“Nothing. Just never seen you messed up over a woman before.”

Beck looked relaxed, his shoulders loose, his body relaxed, and I liked that for him. Finally figuring his shit out with Amelia had been a welcome surprise. I’d honestly thought those two would never get their shit sorted but it had taken Xander Reynolds, that big handsome brute, to bring them into a happy throuple.

“It’s not a woman.”

“So, what is it, and don’t say nothing. Make it quick because my wife is cooking dinner, and I want to get home in time to put Isaac to bed.”

“You’re such a fucking sap these days,” I bit out, but it held no heat because the truth was, I was happy for him. Norrie was a delight and Isaac was the cutest kid.

Harrison lifted his glass. “Yup, and I don’t fucking care. I’d much rather be looking at her beautiful face than yours, sour puss.”

“She is beautiful.”

I knew saying it would push his buttons and he was predictable as fuck. Harrison was a possessive asshole when it came to Norrie. Not as bad as Lincoln with Lottie but pretty damn close. Beck was more relaxed but then he already knew how to share, that lucky bastard.

Harrison pointed his finger at me. “You don’t call my wife beautiful.”

“Would you rather I call her ugly?”

“Not unless you want me to rearrange your pretty boy face.”

I chuckled. This was what I needed, this banter with people who understood me. “The new data compliance officer started last week.”

“Oh?”

Beck was serious now. He knew how much my company meant to me and how much responsibility I felt to make it a safe place for all, despite assholes doing everything they could to make it unsafe.

“She not working out?”

“She’s great. Already has a plan set in place for me to take to the board.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

I shrugged and downed my whiskey. “Nothing really. She’s smart, the team loves her, she’s confident.”

“And?” Harrison rolled his hand because he knew there was more than what I was saying.

“Fucking beautiful, sexy, a body that would sink ships, and she has fucking butt dimples.”

“There we have it. You fucked her already and now you want an out.”

“I haven’t fucked anyone.”

“Then how do you know about the butt dimples?” Beck was swirling his glass as Xander walked in. My friend lit up at the sight of the man he loved, his gaze devouring the tall, handsome movie star. “Hey, I didn’t know you were coming.”

Xander bent down and kissed Beck. I was completely straight but even I could see how hot these two were together.

Xander lifted his head and winked down at Beck. “Not yet but soon hopefully. Amelia needed me to pick up some of that red wine she likes so I thought I’d stop by and see if you needed a lift home?”

Beck stood and downed his glass before slamming it on the desk. “I do, but first I want to see you on your knees with my cock in your mouth so get your ass upstairs and wait for me.”

Xander smirked as if he’d just got exactly what he wanted and then waved. “Later, guys.”

The door closed behind him, and Beck shook his head. “Brat.”

“Dude, I’ve never been into dick but that was hot as fuck.”

Beck smirked completely confident in his own sexuality and not giving a fuck who knew about his sexual desires. “What can I say.”

“How about we give this fucking dildo advice so we can both go home?” Harrison grumbled.

“Fine, so you fucked the compliance woman, so what?”

“I didn’t fuck her.” My voice rose and I speared my fingers through my hair.

“But you want to?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know. Maybe.”

“So do it.”

“But she works for me.”

“You don’t have any rules against that so what’s the problem, or isn’t she into you?”

“No, she is, but something’s off about her and I can’t figure it out. She’s got this vulnerability about her that makes me wary because I don’t want to hurt her.”

“So, don’t. Plenty of women here you can fuck to your heart’s content.”

“True.”

Beck gripped my shoulder. “But is the real problem the fact you actually like her?”

I looked up at my very knowing friend. “She’s sweet and she’s had a rough time with a douchebag ex who cheated on her and then stole from her.”

“Asshole,” Harrison bit out.

“Yeah, but she doesn’t talk about it.”

“Maybe be her friend,” Harrison said.

“That’s what I suggested.”

Beck shook his head. “Believe me, that’s not easy. Especially when you want to fuck them.”

“We all manage with Audrey.”

Harrison nodded as he closed his laptop. “True but then she’s more like one of the boys to us and I, for one, don’t want to fuck her, and I don’t think you guys ever have either.”

“True and it’s not like Eden sees me that way. She’s already knocked me back once.”

Beck held up his hand. “Wait, back up. What?”

I went on to explain how we first met and how I’d asked her out and those two assholes laughed their dicks off at my expense.

“Oh, wow, you made my night.”

“Ryker, looks like it’s the friend zone for you.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll say this though, and I’m pretty sure I speak for Beck and Lincoln too when I say settling down with the one person, or in Beck’s case two people, who get you, who have your back no matter what, who make getting up every morning exciting, is the best feeling in the world. So, if you think she might be that, don’t let her get away.”

Harrison’s words make my chest feel tight, panic almost gripping me. This isn’t what this is, is it? It’s because she’s fun and she turned me down, which doesn’t happen to me, no

matter how much of an arrogant prick that makes me sound. I'm the fun-loving one of the group and I don't want that to change.

“Get out of here, you big, pussy whipped asshole. I just want to get laid.”

Harrison arched a brow at me and he and Beck shared a look like they had some kind of secret. “We'll see.”

“This is why I like to hang around with Audrey. She doesn't give me shit about feelings.”

“Hah, it was Audrey that called me out for loving Norrie.”

“Yeah, pretty sure she gave me the same talk.”

I blinked at them both. “Well, I guess Lincoln just became the voice of reason for the first time in his grumpy-assed life.”

My friends laughed as they both headed home or, in Beck's case, upstairs to get his cock sucked. I wasn't in the mood for this place tonight but going home meant I'd just be bored so I got up and headed out, walking the two blocks to my office from the club. I could go there and work on some code. That would cheer me up. Even though knew I'd end up obsessing over Eden when I finally got to bed, at least I'd managed to keep my hands off her and that was some sort of divine fucking miracle at this point.

The smell of street vendors selling food drifted on the cool air, reminding me that fall was already here, and another year was coming to a close. My phone rang and I glanced at the screen, seeing my brother's name and suppressing a groan. Beau was my older half-brother and the bane of my life. Our mom married my dad when he was four and my dad is the only father he's ever known. Yet he takes every opportunity to remind him that he isn't his real father as if donating sperm is all it takes. I want to ignore his call, but my parents hate that we don't get along and constantly make excuses for his awful behavior.

I hit answer. “What do you want?”

“Ryker, is that any way to greet your favorite brother?”

“You’re my only brother, asshole.”

“I see you’re as charming as ever.”

I didn’t have the energy for this; he only called when he wanted something, and I wish he’d just get on with it. “I’m busy, what do you need?”

“Well, I’m in a tight spot and could do with a loan.”

I roll my eyes. “A loan implies you pay it back and I’ve never had a cent of the money I loaned you over the years returned to me.”

“Ah come on, bro, I had some bad luck with investments. How is that my fault? And it’s not like you can’t afford it.”

And there it was, the reference to my wealth as if it was handed to me on a plate. “I can afford it because I worked my ass off.”

“And you’re Mom’s favorite.”

“I can’t deal with your bullshit tonight, Beau. Haven’t you got a girlfriend you can go and annoy?”

“You didn’t hear? She fucked me over, man. Stole all my money, kicked me out, left me heartbroken after I gave her everything. I’m broke, bro.”

I wanted to find that woman and high-five her for getting out from under my brother and the rest I knew was bullshit. He was playing me as usual. “Well, I guess you better take Mom and Dad up on the offer of your old room then.”

“Ah, come on. You can’t expect me to go back home. I’m thirty-four years old.”

“Exactly. So sort your life out, get a job, and find a place to live.”

“You know what, Ryker, you’re a real dick. I open up to you and you kick me when I’m down. Mom would be ashamed of you.”

Ashamed is a strong word but she’d be disappointed. All my mom ever wanted was for her kids to get along and I know it hurts her that we weren’t close. “Two grand is all you’re

getting and don't bother calling me again unless it's to actually catch up."

"Thanks, man, you're the best."

"Whatever, I gotta go." I hung up my mood even darker now and quickened my step.

I rode the elevator, loving the silence of the building at night. This was where I could come when I needed peace, where I could forget about whatever was going on in my head and lose myself in lines of code.

I frowned when the elevator opened and I saw the lights on. They were on a timer unless someone overrode it and turned them on. I put in a call to security that there was a potential break-in and quickened my pace toward my office, bracing in case we'd been broken into and compromised. I pushed open my office door and the scent of jasmine and orange hit me. I paused, trying to let my brain catch up when I heard a sound from my private bathroom.

I moved closer and opened the door, hot steam billowing out around me, the scent stronger here and I inhaled it like a drug. My eyes moved to the shower where a very naked Eden Sager was belting out some song about forgetting she was a lady as her back bowed and soap cascaded down her perfect body.

She was so lost in the moment she had no idea I was there, and I couldn't look away. She was perfect in every way. High full tits which were a perfect handful, tight peaked nipples that had me salivating, soft curved waist flaring out to an ass that I wanted to take a bite out of. Her pussy was hidden by the angle of her leg, but I knew it would be as intoxicating as the rest of her. My dick hardened instantly, and it took everything in me not to tear my clothes off and join her and see if every fantasy I'd had was as good as I imagined it to be.

I must have made a sound because she started and spun, a scream on her lips as she slipped. I dove toward her, yanking the door open as she flailed, my hands sliding all over her silky wet skin.

I gripped her waist and steadied her, and her eyes locked on mine and for a second it was as if the world fell away. Nothing else mattered but the two of us, and the desire flaming between us. Her tongue came out to lick her lips and my control snapped. I pulled her to me, her body soaking my clothes, and slammed my lips against hers.

She went still for a split second as I covered her mouth with mine. I coaxed her lips open, stroking my tongue along the seam and then she seemed to flip a switch. Her body melted against mine, her arms winding around my neck, pushing her gorgeous tits against my chest. I smoothed my hands over her ribs when her tongue met mine and I could taste her hunger for me only making me want to ravage her like a hungry beast.

My thumb rubbed the underside of her breast and she moaned into my mouth as I pulled her closer, lifting her off her feet like she weighed nothing because she was tiny. I'd never had a height kink, but I loved the fact she was small against me. It brought out something feral in me and I growled against her lips.

I kissed down her throat, licking at the droplets of water on her delicate skin and it only made me hungrier to taste the sweetness I knew lay between her legs. I sucked a peaked nipple between my lips, and she moaned, fisting her fingers in my hair, sending a bolt of lust right to my already hard cock.

Fuck, this woman had me in a stranglehold. She was so fucking beautiful I could hardly think straight. My hand slid over her warm skin to her bare pussy, and I groaned when I found her wet. Her back arched as I stroked a finger over her clit, and she moaned my name.

“Ryker.”

It was breathy and sensual, and I was half a second from going to my knees and tasting her when I heard a voice.

“Hello, is anyone in here?”

I pushed away like she was a live wire, my mind suddenly catching up with what I'd done. We locked eyes and I took the

pussy's way out and ran, closing the door so the security guard wouldn't see her.

“Hey, Gus, sorry. It was a false alarm.”

He eyed my soaked clothes and scratched his head. “You sure? I could check around for ya.”

Gus was a retired cop and, while he came across confused half the time, he had a sharp mind even if his body wasn't what it was.

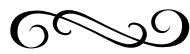
“I'm sure. I forgot someone was working late.”

“Well, if you're sure.”

“I am.”

I need to get him out of here so I could find out what the fuck Eden Sager was doing in my shower and figure out how to apologize for manhandling her like I had, even if my dick was screaming at me to go back in there and finish what we'd started.

Eden



OH MY GOD, OH MY GOD, OH MY GOD! WHAT THE HELL HAD just happened? I'd been sneaking showers here since that first Friday and never saw a soul and now I'd not only got caught by Ryker, I'd practically thrown my wet naked body at him.

I quickly got out and yanked on clothes before running a towel over my hair. I raked a brush through it and shoved it up into a messy bun before shoving my feet into tatty sneakers. How the hell would I explain this? Would he fire me for breaking his trust and violating his privacy?

My body was still humming from that kiss and the masterful way he'd touched me. Every molecule in my body was begging for release, and not just from my own hand but from him. I'd spent two weeks fighting my attraction to him and every day he made it harder by not only being as hot as Hades, but he was kind and sweet and slightly grumpy and broody and definitely alpha, which apparently was my thing.

I packed all my stuff into my rucksack and opened the door. My eyes scanned the office and I found him behind his desk, sitting like a king on his throne. He looked majestic, powerful, and even with his shirt soaked he looked like he ruled the world and we were all just minions orbiting his greatness.

“Would you like a drink? Water, soda, beer?”

I gripped my bag like it could possibly shield me from the embarrassment of what had just happened.

“No, thank you.”

“Care to tell me why you were belting out Shania Twain in my shower?”

I could feel the heat on my cheeks as I hopped from foot to foot. “Well, I um, my water is off.”

I could hardly tell him the truth, that I was still living in my car and got slapped with a parking fine which meant I was even more broke. If I hadn’t paid, they’d threatened to tow my car and as it was my current home, I couldn’t allow that to happen.

“And has it been that way for two weeks?”

I frowned as he stood and came towards me, stopping a few feet away and shoving his hands in his pockets. “No.”

“Funny because I’ve been smelling your scent in my bathroom for two weeks now. Any idea why?”

Shit, that hadn’t even crossed my mind. It had been so good to enjoy the hot water and not feel like I’d needed to rush that I’d got sloppy. Not that it would last. Tonight had been the last of my favorite bodywash and I sure as hell couldn’t afford to buy more. “No clue. Maybe you’re imagining it.”

“Hmm.”

There was something dangerous about Ryker Cabot. Not that I thought he’d physically hurt me, but he seemed to see me more than anyone else and I was afraid he’d find out my shameful secrets.

“Perhaps.”

I could tell he wasn’t buying it but I stayed mutinously silent and lifted my chin in defiance. I’d used his shower. I hadn’t killed a man so he could do his worst. I’d survived before and if he fired me, I would again.

Ryker spun on his heel and his scent surrounded me, mocking me as I sucked it in and admitted to myself that I’d be devastated if I lost this job. Not just because it was my way out but because I’d miss everyone here, especially him.

Back behind his desk, he sat and regarded me, his hands steepled over his chest. “I apologize for the way I acted in

there.” He motioned to the bathroom. “I was taken aback and you’re aware I’m attracted to you, but it’s no excuse. I should never have touched you in that way. It was a mistake and I hope you can forgive me.”

A mistake? Wow, I wasn’t expecting that and I was a little insulted. I’d been called a lot of things in my life, most of them by my ex when I caught him cheating, but never a mistake. “A mistake?”

“Yes. I normally have more control than that. I don’t know what happened.”

“Wow, what an ass.”

Ryker sat forward cocking his brow in confusion. “I said sorry.”

“You’re not an ass for kissing me, you big lug, you’re an asshole for thinking I’m some weak pathetic little girl who doesn’t know her own mind enough to choose. I let you kiss me. I participated in that kiss as much as you and fuck you for making me regret it.”

“Eden.”

I pointed a finger at him, angry and humiliated now. “No. Stay the hell away from me, Ryker Cabot. I’m not a plaything. Keep your lips away from me if you don’t mean it.” With that, I turned on my heel and walked away.

“Eden, wait.”

I was blinking back tears as he grasped my arm. “What?”

He spun me to face him, sucking in a breath when he saw my tears and I swiped them away, not wanting his sympathy.

“You’re not a plaything to me. I wanted to kiss you. Fuck, it’s all I think about, but you work for me and we promised each other to keep it professional and be friends.”

“Fine, we can be professional.” I didn’t elaborate on friends because I wasn’t sure if being friends with him was a good idea.

“Please, Eden, don’t be mad.”

I sighed, my anger ebbing away. He wasn't a bad guy. In fact, I was beginning to think he might be one of the good ones but I was at the end of a fraying rope right now and now I had to add sexually frustrated to the mix. "I'm not mad. I'm tired and I just want to leave. I'll come in on Monday and it will be like this never happened, okay?"

"Thank you."

He dipped his knees to catch my eye. "Need a lift?"

I smiled to let him know I was okay, and I would be, because I had no other option. "No, thanks. It's only a few blocks."

"Let me walk you then."

Absolutely not. "Actually, I forgot I have to meet a friend across the street at the diner."

"Okay, if you're sure. I don't want you walking around the streets at night alone. It's not safe."

God if only he knew.

"I'll be fine. See you Monday."

"See you, blondie."

I smiled as I got in the elevator, and he winked and all my good intentions to put Ryker Cabot out of my mind vanished.

I was fucked.



MONDAY MORNING, I HEADED IN EARLY AND HEARD VOICES coming from Ryker's office. It seemed he was an early riser too. I'd spent the weekend getting my head on straight and was determined to put Friday night and our obvious attraction aside. I had to focus on finding a place to live and having a fling, or whatever it would be, with Ryker wasn't going to aid that. In fact, it would hinder me. The nights were impossibly cold now and I'd barely caught six hours sleep since Friday.

I got to work and was buried in emails when Sally knocked on my door.

“Hey, come in.”

“Got time for a break?”

I stretched my arms up, my back unhappy with the conditions we were sleeping in and my neck was kinked up from sleeping sitting up. “Sure, I could do with a coffee.”

“Good.”

I followed her out to reception so that it wouldn't be left unmanned and sat beside her while we drank our coffee. “So how was your weekend?”

“Well.” Sally looked happy, her face beaming with happiness. She pulled her left hand out from under the desk and flashed a gorgeous diamond ring at me.

I grabbed her hand and smiled, so stupidly happy for her. “Oh my god, he did it.”

Sally nodded, her excitement spreading. “Yep, he took me to the pier where we met and got down on one knee.”

Sally and her now fiancé had met two years ago when she'd been taking her kids on a ferry boat ride. Her then eight-year-old son Jake had thrown up all over his polished loafers. Sally had been mortified and he'd fallen head over heels in love with her right there according to him. They'd been together ever since. It was all the more poignant because her first husband had died, and she'd never thought she'd find love again.

“I'm so happy for you. Tell me everything.”

Sally went on to tell me the story in detail and her joy was infectious and gave me hope that one day I might find somebody who could love me like that.

“I want you to be my maid of honor. I know we haven't known each other long. With work and raising two boys, I lost most of my friends, but I know you're somebody I want in my life, Eden.”

“I’d be honored.”

“Truly?”

“Yes, of course.”

“What the hell is this?”

We both turned to see Mandy glaring at us, her hand on her hip, her skirt so short I could practically see her muff.

“Just a little coffee break.”

“Well, I don’t know who you think you are, taking breaks all the time but Ryker won’t like you skiving on company time.”

The elevator opened behind her and two women walked out, one I recognized from the life painting class and the other had the most gorgeous auburn hair. Audrey, I think that was the name of the woman from the class, looked like an advert for boss bitch weekly if that was a thing. Black pencil skirt, cream blouse that likely cost more than my car, and red-soled black pumps. She was gorgeous, a cross between Audrey Hepburn and Grace Kelly. The other woman wore cream pants and a sage green sweater with cute little ankle boots. Mandy didn’t see either woman and continued her tirade.

“Really, Eden, I’m surprised you’re still here. What with you gorging on the food at lunch and then being a lazy freeloader. Don’t even get me started on your appearance. CabMedia has an image to maintain you know, and trailer trash chic doesn’t cut it.”

I was outraged but before I could respond Audrey caught my eye and grinned like a shark about to take a huge fucking bite out of someone.

“Miss Jacobs, I assume you have work to do rather than stand around here all day behaving like a jealous harpy?”

Mandy jumped and spun around her hand on her chest. “Oh, Audrey, you made me jump.”

“That’s Ms. Kennedy to you and can you please let Mr. Cabot know I’m here.”

Mandy flushed bright red and seemed to consider responding but changed her mind. “Yes, of course.”

“Well, don’t just stand there, run along.”

Sally and I watched as Mandy rushed away and I think I fell a tiny bit in love with Audrey in that second.

“I want to be you when I grow up.” I hadn’t meant to say it out loud but it kind of slipped out.

Audrey turned her smile my way. “That was fun. I hate that bitch.”

“Aud,” her friend warned looping her arm through Audrey’s.

“Fine. Eden, it’s good to see you again. I keep meaning to come and pick up my painting. How are you?”

“I’m good, and it should be in the back room. Just give Candy a call.”

“I will. This is my friend, Amelia Stone.”

I recognized Amelia from the news over the summer, but I hadn’t kept up with how it had panned out. I struck out a hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“You, too.”

“Have you met Sally? She just got engaged this weekend.”

I beamed at my friend who seemed as star-struck by these two women as I was.

“That’s wonderful, show me.” Amelia stuck out her hand and Sally placed hers in it.

“Oh, it’s beautiful. Congratulations.”

It was lovely how genuine the warmth was from both Audrey and Amelia. You only had to look at them to see they were in a tax bracket so far above ours that it was practically outer space.

“When is the wedding?”

“We haven’t decided yet, but I’d love a spring wedding.”

“You must let us host your bachelorette at Club Ruin. We can give you a private VIP booth.”

“What’s this?”

All the hair on my neck rose at the sound of his voice.

“Sally got engaged and I was offering to host her bachelorette party at the club.”

Ryker glanced at me, and his eyes wandered over me for a split second; it felt like the most decadent caress before he pulled his gaze to Sally. “Congratulations and, yes, let us host. My treat.”

“Oh, I couldn’t impose.”

“Nonsense, call it a bonus.”

“Thank you, Mr. Cabot.”

“I should get back to it.” I stood and gave Audrey and Amelia a little wave before I rushed away, eager to get away because being in his company was becoming too addictive.

I spent the rest of the day working with the door closed, barely touching lunch after what Mandy had said, and incredibly self-conscious of what other people might be thinking about the way I ate.

I left late and headed to the soup kitchen, but it was too late, so I made my way to the store looking for the reduced section and had a day-old sandwich for dinner.

The next day I had a meeting on the calendar with Ryker and his head of finance to go over the proposed expenditure and I was getting ready for that when I heard him speaking to Mandy. I hated that woman and was annoyed I’d let her get to me, but I was also annoyed Ryker couldn’t see what a toxic bitch she was in this company. Not a single person had a good word to say about her and she strutted around like she was the CEO most of the time and she still managed to keep her job.

Sighing, I headed for the conference room and hoped I could keep my thoughts of how Ryker kissed like the devil and then offered to pay for his receptionist’s bachelorette. That was

my issue. If he was hot, I could cope but he was hot and sweet,
and it was a deadly combination.

Ryker



“MANDY, ONCE I’M DONE WITH MISS SAGER, I’D LIKE TO SEE you in my office.” She grinned and batted her lashes at me. She wouldn’t be smiling when she saw HR there too, but I’d had enough of being sexually harassed by this woman.

When Audrey told me yesterday how she’d behaved towards Sally and Eden, I was done. I wouldn’t tolerate that kind of toxicity in my company. I’d worked too hard to let an inconsequential person like her damage our reputation as a good place to work and I sure as hell wouldn’t lose good staff over her.

I called reception and it was answered immediately. “Sally, I’d like to see you directly after my ten am meeting with Joan so perhaps around eleven? Get one of the interns to cover reception for you.”

“Of course, Mr. Cabot.”

I stepped out of my office and headed toward the office next door. Eden had been avoiding me and I didn’t blame her, but I didn’t like it and it stopped today. Whatever happened on Friday was done but I missed her ,and I was concerned. I knew she was lying about her water being off. Other things were concerning too, like her weight loss. I was determined to get to the bottom of it one way or another, and it had nothing to do with the raging hard-on I couldn’t seem to get rid of when I thought about her.

“Ryker, shall I go in and get comfy?” Mandy called after me.

If the implication in her tone didn't kill my boner, nothing would. I stopped and turned to her, and she licked her bottom lip, trying to be sexy but all it did was solidify my decision. "No, I'll be five minutes so wait."

I sent Joan a text to make sure she was on her way, and she responded she was.

I stepped into Eden's office, and she looked up in surprise.

"Ryker, I didn't know we had a meeting."

I closed the door. "We don't."

She looked at the door and then back at me and I saw a pulse beat in her neck and I wanted nothing more than to run my tongue along her skin and finish what I'd started on Friday night.

"Is something wrong?"

"You're avoiding me."

"No, I'm just busy."

"Don't lie to me, blondie. I walk into a room and it's like I have fleas or something. You run."

Eden threw up her hands. "Fine, I thought it would be best if we had a little space."

I walked up to her desk and leaned down, bracing my body with my hands on her desk, her scent invaded my senses, and I closed my eyes before opening them to find her watching me with the same hunger I felt. "I don't want space. What I want is to spread you over this desk and make you come all over my tongue." I could see her pulse slamming wildly in her throat and I loved that I could do that to her with just my words because I wanted her as affected as me.

"Ryker."

"I know. You don't date men like me so if I can't have you that way, I want your friendship instead." I meant it too. Eden Sager was fast becoming essential to me and I'd take whatever I could get. I was beginning to see exactly how Lincoln, Harrison, and Beck felt now. I'd take whatever scraps she'd

give me, and I was too chicken shit to examine why because I knew if I did, I might find that I was half in love with my Data Compliance Officer.

“Isn’t that risky? We work closely and we both clearly want to fuck each other’s brains out. It seems risky.”

Fuck. Me.

Those words on her lips had my cock screaming for release and only she would do and yet I’d promised her I’d behave. “We’re adults. We can be friends.”

“Fine. But no more talking about licking me. I’m not a popsicle.”

I huffed out a laugh, not saying what I wanted to which was she was the whole Goddamn meal. “You’ve got yourself a deal, blondie.”

“And just for the record, friends buy doughnuts on Fridays.”

“You got it.”

Her smile was like a shot to the heart. I wanted it again and again and it wasn’t something that had ever happened to me before. I wanted to stay but as I walked back to my own office, I knew the time to get my shit together around her was vital and it started now.

I sighed in frustration to find Mandy’s desk empty again and pushed into my office, eager to get this firing over with. I came to a screeching halt when I saw my PA lying on my cream couch, where I slept more than half the time, naked as the day she was born. Her eyelashes fluttered and she ran a hand down her body before I found my voice.

Anger whipped through me at the blatant disregard for anything I’d said. “What the fuck are you doing? Put your damn clothes on.”

“But I thought....”

“You thought wrong.” I snapped as I picked up her dress from by my feet and threw it at her, just as Joan stepped in

beside me. I looked at her, turning my back on the now-sniffing woman behind me.

“Well, this just got a whole lot easier.”

“Speak for yourself. I need to go find maintenance to clean my damn couch.”

Joan laughed and it was husky. “Why don’t we step out and give Miss Jacobs a second to finish dressing?”

“No fucking way I’m leaving her in my office. God knows what she’ll do,” I whispered harshly.

“MISS JACOBS, USE THE BATHROOM TO FINISH DRESSING, please.”

Joan’s voice was hard but not cold and I heard the bathroom door slam behind me.

“You have cameras in here?”

“Of course. I trust very few people in my office and the only time it’s off is if I turn it off on purpose, mainly when I’m in here. When I leave, I switch them back on. Why?” I didn’t say I’d started leaving them on at night just to catch a glimpse of Eden, that was something I hadn’t shared with anyone.

“Just in case we need it.”

I hadn’t checked it recently because no alerts had come through but now I knew where I might find the answer to how long Eden had been using my shower. I was surprised I hadn’t thought of it but she had me tied up in knots.

I readjusted my cuff, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. I hated drama, which, considering my side hustle, was a joke. Running a nightclub slash sex club meant I was used to seeing people in all different stages of undress and it didn’t faze me in the least but this was my company, which I’d sweat blood and tears over and I wouldn’t have it reduced to a tabloid headline because a money grabbing woman wanted to get her clothes off and proposition me instead of doing her damn job.

“You think she’s going to be an issue?”

Joan shrugged. “Who knows what goes on in her head.”

I sighed and watched Alistair walk out of Eden’s office. I wanted to go in and check on her but I wasn’t about to hover and make her feel uncomfortable. In fact, I should probably mention it to Joan but decided against revealing Eden’s secret showering to the head of HR. It’s not what a friend would do, but I was still her boss and this was already getting complicated. This was why I kept my fun to just sex, it was so much easier than any kind of relationship.

I turned as the door to the bathroom opened and Mandy came out looking a little more put together. She even had a forced smile on her face, and she gave me a come-hither look. The brass balls on this woman were shocking.

“Take a seat, Mandy.”

I headed behind my desk, giving her a wide berth. This wasn’t going to be fun but it was very necessary. It went exactly how I expected it would, with tears, begging, and finally, threats, which was why I had Joan here. I called security up to walk a very vocal Mandy from the building. I walked behind as she was led from my office screaming, with people coming out of their pods or offices to watch. As we passed Eden’s office, I didn’t miss the way she threw a glare and a threat at Eden as she walked past.

“This is your fault. He was mine until you showed up.”

She was practically hissing and spitting like a feral cat but Eden didn’t step back from where she was standing at her office door.

“He belongs to nobody but himself and I’ve known him all of three weeks, so I think this is more about your lack of respect for yourself and those around you than anything else.”

“Bitch.”

I held up my hand. “Okay, enough. Get her out of here.”

I stepped up beside Eden as Joan walked behind security to ensure she left without too much incident. My biceps nudged her shoulder and I felt it all the way to my dick. Just that slight touch and I wanted to strip her bare and fuck her. I moved

away knowing I needed to keep my physical distance if I had any chance of keeping things to friends only.

I glanced down at her and noticed she looked pale. “You okay?”

“Of course. I’ve dealt with worse than Mandy, believe me.”

I don’t know why but the thought of her having to deal with any negative situation made me feel extremely irritated, but then I did know why, didn’t I? With every day, Eden Sager was feeling more and more like she fit into my life like a lost piece.

“Well, this isn’t a usual firing at CabMedia, let me tell you. I fire very few people and our retention is high, but I hate drama.”

“You sure, boss man? Because it feels like you might have a way of attracting drama.”

“Absolutely not. This company is a family. Like all families, we have a few issues but, overall, we run smoothly.”

“Good to know, and this company is the best I’ve worked at.”

Her compliment made me ridiculously pleased. “Really?”

Eden nodded. “Absolutely. I’ve never seen such happy employees, and you always get one or two who cause problems.”

“So, what is it about me that makes you think I like drama?” I turned, shoving my hands in my pockets so I wasn’t tempted to reach out and touch her. This urge was annoying and distracting and very unlike me. I wasn’t affected by women in this way. I liked women, dating them, fucking them. I even had several other female friends now that all my male friends were getting tied down, but I wasn’t consumed by them and this one was all-consuming. Perhaps it was because she turned me down and I spent all my time thinking about it instead of getting laid? Yes, that was it. I’d go to the club this weekend, get laid, and then little Miss Sager would be back where she belonged in the friend zone.

“Well, you asked me out when you were on a date with another woman so that screams drama.”

I laughed. “I can assure you, Audrey and I weren’t on a date. She’s my friend and I have never, and would never, go there with her.”

“Oh, okay. I obviously got that wrong and, honestly, Audrey does seem like a woman with better taste than that.”

I laughed at her teasing, crossing my arms, and ignoring the way her eyes flicked to my chest. “Wait, is that why you said no?”

“No. I said no for all the reasons I told you and it was a good job I did. Can’t have you falling in love with me when I work for you.”

Her smile was fucking magical and lit up her entire face, and I wanted more of them aimed my way. “As if that would happen. If anyone is falling in love, it would be you.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, hotshot, but I’ve sworn off love and men so there’s no danger of me falling for anyone, especially you.”

“Ouch.” I laughed and she gave a short chuckle before heading back inside her office and closing the door.

I’d need to be very careful with Eden Sager because she wasn’t like anyone I’d ever met. She had zero interest in me and wasn’t it fucking perfect that the first woman I wanted was the one I couldn’t have.

I walked back into my office and got to work. I promoted a very happy Sally Rogers as my new PA and answered some emails, before working on a coding issue with the dev team.

It was a good day and I felt happy about how it had all played out despite the shit show with Mandy. But she was gone, and I slept well with dreams of my sexy new friend for company.

The next two weeks were uneventful, and Eden was proving to be a big asset. Everyone in the office loved her and she seemed to make friends with everyone, even the postal

delivery guy knew her by name. My developers crawled out of their dark office when she was around and seemed to hover around like bees around a queen. I watched from afar, trying like hell to keep some distance but every time I looked up, she was there. I found myself spending more time on the main floor, finding reasons to talk to her. She had this pull on me that meant if she was in the room my eyes were on her and I was beginning to feel like a creeper.

She sucked at pool, yet every day she tried, making all my nerds fall hopelessly in love with her. I loved my team. They were more family to me than colleagues and yet I wanted to junk punch every man who looked at her. We were nothing to each other but friends, but she still felt like she was mine. It was possessive and silly because, although we'd said we were friends, we'd never even exchanged a text outside of work. Probably because deep down I knew she was more. Crossing that small line outside of work would send me hurtling down a path I had no hope of navigating without a huge crash and burn at the end.

Work wise life could not be better though, and the office vibe was good after the data breach had hit us all pretty hard. Sally was brilliant, and I cursed the fact I hadn't promoted her sooner. Life looked good if I could just get laid and stop thinking about Eden Sager. I made a call to a woman I'd hooked up with at the club a few times and arranged to meet. I needed a good hard fuck to get Eden out of my head. Feeling positive, I went to sleep with a smile.

A six am call from my lawyer however fucked up all that positive energy with one sentence.

Mandy had gone to the press and accused me of assault. It was all over the media.

Eden



I WAS ABOUT TO SLIP INTO MY OFFICE WHEN RYKER'S DOOR was thrown open and a man with grey hair slicked back off his forehead and a shiny gray suit slammed out, looking furious.

“You’re going to regret this, Cabot.”

“Fuck off, Milton.”

The man barged past me practically knocking me on my ass. “Excuse you, asshole.” He didn’t even turn around but headed for the elevator looking ready to pop a blood vessel.

“Blondie, is that you?”

I walked to Ryker’s open door and stepped in to see him looking rattled but still fucking gorgeous. “You hollered?”

He ran a hand through his hair, and I noticed how exhausted he looked, and it was barely seven-thirty. His eyes swept over me and it felt like goosebumps popped up all over my body as I remembered what his hands felt like on me. Tiny pinpricks of awareness that I didn’t want to feel raced over me.

“Why are you here so early?”

He was frowning at me looking grumpy and pissed off and I had a moment where I just wanted to crawl into his lap and comfort him, even though I didn’t have a clue what put that look on his face. “Good morning to you too, Mr. Cabot.”

He swiped a hand down his face and I took a seat across from him.

“I’m sorry, it’s been a shit start to the day. Good morning, Eden. How come you came in so early?”

“I wanted to get the jump on the day and I’ve always been an early riser. Now, tell me why you’ve had a shit start when it’s barely daylight outside?”

“Haven’t you seen the news or social media?”

“I don’t watch the news or have social media.” I didn’t tell him that my piece of shit phone didn’t have internet and I had no access to a TV so I was out of the loop. Mostly I liked it that way.

“You work for a social media company and you don’t have social media?”

I rolled my eyes at his shocked statement. “Not everyone feels the need to post a picture of the sandwich they’ve just eaten.”

“Fair enough. Well, Mandy has made some pretty explosive accusations in the media.”

“What a bitch. I hope you go after her and make her regret it.” I fisted my hands to keep from reaching out and smoothing a hand down his cheek in comfort.

Ryker cocked his head and steepled his fingers resting his chin on them. “You don’t even know what she’s accusing me of.”

“I can guess, and that didn’t take my college education.”

“I could be a serial killer for all you know.”

“Nah, you don’t give off those vibes.”

“Do they give off vibes? I kinda thought their whole schtick was that they were normal looking.”

“Everyone gives off vibes, people just don’t listen to their gut instinct anymore.”

“And you do?”

“I do now. Let’s just say I had a pretty big life lesson recently that made me sit up and start listening when the

universe gave me cues. You didn't do what she's accused you of, I feel it in my gut."

"Now I want to know more."

"Yes, well, that isn't up for discussion."

"Does it have anything to do with why you flat-out refused my request for a date?"

Gosh, he was relentless but it was kind of charming. "Let's just say I'm off men."

"Aww, your douchebag ex?"

I didn't want to admit how I'd been completely duped or how naive I'd been, at least not more than he already knew. I shrugged, letting him know this wasn't up for discussion. He licked his bottom lip and normally that trick did nothing for me but Ryker Cabot was a different breed and he had my body reacting in ways it hadn't before. Memories of our kiss still made me hot all over.

He seemed to know to change the subject because he sat back and stroked a hand down his tie and I followed the motion wondering if he had a six-pack under that shirt. Of course he did, I'd felt it against me when we kissed and just the memory made my nipples bead. I wanted to cross my arms over my chest but knew I'd only draw attention to myself so I stayed still.

Any man with the kind of big dick energy Ryker had would be sporting a six-pack and most likely a dick to rival a porn star, or at least it had felt that way against my belly. How was I sitting here thinking about his cock when I was off men, and he was off limits? I must be slightly delirious from lack of food and sleep, that was the clear explanation. It didn't stop me from squeezing my thighs together to ease the ache though.

"Well thank you for the vote of confidence, I appreciate it and, for the record, I've never touched a woman without consent."

He blushed a little and I took pity on him. "Not the same thing. So, move on."

I could hear the defeat in his voice and knew it must be the absolute worst for an innocent man to be accused of any kind of assault. It made me want to find Mandy and beat her scrawny ass. “What can I do to help, buddy?”

He took a sip of his coffee and blanched, making a gagging sound. It made me laugh and he glared before joining in and laughing too.

“Fuck, what a welcome to CabMedia. A firing and a boss accused of sexual assault in the first month. Bet you’re halfway out the door.”

“Not a chance. You can’t scare me off that easy, boss man.” He didn’t know that I’d stay no matter how bad it was because I needed this job and I had friends here now and that included him. Shit happened but he was handling it well and I respected that.

“Well, I just fired my lawyer because he forgot to tell me about the two restraining orders that Mandy already has for pulling this shit before.”

“Wow, she’s a piece of work but this is good for you.”

“Yeah, it is because it means the charges won’t stick but she will have damaged my reputation and I don’t take that lightly.”

He was a proud man, I could see that, and this wouldn’t sit well with him. “So make a statement and get a new lawyer.”

I got to my feet and headed for the door as he watched me and I could feel the sexual tension in the room. I needed to avoid Ryker Cabot because he was dangerous to my equilibrium, but I’d promised friendship and if I was honest, I wanted to be around him, which made me two nuts from crazy.

“Blondie?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t work too hard.”

I grinned and shook my head. “Weirdest boss ever.”

His chuckle felt like a feather down my spine, especially given that he was having such a tough morning.

“Get out of here.”

I headed to my office and got to work. The day flew by and only my tummy grumbling loudly made me realize it was late afternoon already, but I’d made a rookie error and not gone down for lunch quick enough. By the time I got there, all that was left was an apple. I snagged it and was heading back to my office when a wave of dizziness had me grasping for something to hold on to. My vision was going black as my fingers hit the soft cotton covering a firm chest.

“Hey, hey, are you okay?”

I was swept up into strong arms as I tried to breathe through it while keeping a death grip on my apple. “I’m okay.”

Ryker set me down on my couch and went to his haunches, gently pushing my head between my knees. “You most certainly are not.”

I could feel him stroking my hair as I breathed through it and the dizziness eased. “This is so embarrassing.”

“Don’t be silly. You’re only human and women swoon at my feet all the time. I’m completely used to it.”

I laughed and lifted my head slowly. “So cocky.”

He made a sad expression. “It’s my cross to bear.”

“Poor you.”

Concern covered his handsome features when I glanced up. “When did you eat last and don’t lie to me?”

How had he possibly known I was about to tell him a white lie?

“Let’s just say I have a sibling who’s a compulsive liar so I can tell when someone is going to lie to me.”

“Yesterday at lunch.”

“Why didn’t you get something from downstairs?”

I held up my apple. “I did.”

“That is not proper food.”

His features darkened, his jaw ticking as he stood and stalked to the door, disappearing through it for a minute. When he came back, he had a protein bar and a soda in his hand.

He sat beside me and handed me both. “Here, eat and drink this until lunch gets here. I asked Sally to order us something from my favorite Italian place so I hope you like pasta.”

“I love it, thank you, but you don’t need to babysit me. I can manage.”

He raised a brow. “Obviously.”

He popped the tab on the soda, wrapping his hand around my shaky one on the can and I took a sip, feeling slightly nauseous as the bubbles hit my empty belly.

“It was an oversight. I’ll do better.”

“See that you do.” He stood and walked to the door, and I hated the idea that he might be mad with me.

“I’m sorry.” The lack of food and sleep was making me emotional, and I couldn’t hide the tears in my voice.

“It’s what friends do, right? Look out for each other.”

I didn’t argue with that and nibbled on the protein bar feeling better already.

“Wait here. I have to make a call but I’ll be back so don’t move.”

I stayed where I was until he came back and sat beside me. “You can go. I’m feeling better now.”

“No way, blondie. We’re going to eat, and you’re going to tell me why you’ve been showering in my office and hardly eating.”

I gulped, trying to figure out what I could say that he’d believe. Luckily the food arrived and he got busy setting me up with pasta carbonara and breadsticks. I moaned when the delicious goodness hit my tongue and heard him mutter something but I was too busy having a foodgasm. It had been so long since I’d had a hot meal that I forgot how good it was.

I ate slowly, not wanting to look like a pig or make myself sick. My stomach had shrunk and I was full after eating half.

“Eat up.”

I patted my belly. “I’m full.”

“But I got tiramisu.” He looked sad like I’d just rejected him and I wanted to smile at him and wipe the look from his face.

“Maybe I can eat it later.”

“Yes, I’ll keep it in my fridge for you.”

“Thank you.” I’d like nothing more than to devour it and him, but I knew it wasn’t a good idea to do either. Although with every thoughtful action he did, the reasons to stay away from him seemed to be falling by the wayside.

He was about to speak, likely to coax an answer from me when Sally knocked on my door.

“Sorry to disturb you, Ryker, but Mr. Hudson Carmichael is here to see you.”

“Send him into my office and I’ll be right there.”

Ryker began to clear away our food and I stood up, feeling ten times better than I had in days.

“Better?”

“Yes, much. Thank you, Ryker.”

“Pleasure and don’t think I forgot about our conversation. This isn’t over, Eden. As soon as Hudson is gone, I want answers, and remember I can spot a lie.”

“Okay.”

He nodded, gifting me with a warm smile that seeped into my skin and settled around my heart, cracking the ice I’d encased it in after my ex shattered everything and tore my world from under me. I’d been wrong about Ryker. He was a good man. Comparing him to that lowlife coward was wrong and I felt ashamed that I’d done it even for a second. He might be a womanizer, but he cared and, right now, that was a bad

thing for me because it was seriously hampering my ability to resist him.

I finished my day off, my heart in my throat every time I heard Ryker's door open but when my clock read six and he was still in his meeting, I knew I could probably escape. It would give me one more night to figure out an answer to the questions he had.

I gave a quick wave to Sally then rushed to the elevator. It was dark out and the first early flurry of snow was gracing the world. It most likely wouldn't stick but it gave the air a coldness that didn't detract from its beauty. There was something silent and soothing about the snowfall. I hugged my jacket around me tighter and hurried along the sidewalk, head down not wanting to stop or engage. I just wanted to get back to my car. The background anxiety I felt every day when I left everything I owned in that heap of metal ate at me, growing bigger the closer I got.

I spotted the old grey Honda and a sigh of relief moved through my body. I was almost to my car. I glanced around to ensure nobody was hanging around when a man stepped from the alley behind the Seven-Eleven.

“Hey, pretty lady, want some fun?”

I ignored him and moved to my car as he laughed and walked away. I wish I could say it was unusual, but it was my life and I knew most were harmless. One or two had gotten a bit persistent though, which meant this would probably be my last night here. Tomorrow I'd need to leave early and find a new spot. I closed the door and locked it, throwing my bag on the passenger seat, which also served as my dressing room, living room, and storage for my good work things. I slept in the back and kept all my other belongings there and in the trunk. I pulled up the cheap sun shades that stuck to the glass with suckers, and gave me an illusion of privacy, and sighed.

Despair hung over me like a cloud even as the white flakes fell on the windshield. I shucked off my boots and was about to change into joggers for the night when there was a loud knock on my window, making me jump. Looked like the guy

was more persistent than I'd thought. I shoved my feet back into my boots in case I needed to run and slid the shade down.

I gasped as dread seized me by the throat when I came face to face with Ryker Cabot. As he glanced at the interior of my car, realization seemed to dawn and his expression turned furious.

Ryker



I WAS JUST SHOWING HUDSON OUT AFTER WE'D SPENT THE afternoon going over the defense for Mandy's claims. Hudson Carmichael was the best lawyer I knew and more than that, I trusted him. He was also my friend's nemesis so I'd asked Audrey if it would be an issue if I hired him to defend me.

True to form, Audrey had put her friends first and said while she didn't like the guy, he was excellent at his job and would do a good job for me, and so far she hadn't been wrong. He had a plan and was convinced we'd have this cleared up quickly. He did advise me not to be seen out with lots of women over the coming weeks because, if by some miracle it did go to trial, they'd play up the fact that I was always with a different woman and try and make out I assumed it was my right to take what I wanted without consent.

I told him it wouldn't be an issue. It was laughable really. I'd been a fucking monk for the last month thanks to a certain woman who I couldn't get out of my head.

I caught sight of the elevator closing and turned to Sally, who was packing up to go home. "Did Eden leave?"

"You literally just missed her."

"Shit."

I turned to Hudson and shook his hand. "I gotta go, but let's keep in touch over the weekend and see how this plays out."

"Just do what I asked and I'll handle it. I don't see it coming to much but women like her are tenacious."

“Thanks, buddy.”

Hudson gave me a funny look and shook his head as I nodded, grabbed my jacket, and rushed to the exit taking the steps two at a time and catching the elevator on a lower floor. I made it outside as the first snow began to fall and I cursed. I fucking hated snow, slushy messy shit that caused havoc.

I glanced around looking for Eden. I knew she was avoiding answering my questions and though I hadn't reviewed the tapes from my office yet, what with all the shit being thrown at me today, I was fairly convinced of what I'd find. I didn't mind but I was worried about her, especially after today, and I was done being polite. I wanted answers and I'd get them.

I caught sight of her as she rushed between two parked cars and followed her at a distance. It was a bit stalkerish maybe, but I wanted to make sure she was okay. I was being a good friend and that was the story I was sticking to.

A frown crossed my brow and unease crept over me like tiny spiders as I continued to follow her. She was heading into a part of town that wasn't safe during the day, let alone at night. I saw her looking around, watchful as if she was uneasy too but her steps were sure as if she knew exactly where she was headed.

She rounded a corner and I saw a man step out of an alleyway and say something to her, but she ignored him and kept walking until she reached a beat-up old Honda that should have been sent to scrap years ago. She got in and I waited for her to start it up but she just sat there. I walked over ready to tell her she wasn't driving that heap of junk.

I knocked on the window, surprised to see she'd pulled up blinds and a horrible realization began to dawn on me as everything began to suddenly add up, even as I tried to reject the thought from sheer horror. I knocked again, impatience caused by a deep-seated anger making it harder than necessary. She opened the blind but my gaze slid past her to the mountain of belongings and the sleeping bag in the car.

She was living in her goddamn car! Fury pulsed through my blood and I tried to wrench the door open, but it was locked. This should have made me feel better, but it didn't in the slightest. "Open the fucking door, Eden."

Snow settled on my shoulders, but I was so angry I'm sure the heat of it was melting everything around me.

Eden pushed open the door, giving it an extra hard shove when it stuck and exited like a fucking elegant fairy. Crossing her arms over her chest, she cocked her hip and gave me a glare that I knew shouldn't be sexy but got my dick standing to attention. "Did you follow me?"

I stepped closer so she had to tip her head back to look at me, her body a hairsbreadth from mine. "Yes."

"Why?"

I'm not sure why I found her attitude such a turn-on as I did, but I was too angry with myself for missing the signs for so long with her to enjoy it. "Because you're living in your fucking car." I knew I was shouting but didn't give a fuck.

Her face dropped and I dipped my knees and gripped her chin, forcing her eyes up to mine and my breath left me. So many emotions, shame, embarrassment, and guilt, but the one that got me was defeat. I hated it and I wanted to find that asshole ex of hers and beat him until he couldn't get up. How could anyone treat a person like this, especially a woman like Eden? She deserved the absolute best and all she'd gotten was shit. How her family could let this happen made me want to rail at them for being such piss-poor parents.

"Are you going to fire me now?"

My head snapped back at her question. Why would she even think that? Had people been so neglectful of her that she expected the worst all the time. "What the fuck, blondie?"

I was now angry at her for thinking I was that man, and angry at myself knowing I'd been in a nice warm safe bed with food for the last month and she'd been barely surviving in this back alley surrounded by hookers and drug dealers and

God only knew what else. I reached past her and grabbed her bag and began shoving stuff into it.

Eden tried to snatch it out of my hand, but I held on tight. She was no match for me.

“What the hell are you doing?”

I straightened and pointed a finger at her. “You’re not staying another night here!”

Eden threw up her hands. “Oh, okay, Mr. Bigshot boss man, I’ll just book myself a room at the Four Seasons tonight instead.”

“Don’t be smart, Eden.” I wasn’t in the mood for her attitude, I was too busy fighting the urge to toss her over my shoulder and take her anywhere but here. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me.”

“Well, it’s not exactly something I’m proud of.”

I stopped with my hand full of her panties that I’d grabbed from the back seat and looked at her. “You have fuck all to be ashamed of, Eden Sager. You got dealt a shit hand and nobody has stepped up to help you. But that stops now.”

I shoved the silky scraps of lace into the bag and tried not to imagine peeling them off her with my teeth.

“Meaning?”

“You’re coming home with me.”

“No. I won’t take handouts from my boss. I won’t be beholden to anyone ever again.”

“Eden, if I have to toss you over my shoulder and carry you the entire way, you’re doing as I say.”

“You’re not the boss of me!”

“You’re being ridiculous. Of course I’m not the boss of you but I am a friend, and this isn’t safe or right.” Being a dictatorial ass wasn’t working on Eden, so I switched tacks. “Are you really going to send me away and let me worry myself sick over my friend sleeping in her car when I have a

spare room? Don't you think I have enough to deal with, what with Mandy fucking Jacobs trying to blow up my life?"

"Wow, you're really going to play that card?"

I smirked because I saw her softening. "I'll play whatever card I need to make sure you're safe, blondie."

"Urgh, fine, but only for a few nights."

I agreed because I knew arguing would be pointless, but Eden Sager wouldn't be going anywhere until I was satisfied she was safe and warm.

"Good, now let's go. I fucking hate snow."

I sent a text to my driver to meet us as she grabbed a few more items from the back seat, including a charger for a phone that was from a science museum, it was so old. Another thing I'd be fixing tomorrow. She walked beside me as I accessed the heating control on my apartment and increased the thermostat. She must be freezing, and I wanted her to warm up quickly. Her jacket was hardly enough for the spring, let alone a New York snowfall.

"What kind of monster hates snow?"

"The kind who broke his leg on the ski slopes his junior year of high school and lost any chance of playing football in college."

"I didn't know you played football."

"I don't now and luckily computers were always my first love but I hate that because my mom insisted on a ski trip, a stupid accident took my choices away."

Eden stopped when she saw my car waiting at the corner, looking out of place and drawing attention. "We should go before you get your wheels stripped."

She was joking but I could already see unwanted attention aimed our way and she'd been fucking sleeping here. The desire to lecture her was strong but I didn't want her hopping out of a moving car and telling me to go fuck myself, which she might. Eden was a proud little thing and I admired that.

We arrived at my address and she looked surprised.

“What, no penthouse or mansion?”

I shrugged. “I buy blocks and do them up for cheap housing and I like this one. It’s a good area and close to the office and the club.”

I grabbed her bags from her hand when she went to carry them and scowled at her, watching her roll her eyes as we headed to the lift.

“The club?”

Ah yes, no social media or TV. That made more sense now. “I own Club Ruin with my friends.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Maybe I can take you there next weekend.”

Eden shrugged. “Meh, I’m not really into all that.”

I looked across at her pretty features, noting the circles under her eyes and the weight she’d lost, and wanted to kick my own ass for not noticing sooner. It was fucking unforgivable, but I’d make it up to her. I’d ensure Eden Sager never had to worry about sleeping in her car ever again and I knew just how I’d do it. I’d keep it to myself for now though, let her settle in first, build her weight back up and let her rest.

The elevator doors opened and I headed to the door of my apartment. It was the largest and took up the entire top corner. I wondered what she’d make of it as I pushed open the door and saw it from her eyes for the first time.

It had zero personality and, for the first time ever, I cared what a woman thought. “It’s not exactly a candidate for House and Home but it serves a purpose.” I led her through the kitchen, which was spotless and all white, through the living room, which had a couch, a coffee table, and a TV, past the row of servers I had set up so I could do my own shit and back it up away from the Club or CabMedia servers, and into the spare room.

“It’s nice. Needs a few cushions or photos but I’m hardly in a position to judge seeing as my home for the last two

months has been a Honda Civic.”

Jesus. Two fucking months. I shivered with horror that she'd been dealing with that. “This is you. It has its own bathroom and I'm just next door.” I placed her bags on the bed and stepped back, fighting the urge to pull her into my arms and make promises I had no business making.

She looked a little lost and tears pricked her lashes like diamonds. “Blondie?” I opened my arms and she fell into them as I wrapped her against my body. She burrowed closer as if she wanted to get inside my skin and I held tighter, wanting that more than I ever thought possible, but things were more complicated than ever now. I wanted her, no doubt about it but she lived with me and she worked for me. If I fucked this up, which I knew I would because I'd never wanted more than a night with a woman before, then I'd cause a nightmare for us both. I should take it slow, allow her some space to regain her balance and be the friend I kept promising I was. The problem was, I'd had a massive realization as she stood in my arms in my spare room, and that was that I loved her. I'd fallen in love with Eden Sager, and I had no clue what to do with that.

I lifted up and she raised her head, so much vulnerability in that one look and it made my chest cave.

“Sorry, I was a little overwhelmed.”

I swiped her tears away with my thumbs relishing the soft skin beneath my touch. “I'm the one who should be sorry, blondie. I left you sleeping in the cold. *Fuck.*” I bit out the word, so disappointed with myself for not seeing she needed me.

“No, you didn't know. How could you? I'm not your problem to fix, Ryker. I can stand on my own two feet. I just need a few days.”

“You're the strongest woman I know, blondie.”

Her mouth gave a half smile. “I wish that were true, but I allowed myself to fall for a man who was shallow and entitled and believed everything he said, even when he was showing me glimpses of who he really was.”

“You loved him, so you believed him. That’s not a crime, Eden.”

“I’m not sure it was love. I think I got swept along by the notion of it.” She stepped back and swiped her eyes with a laugh. “But I learned my lesson. Fool me once, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.” But I wanted to argue that we weren’t all like her ex. Some of them treated people right.

“You’re a good friend, Ryker, and I’ll pull my weight while I’m here and pay you back.”

Oof, the friend zone was a lonely place to be. “Please don’t insult me. I have more money than I can ever spend.”

“Still, I want to be useful.”

I could respect her wanting to pay her way and feel like she had some control over her life. “Fine. Do you cook?”

“I’m a great cook.”

I smiled, loving that she looked stronger already. “Great because I burn water and that isn’t a joke. I’ll buy the groceries, you cook.”

“Deal and be prepared to have your socks blown off.” She rolled her lips as if she too had jumped on that double meaning. “Don’t say it, boss man.”

“Spoilsport.”

I needed to get out of there before I did something stupid like tumble her onto that white comforter, shove that dress up, and fuck her until this ache inside me eased.

“Get settled. I’ll order pizza.”

“Sounds good, and thank you, Ryker.”

I turned and looked at her. “My pleasure, blondie.”

I hot-footed it back to the kitchen and grabbed a menu out of the drawer before leaning against the island. This may have been a big mistake because the chances of keeping my hands off Eden Sager, when I knew the friend zone was a bullshit barrier, were looking slimmer with each fucking smile. I was

in love with this girl and it was disconcerting and terrifying and exciting. I wanted to fix everything in her life that didn't make her smile. I wanted to protect her and paint fucking pictures and walk in the snow with her but I couldn't because she was still recovering from what that fuck knuckle ex of hers had done.

I needed advice, and I knew exactly who I should ask. I sent a text to the group I had with the girls and waited.

RYKER: EMERGENCY. I NEED ADVICE.

NORRIE: OH, IS IT A GIRL? HARRISON SAID YOU WERE CRUSHING ON A GIRL.

RYKER: I'M NOT CRUSHING. I'M IN LOVE WITH HER.

AMELIA: AUDREY, YOU OWE ME TEN BUCKS.

AUDREY: PLEASE. I PRACTICALLY SET THIS UP.

LOTTIE: LOVE HER SEXY BODY, OR LOVE-LOVE HER LIKE YOU WANT TO WRITE SONNETS ABOUT HER SMILE?

RYKER: IS THERE A DIFFERENCE?

NORRIE: OF COURSE. LOVE IS YOU WANT TO SLEEP WITH HER AND WORSHIP HER BODY. LOVE-LOVE IS YOU WANT TO DATE HER, MARRY HER, AND HAVE BABIES WITH HER.

RYKER: WHAT IS IT IF YOU MOVE HER INTO YOUR APARTMENT AND WANT TO FUCKING MURDER HER EX-DOUCHE NOZZLE BOYFRIEND AND NEVER LET HER OUT OF YOUR SIGHT AGAIN?

AMELIA: OH ALPHA RYKER IS OUT TO PLAY. THAT'S DEF LOVE-LOVE.

LOTTIE: WHAT DID HE DO?

RYKER: DOES IT MATTER?

AUDREY: YES. WE NEED TO KNOW IF WE'RE BURNING HIS HOUSE DOWN OR JUST DOING A LITTLE DAMAGE TO HIS LIFE.

RYKER: FUCK ME. YOU'RE TERRIFYING, AUD.

AUDREY: AWW, THANKS.

RYKER: TO ANSWER YOUR QUESTION, HE CHEATED ON HER, STOLE ALL HER MONEY, AND LEFT HER HOMELESS. I JUST FOUND OUT SHE'S BEEN LIVING IN HER CAR FOR THE LAST TWO MONTHS (ANGRY EMOJI, ANGRY EMOJI)

NORRIE: OH, WE'RE BURNING DOWN HOUSES, BABY.

LOTTIE: NORRIE, YOU'RE SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME WITH AUDREY.

AUDREY: YOU GO, GIRL. I SAY WE RUIN HIM. IS THAT WHY EDEN IS AT YOUR APARTMENT?

RYKER: YES, I WASN'T GONNA LET HER STAY IN HER FUCKING CAR.

LOTTIE: AWW I LIKE SWEET RYKER MORE THAN FUNNY RYKER.

RYKER: FOCUS, LADIES.

AUDREY: I'M ON A DATE. HE'S BORING AS SHIT. HE'S TRYING TO MANSPLAIN THE STOCK MARKET TO ME. MIGHT NEED BAIL MONEY IF I STAB HIM IN THE EYE WITH A FORK.

RYKER: JESUS CHRIST. FOCUS.

NORRIE: WHAT WAS THE QUESTION?

RYKER: HOW DO I PROCEED? DO I JUST TELL HER I WANT TO FUCK HER UNTIL SHE FALLS IN LOVE WITH ME TOO OR SEDUCE HER SLOWLY AND BE HER FRIEND? WHAT'S MY PLAY HERE?

AMELIA: BECK SAYS THAT'S A HORRIBLE IDEA.

RYKER: WHY THE FUCK ARE YOU TELLING BECK?

AMELIA: WE'RE IN BED. HE'S READING OVER MY SHOULDER.

RYKER: (FACE PALM EMOJI)

LOTTIE: RYKER, JUST BE HER FRIEND. SHOW HER WHO YOU REALLY ARE AND I'M SURE SHE WON'T BE ABLE TO HELP FALLING FOR YOU.

LOTTIE: THIS IS LINC. STOP TEXTING MY WIFE, FUCKER.

LOTTIE: IGNORE GRUMPY. HE'S JUST FEELING LEFT OUT.

NORRIE: LOTTIE, GO SCREW YOUR HUBBY. AUDREY, I HAVE A BAIL FUND READY FOR YOU. RYKER, WE NEED TO MEET. BREAKFAST TOMORROW?

AMELIA: COME TO MY PLACE. XANDER AND BECK ARE MEETING WITH MASON MASTERS ABOUT SOMETHING.

NORRIE: I'LL BRING COOKIES.

LOTTIE: NO!

AUDREY: GOD, NO COOKIES. PLEASE!

AMELIA: I HAVE IT COVERED. I'M MAKING FRENCH TOAST.

RYKER: I DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THIS.

AMELIA: LOOK, MIDAS, DO YOU WANT THE GIRL OR NOT?

RYKER: FINE. SEE YOU ALL AROUND TEN?

AMELIA: WORKS FOR ME.

I set my phone aside, not entirely sure what I'd started but if I had any chance of seeing where this could go, and I wanted that, I'd need some help.

Eden



THE LAST FEW DAYS HAD BEEN UNREAL, IN A GOOD WAY. Ryker dropped me off on the corner before work like I insisted, and I walked into work every morning with a full belly and no bags under my eyes. He'd disappeared that first morning but came in later with a swing in his step and a smile for everyone.

We'd had take-out the last few nights because he said it was only fair until I got settled. I can't say I didn't like him taking care of me, but I couldn't allow myself to become dependent on it. He wasn't making it easy though. My bathroom had mysteriously filled with five different shower gels, including my favorite. I had two different kinds of shampoo and conditioners to choose from. He'd even stocked the bathroom with sanitary products, which was sweet and thoughtful, and made it so much harder not to let the barriers between us slip. The fridge, which had been pretty bare that first night, was now stocked with chocolate, full-fat creamer, and a freezer full of ice cream after I mentioned how much I missed those things.

Tonight, though, I was making my special turkey enchiladas and I was going to make Mole this weekend. It was my favorite. Mole was my Mexican sauce, but it required a long time to cook and lots of stirring so was best saved for a weekend.

My mom and dad had spent a year in Mexico before my brother and I were born and she'd soaked up recipes like a sponge and passed them down to me. She may not be the

typical mom or wife but my mom loved hard. She showed it by caring for those around her, whether that was with food or changing a spark plug on a Harley.

I'd changed into yoga pants and a tee, and I was excited because today was pay day. It meant I could start looking for a place to live. I knew it wouldn't be easy, especially as I still didn't have a deposit but I had to try. Living with Ryker was great. He was a good roomie, considerate, sweet, tidy, and I felt relaxed around him. I trusted him and that was dangerous ground. I could grow used to him being around far too easily. The sexual tension between us felt like it was a rolling boil, ready to spill over at any second. If it was just sex, I could handle it, maybe. The truth was, I was falling for him and I couldn't allow myself to get so caught up again that I lost myself, but it felt like pushing against the tide fighting this thing between us.

“Hey, can I help?”

I turned at the sound of his voice and almost choked on the spit in my mouth. He sauntered over to me at the island, where I was chopping peppers, wearing grey joggers and no shirt. His feet were bare and his hair was tousled and wet from the shower. He looked like sex on legs. His chest was chiseled, his nipples perfect round discs, which I found irritatingly arousing. His abs had not six but eight carved slabs of deliciousness that led to a trail of hair that pointed toward his dick. Two lines of muscle roped over his hips making my mouth water. Even his fricking belly button was sexy.

I mean, who has a sexy belly button? Nobody, that's who. And don't even get me started on the bulge that seemed to be growing before my eyes.

“My eyes are up here, blondie.”

My eyes snapped up to see him watching me with his arms crossed as he leaned against the island, a giant smirk on his handsome face.

“You should probably put a shirt on. It's not sanitary to prepare food shirtless.”

Really, Eden, that is what you're going with? Maybe the intoxicating scent of him was killing off my brain cells because I felt tongue-tied around him.

Ryker gave me the sexiest smirk as he leaned forward so his front was pressed against my side and bent his lips to my ear. "So I suppose me tearing those yoga pants off you and eating you out on this island would be considered unsanitary?"

His breath feathered against me and I gripped the counter to keep my legs from buckling at the dirty image he'd just painted. I wanted that more than anything, and the longer I fought this attraction, the weaker my resistance to him became.

He stepped away with a chuckle. "Don't worry, blondie. I'm only messing with you." I sighed but he went on. "The first time I taste that delicious pussy, I want you sitting on my face playing with those gorgeous tits."

With that, he walked to his room and I sagged against the counter, dropping the pepper I was chopping. Hell, could you die from too much stimulation? Because right now, my body was on fire. My pussy ached, and I felt a low hum in my belly from the constant state of arousal around this man, and to make it worse, he was nice.

Just this week, he'd gifted every employee a new smartphone with a full twelve-month contract fully paid. It was fully loaded too, data, text, and calls and it meant I could talk to my family and Facetime my parents. I hadn't seen their faces in so long and I missed them. Thanksgiving was coming up and I couldn't afford to go home but at least now I'd see them.

"Dinner smells great."

Ryker came back out of his bedroom wearing a t-shirt that said Nerds do it better. I couldn't confirm but judging by the equipment he was working with, and the dirty talk, I believed him wholeheartedly. "It won't be long."

"Can I help?"

“No, you paid remember. Just sit and relax or come talk to me.”

If I had any sense of self-preservation around this man, I’d tell him to leave me in peace but it seemed I was like Icarus, determined to fly too close to the sun.

“I could get used to this.”

“Yeah, well you might have to. I checked some ads earlier and there are no apartments or even rooms I can find that don’t want a rental deposit.”

“I actually wanted to talk to you about that.”

Dread pooled in my belly. Oh God, he was sick of me already. “Oh?”

He leaned his elbows on the counter and I tried not to get lost in the muscles and veins on his forearms or the size of his hands. “Yeah, so you remember I said I bought buildings and did them up?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I have five units still left to do in this building. If you’re prepared to wait six weeks and slum it with me, you can have the last one. It’s not huge, but it has two bedrooms. I’m happy to forgo the deposit as I know you, and they all come furnished so you could save for something else.”

“Wow. That’s incredibly generous, Ryker, but I don’t know if I can accept.”

“Why not? It’s not like I’m a bad landlord, and it’s safe. It’s close to work, and the rent is fair. I only rent to families or people who are recommended to me through the charity I helped set up.”

I didn’t really have a reason to say no except it felt like charity and I hated the thought of him seeing me that way. “I’m not a charity case, Ryker.”

“No, but you *were* dealt a shit hand. This is just me balancing the scales, and you’ve saved me a shit ton of work and gone above and beyond at the office. It’s my way of saying thank you.”

“And I’d pay a fair rent?”

He named a number and I nodded, biting my lip. It was fair. On the lower side but still fair, and everything he’d said was true. It was a great location, I wouldn’t need to buy furniture, and the lack of deposit meant I might be able to go home for Christmas. “Would I have a rental contract? I don’t want to end up here again if we ever fell out or you got sick of me.”

He smiled at me and my breath caught in my throat. He was so handsome it was almost hard to look at him.

“I could never get sick of you, blondie, but yes. I’d give you the same contract the other tenants get.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

I smiled wide and he reached up and cupped my cheek. His touch was light and tender, but it was the emotion that flashed across his face that spoke volumes.

“One condition, blondie.”

I almost groaned. *Here we go.*

“Don’t make me fall in love with you in the next six weeks and then break my heart, okay?”

I laughed, throwing my head back and losing his touch as I did. “Oh, I’m too annoying for that to happen. By the time I leave, you’ll be ready to dig a grave and dump me in it.”

He smiled but it didn’t reach his eyes. I had the oddest feeling in my chest that maybe he’d meant what he’d said but I dismissed it as I served up the enchiladas and we went back to talking about movies and music. Ryker was a fun, intelligent man, and being around him was easy. Even with the undercurrent of attraction or maybe because of it.

By the time we went to our own rooms, the atmosphere was almost gone, just that sizzle of attraction fizzing beneath the surface. I changed into my shorty pajamas, loving not sleeping in layers and layers of clothing so I didn’t freeze to death and brushed my teeth before scrubbing my face. I looked

healthier already and my hip bones stuck out less. It was amazing what a few days of sleep and good food could do. I'd always considered myself lucky but after this experience, I'd never take a safe bed for the night for granted again.

I climbed into bed feeling happy and relaxed, my head sinking into the soft pillow. Silence filled the room, punctuated by the sound of light movement from next door. I knew that Ryker's bed backed onto mine and the thought of him so close, probably naked, or so my brain was imagining, made my pussy ache.

We may have said we'd be friends but the spark between us was moments away from burning down the building and we both knew it. Slipping my hand down my belly, I slid my fingers into my panties knowing I'd find myself soaked with desire for my enigmatic boss slash landlord.

Pleasure washed over me as I stroked my clit, my eyes closing on a moan as I imagined it was him touching me. I kicked the covers off with my feet, lifting my ass so I could shove my shorts and panties off. It had been too long since I'd come, and I needed this more than oxygen right now.

Teasing my entrance, I spread my legs wider, pushing two fingers inside my aching pussy, my back arching off the bed. My other hand cupped my breast, pinching the nipple as I used my own wetness to draw circles over my pulsing clit.

I imagined Ryker, his head between my thighs, those blue eyes looking up at me as he made me come with his hands and mouth. I moaned again, no thought for anything other than the pleasure I was shamelessly chasing.

I was climbing the peak, my climax in sight, when my bedroom swung open and I didn't have to imagine him watching me any longer. My fingers froze but I didn't scream or stop, I just lost the capacity to move or speak. Our eyes locked, I watched his shoulders lift, his bare chest heaving, nostrils flaring as his gaze moved over me, down to where my bare pussy was exposed, my fingers paralyzed on my clit.

"Don't stop, blondie. Make yourself come while I watch."

His words are husky, like he just woke up, and heavy with desire. His boxer shorts are tented with the evidence of how much he likes what he saw and I preened inwardly that I could make a man like Ryker Cabot so aroused that his cock was trying to break through the thin fabric.

“Eden.”

My eyes flick up to his where he’s watching me with lust. “Yes?” I hardly recognize my own voice, it’s smoky and cracked with need.

“Do you want me to leave?”

“No.” The word rushes out of my mouth on a breath.

“Good girl.”

A wash of pleasure moves over me, and I feel my body tingle at his praise.

Ryker steps closer but not close enough to touch me. I feel his eyes on me and the way he’s looking at me leaves me breathless.

His hands are at his sides, and I want them on me but I’m too chicken to ask for that, knowing it’s against everything we agreed.

“I want you to do as I say. Can you do that for me, blondie?”

I nod, my words lost somewhere in this fog, but he shakes his beautiful head.

“Words, beautiful. I need words.”

“Yes, I can do that.” I force the words out frightened he’ll disappear and this fever scape will go with him.

“Good. Spread your legs wider. I want to see that pretty pussy.”

Jesus, the man can talk dirty and I love it.

I follow his command and move my legs wider, exposing the most private part of me to his hungry eyes. His fingers

pinch his bottom lip and I want to taste his kiss, to feel those fingers.

“Fuck. Such a pretty cunt, all wet and dripping.”

I arch at his words, feeling achy and desperate for release.

“Were you thinking of me when you had your hands all over that sweet cunt, Eden?”

The thought of lying doesn't even cross my mind. “Yes.”

“Tell me. Paint me a picture, beautiful.”

I've never been this bold before, my past sexual experiences were all a bit meh, and lacking. Yet I don't think about disobeying him. “I imagined you on your knees, your hands spreading me wide.” He sinks to his knees exactly like I imagined. “Your thumbs part my folds before teasing my entrance.”

Ryker's hands move to my inner thighs, his touch electrifying everything as my hands fall to my sides. He strokes my skin slowly, in no rush as if he wants to imprint every inch of my body in his mind.

His thumb swipes at my folds, his eyes dilating with desire as my back arches, and my pussy feels empty and needy.

“Then what?”

“Then you fucked me with your fingers and mouth, sucking on my clit until I couldn't stand it, until I couldn't remember my own name.”

“Goddammit, blondie, that's so fucking hot. Did you know I could hear your little moans and whimpers through the wall? Did you know you'd make me lose my mind?”

Before I can answer, he pushes two fingers into me, acting out my fantasy for me.

“Fuck, so tight and wet. Your pussy is like fucking nirvana.”

His head dips and I feel his tongue swipe through my folds as he continues to slowly fuck me before flicking my clit.

A whimper lodges in my throat as he continues his mission to make me lose my mind. His tongue switches between licking and flicking, the rhythm changing as he learns my body and makes it sing. I'm a panting, writhing mess as he strokes his fingers over my G-spot. My legs shake and he doubles his efforts as I mumble and moan incoherently. I should be mortified but all I can think about is chasing the high his mouth promises.

"I could drink your juices morning, noon, and night, blondie. So fucking sweet."

My hand lands in his thick, dark blond locks and he chuckles as I push his head back down, not caring how wanton it makes me look. "Don't stop."

"No intention of it. Not when you taste so good."

His lips fasten over my clit and he sucks as his fingers twist and my body hovers for just a second, pulsing on the brink, and then like a roller coaster I fall. Every molecule in my body zings with untold pleasure. My body shakes and a scream leaves my lips and I don't hold anything back.

Wave after wave of pleasure consumes me until I'm boneless. My breaths come in soft pants as I stroke my fingers through his hair. As I force my eyes open, I see Ryker watching me with hooded eyes. His chin is coated in the evidence of what just happened, and I feel suddenly shy and uncertain. His tongue whips out and he licks his lips before giving me a wink.

He kisses the inside of my knee and stands, his magnificent body a work of art. The man should be gracing the billboards in Times Square, he's that hot. I move my hands to cover myself and he frowns, before pulling the covers over me and dipping to kiss my hair.

"Get some sleep, beautiful."

"What about you?" I motion to his boxers where his huge, hard cock is sitting proudly across his abs.

"This wasn't about me and, believe me, I had more fun watching you come and tasting that sweet pussy than I can

ever remember. Just get some rest. We can talk tomorrow.”

My body languid and relaxed from my orgasms agrees, and I can already feel my body shutting down. “Mmmm, okay.”

The soft click of the door is the last thing I hear before I’m pulled into a dreamless sleep.

Ryker



I WAKE UP WITH MY COCK HARDER THAN EVER, DREAMS OF what happened with Eden last night, coupled with the taste of her on my tongue, meant it was an uncomfortable night. I hadn't lied to her when I said it was about her and how much I'd enjoyed it.

Just the memory of her chasing her pleasure and the sounds she made as I fucked her with my fingers and tongue are enough to make my dick weep. Throwing back the covers, I head for the shower where I quickly take care of my angry cock.

Normally, I'd take my time and enjoy the mental images but this morning I'm too eager to see Eden, so I jerk off quickly. It doesn't take a lot with the sounds she made swimming in my head.

The kitchen is empty when I get there so I put a pot of coffee on and begin to take ingredients out of the fridge for scrambled eggs and bacon. I wasn't lying when I said I wasn't much of a cook. I get by but that's about it.

I have my back to the door when I feel the air change and turn to see Eden standing in the entry to the kitchen, looking unsure. She's pulling the sleeves on her sweater over her hands and bouncing from foot to foot. It's adorable and I want to smile but I also want her comfortable around me.

“Morning, you want bacon and eggs?”

“Yeah, sounds nice.”

“Great, how do you like your bacon?”

She walks in and takes a seat at the counter still looking a little unsure. “Crispy bordering on singed.”

I grin at her as I crack more eggs and whisk them up. “A woman after my own heart.”

She returns my smile and it takes everything in me not to go over and kiss her, to put my hands on her and claim this woman who is upending my life in the best way. I barely control the urge, knowing she’s in flight or fight mode right now and this matters far too much for me to blow it by being overeager.

“Can I help? After all, the kitchen is my domain now.”

“Maybe grab some juice from the fridge for us both.”

She moves around my kitchen with ease and a relaxed gait that speaks of comfort in this space. Watching her has become my new favorite sport. Every move she makes is with grace and elegance. Eden doesn’t have to try to be sexy or alluring, she just is. I noticed it the first time we met at the art class and every day since.

She pours us both a glass and our fingers brush as she hands it to me, her eyes jumping to mine as she feels the electricity we can no longer deny spark to life.

“Thanks.”

A small smile lifts her lips, giving me a delicious view of those dimples that drive me crazy.

I pull away before I can let my cock rule my brain and throw her over the island and eat her for breakfast instead. We chat about mundane things like our plans for the day and she tells me that she’s making mole for dinner and what that entails. I ask about her Mexican food repertoire and she tells me a little about her parents as we eat at the island.

Watching her slide a fork between her lips should not be a sexual experience but everything Eden does is sensual and erotic, or perhaps it’s just her. Norrie, Amelia, Lottie, and Audrey convinced me to woo her slowly. To show her a little of what she was missing. Not to overwhelm her with sex, but to show her who I am as a man. This is all new to me. I don’t

woo women and I certainly don't cook for them, but nothing about Eden is usual and neither are my feelings for her.

I spent so many years playing the field, to then watch my friends find their soulmates, but I never expected it for me. It just wasn't on the cards. I'd never had a girl I wanted to own, to consume, to claim, until I met Eden.

Eden places her knife and fork together on her plate and sighs, and the sounds go right to my already hard dick. I groan and her wide eyes shoot to mine. I see every doubt and fear reflected but I also notice the way her pulse pounds in her neck and the way her eyes dilate with heat.

“Eden, we should talk about last night.”

She stands, her chair screeching as it almost flips back from the sudden movement. “I get it, and I agree we should pretend it didn't happen.”

Unease and a swift denial are like a kick to my gut. Eden begins grabbing the plates to clean up and I grip her wrist to halt her movements. “Sit down.”

My tone has more bite than I intended but it works as she lowers herself back into her seat. I keep my hand on her wrist, my thumb running over and over the delicate skin. Touching her is becoming addictive.

“I was going to say, that last night was amazing. I didn't even come and it was the most erotic experience of my life, and believe me when I say that's saying a lot.” I haven't explained the club yet but I will in due course.

“Really?”

Her dark blue eyes are wide and full of something I can't put my finger on but I hope it's a good sign. “Fuck yeah. Watching you fall apart, feeling you, tasting you, it was incredible, Eden. I know we said we'd be friends and I know you have your reasons for not wanting to get involved but I've never wanted anyone the way I want you. And not just in bed, either. I like being around you, hearing your voice, listening to you talk and laugh.”

“What are you saying?”

“I want us to see where this could go.”

I feel her pull back slightly and rush on, not wanting to lose her. “We can take it slow, one day at a time, or go at your pace, but I really think we could have something here.”

“I don’t know, Ryker. How would it even work with me living here and working for you? I can’t lose this job.”

I hate that she’s been through so much at the hands of a man who never deserved her. “I can guarantee you won’t lose your job and if you’d prefer I speak to HR and have it so you no longer report to me, then I’ll do that. As for the living here.” I tug her off her seat and she comes willingly, falling into my lap. Her scent surrounds me and I want to bury my head in her neck and inhale until I’m drunk on her. “Having twenty-four-seven access to you feels like a fucking gift but if it’s too much, I can go and stay with a friend and you can stay here.”

She pulls back, looking at me incredulously. “Are you insane?”

“No, but I’m deadly serious about how much I want you, Eden.”

“You scare me.”

Her voice is small as the words slip out and I’m not certain she meant to say them out loud when she rolls her lips between her teeth.

I lift my hand and tug her bottom lip away from her teeth, keeping my grip on her chin. “You fucking terrify me, blondie. But from day one I’ve wanted you, and this thing between us feels more inevitable than the tides rolling in or the moon rising.”

Her lips tip into a smile. “That was almost poetic.”

“I try.”

I keep her gaze, letting her know the decision is hers alone now. I’ve said my piece, but I won’t bully her into something she isn’t ready for, no matter how badly I want her in my bed and, more strangely, my life.

I see the second she makes up her mind.

“Fuck it.”

Her fingers tunnel into my hair and she seals her mouth over mine. I waste no time taking over control of this kiss. I fist her hair, angling her head perfectly so I can plunder her mouth. My free hand sweeps down her spine until I’m cupping her sexy as fuck ass. My fingers flex, digging into her flesh and a little whimper falls from her lips as I swallow it down.

Standing, I lift her in my arms, my mind stalling on how little she weighs and the reason for it but as her legs wrap around my waist, those thoughts die and only the single focus of wringing as many orgasms as I can out of this woman fills my brain.

I move with confidence as I head for my bedroom, kicking the door shut with my foot, before striding to the bed and dropping Eden in the middle where she bounces with a laugh. I’ve always been single-minded about sex. It had a purpose, a focus, and it was never a cause for laughter or lightness but as a giggle erupts, I can’t help but respond. Everything is different about this encounter; everything is different about this woman.

“Oh, you think I’m funny, huh?”

She lifts onto her elbows and cocks her head. “I think this entire situation is funny. You’re so far out of my league it’s not even funny.”

I don’t like that thought in her head one little bit, so I bend down, caging her in with my hands on either side of her body. “Other way around, beautiful. I don’t know what kind of men you’ve been with but you’re fucking spectacular. You’re a gift, and if they didn’t treasure you then fuck them, they didn’t deserve you.”

She blinks once, twice, and lifts her hand to caress my cheek. The emotion is almost overpowering as I look at her. The urge to spill words that have never left my lips for a woman is almost overwhelming, so I kiss her to stop myself from blurting out anything that might make her run.

My fingers find the edge of her sweater and draw it up over her body, revealing the flawless pale skin to my eyes. Eden helps me pull it up and over her head and then she's before me in leggings and a plain white bra, and I've never seen anything sexier. My need to touch every inch of her is like a drumbeat in my chest.

I stand from the bed and gaze at her, lust clouding my brain. She's breathtaking and she has no clue. "Get naked, blondie, I think I made a promise about you riding my face."

Her sharp inhale makes her tits heave and I have to squeeze my cock over my sweats to stop from popping off like a Goddamn schoolboy. Her gaze follows my movements and her tongue comes out to lick her bottom lip, forcing a growl from somewhere deep inside me.

"Did I stutter, Eden? I said get naked, and I expect you to obey me."

I wait to see if she'll react to my dominant tone as I think she will, and she doesn't disappoint.

She rises on her knees and strips as I do the same, my eager eyes moving over every curve as it's exposed to me. The tattoo on her leg is intricate and enhances every beautiful curve and I can't wait to explore it but not now. All I can think about right now is tasting her again.

I stand before her naked, my cock leaking pre-cum, my balls aching from the need to be inside her and take her in fully. She's fucking stunning, with high tight nipples on tits that are just a handful, and a small, trim waist that needs a little weight to stop her hips from poking out but only because I hate the idea of her being hungry. She's perfect and she's mine. I stroke my cock, my hand fisting tight and her mouth drops open, an invitation, a temptation, but I can wait for that.

I move to lie on the bed beside her as she kneels in the center of my huge California king. I shove a pillow under my head. Reaching for her hand, I give it a tug to get her attention, which is fixed on my cock. "Come here."

I tap her leg and she lifts it to straddle my hips and my cock pulses. Impatient fucker can wait. I need another taste of this goddess. Eden hovers over my abs, her pussy glistening and wet and I can smell her desire and it's heady and enticing. She's like a smorgasbord and I don't know where to look first. My brain is trying to take in all her beauty as I run my hands over her smooth thighs, and up to her waist.

“Nervous?”

I can sense it coming off her in waves and wait for her to deny it, but she nods.

“A little.”

“Talk to me, beautiful. Why are you nervous?”

She glances behind her and my cock flexes, the showy little fucker.

“You're big.”

I grip her hips, my fingers flexing, gaining her attention as I smooth my hands over her skin. “We don't have to do anything you don't want, Eden. You're in control and we can take it slow, but I have no doubt whatsoever that we fit. You were made for me.”

“I trust you.”

Her words hit me like a blow to the chest, filling me with a sense of pride.

I reach up and cup her nape, dragging her mouth to mine so I can show her how much her words mean to me. Her hands sweep over my chest, her short nails digging into my skin as the passion between us grows into something unstoppable. I could kiss her until eternity ends and it would never be enough. The thought only solidifies my need to claim this woman.

I release her and she looks at me with the same wonder in her eyes. “Climb up.” I tap the top of my chest and she blushes but does as I ask.

“Good girl, now I want you to pinch those puffy nipples while I feast on your gorgeous cunt.”

I know my words shock her, but from the way she shivers and her pussy glistens with more of her juices, I also know she loves it. I keep my eyes on her as her hands pinch and roll her nipples, her head falling back on a groan that is wanton and seductive, and then I lick her from hole to clit.

A strangled moan falls from her and I hook my arms under her legs and wrap my hands around her thighs from the back and fuck her with my tongue and lips until she's squirming and moaning, her hips rocking into me as she uses me to chase her climax.

My movements are frenetic, the taste of her like a drug I can't get enough of. The sounds she's making are driving me to wring every last drop of pleasure from her. Her body sinks lower, her movements jerky now as she rolls and gyrates against my face, her juices running down my chin and I've never seen anything sexier in my life. I could come from watching her without a single touch. She's like a wet dream I never want to wake from.

“Oh God, oh fuck. Ryker, I'm.... I'm gonna....”

I drink her down, my eyes on her hands and face as she lets go and soaks me with her pleasure. She's flushed all the way down her body as her clit pulses against my tongue, her body undulating in its own rhythm.

Then she's screaming my name.

“Ryker, oh God. Fuuuuccckkk.”

I double my efforts and she soars, riding my face like a porn star and I know I'm wrecked for any other woman after this. I've never even been inside her and yet I know she's it for me. I don't let up, pulling every spasming second of pleasure from her body, then gentling my ministrations, savoring her.

I kiss her pussy gently before kissing the inside of her thighs as she sags back onto my chest. Her eyes are wild and the deepest blue I've ever seen. “More?” I ask the question, wanting inside her more than anything but not willing to rush her if she isn't ready.

A wide smile graces her face as she bites her bottom lip, the shyness still evident even after she rode my face like a queen. “Yes, please.”

I smile as I tap her leg and she lifts off me. I snag her hips and turn her back to me before I push gently between her shoulder blades.

“Don’t move.”

I keep my eyes on her as I snag a condom and roll it down my hard length. Eden hasn’t moved but I can see her squirming, her greedy pussy just begging to be filled.

I kneel behind her as her ass lifts in the air and I smooth my hands down the arch of her back and grip her ass cheeks, spreading them slightly so I have an unimpeded view of her sweet pussy. “I can’t wait to feel my body slam against yours as I fuck this sweet pussy.”

A moan falls from her as she wiggles her ass, tempting me. I land a light slap on the silky skin and she jumps. “Greedy girl.”

“You spanked me.”

I fight the grin as I rub my crown through the wetness gathered at her entrance, my other hand clenching on her hip. “I did and if this soaked pussy is anything to go by, you fucking loved it.”

Eden is silent but she needs to learn to use her words. “Words, blondie.”

“What was the question?”

I thrust slowly, forcing my cock to rub against her clit and her fingers fist the covers as she looks back at me. “Do you like me spanking you?”

I continue my slow glide and she forces an answer past her lips. “Yes. Oh God, yes.”

“Good.”

I notch my crown at her entrance and slowly begin to push inside her tight, wet heat. It takes every ounce of control I

have to go slow, but the last thing I ever want to do is to hurt her.

“Fuck, Eden, you feel like heaven. Watching this tight cunt swallow my cock, there’s no way I’m gonna last long.”

Finally, I’m seated fully inside her and I close my eyes and look to the heavens, fighting the urge to rut into her like some wild beast. Eden wriggles and I reward her with another light slap and feel her pussy clench around my dick.

“You want me to fuck that hungry pussy hard, Eden? You want me to ruin you?”

“Oh God, yes.”

Before her answer has died on her lips, I’m moving but I don’t fuck her fast yet. I begin a slow, hard glide in and out of her. My hands stroke her spine, her gorgeous ass cheeks. I can feel her trembling, her pussy slick and wet as she moans and whimpers, fueling the delicious ache in my balls.

She’s close, I can feel the way her pussy spasms and her body shakes. I lean forward, bracing her spine with my chest and hook her waist as I kiss her neck. “Give me that mouth, beautiful.”

Eden turns her head and I kiss her, our tongues tangling frantically.

“You feel so fucking good, baby.”

“Ryker, I need...”

“What, baby? What do you need?”

A half sob escapes her as if she can’t articulate or doesn’t know, but I know what she needs, her body like a road map to her pleasure.

I lift up and smooth my hand over her waist, my fingers flexing on her delicate skin and knowing I’ll leave marks. Something about that turns me on even more. I slide my fingers around to her clit and put the slightest pressure on it as I pound into her, and she detonates like a rocket.

A scream leaves her as her pussy clamps down, almost strangling my dick and I have to fight through following her over, but I want to revel in watching her come on my cock.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God.”

My cock grows harder as she babbles incoherently, her arms giving way, so I pull her up against my body and hold her upright as I turn her head with my hand on her cheek and kiss her long and deep.

Pulling back, I catch her heavy satiated gaze. “You got one more in you, baby?”

Her eyes widen and she looks unsure. “I don’t know. That one was a first.”

I don’t answer that because the thought that no man has ever bothered to take this woman’s pleasure and made it a priority makes me furious, but also the dick half of me is pleased I got to give her that. “I do and you can.”

“Okay.”

“Good girl.”

I sit back down on my knees, so she’s almost sitting astride me reverse cowgirl. “Arms up, baby. I want you to hold on to my neck so I can watch those tits bounce as I fuck you.”

She does as I say and I steal another kiss from her lips before I grip both her hips and begin to fuck her in earnest. Long, hard, powerful strokes that make her tits jiggle and her ass bounce against my thighs.

At this angle, I’m deep and it feels so good I know it won’t be long before I spill inside her. “Such a greedy little slut for my cock.”

“Yes.”

A flood of desire from her pussy shows me she likes my dirty talking. “You gonna milk my cock, beautiful? Your pussy hungry for my come?”

“Oh God, yes.”

Her words make me lose my mind and I buck up into her, fucking her like a savage as I hit her g-spot and she comes all over my cock, dragging my own climax from me. My balls tighten and I shoot my load into her on a bellow that would wake the dead.

I'm so done.

This woman is it for me. She just isn't ready to hear it yet. But I can wait because if I have my way, we'll have all the time in the world.

Eden



“WOW, THAT WAS...” MY WORDS TRAIL OFF AS I TRY AND fail to find the ones to describe what just happened. I’m lying in Ryker’s huge bed, wrapped in his arms after the best sex of my life and I feel safe and terrified at the same time. I’ve had good sex, but that was another level.

His fingers flex where they rest on my hip, my head on his shoulder as he seems to pull me in even closer.

“I know. It was something I’ve sure as hell never experienced before.”

I sit up on my elbow so I can see his face, his hair mussed and sexy, blue eyes lazy and languid. He’s like every dream man I have ever managed to conjure and more because he’s real. “Really?”

He reaches for me, pulling me down and rolling me, so he’s hovering between my legs, his hard cock making me moan as it brushes against my clit.

“Really. I wouldn’t lie to you, Eden.”

I want to believe him as he looks at me with such openness that my heart does this weird skip, but I’ve been more than burned before. The fact that I only have a roof over my head because of his kindness leaves me wary. “Shouldn’t you be cool about this and act all nonchalant?”

His fingers trace over my collar bone and it takes everything in me not to purr like a contented kitten.

“I don’t know what kind of men you’ve been with, Eden, but I don’t dick around or lead people on. I like you a lot and I think from the noises coming out of your mouth that you like me too.”

His lips graze my neck just below my ear and I can’t control the shiver that moves through my body. Ryker seems to have a direct line to every erogenous zone in my body.

“I know you’ve had a shit time and I hope you’ll tell me about it when you’re ready, but I want you to give this a chance, beautiful.”

It’s hard to think straight when he’s slowly rocking his hard length against my clit in a slow tease. “I can’t think when you’re touching me.”

His deep chuckle rumbles against me and it’s probably my favorite sound in the world right now.

“I said I won’t lie to you. I never said I wouldn’t use every method of persuasion at my disposal to make you say yes to this.”

“I already said yes.”

“Blondie, your body said yes. I want your brain and heart on board, and I know that’s a bigger ask.”

I remain silent because he’s read me so easily and so correctly. I did say yes because I’ve never wanted a man like I want him, but I can admit to myself, if not him, that I’m one foot out the door, even now. “My life is complicated.”

He lifts his head and gazes down at me, and I feel like he’s peeling back every layer and exposing the most vulnerable part of my heart.

“Then let’s uncomplicate it. I want you, you want me. Let’s not make any promises or demands. Let’s go with the flow each day and see what happens. I don’t do relationships but from day one everything has felt different with you, blondie.”

I laugh. “Because I was probably the first woman to turn you down.”

He grins and shakes his head. “Not true. When I was a teenager, I got turned down the same as anyone.”

“But not recently?”

“No, but I think a lot of that is because of who I am to the world, not who I am up here or in here.” He taps the side of his head and then his heart and I feel my heart flip over. “You’re the first woman who sees me and I want to explore that. I get you have scars from your past but don’t let someone who hurt you take away what could be something wonderful.”

I cock my head. “I want to.”

“Then do it, blondie. I won’t hurt you. I promise.”

“You can’t make those kinds of promises.”

“Maybe not but I can promise I’ll always treat you with respect and kindness.”

His words are honest, I can feel how much he means them and I’ve seen with my own eyes how much people love and respect him. That counts for something, so I jump and hope the landing doesn’t destroy me, because no matter how badly Beau hurt me, Ryker is a man I don’t think I’d recover from. “Okay.”

He grins. “Okay?”

“Yeah, let’s see where this goes. All I ask is you don’t lie to me.”

“That I can do.”

I run my hands down his sides and he shivers, forcing his cock to slide through my pussy lips and making us both moan.

“I need to be inside you, beautiful.”

“What you waiting for, an invitation?”

He cocks a brow and I love the way the energy changes in the room, the sexual tension flying off the scale.

“I think perhaps that sassy mouth of yours needs filling with a big hard cock.”

I've never been with a man so vocal during sex and the things he says make me so turned on it's hard to think. I've never enjoyed blow jobs but the thought of bringing this man to his knees with my mouth is intoxicating.

I reach between us and grip his cock, stroking his velvety length. Ryker closes his eyes but then his steel grip lands on my wrist and he yanks my hand away.

“Did I say you could touch me, beautiful?”

“No.”

“I think my little cum slut needs to learn some manners.”

God, why does this alpha thing make me so wet? It's like a switch has flipped. I normally hate such language and would never tolerate a man speaking to me in such a way, but with him, it's perfection. He's watching me carefully to gauge my reaction and it's another reason I allow it, because outside of here he's tender and sweet.

“Turn over and put your head at the bottom of the bed.”

I scramble to do as he says as he stands at the bottom of the bed and watches me, his thumb and forefinger pinching his bottom lip. His cock is long and thick, standing proud against his abdomen. I can feel my mouth water with the need to taste him, to have all that power in my hands.

“Like what you see, blondie?”

I nod as I lie on my back and watch him come closer until he's standing above me, his heavy balls high and tight above my head. “Good girl.”

I want to preen every time he says those words to me. I never considered myself to have a kink of any kind but when it comes to him, I seem to have more than one.

“I'm gonna feed you my cock for being my good girl, and while you suck me down, I'm going to play with this pretty pussy.”

Oh God, can you come from words alone? Because if you can, I'm moments away.

His hand strokes my pussy, moving over my belly and up between my breasts. He uses both hands to push my breasts together, his thumbs toying with my nipples, as he does.

“Gonna fuck these gorgeous tits, too.”

I arch my back, rocking my hips, seeking something and finding nothing but air. “Yes, please.”

“Head back until it’s hanging off the bed and open for me.”

I scooch back until my head is hanging like he instructed. Ryker fists his cock and I watch hungrily as he strokes it hard and slow, a bead of pre-cum resting on the tip. Bending his knees, he paints my lips with it and it’s the most erotic thing of my life. My tongue snakes out to taste him and I moan from the heady salty taste.

“You like that, beautiful? You want more?”

“Yes, God yes.”

His chuckle is deep but I have no time to enjoy it because he’s there and guiding his huge cock into my mouth. I suck and tongue his crown as he lets me set the pace for now.

“Fuck, that feels good. God, your mouth is heaven.”

His praise spurs me on and I take more of him. I realize I won’t have a lot of control at this angle and I’ll have to trust him to set the pace. He must read my mind.

“If it gets too much, tap my leg and I’ll stop immediately, okay?”

I nod as best I can and then all thought is gone as he leans over my body, forcing his cock to hit the back of my throat, but it’s not that, it’s his magical mouth sucking on my clit that makes me moan around his length.

Ryker begins to fuck my mouth carefully as he grips my thighs and eats my pussy like it’s the only thing keeping him alive.

I lift my hips and he growls, tightening his hold on my thighs and I know I’ll have bruises and something about that

turns me on. I want this man undone but his movements are careful. I want him as unhinged as I am. I grab his ass and shift slightly so he's fucking my throat now and feel his control slip a little. His fingers plunge inside my pussy as he bites my clit and I detonate.

Pleasure consumes me, as wave after wave rolls over me and all I can do is moan and whimper around his cock. I think he's going to stop but he doesn't and soon another orgasm is rolling through me and I don't even know if it's the same one or a second, because it doesn't seem to stop.

I suck on his cock as he slowly kisses between my thighs like he wants to clean up every drop of my climax. He's gentle with me but I want him unleashed so I lift my hand between his thighs and fondle his balls. He jerks, his cock hitting my throat as far as I can take him. Tears run from my eyes as I take him, his big body moving over mine as his control slips and he fucks my mouth.

“Fuck, what you do to me, Eden.”

His voice is raspy and deep as he stands and grips my face, shoving his cock into me over and over. I feel him swell and ready myself for his come but he pulls out suddenly and steps back, his hand gripping his cock, his eyes moving over me like a caress.

This man owns me in this second and I want it. I want to be his but more than anything, I want him to be mine.

“I gonna come all over those gorgeous tits.”

My hands move to my breasts, and I whimper as I pinch my nipples and squeeze them together.

“Fuck, that's so hot.”

I angle my head to watch him, his powerful hand stroking his cock, head tipped back as he roars my name, and hot jets of his come spill onto my chest and belly.

His head sags and he looks at me like he'd go to war for me. The moment is still, silent, both of us breathing hard, sweat dripping down his chest. His eyes move from my face, and he smooths a hand over my breasts as he rubs his come

into my skin. The sticky substance was like a brand as he massages it all over my chest and belly before he scoops a bit onto his finger and rubs it over my sensitive clit, making me moan and twitch from the sensation.

“I marked you.”

He isn't looking at my face as he speaks but at my body. I follow his gaze and see the come drying on my skin and for a second I think that's what he means, but then he runs a finger over the bruises on my inner thighs.

“Yes, you did.”

“Does it hurt?”

I shake my head. “Not at all. I liked you not treating me like a China doll.”

“Would it freak you out if I said I like seeing my marks on your perfect skin? That it turns me on to know you're walking around with my finger marks on you?”

“Maybe it should, but I like it too. It's like a secret that only we share.”

Ryker looks at me then, before dropping onto the bed and gathering me into his arms and kissing me. This kiss is different. It's still hot, with all the passion between us I can't ever imagine it not being that way, but this is lazy and tender as he holds me like I'm precious.

“I've never met anyone like you before, Eden.”

“In a good way?”

“In the best way. It's like we fit. You like hot, dirty sex and can handle my needs like nobody I've ever known, and yet I don't want to just fuck you and walk away. I could lie here all day and just hold you and kiss you, and it would be enough. That's new for me.”

“I like you too, Ryker. I like that you seem to know what I need in bed and out, and that you respect me enough to trust I can handle it.”

“I do respect you.”

“So apart from being a bossy alpha with a branding fetish, what else do I need to know about you?”

His finger is tracing over my thigh where I have my ink. “Well, you might be surprised to know I’m obsessed with this tattoo. I googled the shit out of it after the art class to try and find something like it, but I couldn’t.”

“I designed it, so you won’t find anything the same. Maybe similar but mine is unique to me.”

“It’s sexy as fuck.”

“So, a tattoo fetish, good to know.”

He smiles at the humor in my voice and kisses me again. “More like an Eden Sager fetish.”

“You seem to know a lot about these things.” I’m teasing him but he goes still, and I lift when he sits up. “What is it?”

He loops his arms over his bent knees as he looks at me. “I promised not to lie, but I need to know you won’t tell anyone about this or my partners will skin me alive.”

“Okay, I promise.”

He cocks his head and then turns to me, pulling me between his legs so I’m nestled against him. “How can you promise that? You don’t know what it is.”

“I choose to trust you.”

“God, you’re something else, something special.”

I smile shyly, not used to such compliments.

“You don’t like compliments, do you?”

“They just make me feel awkward I guess.”

“Well, get used to them because you’re gonna hear them a lot.”

“Okay, stop with the avoidance and tell me.”

He tweaks my nose. “See, smart and sexy. I’m doomed.”

I swat his hand away playfully, loving this side of him as much as the dominant side. They fit into a man who is

difficult, if not impossible, to resist. “Talk.”

He sighs. “So, you might be aware I own a share of Club Ruin with my friends.”

I nod. “Yeah, with Audrey and a few others. You offered to host Sally’s bachelorette party.”

“Yes, exactly. What isn’t known is that we have a third floor that’s very, very exclusive.”

“How so?”

“Membership is via a recommendation or invite-only, and it’s very difficult to get.”

“Not a crime or that unusual in this city.”

“No, but the things that happen on the third floor are a little more... unconventional.”

My mind is slow to catch on. “In what way?”

“It’s a sex club. Members pay a yearly fee and anything goes as long as it’s consensual. We have themed rooms, a bar, a dance floor and a stage, spanking benches, bondage shows. People can have sex publicly or get a private room, depending on what they like.”

“Wow, I wasn’t expecting that.”

He’s watching me carefully as if I might run, but I’m not disgusted, I’m intrigued. “Do you ever play there?”

“I have in the past.”

“Publicly?”

“No, I mostly like to watch and then go back to one of the rooms.”

“Watch a show or a couple?”

“Anything really, groups, bondage shows, put on by people we bring in especially, or just people fucking.”

“Does it turn you on?”

“Fuck yeah, watching people fucking is hot. Does that freak you out?”

Weirdly it doesn't at all. Do I hate the idea of him doing it without me, yes, but the thought of him watching with me is hot. "Will you still go there now and play?"

Ryker grips my chin hard and forces my gaze to his. "No. When I said we were going to try this, I meant monogamously. I don't share and I'd never disrespect you by being with anyone else but you. It's why I told you because sometimes I have to go in as part of my responsibilities, and I want you with me when I do."

"You want to take me to a sex club?"

"I want you with me. We can go in through the back and not have to see a thing or we can do whatever you want, but I mean it, Eden. I won't fucking share you."

"Have you in the past?"

Ryker frowned. "Shared women?"

"Yes?"

"Yes, I have, but not you. Never you, what I feel for you doesn't compare."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay, I understand and when you go, I want to be with you and maybe we could explore a little and see if I like it. I seem to have unlocked a few kinks in the last few days."

"All right, beautiful."

My tummy chooses that moment to rumble and Ryker grins, a lock of hair falling over his forehead, making him look boyish and handsome. "Let me feed you, and then I'm going to fuck you in the shower."

Oh boy!

Ryker



I'M LOOKING OUT OVER MANHATTAN AS I DRINK MY SECOND cup of coffee of the morning. I can't concentrate on anything but the woman in the office next door. This weekend we hardly left my bed. I should be over this desperate need to be inside her, but it's like my brain has been taken hostage by her, and, weirdly, I'm okay with it.

We didn't talk about anything heavy after our first conversation and I still don't know the full details of how she ended up living in her car. My hand tenses on my mug and I wish it was the neck of the bastard who hurt her. To do that to anyone is beyond my comprehension but to her, it's unforgivable.

I'm hoping she'll tell me in her own time if I give her enough space. This is all new to me and while I don't mind bossing the fuck out of her in bed, I don't want this fledgling relationship to blow up in my face.

I turn as my cell rings and sigh when I see Hudson's name. This nightmare with Mandy is still hanging around like a bad smell, and it's one of the reasons I went along with Eden wanting to keep things quiet about us at work. Plus, there was the fact that she was worried about how it would look with her being so new and fucking the boss.

It had been on the tip of my tongue to tell her that I didn't care what others thought and that we were more than a fuck. Hell, I'd put a ring on her finger tomorrow if I knew she wouldn't run for the hills. An image of an Eden-shaped hole in

my door a la the Road Runner cartoon flies through my brain, making me smile as I answer my cell.

“Hudson, tell me you have good news.”

“Not exactly. It seems Mandy has been sniffing around the Club and talking to some of the women you work with.”

My heart sinks, his tone indicating I’m not going to like what he says next. “And?”

“A woman, who is nameless at this point, claims you coerced her into having sex with her and then humiliated her.”

“Bullshit. I don’t need to coerce women to have sex with me.”

“Listen, I believe you, but it’s all about the optics and what they can make a judge believe.”

“Shit.” I spear my fingers through my hair and pace. “What now?”

“Is there anyone likely to have said that or want to hurt you?”

I consider the staff roster and only one person sticks out and that’s Monica. “Maybe. I had sex with her once and she wanted more. She got a bit aggressive about it so I shut her down pretty firmly. She probably didn’t take it well.”

“Any witnesses?”

“No, but I know she was the same with Lincoln before he met Lottie.”

“Will he go on record?”

“I’m not sure. He won’t want it to upset Lottie but I can ask him.”

“Do it. You need every advantage you can get. If this goes to court, it will get ugly so we need to shut her down. Have you considered paying her off?”

“No fucking way. I’m not an ATM for assholes who tell lies about me.”

“Fine, then speak to Coldwell and get back to me. In the meantime, I’ll get my PI to look into Monica.”

“Hudson, could this end up in court, like really?” The thought makes me feel sick. Not because of me, but I don’t want Eden to be dragged through my mess.

“Not if I can help it. Mandy has a lot of holes in her story and her history is against her, but we need to play it smart. Are you keeping yourself out of trouble like I asked?”

I don’t want to lie to my lawyer and Hudson is a good man, no matter what shit is brewing with him and Audrey, but I agreed to keep things quiet about me and Eden until she was comfortable with it.

“Your silence isn’t making me happy, Ryker.”

“It’s complicated, and for me it’s serious but nobody knows about it. I agreed to keep things on the down low for now.”

I hear Hudson sigh and can imagine him shaking his head. “What the fuck is wrong with you Kings? Can’t you keep it in your pants?”

I don’t like his implication and I tell him so. “This isn’t me thinking with my dick. I told you, it’s serious.”

“So you’re the latest King to fall.”

I stay silent, not ready to confirm that and not able to deny the truth of it either.

“Fuck, that leaves the Queen standing.”

“You gonna be the one to bend the knee for her, Hudson?”

“Ha, she’d cut off my head or my dick. Maybe even both if I did.”

I laugh because he’s probably right, Audrey doesn’t fuck around and her animosity for Hudson is well known, just not the reason. That she guards with her life.

“Whatever. Just keep a low profile and maybe avoid the club.”

“Fine, and thank you.”

“Don’t thank me until it’s over.”

Hudson hangs up and I put a quick call in to Lincoln who says as long as Lottie doesn’t mind he’s happy to help me. He offers to fire Monica but as I have no proof I don’t want to stoke an already smoldering fire.

I know Lottie will agree but I get why Linc is putting her first. In the same boat, I’d do the exact same thing. It’s funny how falling for someone can alter your brain chemistry so fast.

“Knock, knock?”

I look up and see Sally standing in the doorway. “Come in, Sally.” My work life has never been so organized and easy, and I curse myself for overlooking this woman for so long. “What can I do for you?”

“I wanted to remind you that I have an appointment at twelve, which will last about two hours.”

“Yes, of course. Just switch the phones to the answering service before you leave.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course. No problem.”

A little while later Sally smiles and gives me a little wave before I see her walk past my door and head for the elevator. I spend the next hour going through emails until I look up and find Eden watching me from the doorway. She looks stunning in a black pencil skirt and a cream blouse with a bow at the neck, like a gift I can’t wait to unwrap. Her dainty feet are encased in nude heels that I want to see over my shoulders as I eat her pussy.

“Come here, blondie.”

I turn my chair as she steps over the threshold and closes the door. I spread my thighs to give my hard cock some room and she steps between my legs. My hands go to the back of her thighs, lifting her skirt out of the way so I can touch her bare skin. She’s wearing hold-ups and they’re the reason I was

almost late for work for the first time ever. Her hands land on my shoulders as I look up at her.

“I missed you.”

Her smile is the kind poets write about, open and sexy as if she has a secret to tell. “You saw me a few hours ago.”

“I know, it’s too long. I need you.” I’m only half joking as I say it.

“I want you too. It’s crazy how much.”

Her words are like a chemical reaction taking me from wanting her to knowing I’ll explode if I don’t have her right now. “Go lock the door, beautiful.”

“Ryker.”

“Now.”

I see the pulse in her neck beat wildly at my tone and she spins on her heel and does as I ask. I don’t know what I did to deserve such a woman but I do know I’m never letting her go.

Eden turns and regards me, waiting to see what I’ll do.

“Do you have any idea how fucking stunning you are?”

Eden blushes at my words and shakes her head, her teeth digging into her bottom lip.

“I’ve been distracted all morning because all I can think about is what it would feel like to flip that skirt over your gorgeous ass, bend you over my desk, and fuck you until your juices are running down my balls.”

Eden moves closer and I can see her nipples are beaded through her blouse. My mouth waters to take them between my lips and suck on them until she comes.

“Undo your blouse but leave the bow.”

Her hands move to her buttons and she undoes the tiny pearls, revealing the sexy cream bra beneath.

I grab her by her hips and bend my head, sucking a nipple into my mouth through the lace. Her hands clutch at my shoulders and a whimper escapes.

My eyes flash to hers. “Quiet. If anyone hears you, I’ll stop.”

“Okay.”

“Good girl.”

I bend my head and resume my ministrations as her hands fist my hair, holding me in place. My cock is like granite as I work my girl up until she’s on the edge. Soft noises slip from her lips so often she covers her mouth with her hand.

I relent and lift my head and her eyes are wide and indignant. I smile and flip her around so she’s bent over my desk with her tits hanging out.

“I should punish you for distracting me, for tempting me.”

I shove her skirt over her ass and groan at the sight of her bare ass cheeks. I kick her legs apart and see the bruises on her skin. Running my hand over them, I go to my haunches and kiss each mark gently. Part of me feels guilty for inflicting them and if she didn’t like it I’d never do it again but Eden seems to get something out of it too. I saw her admiring them in the mirror with a small smile on her face.

I lean in and run my nose over her wet cunt and she twists to look at me, a moan sliding free. The scent of her desire is like a drug and I’m a willing junkie. I should make this quick but I need to taste her before I fuck her, my tastebuds tingling with the need to have her on my tongue.

Pulling the sexy panties to the side, I swipe my tongue through her folds and groan as she grips the desk. I lap at her, toying with her clit and closing my eyes when she whispers my name on a plea.

Standing abruptly, I snag a condom from my wallet and quickly unzip my slacks. Freeing my cock, I sheath myself, trying not to fumble like an inexperienced kid losing his virginity. Swiping my crown between her folds, I grip her hip and plunge inside her, driving her upper body over the desk as she grunts.

Her warm, wet heat tightens around me and I want to live here. I want to shut up shop and dedicate my life to fucking

this woman in every position I can think of. I slam into her mercilessly and she takes it, thrusting her hips back into mine, as desperate for my cock as I am for her pussy.

“Ryker, oh God... yes.”

I’m right there, my balls pulled high, my orgasm sizzling across the base of my spine. “Touch yourself, beautiful.”

Her hand slips between her legs as I cup her tit and turn her head so I can kiss her, drinking down the sound of her climax as she tightens around my cock like a vice and takes me with her.

Our lips are fused as we pant against one another, my fingers flexing on her breast. I pull back and kiss her lightly on her lips, cheeks, and eyes. “Did I hurt you?”

Eden shakes her head. “No, it was perfect.”

She’s perfect in every way, and with every kiss, I fall harder for this woman.

I withdraw my sensitive cock and dispose of the condom in my private bathroom while she fixes her clothing. Personally, I’d love to see her walking around looking disheveled from my hands on her but then I’d have to have all my staff fired or murdered for seeing her.

I wasn’t lying when I said I don’t share, not with her. I’ve never had an issue with threesomes or group fucking but the thought of another man touching Eden makes me wild. I want to beat my chest and tell the world she’s mine but for now, I can’t.

“If you want to use the bathroom, I’ll grab us some food and you can eat with me since Sally is on a long lunch break.”

“Sure, sounds good.”

I half expected her to say no, that she’d eat in the staff room with the others but it seems my need for her isn’t one-sided.

By the time she comes back, I’ve commandeered sandwiches and some water, as well as those mini macarons I know she loves and set it up on the table next to my couch.

“Wow, this looks great. I’m starving.”

I kiss her palm, not capable of being close and not having my hands or lips on her.

Eden gives me a soft look that hits me in my chest. “So how was your morning?”

I tell her about my call with Hudson and she’s sympathetic, offering to help in any way she can. I love that she’s on my side without me even needing to defend myself.

“It’s nice to have you on my side. I haven’t always had that.”

I hadn’t meant to say that, but Eden is very easy to be around.

“How come? I thought you had a close family and a sibling? A brother, right?”

“Yeah, I have an older brother. We aren’t close. He has a different father than me. My dad is the only one he’s ever known but he still treats him like shit. We’re very different people. He thinks the world owes him a favor and a living, and he manipulates our parents constantly.”

“That sucks. Travis and I are close, but we’re very different too. He’d be furious if he knew what my ex did to me, and if he ever found out how I was living before you rescued me, I’d be in serious trouble.”

“I like him already.”

Eden laughed as she nibbled on a sandwich thoughtfully. “I think you’d get on well. He hated Beau. He thought he was an asshole, and Beau thought Travis poked his nose in too much. He practically cheered when Trav went to work in Japan.”

Eden carries on talking but I’m only half listening, my brain stuck on the name of her ex-boyfriend.

Beau.

Not an uncommon name, but not common either, and the way she describes him sure as fuck fits. Surely the universe

wouldn't be fucked up enough to make me fall for the one person my brother had fucked over more than anyone else. "Beau?"

"Yeah, my ex. We lived together for a bit. He even talked about marriage but I'd started to see red flags. I met his parents and they were lovely people but he said they didn't treat him well growing up, always favored his younger brother. He always had his finger in the next big idea to make him millions, or the next big investment was always around the corner, but, really, I think he was just full of shit. I should have seen the bucket of red flags he was toting around then but I didn't."

Oh God, this was getting more damning with every word, and half of me wanted to rewind time and stop her from telling me his name.

"Anyway, I caught him cheating in our apartment and tried to kick him out but he'd somehow managed to change the rental contract so his name was on it, not mine. I left but when I went to draw some money out, I found he'd maxed out every credit card I had and stolen every cent from my savings account."

It was the most we'd ever talked about her past and I wanted to bottle it up and throw it away so I could pretend this wasn't happening. Eden was watching me and I realized I'd gone quiet on her. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"I asked if I'd overshared."

I reached for her and hauled her onto my lap, burying my face in her neck as I did. Her sweet scent calmed my racing heart but not for long. I should say something and share my concerns but what if I was wrong? Why tell her when I could be jumping to conclusions?

"You haven't overshared. I want to know everything about you."

"That's sweet, but I have a meeting in ten minutes so it can wait."

Relief flooded me and I felt like shit for even thinking that.
“I want to take you out someplace nice.”

“Like a date?”

“Yeah, a date. I want to spoil you.”

Eden stroked my cheek. “You don’t need to do that, I’m a sure thing.”

“I want to spoil you.”

“Then I accept, but what if we’re seen? Won’t it make it difficult with the case?”

“Let me worry about that.”

“Okay, just let me know where and when.”

She stood from my lap after a final kiss that I wanted to last forever and I walked her out. “See you at home?”

She grinned and winked. “Later, roomie.”

If a heart could beat out of a chest, then mine surely would as I sat down heavily in my chair and thought about every word out of her mouth. I could call Beau and ask him, or I could pretend I didn’t suspect.

In the end, I called the person I knew who would give me the best advice. “Audrey, I need to see you, now.”

“Well, hello to you, too.”

“Cut the shit. This is serious.”

“I’m on my way.”

“No, let me come to you.”

Twenty minutes later I was sitting across from Audrey at her office at Kennedy Enterprises. “Well?”

She leaned back and sighed. “I agree it does sound damning, especially the description but let’s not throw the baby out with the bath water and overreact.”

I frowned. “Where the hell do you get these sayings?”

“My mom dated a British guy and his mom would say them.”

“So what do I do?”

“Speak to Eden.”

“I can’t. You don’t get it. She’s jumpy and if it wasn’t for the fact our connection is so strong, she never would’ve considered dating a man like me because of her douchebag ex, who’s probably my douchebag brother.”

“Yeah, I can understand it would make her nervous. He really is a bastard for what he did to her.”

“If he did this we’re done, and I mean nothing he says will fix it.”

“Makes me want to ruin his life.”

“Get in line. I can hardly breathe when I think about how she was living. If I find out it was because of Beau, he’s a dead man. Brother or not.”

“Then that’s what you do. Get your private investigator on it and find out for sure, and if it’s Beau, you need to tell her before it blows up in your face.”

I pace and pull at my hair in frustration. “Fuck, Aud, why her? Why did it have to be the one woman in the world who completes me that he fucks over?”

“Well, we don’t know anything yet.”

“I do. In my heart, I know what I’ll find. I also know Eden won’t be able to accept it and I’m gonna lose her.”

“You really love her?”

I nod slowly. “I know it’s quick and sudden but I feel alive when I’m with her. She calms me and excites me and makes me want to be better.”

“I’m happy for you.”

“Yeah, well, don’t get too excited. Looks like Beau might fuck that up, too.”

“We won’t let him. I’ve got your back.”

“Thanks, Aud.”

I headed back to the office and made a call to my PI from the car. I asked him to get me everything on Beau and Eden, and prayed my gut was wrong. For now, I'd put it behind me and love the woman who had stormed into my life and shown me what it was to be alive and hope it was enough.

Eden



“HEY, MOM.”

“Hi, my sweet baby. How are you? How is the job?”

I smile at the phone, which is on the bed in the room I haven't used since the first night in this apartment. I'm folding my clothes and putting them away in drawers while I wait for Ryker to come home. He had a late meeting with some bigwig tech giant so I left him to it. It had been a week since we got together and I've never felt more fulfilled or happy. “I'm great, and the job is going really well.”

“Good. Have you made any new friends?”

“A few yes, but pretty much everyone is lovely. I made friends with a lady called Sally who has two sons and just got engaged. She wants me to be her maid of honor.”

“That's wonderful, Eden. I'm so proud of you.”

I knew she was, my parents were effusive with their love for us and each other. “How's Dad?”

“Oh you know, your Dad won't admit that his hip gives him trouble every time he rides the Harley but other than that, he's the same.”

“I miss you guys.”

“Oh, baby, we miss you too. Have you heard from that ex of yours?”

I wrinkled my nose at the mention of Beau. “No, thank goodness.”

“He was a bad apple.”

“He was, but not all men are like him.”

If they even knew the half of it, they would’ve driven down and had some of my father’s shadier friends deal with him, but I didn’t want parents involved and, thanks to Ryker, I was through with that part of my life for good.

“No, but rich men are.”

My mother didn’t trust rich people. She’d been on the receiving end of too much bad behavior from those with money as she called it, when her mother worked cleaning jobs.

“Well, Beau wasn’t rich. He only pretended to be rich.”

“All the same.”

“That’s a little unfair, don’t you think? If everyone judged you for being a biker’s wife or Daddy for being a biker, would you have half the clients you do?”

“Maybe not, but rich men are a different breed.”

“Well, they aren’t all bad.”

The line went silent for a beat. “Eden Sager, have you met a man?”

“No. Yes. Maybe.”

“Well, which is it?”

“It’s new.”

“And he’s rich?”

God, how did I even begin to explain how rich Ryker was or even who he was. Yet I’d always been honest with my parents until the nightmare with Beau and I didn’t want to start something new by lying to my family. “He has more money than a Saudi Prince.”

“I see.”

“That’s not all.”

“Tell me.”

“He’s kind of my boss.”

“What!”

I yanked the phone away from my ear as she shrieked the last word. “Jeez, Mom, I need new eardrums.”

“You’re messing around with your boss? Oh, Eden, is he forcing himself on you?”

“God, no. Ryker is a good man. He’d never do that.”

“Ryker, you say?”

I knew she’d be googling the shit out of him the second we hung up so I told her all about him. Leaving out certain aspects, like the harassment case and the sex club, and talking up how much his staff loved him and how he offered to pay for my friend’s bachelorette party.

“He sounds too good to be true and you know what they say, Eden. If it sounds too good, it probably is.”

I sighed, feeling like I’d had the wind knocked out of my sails. “Can’t you be happy for me?”

“Of course I’m happy for you, baby, but I worry. That’s all.”

“I know you do and I love you for it, but I like him, Mom, and I was thinking about coming home for Christmas and maybe bringing him with me if he wants to come.”

“Truly? You’re coming home for the holidays?”

“Yeah, Mom, I am.”

I wanted to be with Ryker, but I knew my parents needed to see me and see I was okay with their own eyes. I’d ask Ryker if he wanted to come but make it clear there were no expectations. I didn’t want him to think I was getting too serious too quick by forcing him to meet the parents. We hadn’t even discussed Thanksgiving yet.

“Oh, this is the best news. Travis is coming home too.”

“He is?”

“Yes, he is, and he’s bringing a friend too.”

“That’s exciting.”

“It is. Both my babies home.”

My mom went off on a tangent about what she'd bake, and I was glad the matter of Ryker was forgotten. I hated that she'd made me doubt when he'd done nothing but treat me with respect and affection. We hang up with promises that I'd call her in a few days and I feel a sense of confusion. I love my mom but she's screwed with my head in a way I didn't need.

“There you are.”

I looked up from sitting on the bed and saw the man in question watching me, his hands gripping the top of the door making his muscles bunch, his jacket gone, just his white shirt rolled at the sleeves covering his top half and straining over his broad shoulders and chest.

Fuck, but he was handsome. He made me feel like a thousand butterflies had taken flight in my belly when I looked at him. “I was just folding laundry.”

He beckoned me over with a curl of his finger and my stomach hollowed out as my clit pulsed with a slow hunger for his hands on my body.

Moving on autopilot, I walked to him, stopping when we were almost touching.

“I need that mouth.”

A smile tipped my lips as I went on tiptoes and kissed him, slowly, letting my tongue tangle with his. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

I yelped when he bent and lifted me in his arms, forcing my legs to swing around his trim waist. He walked out of the room and into his, heading for the bathroom.

“Where are we going?”

“Bathroom.”

“I can see that, but why?”

“Women like bubble baths, so I bought you some bubbles and thought we could relax and you could tell me about your day.”

Another one of the barriers around my heart falls to this man and my mother's words from earlier fall away. "You're sweet."

"Hey, I'm trying to do something my girl will enjoy."

I don't react outwardly to him calling me his girl but internally I'm jumping for joy. I want to be his so badly I can taste it and not just for today either. I'm beginning to find it impossible to imagine a life without Ryker in it. It should send me running for the hills but I'm running toward him instead.

"I love it and, for the record, sweet is good."

Ryker leans in and takes my lips in a kiss that makes my knees weak. "Only for you, beautiful. Only for you."

I smile as I step back and he lifts me so I'm sitting on the vanity. He moves to run the taps, hot water filling the room with steam. I watch him pour my favorite bubbles under the water and then he comes back and slowly undresses me before gently tying my hair up. Kissing every part of me as I'm uncovered, he makes me feel like the only woman in the world that matters. Checking the water, he seems satisfied with the temperature before he lifts me and deposits me in the warm fragrant water.

I sigh happily and close my eyes as I lean back in the huge tub. Ryker moves to leave and I reach for him.

"Stay."

He crouches at the side of the bath and leans his elbows on the side.

"I'm not going anywhere, except to get some bubbles for us to drink."

"You spoil me."

"No, I'm giving you what you deserve, Eden. You deserve to be treated like a princess because to me you are one."

"Your dirty princess is horny, so hurry back."

I see the sexy smirk in his eye as he stands and I'm at eye level with his erection.

“My little slut princess wants my cock.”

“She does.”

“Fuck.”

He hurries away and is back minutes later with two glasses of champagne and nothing else. His glorious body is strong and tanned, every muscle rippling as he hands me the glass and then sits behind me and pulls me against his chest, his arm around my chest.

“Hmm, this is nice.”

“Do you want to know a secret?”

I turn my head to look at him. “Always.”

“You’re the first person to use this bath. I don’t take baths and never with another person.”

“I like that. You have so much more experience than me and it’s nice that we can share this.”

“Eden, you own all the firsts that matter.”

“This feels like more than one day at a time, doesn’t it?”

“That’s because it is.”

“Ryker?”

“Yes, beautiful?”

“Don’t hurt me.”

“Hey, look at me.” He turns me so I’m straddling him, and I feel his bare cock nudge my entrance. “I’d cut off my own arm before I’d hurt you.”

I see the truth of his words in his eyes, as well as the hunger that is always there and had been from the beginning if I’d just looked. “I want you.” He moves to get up and I shake my head. “Here, like this.”

I rock my pussy against his cock and he cups my cheeks, emotion awash all over his face with words neither of us are ready to say. “Are you saying what I think you are?”

“I’m saying I want to feel all of you inside me without anything between us. I’m on the pill and clean.” Thank goodness I’d had a new six-month prescription filled before my life went to hell.

“I have regular physicals and always use a condom. Baby, don’t do this if you aren’t ready. I can wait.”

“I want this. I want you, Ryker.”

“Fuck, you’re something else, blondie.”

I feel him shift his hips and then he’s pushing up into me as I sink down on his cock. It feels different this time, not rushed or frantic but slow and leisurely as we come together and it’s because this isn’t sex, it’s making love. It should frighten me with the intensity of how this man makes me feel but I trust him.

His fingers push my hair off my face and he watches me reverently as I slowly glide up and down his thick length. My hands rest on his chest and I can feel the steady beat of his heart beneath my fingertips.

“God, Eden, you’re so fucking perfect.”

His thumbs skim over my collarbone, down my ribs to my hips and I arch against him as the water splashes over the sides. Having him inside me like this with no barriers unlocks something inside of me. I feel exposed and free, safe and loved, his handsome gaze on mine as I lean in and kiss him.

He cups my cheek, his fingers spearing into my hair as our tongues collide and my climax begins to build from the friction of my clit against his pelvis. He’s so deep like this, his cock teasing my G-spot with every thrust.

As he kisses my cheeks, my eyelids, my neck, as if I’m the most precious thing in his life, his wicked fingers tease my nipple and I gasp. My breath stutters in my chest and freezes before I fall, my body pulsing and spasming as I feel him swell and still, his hands now gripping my hips as he spills inside me with a groan and buries his head in my neck.

Later as I’m lying in his arms, his soft breathing deep and rhythmic, I know that whatever is happening between us will

either be the greatest gift of my life or the worst mistake, because in a matter of weeks, I've fallen in love with this man and now he has the power to make or break me at his will. And all I can do is hang on and pray at this point.

Ryker



I LOOK AT THE EMAIL AGAIN, AT THE FLASHING NAME OF MY private investigator and the attached report that I can't bring myself to open. I know I have to, but it's like sitting on a bomb and knowing at some point it might explode and kill you all.

Blowing out a breath I think of the woman next door in the bedroom where her clothes are kept, dressing for our date. Completely unaware of the turmoil swirling through me. I'd foolishly thought I could take this slow, but nothing about how I feel for Eden is slow. She's like a whirlwind who has blown into my life and upended everything I thought I knew and I couldn't be happier.

She challenges me at work, she makes me laugh, she makes me see the world differently. I have never appreciated love or considered what I was missing, it was always a far-off concept to me. I saw it with my mom and dad, and my friends. I was front row to watch Lincoln, Harrison, and Beck fall hard, and while I'd thought I understood it, I didn't have a fucking clue.

I see the time on my laptop and know we need to leave if we're going to make our reservation. It's all the excuse I need to close my emails and deal with them tomorrow. I shove my dark thoughts away and walk toward what is now Eden's dressing room.

I lean against the door and cross my arms, taking in the utter devastation in the bedroom. It looks like a hurricane blew through the room and I can hardly keep the smile from my face as she cusses underneath her breath.

Eden turns to look at me from where she's standing in front of the mirror and frowning. The adorable pout on her lips made me want to kiss away every doubt in her pretty eyes. I should probably warn her we might miss our reservation, but I haven't got the heart to rush her. If need be, I'll buy the damn restaurant just to keep the worry from her face.

"I'm sorry it's taking so long."

I move toward her and stand behind her in the mirror, my hands moving to her hips as I drink her in, as she looks at herself so critically. "Take your time, beautiful. We don't have to rush." I drop a kiss on her shoulder, wanting more but also wanting her to enjoy this process of getting ready for our date in her own time. I move to sit on the edge of the bed and watch her.

"I hate these straps."

She slides them off her shoulder and lets them fall as she shimmies the dress to the floor to join the other three, already discarded, outfits. My hands itch to touch her as I take in the lacy black bra and panties but I wait patiently, enjoying this moment with her.

"What about this?"

She pulls out a navy sheath dress that lands at her calf and leaves nothing to the imagination, even with the high neck. Eden wiggles into it and then steps backward presenting me with her back.

I stand, ignoring my hard cock, and move in behind her, admiring how we look together, her so tiny and me towering over her. Eden barely makes my chest without heels and I fucking love how it makes me feel, even if it is slightly caveman.

I run my knuckles up her back and watch her shiver as I zip her up and fall just a little more in love with this woman as I do.

I step back and place my hands in my pockets because the need to sink myself into her and show her exactly how fucking beautiful she is almost takes my breath away.

Eden cocks her head critically and moves side to side assessing herself before her shoulders fall.

“I’m sorry.”

I catch her eyes in the mirror. “Don’t be sorry, I’m loving the show.”

Eden bursts out laughing and turns to slap me playfully. I catch her hand and tug her closer until my arms are around her. “Eden, it doesn’t matter to me if we arrive late or not at all. All that matters is you feel like the queen you are when you walk into that room. If that means I get to sit and watch you try on every outfit you own, then I’m a lucky son of a bitch.”

“God, you make me swoon, sometimes, Ryker Cabot.”

I huff a laugh at her turn of phrase. “It’s the truth. You look stunning in everything, and I couldn’t be prouder to have you on my arm.”

“Thank you.”

She goes on tiptoes and gives me a soft kiss that I resist the urge to take over. “You have no idea how special you are to me, Eden. I’d do anything for you.”

It’s in that moment I realize how stupidly in love with her I am, and how I’d move heaven and earth to keep her with me.

“Okay, I’m ready now.”

“You sure? I can unzip you and I promise you, it would be my absolute pleasure.”

“Ha, ha. I bet it would.”

Her smile makes my chest ache and the words I can’t say yet are on the tip of my tongue. She isn’t ready for that. I know she cares about me but I also know how skittish she still feels. The reason for that could very well be my own flesh and blood and it makes me murderous to even think it. The answers lie in that email and I’ll read it because if it was my brother who damaged this amazing woman and left her to the wolves, he will pay. I’ll make it my life’s work to destroy him, brother or not.

“Ready?” Eden pulls me out of my funk as she stands in front of me, taller now with her silver strappy sandals and clutch.

I grin and offer her my arm. “Shall we?”

I escort Eden to the car and hold her hand in mine all the way to the restaurant, not wanting to let her go, but wanting her to get the full date experience. We’ve gone about everything ass backwards so far and now it’s time to slow it down. Well, this part anyway. There’s no way I can keep my hands off her for long.

The driver stops and I hurry around the car and open her door for her, taking her hand so she doesn’t trip on the curb. This Italian restaurant is small, and not well-known and I want to keep it that way. My friends and I found it when we were barely out of college and making our way in the world. We all have more money than we know what to do with but the nights when we’d find a gem like this were my favorite.

You could keep those high-priced restaurants where the idea was to see and be seen, where the real reason you were dropping thousands on food and wine wasn’t because of the food but because of being seen.

As we stepped through the door, it was like being escorted back in time to a golden era in northern Sicily. Black and white pictures on the walls, candles on the tables, and red and white checked tablecloths, but it is the food that is exquisite.

“Mr. Cabot, so good to see you.”

I smile wide as Antonio Mancuso rushes toward me with a smile.

“Antonio, it’s good to be here.”

Antonio is a stocky, short man with black hair slicked back and a black mustache that he twirled when he was out to impress. He shakes my hand, using the other to cup my hand, his greeting always warm and effusive, treating you like a much-loved member of the family, not a patron.

“And who is the Bella Angelo?”

I turn to Eden with a smile, my arm around her back resting on her hip with possession. “This is my girl, Eden. Eden, this is Antonio Mancuso.”

“Like the beautiful garden. It is my pleasure.”

“It’s lovely to meet you, Mr. Mancuso.”

“Antonio, please.” Antonio half-bows as he takes Eden’s hand and bestows a kiss on it.

I cock a brow at him, only half joking and he laughs, the sound booming around the small venue. Antonio isn’t the least intimidated by me, and if his stories are true, his great-grandfather was a Don in the Sicilian mafia.

“Come, come, let me show you to your seat. I have saved the best private spot in the courtyard for you.”

Antonio leads us out into a small courtyard set with a table for two. Fairy lights are strung all around and the blooms that grow in pots and up the walls fill the air with a fragrance that compliments the mouthwatering scents from the kitchen.

Once we’re seated, we order a bottle of red wine and he leaves us to look at the menu.

“Wow, this place is fantastic. I feel like I’m in Italy, not downtown New York.”

“We found it when we were fresh out of college. Every Friday we’d pick a random, unknown place for dinner.”

“We?”

“Lincoln, Harrison, Beck, Audrey, and me.”

“So, you’ve been friends for a long time?”

I nod slowly as I gaze at her, reaching across the table to take her hands in mine. “Yeah, we have. We all come from such different backgrounds but formed a bond early on. They’re my people, and I trust them with my life. No matter the spot you find yourself in, they always come through.”

“And you all own the club together?”

“Yes.”

The waitress Rosa, who was an undergraduate at Harvard studying law, interrupted to take our order. We chatted for a few minutes as I asked about college and she thanked me again for the scholarship. I reminded her I didn't do it for thanks, I did it so the world would have more people who cared like she did in positions to help others.

"That's sweet of you to pay for that."

I shrugged, hating the praise. "It's true what I said, the world needs more people to care. Antonio and his family had a rough time when Rosa's mother died of cancer and I stepped up because I could, and the thought of this place closing, because he couldn't afford to keep it, filled me with dread."

"Still, it was nice."

I smirk. "I'm a nice guy."

"Yes, you are."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

I don't know why I feel nervous but this feels important to me. "What are your plans for Thanksgiving?"

Eden blinks, once, twice. "I don't know. I haven't given it much thought."

"Spend it with me. We're all going to Norrie's cabins in the Catskills and I want you with me."

"That sounds pretty intense. I thought we were taking it one day at a time?"

"We were, but I think we both know this is so much more than that. I crave you all the time, Eden, and not just your body. You're the first and last person I think about when I wake and go to sleep and every minute in between. When something happens, you're the first person I want to talk to, good or bad. We're more. Tell me you feel it too."

"I do."

Her words are cautious and I hate it. I'm out of my seat and crouching beside her chair as she swings her legs around

to face me. “But?”

She shakes her head. “No buts, I do feel it. I have from the start and I won’t say I’m not scared because I am, but I won’t let my past rob me of this. I’m choosing to trust this feeling inside me.”

I smile like I just won the damn Superbowl and take her hands in mine. “Does this mean you’re my girlfriend now?” Eden blushes and drops her head and I reach up and lift her chin with my knuckle. “Does it?”

“Is that what you want?”

“Fuck, yeah, it’s what I want. I want it all, Eden.”

“Then yes, I guess you’ve got yourself a girlfriend.”

“So Thanksgiving at the cabins?”

“Sounds like fun.”

“It will be.”

I kiss her one last time and move back to my seat like I’m on cloud nine.

Her eyes twinkle at me as we continue to talk about her family and what it was like growing up with bikers. I laugh at some of the antics she explains and I tell her about some of the things me and my friends have gotten up to.

Eden sighs as she sits back and pats her stomach. “I’m gonna burst. That was the best thing I’ve ever eaten.”

We’d had the Pasta alla Norma, which was Antonio’s mother’s recipe, and a classic Sicilian dish but started with Arancini.

“Leave room for dessert. Antonio makes the best cannoli in the world.”

“Wow, the world? That is high praise.”

I bite my bottom lip as her eyes danced with happiness. “They’re my second favorite dessert.”

She cocked her head, a smile playing over her lips. “Oh, and what’s the first?”

“You.” I grinned as I made the cheesy comment, even if it was true.

“You know what would be better than that?”

I finish my wine as her fingers play with the stem of her glass. “Tell me, beautiful.”

Her blush is stunning and makes me hard as fucking nails.

“Cannoli in bed.”

My body hums with lust at the look in her eyes. “Even better. I could eat them off your gorgeous fucking body and mix the taste of your pussy with the delicious, sweet cream.”

“Do I get to come?”

“Baby, I’ll make you come so hard you won’t remember your name.”

“Take me home, Ryker.”

“Check.”

Eden giggles but I’m deadly serious. I need to be inside her and she’s too far away right now.

We order cannoli to go and I pay the check and thank Antonio for his hospitality as quickly and politely as I can, with a promise to come back with Eden again soon.

Then I take my girl home and make good on my promise.

Eden



“NERVOUS?”

I look at my boyfriend and shrug, trying to come off more confident than I feel inside. We’re going to his club for the first time. His sex club, and I feel nauseous with excitement and nerves. I’m not some lily-white virgin, but the things Ryker and I do and the way he pushes me is so fucking good and opened my eyes to things I never would have explored before, but this is a sex club.

“We can go home. I’d be perfectly happy to cuddle up on the couch and then eat you out while you watch those design shows you like.”

I laugh and shake my head at his ridiculousness. As if I could watch TV while he had his mouth on me. The man is a fucking master with his tongue, hands, and cock. Life with Ryker is perfect and, ever since our perfect date last week, it’s been like living a dream.

We haven’t told anyone at work, mainly because I don’t want it to seem like I’m the new girl fucking the boss, but it’s getting harder and harder to hide how I feel about him. Watching as some of the female staff members flirt with him makes me green. Don’t get me wrong, they aren’t like Mandy, but the desire is clear to see.

“I want to see the club. I’m just a little out of my comfort zone.”

Ryker takes my hand and leads me up some back steps, the sound of the bass below us vibrating through me. “I’ll be with

you every step and if at any point you want to leave, then we leave.”

“Okay.”

He dips his head and kisses me softly as a sigh of pleasure falls from my lips. All of his kisses are perfect. The sweet ones, the slow lazy ones, and the passionate ones that are pure fire, but these ones, where I can almost feel how much he cares for me are my favorite.

He lifts his head and winks. “Better?”

I nod and he opens the door and leads me into a hallway. He explains how the club works but seeing is believing. The building is set up so that the first-floor ceiling is vaulted to the roof, giving it an opulent look of majesty. The second floor is set back to surround the first floor on three sides. It overlooks the dance floor below like a balcony, with a bar, dance floor, and seating around the three sides. The top floor is set in the same way but has private rooms behind the dance area with offices that lead off to the side.

It’s hard to imagine but it’s grand, and I’m impressed with the attention to detail. From the uniforms to the lighting, everything has been done with care.

“This place is amazing.”

He leads me past the second floor and up the stairs that are reached by a private door with two hulking bouncers standing duty. Neither man looks at me or even acknowledges us, but I have no doubt it’s because I’m with Ryker and my chances of getting past them without him are exactly zero.

“Harrison and Audrey designed it and they did an amazing job.”

As we reach the top, I expect to hear music or the sounds of sex but it’s silent.

Ryker turns to me, his hand still firmly holding mine. “You ready?”

I nod. “Yes.”

He smiles and winks and the door opens. As the sounds reach me, I realize the room is soundproofed.

Music is the main sound as we step through into a reception area. The hostess is wearing a skimpy dress but her smile is professional.

“Leona, this is my girl, Eden. Can we have drinks and ‘not open to play’ stamps, please?”

“Of course, Mr. Cabot.” She turns to me with a sexy smile and her eyes move over me in a sexy caress that has me feeling naked.

“Welcome, Eden. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Just the stamps, Leona. Eden is mine and I won’t be sharing her. Ever.”

Leona pouts but then nods and giggles. “Shame.”

Ryker offers my hand and Leona stamps it twice with two different colors. The logo is obscure and when I drop my hand, I can’t even see the stamps.

“What are these for?”

Ryker leads me to another door and we push through past more bouncers, these two shirtless and built with rippling muscle. A bar is set up on the left with a wide-open dance floor and a large stage behind it. Tables and chairs are set around the outer edges interspersed with booths that are darker and offer some privacy.

People are in varying degrees of undress, some in normal club gear, like me, others in leather bondage outfits, and some wearing nothing at all. At first glance, the colored lights make it tricky to make out anything but as my eyes adjust, I can make out more. Ryker lifts me to sit on the bar stool and then stands in front of me.

“How are you doing, beautiful?”

“Good.”

He dips his knees and catches my gaze. “You sure?”

“Yes, just taking it all in.”

“Drink?”

“Yeah, Vodka and cranberry, please.”

Ryker orders our drinks from the barman, who is wearing a tight black t-shirt with the same logo as my stamp, as I watch the room. As my eyes adjust to the lighting, I see couples in various stages of undress and activity.

The room is awash with sensuality, even the thrum of the music has a sexual tone to it. I notice a man on his knees, his head between the legs of a woman I recognize as an actress from my favorite sitcom. My eyes widen as another woman moves in and kisses her lazily, her hands moving to toy with her breast.

Heat floods my body with desire as I watch the emotions on her face and the pleasure wash over her as he brings her to climax. Her legs shake as she strokes her hand over his hair and he licks his lips and stands, giving her a slow kiss before walking away with the woman she was kissing.

“Here you go.”

I blink, like I’m coming out of some drug-induced stupor.

“Oh, thanks.” I take the drink Ryker hands me, my eyes lingering on his handsome profile. I see two women walk past and barely resist the urge to claw their eyes out when they look at him like he’s a piece of meat they want to take a chunk out of.

“Want to walk around a bit or stay here?”

“Tell me about the stamps first. What do they all mean?”

Ryker strokes a finger over the stamp on my hand and I feel desire shoot down my spine. God, this man is something else.

“Well, this one means you’re a guest, and the other means you’re not open to playing. We have different stamps so that people can easily determine what others are open to. A green stamp means open to anything with any sex. Blue means straight only and open to play.”

“Wow, that’s a lot to remember.”

“It can be but new members are given a welcome packet after they sign the NDA and the membership contract.”

“What happens if someone gets turned away for a membership? What stops them from telling the world about this place and the members?”

“Well, they don’t know anything about other members until they’ve signed the NDA and trust me when I say it’s watertight. Anyone who breaks it is basically signing away their career and fortune because we’ll go after them so hard they won’t know what hit them.”

“Has it ever happened?”

“Once, and we shut it down fast. That person now works in Burger King instead of Wall Street, so it’s a cautionary tale.”

“Wow, you don’t mess around.”

“Can’t. It’s our job to protect our members and we take that seriously.”

I sip my fruity drink as I notice a man strapping a woman onto a bench on her back. She’s completely naked and so is he, from the top anyway, his chest is glistening with oil or sweat I can’t be sure which one, but it makes the tattoo on his arms stand out.

Ryker follows my gaze and smiles. “Want to go watch?”

I nod, not able to find my voice in this situation. It’s so far out of my comfort zone and yet I’m intrigued by how much I like seeing it. Ryker takes my hand and we walk to where a crowd is forming around the couple. Ryker is at my back, his arms around my waist making me feel safe and protected. My skin feels hot and tight, tingles moving over me as Ryker’s fingers draw patterns on the skin of my belly.

The man tightens the leather straps and bends to whisper in her ear and she nods, looking at him with adoration and trust before he kisses her deep, his palm squeezing her breast and causing her hips to buck against the restraints. I get that same

empty feeling she does as Ryker flutters his hands over my waistband and everything below my waist coils tight.

The man in front of us strokes his hand down the woman's body reverently and comes to stand between her legs, looking down at her with hunger and I get the distinct impression that although she's the one tied down, she holds the power, not him.

"Look at how much he wants her. His dick is straining to be inside her, but that's not what she needs yet and he knows it."

Ryker's whispered words at my ear cause a shiver to trip down my spine, my clit pulsing with desire as if it has its own heartbeat.

I think he's going to fuck the beautiful woman but he picks up what looks like a riding crop and feathers it over her skin, causing a sensual moan to fall from her lips.

Ryker's hands flex on my body, his fingers sliding into the gap between my skirt and my top, his warm hands on my skin making me wriggle closer into his hard cock pressed at my back.

I jump at the first strike of the crop against her pussy, my gasp drawing the eyes of a few others around us and I blush, ducking my head.

Ryker's lips touch my ear. "Look at the pleasure on her face."

I shiver from the contact and the deep resonance of his voice and do as he says. He's right, she looks blissed out, her moans and cries getting louder as the man alternates between feather-light strokes and hard strikes against her pussy.

My folds grow wet and I feel Ryker's hand move up under my top, his thumb, stroking over my sensitive nipple as a heavy throb moves over my pussy. His touch and the scene playing out before me are turning me on more than I ever expected, showing me things about myself that I didn't know.

"You wet, beautiful?"

His deep, raspy question runs over my skin like a spark of electricity and I nod, turning my head to look at him, his bright blue eyes darker now with heat and need.

“You want me to make you come here while we watch or later?”

“Both.”

His dark chuckle forces my blood to pound with need. This man is sex personified, and I can't get enough of him. “My greedy little slut. Turn around and watch him make her scream while I take care of you, baby.”

Somehow the way he alternates between names I'd never tolerate from another man, and the sweet endearments and his actions, make me want it more. He treats me with respect and adoration, like I'm everything to him but he doesn't shy away from pushing me sexually and I like it.

His hand stays on my breast, his thumb gently stroking as it was before, the rhythm not changing in the least. I wonder if he changed his mind and force my eyes back to the woman who's covered in sweat as the man dips to whisper in her ear again, before standing and unbuttoning his jeans.

As he releases his huge cock, I feel Ryker's hand slide between my legs and barely stifle the groan as his fingers push my panties aside. My eyes stay on the man as he strokes his cock, my pussy dripping as Ryker runs a finger up through my soaking folds, before stroking over my clit, making me shudder and sink against him.

“You want a big fat cock like that in your tight pussy, don't you, dirty girl?”

“Only yours.”

“Good girl.”

I'm rewarded with him shoving two fingers inside me and fucking my pussy rhythmically as his thumb finds my clit and rolls his thumb in slow firm circles. My body clenches and I moan his name.

“Eyes forward, beautiful, and try not to distract him with your sexy whimpers.”

Another blush steals over my skin as I catch the eyes of people watching us now too. I never considered I might like being watched and fully exposed. I didn't think I would but watching other people as Ryker commands my body is hot.

As the woman is brought to climax by the hard slap of the crop on her clit, the man plunges his cock into her and she screams.

Ryker pinches my nipple hard and my own climax washes over me, taking my legs and leaving me biting my lip to hold in my own screams.

“Good girl, I can feel that tight cunt squeezing me.”

“Ryker, I need you.”

I turn in his arms and reach for him and he lifts me so I'm straddling his hips as he walks us at a fast clip toward the back. He pushes through the doors and we're in a dark corridor with doors left and right. My curiosity peaks and I wonder what is behind each room but Ryker is on a mission, and I like this desperate side of him.

He takes the first empty room and slams the door shut with his foot. He lets me slide slowly down his body, and I feel how hard he is against my stomach. Our height difference doesn't usually register much with me, I'm so used to being the smallest person in a room, but the way he handles me sometimes like I'm his to do with as he wishes makes me feel like a fragile doll he can just throw around. It shouldn't but the thought makes me wetter than I was before.

“Where did you just go?”

His knuckle lifts my chin and I answer him because I want him to know how he makes me feel. “Our size difference.”

“What about it, baby?”

“The way you lift me and move me around makes me feel like a tiny doll.”

“Does that make you wet, my little slut?”

“Yes.”

His fingers slide between my legs and he rubs two fingers over the soaked underwear he finds, a growl turning his features feral. “I want you naked right fucking now.”

I love the snap of demand in his voice and I move toward the bed, unbuttoning my skirt, my eyes on him. The room has a large round bed with black silk sheets and throw pillows in bright, jeweled colors. An intricate rug on the floor with a Persian design makes me look around more, and I note it has a definite feel of an adult Aladdin movie.

“Not fast enough, blondie. Unless you want me to tear your clothes from that sexy little body, hurry up.”

I look back to where he’s standing naked and proud, his cock in his hand as he watches me. My mouth waters at the sight of him, so handsome, with broad shoulders and an arrogant tilt to his head like a conqueror. He calls me beautiful, but this man is beautiful. All hard planes of muscle, thick powerful thighs, that gorgeous ribbon of muscle over his hips that makes me lose my mind, and then his cock, which is so velvet soft and yet so hard I see stars.

I strip my clothes off quickly and his eyes go hungry, hard with passion for me.

“On the bed, legs open so I can see that pretty pussy.”

I scoot back and do as he says, my chest heaving from trying to get enough oxygen to my brain when it’s consumed by pleasure and desire.

Ryker puts a knee in the bed between my legs. “Fuck yourself with your fingers. If you do a good job, you can have my cock.”

I run my hands over my breasts, squeezing and rolling the nipples as I lift my fingers to his lips. As if reading my mind he takes them into his mouth, coating my fingers with his saliva and sucking like I’m his favorite lollipop.

I pull them out and he groans as I plunge my fingers through my folds and into my empty pussy. I slowly fuck myself as he strokes his cock, stopping every so often to

squeeze the base. Sweat drips down his chest and I want to feel all that slick heat on me, so I increase the friction of my movements and bring myself to the edge, before withdrawing and pressing against my clit as it throbs.

“Oh...oh...I’m gonna.... Oh fuck.”

My orgasm washes over me, pulsing and throbbing and then he’s there, leaning over me and pushing his heavy cock into me so hard and deep that another climax rolls through me before the last can ease up.

“Fuck, my girl is so damn perfect.”

“Fuck me hard, Ryker. I want to feel you for days.”

Our eyes lock and it’s as if he’s making sure I can take it before he grins a deliciously devilish smile, and then he moves and I’m shoved up the bed by the force of his thrusts. His hips piston as he grips me tight at the hips. His fingers will leave imprints and I fucking love that. I want his marks on me, like he owns me, and I score my nails down his back as he groans and fucks me harder because I want mine on him too.

“Fuck.”

Ryker pulls out as my orgasm hits and he grips his cock, stroking hard as his seed coats my chest and belly. I watch him come, knowing it’s the most erotic sight in the world to see his pleasure coat my skin. His fist slows and his hips still as he falls forward, bracing his hand beside me as he takes my mouth in a lazy, sloppy kiss, our breaths heaving between us.

We kiss like that until our breathing evens a little and then he sits up and places both his hands on my belly as he massages his come into my skin, smoothing it over me like lotion, his eyes filled with desire.

When he’s satisfied, he slumps beside me and pulls me against him, kissing my head. “I fucking love fucking you, blonde.”

I shouldn’t be disappointed by those words when he’s just made me feel things I never imagined, but I want the *I love you*, on its own. It’s silly and too soon, but I know deep down I already love this man.

I smile through it and press a kiss to his chest. “I love you fucking me, so I guess we’re good.”

“Want to stay here and go again or go home and I can fuck you in our bed?”

“Home.”

His lips find my hair and he squeezes me tight. “Good answer, but you’re wearing my come on your skin when we leave. I can’t claim you at work but I want every asshole we see from here until I fuck you in the shower later to know you’re mine.”

“Unless your come is glow in the dark, I doubt they’ll know.”

“Trust me, beautiful, they’ll know.”

“You’re a nut.”

“Nope, but I just busted my nuts all over you.”

“Eugh, gross.”

He rolls and kisses me before tickling me. “Didn’t say that a minute ago.”

“Yeah, well, you hypnotized me with that big dick.”

“Mmm, how about we go home, and you tell me more about how much you like my big dick?”

I giggled. “Fine, but you need to feed me.”

“Deal.”

Being with Ryker was the single best experience of my life and I was terrified it would all be snatched away, but I shoved those thoughts aside and lived for the moment because the present was perfect.

Ryker



“SALLY, I HAVE A MEETING AT ELEVEN WITH LINCOLN Coldwell in the conference room but I’m just going to head down and grab some pie for the afternoon briefing with the team later.”

Sally looks up at me with a smile. “Sure thing.”

“Would you like anything?”

“No, thank you. I’m trying to get in shape so I can go wedding dress shopping after the holidays.”

I shake my head. “I’m sure he loves you exactly the way you are.”

“True, but I need to love myself too, and right now I don’t so I’m being good.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

She gives me a quizzical look. “Like?”

“I don’t know, have healthier options for the lunches?” I throw my hands up slightly at a loss as to why I offered.

“Oh that would be good, maybe some healthy soups and alternatives to wraps or bread.”

“Consider it done.”

“You’re a good man, Ryker Cabot. I can’t believe no one has snatched you up yet.”

I wink and tap my nose. “Maybe they have.”

Sally’s eyes gleam and I chuckle.

Eden still insists on coming in separately and not saying anything to the staff, even though we've signed the paperwork with HR. She says it's about timing but I think it's fear that I'll change my mind, but I won't. She's it for me. I just need to make her see it.

That unread email still hangs like a sword over my head and I know I need to open it and deal with whatever it says, but then I know I'll have to decide what I tell Eden and that isn't something I relish, because whatever I do if Beau is her ex, I lose her.

"Is Eden coming in later today?"

Sally gives me a look that suggests we aren't fooling her in the least and I push my tongue into my cheek to stop myself from revealing our secret. I just nod and smile, trying to tamp down my grin when I think of her. "Yes, she had an appointment but should be in later this morning."

She was actually having her physical for her health insurance but I wouldn't divulge that to Sally.

"She's good for you."

I wink at my assistant without the worry of her taking it as a come-on and mauling me. "I can neither confirm nor deny."

"You don't have to, the smile on your face says it all."

I knock my knuckles on her desk and walk to the elevator and head to the ground floor to put my order in. Every other Friday we have a team meeting with the developers and I always provide the treats. This time the request was pie which fits with Thanksgiving only a few days away.

While I wait to place my order, I consider how different my life is now. On the outside nothing has changed but internally, I feel like a different man entirely, and all because of a class my friend dragged me to.

I should send Audrey flowers. Without that class would Eden and I be where we are now or was fate playing her part? I'd never much been one for believing in things I couldn't control but with Eden and I, there were so many things bringing us back together.

“What can I get you?”

“Can I order two pecan pies, two pumpkin, and three apple for Friday, please?”

“Of course, let me write it down.”

I grabbed two pieces of cherry pie for me and Eden and had them boxed before I paid and headed out with a grin on my face.

I hit the lobby of my building when I heard her voice.

“Hey, wait up.”

I turned with a giant smile for the woman I loved as she rushed to catch up with me. I wanted more than anything to pull her into my arms and kiss her. “Hey, you. How did it go?”

We walked side by side and she waved at George, who thought the sun shone out of my girl and he wasn't wrong.

“All good. Doc said I'm perfectly healthy and to tell my boyfriend to stop trying to feed me up before my ass gets so wide I need a new desk chair.”

We got the elevator and waited as it descended from the top floor. “Your boyfriend clearly loves your ass and wants to maintain it.”

Eden pulled the corner of her lip through her teeth trying to hide her smile. “He does seem to love my ass.”

I bent close so only she could hear. “I bet he wants to sink his hard cock into it while you take a dildo in that pretty cunt.”

Her bottom lip opens with a gasp. “Ryker.”

I shrugged my shoulder. “I can't help what this boyfriend of yours thinks.”

“Well, if he keeps turning me on at work, he's going to be flying solo for the foreseeable future.”

I laugh out loud as the elevator doors open and people file out. Once it's empty, we step inside and I want to punch the fucking idiot from finance who steps in after us, spoiling my plans to slip my fingers inside Eden's panties and see if she's

wet for me. The dipshit stands between us, grinning at Eden like a fucking sap.

I'm a cool boss, but if this dick doesn't take his eyes off my woman, I'm going to make sure he's eating through a straw by lunchtime.

The car stops again and the doors open and I almost groan as Alisha, who works for some marketing firm and who I screwed twice last summer, steps on.

Her eyes glide over me and she gives me a coy look. "Hey, handsome, long time no see."

I nod and keep my facial expression neutral. "Alisha."

She moves closer to me, pushing Eden further back and I want to push her away as her hand lands on my arm. "You never called."

"I've been busy." I want to add that I had no intention of calling and she knew it but I just want to get out of there as quickly as possible. The car stops again and I want to stomp my foot in temper.

The fates must hate me because the next person to step inside is Carmel, who's an intern at a law firm that specializes in entertainment law. I actually met her at the club and we shared some fun but when I wouldn't get on board with her plan to meet her mother and grandmother, the feisty Latina turned into a bunny boiler. Her hateful stare works over me as she steps inside.

"Urgh, sweetheart, don't bother. He won't remember you in the morning."

Her verbiage is aimed at Alisha who glares at her but it's the eyes burning into the back of my skull that makes me uncomfortable. I glance back and look at her and my Eden looks away, the heat of embarrassment on her cheeks, as well as hurt. I want to cut down every person in this fucking box for making her feel that way.

When the lift opens again, I groan. "You have *got* to be fucking kidding me."

Lincoln looks around, noting Alisha and Carmel's hostility and my awkwardness before his eyes land on Eden and he begins to chuckle.

"Shut the fuck up, asshole."

He moves in beside me and I can feel his shoulders shaking with laughter at my expense and I want to junk-punch the asshole. "Fucking priceless."

"Dude, stop before I call Lottie and tell her you fired our favorite bartender because he said Lottie was hot."

Lincoln sobers, his smile disappearing. "Prick needed to keep his eyes off what's mine."

Not quite what I was going for but it stopped his laughing at my expense. As Alisha and then Carmel get off at their respective floors, I step back beside Eden.

"You good, blondie?"

Eden moves sideways as if to get away from me, the ice-cold vibes rolling off her. "Yes, thank you."

"You always lie to your boss, blondie?"

She graces me with a look that could shrivel the balls of Atilla the Hun. "I apologize if being in a small box with your drop-dead gorgeous harem makes me uncomfortable."

"First of all, they aren't my harem and never were. Secondly, I know it's awkward but I can't help my past. If I could go back and change it, I would but I can't."

The doors open on my floor and a smirking Lincoln steps out, with Eden huffing after him, her stride quick considering her short stature. My little minx is jealous and feeling insecure. I won't have her thinking for one second that she's second best or that those women hold a candle to her. I stride after her as she gets to the middle of the office and grab her arm, swinging her around, pulling her into my arms, and kissing the hell out of her. Her body goes still and for a second I wonder if she'll knee me in the nuts for outing us like this but I'm done pretending she doesn't mean everything to me.

Her body softens as I flick my tongue along her bottom lip and she opens for me, kissing me back like we're the only two people in the world and that's exactly how I feel when I'm with her. I lift my head, dragging my mouth from hers to hear cheering and whistling around us. I only care about Eden, who's touching her lips and smiling, even as her cheeks flame.

I keep her in my arms as I tip her head up to me. "Lastly, every woman pales next to you, Eden. When you're in a room, the only person I see is you, so shelve your green-eyed monster, beautiful."

"I wasn't jealous."

I smirk at her obvious lie and kiss her head. "If you say so, baby."

I let her go and she walks toward her office, where Sally is practically bouncing from foot to foot with excitement. I watch her go, paralyzed by the effect she has on me, a stupid smile on my face. She turns and gives me the biggest grin, blowing me a kiss which I pretend to catch.

A chuckle from my right makes me turn to Lincoln, who is shaking his head. "Oh, fuck off, like you're any different."

"Man, I own it. Lottie owns me body and soul and I wouldn't have it any other way."

We walk to the conference room as my staff goes back to work. I take a seat and Lincoln sits opposite me, crossing his leg over his knee.

"Lottie wants me to make a statement in support of you."

I sigh heavily. This case as well as the Beau thing has been weighing heavily. "Thank you."

"Just tell the douchebag to contact me."

He means Hudson. The two men have never been great friends, probably because of Audrey's hostility towards Hudson. Lincoln will always take his cousin's side. Add that to the fact that when he fucked up big, and boy did he, Hudson helped Lottie hide from him.

"I will."

The email from my PI felt monumental after I'd just announced publicly that Eden and I were together. I'd need to tell Hudson too. He wouldn't be happy but fuck it, I loved her and his job was to fix this, not corral my dick.

“What's that dumb look on your face?”

“What, you mean my natural good looks?”

“No, I mean the constipated look. What's going on and don't say nothing. I know you too well for that shit.”

“You know, you've become a right nosey fucker since you found love.”

“Yeah, maybe, but I want my friends happy and Lottie likes your ugly ass, so I need to make sure you're okay.”

I sigh and it feels like a crushing weight is on my shoulders despite the happiness I feel around Eden. “I told you briefly what happened with Eden and her ex.”

Lincoln curled his lip and nodded. “Yeah, fucking prick. Assholes like him need shipping to an island someplace and then nuking the fucking thing.”

Harsh but I didn't disagree. “Yeah, well, I have a feeling the douche in question is Beau.”

Lincoln sat forward fast, his foot dropping to the floor. “Your brother is her ex?”

“I think so. I had my PI look into it but I can't bring myself to open the email and confirm it.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“Because if it is him, I either need to tell Eden and in all likelihood lose her because she fucking hates him, or I lie to her and it comes out anyway and I lose her.”

“Or, it's not him, it's just some dick with the same name.”

I shake my head at Lincoln. “My gut tells me it's him.”

“Well, stop fucking messing around with uncertainty and find out. Burying your head in the sand sure as fuck won't fix it.”

“You know, you cuss more now.”

“No, I cuss the same amount but I have to get all my cussing out of the way when Lottie isn’t around because when I cuss around Eric, she goes nuts and I like my nuts and so does my gorgeous fiancée.”

“Whipped.”

Lincoln grins. “Guilty. Now get your fucking emails open and let’s see what we’re dealing with.”

I reluctantly log into my emails as Lincoln comes to stand behind me and reads over my shoulder. It would normally drive me crazy but him reading it means I don’t have to relay it all to him.

“Well, fuck.” Lincoln squeezes my shoulder in solidarity.

My gut twists as my worst fears are confirmed. My brother Beau is the man who hurt the woman I love. I’ve never felt angrier in my life, the urge to destroy him riding me hard, and in the back of my mind I see my mother’s face, and it only makes things that much harder. I want to destroy him, but do I destroy my parents too?

“He’s done.”

“And Eden? What will you tell her?”

“Nothing for now. I need to think and you can’t tell anyone either.”

Lincoln shook his head. “Buddy, I don’t keep secrets from Lottie. I learned my fucking lesson the hard way.”

“Fine, but tell her to keep it to herself.”

“We’re here for you, Ryk.”

“Thank man, ’preciate it.”

I sat in my office long after he’d gone, considering my options and hating all of them. Either way I looked at it, I lost the best thing I’d ever had, and all for the same asshole who had been the bane of my life since the day I could understand how much he hated me.

“Hey, ready to head home? It seems silly to go separately now you’ve outed us.”

I looked up at my beautiful Eden and smiled, closing my laptop. I didn’t need to decide right now and with her looking at me like that, I didn’t want to waste a second. “Let’s go home, beautiful.”

Eden



“YOU HAVE SOME EXPLAINING TO DO, YOUNG LADY.”

I look up from my desk to my friend’s semi-annoyed face, her hands on her hips as she gives me what can only be described as the ‘mom’ look. I could pretend I don’t know what she’s talking about but the need to talk about me and Ryker is overwhelming.

“I know and I’m sorry.”

“Hm, well, I’ll forgive you but only if you give me all the juicy details at lunchtime.”

“Of course.”

Sally nodded and gave me one more raised-brow look before smiling and leaving, closing my door behind her. I touched a hand to my lips, where I could still feel his lips on mine.

I knew he hadn’t been happy about us keeping our relationship a secret and I don’t really know why I insisted. The people here were becoming good friends and I knew they wouldn’t think I had slept with Ryker for the job. And, honestly, did I care? After everything I’ve been through these last six months, what other people thought should be the least of my worries.

Being trapped in an elevator with Ryker and his beautiful ex-hook-ups had been torture. I’d wanted to slap that bitch’s hand away from him and tell both of them he was mine. I’d never been territorial before, the way I’d grown up around people who didn’t always practice monogamy made me more

relaxed, but now I was thinking it had nothing to do with that and more to do with the fact that I just hadn't cared enough to be jealous.

Ryker was different in every way. Not only because of the way he was with me, treating me like I was the only person in the room but the way he was with others too. He was kind and considerate and put others' feelings first. The fact he was a fucking sex god in bed and anywhere else, as well as being a good man, made it impossible not to fall in love with him.

That elevator ride had shown me just how much I loved him, because not only was I jealous, I wanted to shout at the Carmel bitch and tell her how wrong she was about him and how amazing he was. In hindsight, his friend stepping on had been funny, but even he hadn't stepped up and stood up for my man.

The kiss in front of everyone was movie-hero worthy and my heart fluttered wildly when I thought about it. If swooning were a thing, I think I just might have from that kiss.

I got to work finishing up my current project and sending some changes to the test team to check and tried to put my giddy thoughts to the back of my mind so I could act like an actual functioning adult rather than a love-sick teenager.

My door opened and Sally appeared with a tray of food, and I frowned. "What's all this?"

"This is that man of yours. I told him I was on a diet and he asked if he could help. I said some healthier options like soup for lunch might be nice. Next thing I know, a catering company is delivering hot chili bowls, soups, and veggie stew."

She laid it out on the edge of my desk and the scents made my tummy rumble. Again, Ryker was proving what I already knew, that he was the real deal.

"I swear if I wasn't engaged to my handsome man, I'd swipe that man from right under your nose."

I smiled as I took the utensils from her. "You could try."

Sally laughed and squeezed my arm. “Oh, honey, Aphrodite herself could walk in this room and that man still wouldn’t take his eyes off you. He’s well and truly smitten.”

I can’t help the huge smile that tips my cheeks into a permanent grin these days.

“And so are you.”

I shoved a bite of the hot chili into my mouth as Sally sipped her soup.

“He’s just so...”

“Perfect?”

“Yes, and I know that’s silly to say because nobody is perfect, but he is. He’s sweet, and kind, patient, funny, and so damn alpha in the bedroom I can’t stand it.”

“You’re right, honey. Nobody is perfect but someone can be perfect for you and that’s the same thing.”

“You think so?”

“Yes absolutely. Take my Paul, for instance. The man can’t cook worth a damn, but that’s okay because I love to cook. I can’t stand yard work but he loves it, so we work because we aren’t perfect apart but together we are.”

“That makes sense, and he’s been so good about everything.”

I stopped as I was about to blurt out how I’d been living and considered if I should tell her and then decided secrets only ever caused problems and I was done with that shit. “I’m actually living with him.”

“Wow, girl, you move fast.”

I laugh at her words but shake my head. “It’s not like that. When I started working here, I was living in my car. About a month later, Ryker found out when he followed me and he hit the roof. Demanded I stay with him. At that point, we weren’t together but the attraction was there, and things progressed fast.”

I looked up to see tears in my friend’s eyes. “Don’t cry.”

Sally gripped my hand tight in hers. “I hate that I didn’t know. You could have stayed with me. How did this happen to such a beautiful young woman?”

I told her about Beau and how he’d maxed out all my credit cards, stolen my money, and changed my rental contract. The horrified look on her face turned feral.

“That little prick better hope I never see him around you.”

I shook my head. “You won’t. I haven’t seen him since we split and, honestly, there’s no reason to see him either.”

“Good, I’m too hot for prison. I’d end up someone’s bitch.”

I laughed as the heavy moment lifted a little. “Rest assured prison isn’t in your future.”

“Even more reason to love that man out there.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Sally cocked my head as if sensing my hesitation. “What?”

I blotted my lips with a paper towel and scrunched it in my hand as I tried to put into words how I felt. “I’m scared.”

“Oh, honey, of course you are. After everything you’ve been through with that rat bastard ex, you’re bound to be wary, but I’ll tell you now, that man loves you.”

I shook my head, too afraid to hope. “He doesn’t. It’s too soon.”

“After my husband died, I never thought I’d find love again. I loved him so much and when Paul came along, I kept him at a distance for a long time because I thought it was too soon. When I finally gave in, I realized that time doesn’t factor into love. I loved Paul from the first time we met. The only thing that changed was my knowledge about the man he is and the father he is to my sons. Ryker Cabot loves you, and I think you love him. Embrace that.”

“I’m scared. What if he changes his mind or it all blows up on me and I’m left with nothing again?”

“My sweet girl, love is a risk, but the reward is so much greater. Even knowing how things ended for me and Scott, my first husband, I’d still walk that path with him, because what we shared was magical.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“I am and I have a good feeling about you two. Any idiot can see the connection you share is special. If he fucks up and you end things, you still have me, so don’t even think about living in your car again.”

“I won’t and in any case, Ryker set me up with one of his apartments with a proper rental contract and everything so I’m safe from that.”

“See, proving he thinks about your feelings and tries to make you feel safe. A douchebag boyfriend wouldn’t do that, but a man in love will do whatever it takes to make his woman feel safe and happy.”

“Okay. I’ll try and be brave.”

“Good. Now what about details? Is he as hot under that suit as I think he is?”

I giggle and roll my lips, pretending to zip them. “A lady never tells, but I will say this. If a billboard went up of him in shorts, Times Square would grind to a halt.”

“Damn, you lucky girl.”

My cheeks pink and I can’t help the joy from showing on my face. “Yeah, I am.”

As the day draws to an end, I think about what my friend said and everything that has happened between me and Ryker so far. He’s shown me nothing but the loving wonderful man he is, and it’s time I stopped letting my ex turn me into a wimp who let assholes control their future. It won’t be easy but I’ll be brave and put my trust in this man.

Ryker



“OH, MY GOODNESS. THIS PLACE IS STUNNING.”

I cocked my head to look at Eden as I pulled my Range Rover into the spot beside Lincoln, Lottie, and Eric.

The cabins owned by Norrie had belonged to her grandmother and had been left to her when the old lady died. Norrie had been running the place when she met Harrison after he came here to relax and de-stress. It was here my friend fell for the cute blonde and left her with way more than a smile when he came home.

“It *is* beautiful here.”

I looked out over the mountains that framed the lake behind the main cabins and sighed. This is what I needed, to relax with my girl and friends and forget about my asshole brother and the predicament he’d unknowingly put me in with his vile actions.

“Hey, you okay?”

I smiled reflexively and took her hand, laying a kiss on her palm. “Perfect.”

A bang on the window had me looking up at Eric, Lincoln’s much younger brother.

I grinned and we got out of the car, with Eden heading over to Lottie. “Hey, kid, how’s it going?”

“Good. Is she your girlfriend?”

I walked with him to where Eden was talking with Lottie.
“Sure is, kid.”

I saw Eric kick at the stones, hands in his pockets as he nodded. “Cool.”

“You got eyes for my girl, kid?”

“No.”

His abrupt answer was enough. Eric had a crush on my girl and I didn't blame him. “Good, I don't want to have to kick your ass.”

“As if, old man.”

Eric was almost twelve now and taller than his sister, Lottie. The dynamics were odd because she'd raised him as her son, and her fiancé Linc was also the kid's brother after his disgusting father attacked Lottie's mom and got her pregnant with Eric. It was a mess on paper but in real life, it worked, and they were happy.

“I could take you.”

“Hey, you threatening my kid?”

Lincoln punched me in the shoulder, and I pushed him back, the pair of us acting like big kids.

“You gonna try and take me, Grandpa?”

“Children, behave. I don't want to spend this weekend patching up grown men who should know better.”

Beck shook his head as he leaned in to grab Amelia's bags, but she was busy hugging Norrie with her movie star boyfriend, Xander, hovering over her.

“Don't worry, I'm going to save myself for the football game later and kick his ass.”

“Language!” Norrie shouted and Eden laughed as her head swung between us all.

“Shit, I haven't introduced everyone. Eden, you've met Lincoln, Audrey, and Amelia but this is Norrie, Harrison, their cute son Isaac, and Linc's fiancée, Lottie. Beck and Xander

belong to Amelia, and then Eric. Everyone, this is my girlfriend, Eden Sager.”

Everyone spoke at once and Eden laughed again. “I’m never going to remember everyone’s names.”

I slipped an arm around her as I hooked our bags over my other shoulder. “Don’t need to, beautiful. I’m the only one who matters.”

“God, the ego on this guy.” Audrey rolled her eyes and linked an arm through Eden’s. “We’ll take it from here, stud.”

I watched as Eden was pulled away into the group consisting of my friend’s wives and partners. For a second, I felt panicked that she wasn’t beside me but then I realized just how much I loved the thought of Eden having the support of these amazing women.

Beck slapped me on the shoulder as we walked to our respective cabins that ran behind the main lodge, where we’d eat dinner later.

“Man, you have it bad.”

“I love her, Beck. I’d seriously marry that woman tomorrow.”

He pulled his head back and glanced at Harrison and then Lincoln before smiling. “I’m happy for you, man.”

“Yeah, well, don’t buy a new suit just yet. I have a major fucking hurdle to get past first, not to mention this shit with Mandy.” I’d considered not saying anything but these were my boys, Xander included now, and I could honestly do with some advice. “I need a drink for this.”

“I have a bottle of Macallan Oscuro in my cabin.”

“Lead the way, my friend.”

Beck poured each of us a glass and I told them about my brother and everything he’d done. It was somewhat cathartic to bring all my boys in on this but it also left me feeling like shit because I was hiding this huge fucking secret from Eden, the woman I loved.

“What an absolute douche nozzle.” Harrison shook his head, his face mirroring how I felt.

“Want me to have a word with a few friends of mine and see if we can break his legs?”

I grinned and knocked my glass against Xander’s. “Nice idea, my friend, and if it wouldn’t break my mother’s heart, I’d do more than that.”

“Yeah, it’s a tough situation.” Beck pursed his lips as he nodded. He was the more controlled one of the group. Fuck, he’d loved his best friend for fucking years and never said a word to her until Xander came along and he thought he’d lose her. Then the bastard went one better and claimed the fucking pair of them.

“You need to tell her.”

“I told him that.” Lincoln gave me an ‘I told you so’ look.

“Yeah, but if he tells her, she runs, and we know it.”

I looked at Harrison, not expecting him to side with me. I pointed at him. “See that. Eden will run. She won’t trust what we have is real. She’ll think I played her.”

“Do you love her?”

I hung my head and sighed, before looking up at Beck. “Yes.”

“Does she know that?”

“We haven’t said it yet. I was waiting for her to be ready.”

“Bullshit, you were waiting for her not to reject your ass. Grow a pair and tell her you love her before this blows up and then be prepared to grovel, and I don’t mean no weak-assed grovel like Lincoln got away with, I mean proper shit.”

“Hey, I wrote her a letter.”

“Exactly. Weak as shit. I’d have made your ass crawl for bringing that woman into my house.”

Lincoln hung his head. “I’d never have touched her. Fuck, my lips never made contact with her.”

“Don’t matter, you were a dick.”

“Fuck you, Beck. I know I messed up but believe me, the grovel is ongoing. Lottie owns my balls now and I’m fine with it.”

I nod and knock back my drink, letting the burn smooth away the fear riding me. “A never-ending grovel. No wonder I like your girl, Linc.”

“You worry about your own girl.”

“So basically, you fuckers are no help?”

“For what it’s worth, I think you tell her and then you show her you aren’t letting her go and prove you’re nothing like him.”

“Probably the best plan. I just need to get this case with Monica figured out first. I don’t want this blowing up publicly when my brother finds out because you can bet when I confront him, he’s going to be a pain in my ass.”

“Seriously, man, the best part of that asshole slid down the crack of your Mom’s ass.”

“Dude, shut the fuck up about my mom’s ass.” I eyed Harrison, who was normally reserved, in shock, even if I didn’t disagree with him.

“Sorry, I just hate fuckers like him.”

“Yeah, whatever. Let’s go annoy the girls. I’m starving.”

We walk as a group back to the main lodge and Harrison apologizes again and I shake it off. “It’s fine, man. Let’s just enjoy this trip.”

“Hey, Beck, did you bring the Tums for later.”

“Yep.”

“And this is why we keep you around, Beck.”

“Bullshit, I keep you lot around to remind me how good my fucking life is compared to you dicks.”

“Speaking of dicks, did Eden enjoy the club?” Lincoln asked.

“Yeah, I think she did.” I can’t help the smile as I remember it.

I SIT BACK AND WRAP MY ARM AROUND THE BACK OF EDEN’S chair as she laughs with Norrie about a book they both read about some mafia hero. Lunch as usual for us was a lively, loud affair with lots of laughter, love, and teasing.

I watch her smile and talk animatedly with her hands as I stroke her shoulder, and she lifts her hand to link her fingers through mine without even pausing for thought. We’re so in sync, as if this is practiced, not new, and I feel my heart widen with love for her.

If she asked me to harness the moon, I swear I’d buy a fucking rocket and do it. I never knew it could be like this, that I could love one human being so much that I’d jump in front of a moving train to stop just one second of pain for them.

She twists her head and looks up at me, as she leans in closer and I kiss her shoulder, loving how comfortable she is with my friends and allowing me to be so open with touching her in front of them.

“Who’s ready for pie?” Norrie jumps from the table and Eden moves to help.

“Me.”

“Beck brought the Tums.” Amelia kisses him and he looks at her with indulgence and adoration and I wonder if that’s how I look at Eden.

“You having pie, handsome?”

Eden flops down into my lap at this hulking great table where all my friends are celebrating everything they are thankful for.

“Handsome, hey?”

Eden smirks as I rest my hands around her body and feel her wriggle a little, making my cock harden.

“You call me beautiful and you’re a handsome man, so....”

I nip her ear. “I’m a fucking horny man and right now that sweet body is what I want more than pie.”

“Hmm, is that so?”

That little hum does things to me and if I didn’t want her to bond with my friends so badly, I’d whisk her back to our cabin right now and show her exactly what she does to me. “It is so.”

“Well, if you play your cards right, this body is all yours after the girls beat your asses at football later.”

The girls had been championing the idea of playing boys versus girls at football after dinner. Harrison and Lincoln had been dead set against it, citing the reason as not wanting their women to get hurt. Honestly, for two highly successful and intelligent men, they could be dumb as fuck sometimes. Saying no to a woman was never a good idea, but saying it was because they might get hurt and inferring they were the weaker sex, was asking for trouble.

Beck and I had been okay with it, probably because we weren’t overbearing assholes and knew exactly how tough these women were. We were still gonna beat them but at least they will have tried.

“Blondie, I always play the right hand.”

She laughs, drops a kiss on me that is over too soon, and jumps up to head into the kitchen, sashaying those sexy hips and teasing me as she goes.

Little Minx will pay for that later.

Pie is served and the banter around the table is loud as the girls throw down smack talk about beating the boys, with quiet little Lottie being the most vocal, which I love.

“As if girls could beat grown men at football.” Xander smirks and Beck shakes his head as if he can’t believe the man he loves would come out with something so stupid.

“Xander, it’s a good job you’re hot or I’d whip your ass for that comment.”

I laugh at Amelia, and Beck shrugs as we all move off to change into more suitable shoes and the girls head for a team

talk.

We should have known if the girls were talking smack they had a plan, and boy did they. When they walked out on the field dressed in tight, short shorts, knee-high socks, and crop tops with their numbers on, we were toast.

I clapped and whistled as Eden did a little twirl for me and giggled.

“Gather round, ladies.” Audrey, as captain, called her team together and we all just stood there like fucking panting dogs.

“Can you believe they pulled this stunt?” Lincoln had his hands on his hips watching Lottie and I couldn’t figure out if he was horny or indignant.

“How can you not?” Beck laughed.

“Those ladies are forces of fucking nature, it’s why we love them. I for one am proud of them.”

Harrison glared at me. “Whose side you on, chump?”

“Well, ours of course but you gotta admire their spirit.”

My arrogance was short-lived when after the first quarter we were already behind thanks to cheap shots like Lottie bending over to tie her mysteriously undone shoelace, causing Linc to run out of his position and stand behind her so nobody could ogle her ass.

When Xander had the wonderful idea that we lose our shirts, literally, we managed to gain some ground. Unluckily for us, Audrey wasn’t the least bit affected by any of our naked torsos.

We ended up losing so badly that the girls let Eric, who was the referee, kick a field goal for them. It was the best Thanksgiving I could remember in a very long time. I slung my sweaty arm around Eden’s shoulders and kissed her cheek, before throwing her over my shoulder and racing towards our cabin with cheers and catcalls from my friends.

“Oh my God, put me down, you oaf.”

I slapped her ass. “Oaf?”

“Oh, you’re going to pay for that, mister.”

I dumped her on our bed and bent over her gorgeous body, her cheeks glowing with health and happiness, and vowed in that moment that I’d do whatever it took to keep that smile on her face.

“Yeah, how so, baby?”

Her cheeks pink from exertion, eyes bright, she wiggled her top off and threw it at me. “I have my ways.”

Then she darted off the bed and ran to the bathroom, throwing clothes as she went.

“Someone wants to play.”

“We already played, babe, and you lost.”

I shucked my clothes as quickly as I could and joined her in the shower, backing her against the tile wall with my body. “Beautiful, I have you naked in my shower. How have I possibly lost?”

Her hands loop around my neck, forcing her body against mine and I lift her as she wraps her legs around me and bring her down on my cock. Her breath hisses out, her lips falling open and I bite down on her bottom one, sucking it between my lips.

“Fuck me, Ryker.”

So I do.

I pound into her, watching her body take my cock until she’s crying out my name and the pressure in the base of my spine turns to white hot pleasure and I come with a growl against her neck. Every time I come with this woman, it’s powerful but my knees are almost weak from the power of that one.

Her tiny hand smooths over my cheek, bringing my focus back to her gorgeous face.

“I’m thankful for you, Ryker Cabot. This year has been the worst, but you’ve turned it around and made it one of the best.”

I kiss her to hide the wetness gathering in my eyes from her words. “Same, baby.”

I can't say more for fear of sobbing like a little bitch, so I show her with my body just what she means to me.

Later that night as I'm lying with Eden nestled against me, sound asleep, I get a text.

I blink as an image of me and Eden walking into Angelo Mancuso's place fills my screen. Half asleep, I hadn't read who it was from but when the next message comes through, I see red.

BEAU: WELL, WELL, LOOKS LIKE THE GOLDEN BOY HAS BEEN BREAKING UP A HAPPY RELATIONSHIP AND STEALING MY GIRL. MOM WOULD BE HEARTBROKEN AND SO AM I. PERHAPS A HUNDRED K WILL HELP MAKE ME FEEL BETTER.

I can hardly breathe from the rage firing through my blood at his crass, disgusting attempt to blackmail me and paint himself as the victim after what he's done. I've never hated someone more. To think when I was little I worshipped Beau. I'd follow him around but I learned quickly that he was spiteful and mean when he forced my face into the mud and made me eat grass.

After that, I avoided him as best as a six-year-old could, yet I've always tried to do the right thing by him because I could see what it did to my parents when we fought, but no more.

Beau was dead to me and if he came after Eden, he'd be dead. I'd bury that fucker so deep nobody would find him, and I'd sleep soundly afterwards. I grabbed my phone and wrote out a text, careful not to put anything incriminating in it.

RYKER: FUCK YOU, BEAU. TELL MOM WHAT YOU WANT. WE BOTH KNOW YOU'VE NEVER LOVED ANYONE BUT YOURSELF AND YOU'LL NEVER GET ANOTHER DIME OUT OF ME, SO TAKE A WALK AND LOSE MY NUMBER.

BEAU: BIG MISTAKE, BROTHER. I'LL SEE YOU SOON.

I didn't bother engaging with him after that because I knew it would do no good, but you can bet your ass my PI

would be following his ass until I had a chance to figure this out and tell Eden and my parents, and I knew time was running out.

Eden



THANKSGIVING WAS THE MOST FUN I'VE HAD IN A VERY LONG time and reminded me of when I was young and my parents would basically open our home to their friends because to them they were family. Seeing Ryker with the people he loved confirmed everything I knew about him. He was a good man and I was right to trust him with my heart.

We'd been home five days after spending the entire weekend up at the cabins, which were magical. Work was hectic, as every other sector like ours was leading up to the holidays. Ryker was busy and had thrown himself into it head-on, meaning I saw a little less of him. I understood he had a lot going on, especially with that bitch Mandy and her lies.

By some miracle, the media aspect had died down a lot and I had a feeling that might be something to do with Audrey and Lincoln, who I may have been a little hard on before. Kennedy Enterprises was their family company and Lincoln was CEO and Audrey CFO. They had recently bought the news station that handled one of the biggest news outlets in the US. I don't think that was why they bought it for one second, that would be insane, but I know for their friend they'd definitely flex their muscles and have the story killed.

I closed my eyes and brought my knees up to my chest as a whimper fell from my lips, a familiar cramp twisting my lower abdomen. My periods had always been a bit irregular but when I got them, oh boy, were they hard to deal with. Thankfully, it was Saturday morning, even if it was only six-thirty in the morning.

I slowly untangled Ryker's hand from where he cupped my breast like his favorite blankie and slid out of bed. I tiptoed to the bathroom and closed the door, sinking to the floor as another cramp brought me to my knees. I'd always suffered from period pains and, unlike some women, the contraceptive pill didn't help me.

Dragging myself to the toilet, I cleaned up and thanked my lucky stars that I'd seen fit to put some tampons in the small cupboard. Washing my hands, I was considering what to do when I doubled over and a small cry fell from my lips. I muffled it but boy were these bad. I knew by tomorrow it would ease enough for me to function but the first day was always awful, and I'd even missed work on occasion because of it.

"Eden, beautiful, are you okay?"

I froze at the sound of Ryker's deep, sleepy voice on the other side of the door. The thought of him seeing me like this was embarrassing. "I'm fine. Go back to bed."

"You don't sound fine."

Damn him and his stubbornness. I was about to respond when a cramp ripped through me taking my breath and a pitiful whimper slid past my lips.

"Eden, open this damn door right now before I kick it in."

Now he sounded worried and angry and I didn't want that. I crawled to the door and flicked the lock and Ryker barreled inside, his eyes seeming to look for some kind of threat and finding none. He moved to his knees and slid his arms underneath me, lifting me into his strong arms, like a bride. "Baby?"

I laid my head on his chest as he carried me back to bed. "I'm sorry."

Sitting on the bed, his back braced against the headboard, he cradled me close. "Don't be sorry, just talk to me. What's hurting? Do you need to go to the hospital?"

I shook my head, a smile tipping the corners of my lips, God, this man. "No, handsome. I've just started my period and

the cramps are kicking my ass.”

I half expected him to fling me from his lap and jump out of bed like I might spontaneously bleed all over him and melt his skin off, but he just held me closer, kissing my head.

He laid his hand over my lower abdomen, and it was warm and firm as he began to slowly rub in small circles.

“Mmm, that helps.”

“What else? Medication? Heating pad?”

I looked up at his worried expression and thought my heart might crack into two with the sheer amount of love I felt for this man. Never had I felt so cherished. “How do you know about these things?”

“Audrey educated us boys in college.”

“I love that woman.”

His low chuckle vibrated against me and I wanted to sink into him and stay forever. “Tylenol helps and so does a heating pad.”

“Let me up and I’ll get them.”

I moved off his lap and he tucked the covers in around me and kissed my head before walking his sexy ass, dressed only in boxer briefs, out of the bedroom. A bolt of lust bit through me at the sight and I thought it was a sick twist of fate that my period always made me extra horny at a time when most men ran for the hills.

Ryker was back in a flash with Tylenol and a glass of water, holding it out for me like I was dying when I’d been through this more times than I wanted to consider.

“I’ll just grab the heating pad and be back.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re my girl, of course I’m gonna take care of you.”

A warm fuzzy feeling filled me, and I wished I could bottle it and take it out whenever I had doubts or wobbles. My eyes were closed, knees bent to my chest on my side when he

came back in and slid in behind me, placing the soft, furry heating pad over my tummy and holding it there with his hand while he cradled me against his front.

“Mmm, that feels good.”

I felt his lips press against my hair. “Is it always like this for you?”

“The first day usually and then it’s manageable.”

“Have you seen a doctor about it?”

I shook my head, already feeling the heat helping. “No point. What can they do?”

“I don’t know, but there might be something. I don’t like the idea of you suffering like this every month.”

“It’s part of being a woman. We deal with it.”

His lips brushed my ear. “Maybe I’ll knock you up so you have nine months free of it.”

I laughed at his logic. “Two problems. The first would be that I’d then have the pain of labor and the second, it would only last nine months then it’s back to square one.”

The thought of having Ryker’s baby made my tummy somersault, images of cute little boys with golden blond hair and blue eyes or a little blonde angel with curly hair wrapping her daddy around her little finger made me want what he was jokingly offering.

“Easy, drugs handle the first issue, and for the second, I’ll just keep you knocked up.”

“You have a barefoot and pregnant kink I see.”

“Baby, I have a ‘you’ kink.”

“I’m not sure you would after I’d given birth to all those kids. I’m not sure my vagina would fare well.”

“Um, it would be a bit like watching your favorite bar burn down, seeing the devastation hundreds of kids had on your sweet pussy.”

I giggled at his antics. “You’re crazy.”

“About you.”

I wriggled back and he groaned as I brushed his hard cock, and he moved his hips.

“Sorry, baby, just ignore him. He has no respect for woman’s troubles and we were talking about your pussy so he got excited.”

I laugh and snuggle closer, my pain easing to a manageable level now and my hormones taking over. I knew Ryker would run a mile if I rolled over and asked him for sex, so I tried to lie still and not let the empty ache in my pussy distract me.

His thumb was softly rubbing circles on my hip, not sexually but in comfort but even that innocent touch was making me squirm. I squeezed my thighs together trying to relieve the throb between my legs.

“What’s wrong? You’re all fidgety.”

“Nothing.” I couldn’t admit that I was horny to this man when I was on my period.

His hand stroked my hip and I bit back a moan, but not quick enough.

“Eden, baby, are you wanting something from me?”

I could hear from his tone that he was smiling, and he knew exactly what I wanted. “It’s hormones, ignore it.”

His hand swept up and cupped my breast through my thin tank top, squeezing gently, his cock rocking against my ass and making me whimper. “You want my cock or my fingers, beautiful?”

Oh God, this man, he made me feel so much. “I need your fingers on my clit.”

I couldn’t explain to him I had a tampon in, it was just too mortifying. The hand holding the fluffy water bottle against my tummy shifted, tunneling under my panties, his firm middle fingers sliding either side of my clit and pinching as he moved them up and down. Heat seized me as he slowly

worked my clit, his other hand spearing into my hair and tugging my head back so he could kiss me.

My whole body felt like a live wire, every part of me electrified by his touch, his tongue lazily stroking and fucking my mouth in rhythm with his fingers on my clit. I moaned and squirmed as he increased the pressure, moving his fingers lower, and I tensed. Ryker lifted his head and regarded me with so much heat and passion I could hardly catch my breath.

“A little blood doesn’t bother me, beautiful. You want my cock then it’s yours. You want my fingers or mouth, the same thing. You own me, baby.”

“I want your fingers on my clit now and I want your cock later when the pain eases up but only if you’re sure.” I could feel my blush as I spoke to him about this, even after everything we’d done and shared.

“I’m sure, baby. I want to make you feel good.”

His fingers toyed with the string of the tampon before working their way back to my clit and going to work in earnest. He gave just the right amount of pressure and movement. As my climax pulsed through me, he took my mouth in a hungry kiss that inflamed the fire burning through me.

His fingers stilled and he lifted his head, giving me one of those panty-melting smiles he gifted me with so often, the soft look in his eyes making the words fall from my lips.

“I love you, Ryker Cabot.”

I didn’t expect to say it like this and certainly not yet, but it was out and I wouldn’t take it back, I didn’t want to.

“Oh, blondie, I’ve loved you since the minute you shut my ass down in that art studio.”

“Really?”

He cocked his head. “Why so surprised?”

“I don’t know, it just seems fast and scary.”

“It was fast. It was like getting hit over the head with a pan, and I knew you were mine from that moment. At least, my heart knew.”

“Is this crazy?”

“Maybe, but if it is, I never want to be sane, because I never want to lose this feeling or you.” He settled back behind me and held me close.

I cupped his cock behind me. “You want me to handle that.”

He eased my hand away. “No, baby, this is about you for now. You can give him some attention after you get some more sleep.”

“I am tired.”

“Sleep, baby.”

And I did, falling into a dreamless sleep, free of pain, and filled with the knowledge he loved me.

We spent the day on the couch, watching Netflix and eating the mountain of junk food Ryker had gone out and got me. It was perfect in every way and all because he was being who he was, and by some miracle loving me.

Ryker



“HUDSON, PLEASE TELL ME YOU HAVE GOOD NEWS FOR ME.”

I watch him take a seat opposite me and lean back, comfortable in his own skin. “I wish I could, but Mandy is getting some really shitty advice. Her lawyers have convinced her to go to court, and with Monica beside her, she can win this case.”

My gut feels like it has a fish hook embedded in it at the moment, every way I turn it digs deeper. “Can she win?”

Hudson isn’t a man to rush into an answer and blow smoke up your ass. He’s a straight shooter and just what I need right now. I want to rush him to tell me what I want to hear, but I won’t.

“No, with everything we have from your logs with HR and the video evidence of some of the things she pulled here in this very office, it’s almost impossible she can make this case stick.” I sigh, my shoulders falling in relief, until Hudson lifts a hand. “However, mud sticks, Ryker. And win or not, if she does a circuit of the talk shows and papers or even social media, she could still create a hell of a lot of damage.”

“I have some of that covered. Kennedy Enterprises recently acquired Sutton Entertainment, as you may know.”

Sutton Entertainment was huge, and the takeover had been Audrey’s baby.

“So, I take it we have your friends to thank for the lack of media interest in this case when it would usually be huge?”

I pinched my bottom lip and nodded slowly. “Yeah, we do.”

Hudson blew out a breath and sat forward. “Well, that’s something at least. It won’t stop her from going to the smaller studios, and I’m assuming you’ll handle some of the social media aspects.”

“I can.”

“I won’t lie, this could still hurt your image, Ryker. I know you’ve been keeping a low profile but I also know you’ve been seen out with your colleague, Miss Sager.”

“Who told you?”

Hudson raises a brow. “Does it matter?”

“Yes, maybe.”

I’d had no intention of telling Hudson about this, but I wasn’t stupid enough to let my lawyer get blindsided either. “This goes no further than this room.”

“Goes without saying. I’m your lawyer and, even if I wasn’t, I don’t run my mouth.”

“Fair enough.” My eyes flickered to the door and guilt assailed me again. Eden had told me she loved me, she’d put her trust in me and every day I didn’t tell her the truth I felt like a bigger asshole.

“Spit it out.”

Hudson looked unimpressed with my stalling. “It’s true I’m seeing Eden Sager but it’s more than that. We’re in a relationship and she’s living with me.”

“So, it’s serious, then?”

“Very. I love her and plan to marry her if she’ll still have me after she finds out the truth.”

“The truth being?”

“Eden got out of a bad relationship about six months ago, a little more actually. Her ex stole her money, draining her bank accounts. He maxed out her credit cards and somehow

managed to get the rental contract on her apartment put in his name. When she caught him cheating, she tried to throw him out but he, of course, had the legal rights and she ended up sleeping in her car until I found out about a month after she'd been working here and gave her a place to stay. Our relationship began just after."

"You know, I see the lowest of scum in my job and I shouldn't be shocked but that's fucking pond scum low."

I clenched my fingers on my knees, knowing that wasn't even the worst part. "Agreed, he's a piece of shit."

"He's a criminal too. That's theft, and changing a lease is illegal without the agreed party's consent."

"Yeah, well, it gets worse. I recently found out this ex of hers is my estranged brother, Beau."

Hudson's eyes widen. "No shit."

"Yeah."

"And she has no idea? How is that possible?"

"We have different fathers and despite mine bringing him up and being the only father he's ever known, Beau insists on going by his birth father's name."

"Fuck. I can see why you haven't told her but as I often tell my clients, honesty is the best option. If you don't tell her and she finds out anyway, it will go down a lot worse. Get out in front of this and talk to her."

"I might lose her." I had no idea why I was telling him this, but I liked the guy, despite one of my best friends hating him.

"You might, but if she finds out you lied, you'll definitely lose her."

"Shit, Hudson, tell me how you really feel."

"I don't sugarcoat shit. Believe me when I say I've learned from experience the damage secrets do."

"It gets worse. Beau has pictures of us together and is blackmailing me. He's going to tell our parents and play the victim in it all and most likely go to the press."

“All the more reason to tell her. What did you tell your brother?”

“To fuck off.”

“Good. Don’t engage with him anymore and make sure you keep evidence of all his texts. I’ll have my guy look into him.”

“Mine is on it.”

“Yeah, no offense but I trust my guy more so let me do this my way.”

“Whatever.” I honestly felt too sick with guilt and worry to fight this battle with him.

“So, back to Eden. It might be in our interest for you two to go public and put on a united loved-up front.”

I snort. “Yeah, until the press gets wind of Beau, and my parents are dragged into this mess too.”

“We can do an interview and explain what you told me, but it will mean you telling her the truth.”

I shake my head. “No, I’m not putting her in the spotlight like that. Eden and I stay under the radar.”

“A little late for that, don’t you think? You’ve been seen out together. You went to the club and you kissed her in the middle of your office.”

“The fuck?”

“This is what I mean, nothing stays hidden.”

I stand and lean on my desk. “I said no. I don’t want people to know about Eden and I.”

Hudson threw up his hands. “Fine, then we go to court and I’ll have this case dismissed as fast as I can, but any fall-out after that we can’t control as much.”

“I understand. Just do what you can and make sure when I walk into that courtroom, we bury Mandy and Monica for this.”

Hudson stood and picked up his briefcase. “Will do, and think about what I said.” I went to bite his head off, and he held up a hand. “Not that, about telling her the truth. It’s the only way forward and if you don’t, trust me, you will regret it, so don’t leave it. This is like sitting with a ticking time bomb under your ball sack.”

I laughed and winced at the analogy. “I get it.”

“I’ll be in touch, Cabot.”

I walk him out and try and get back to work, but my mind is on his words. I know he’s right, just like I know all my friends are too. I just need to grow a pair of balls and find the words to tell her. Watching her in pain last week almost brought me to my knees. If I could have taken it from her, I would have and yet here I am, about to unload even more pain on her. Not physical but emotional trauma and there’s no other way but to hurt the woman I love with my whole heart. I never imagined feeling this way and I’d been as serious as shit when I talked about knocking her up. I’d have kids with her tomorrow, and I’ve never imagined that in my future.

I wanted a family and future with her and if she asked me to give up every cent I’ve made and walk away from my company I would, but none of that helps me because what I’ll need to do is walk away from my family. Beau is already dead to me, but if my parents choose him this time, I know what I’ll do even if it kills me.

First, I need to speak to my parents and have a very frank conversation with them about Beau and how destructive he is. I need to give them the chance to do the right thing this time no matter how much it pains them. I pick up the phone and call my mom, a smile splitting my face when she answers.

“Hey, my baby boy.”

“Hey, Mom.”

“How are you?”

“Good, really good.”

“How were the cabins?”

“Wonderful. Listen, can I come see you and Dad. I want to talk to you about something important.”

“Is it a girl?”

I can hear the excitement in her voice and a grin breaks through the clouds of despair I feel. “Maybe.”

“Oh, honey, yes of course. You should bring her.”

“Not this time, but maybe in the future if that’s what you want.”

“Of course it is. You’re my baby no matter how old you are, and I love you. If she’s special to you, she’s special to us.”

I can’t help but tease her. “How do you know she’s special?”

“Darling, I know you and I know you wouldn’t bring her home or even mention her if she wasn’t. So come home and see us. Maybe Friday night, if that works? I can make your favorite lasagna.”

“Okay, Mom, that works. I’ll see you Friday. Love you.”

“Oh, I love you too, sweetheart.”

I hang up and feel slightly better for having a plan. I’ll speak to my parents and then tell Eden. No matter what happens I’m not giving up on us not ever, and I’m going to tell her that too.

Ryker



I PULL UP TO MY FAMILY HOME IN THE SUBURBS. I OFFERED TO buy them something bigger or fancier but they insisted this was where they raised their family and was home. My father's car was in the drive and I smiled at that. They hadn't let me buy them a new house but I'd paid their mortgage off and now my father only worked part time.

I felt pride that I could do that for the two people who'd raised me and shown me what love was meant to look like.

I exited my black Porsche and walked up the driveway. I didn't get to drive my baby often so when I could, I did. Snow was falling but it didn't seem to be sticking, and the roads were still clear.

Before I could knock, the door was pulled open and I was enveloped in my mother's warm hug. She was little but she was mighty, holding on with fierce strength and making me smile.

I lifted her off her feet and swung her around, before dropping her back inside the door. "Hey, Mom."

She looks up at me and seemed to do that mental reading that moms can do. Sniffing out any problem or concerns in an instant. Aurelia Cabot is five foot five and a hundred and twenty pounds of dynamite. She keeps fit with yoga and power walking, and worked as a school administrator while I was growing up. She took no nonsense, except with Beau.

"What's wrong?"

“Jeez, Mom let me through the door before you start the interrogation.”

I stepped through and walked past her to the kitchen where I knew my father would be sitting at the kitchen table painting the miniature figurines he collected.

“Hey, Dad.”

He looked over his glasses and then stood with a huge smile, opening his arms for me, and embracing me in a huge hug. Andrew Cabot was a big man. Like me, he was tall and blond, with wide shoulders. I was him in replica, but I had my mother’s eyes. I had Dad’s temperament though. He was chill and calm and not a whole bothered him. He was laid back and wise and took things in his stride, but he was fiercely protective of my mom, like a King protecting his Queen. Now with Eden in my life, I got that, which made it that much harder to understand his stance on Beau or maybe it didn’t. Maybe he went along with it to keep her happy. How much would I swallow if it kept Eden happy? I was guessing a lot.

“You look well, son.”

“Thanks, Dad, so do you.”

He patted his stomach. “Your mother put me on a diet. You need to come home more so I can have red meat again.”

“Andrew Cabot, don’t use our son as an excuse to break your diet.”

“Yes, dear.”

I grinned as I sank down in the seat at the family table where I always sat for dinner. Everything about this place filled me with nostalgia, from the magnets on the fridge depicting our vacations over the years, to the fruit bowl on the island, which had been my grandmother’s and now had a crack down the side after Beau had a tantrum about something and threw his school bag, knocking the bowl to the floor. My father had painstakingly glued every piece until it was almost perfect, except for that crack.

“Dinner is almost ready.”

“Thanks, Mom, it smells amazing.” Lasagna was one of those dishes that I never ate anywhere but here, because nobody could make it like my mom.

She sat beside me and pinned me with a look. “So?”

Almost thirty years old and she could still make me feel like I was six years old. If the CIA had my mother, the enemies of our country would shake in their boots. “Can we eat first?” I didn’t feel like food, nerves twisting my stomach.

“Fine. Have you heard from Beau?”

Great, this was even worse. “Yes.”

“Did he say much?”

“Not really. Just the usual.”

“He was going to come over tonight, but his plans changed.”

“Before or after you told him I was coming?”

“I’m not sure.”

My mother was lying. She remembered, she just didn’t want to say. I was a little surprised Beau hadn’t taken the opportunity to try and make me look bad in front of my parents, or make me sweat, but I’d given up trying to figure him out years ago.

Dinner was served and we all dug in, and it was even better than I remembered. The awkwardness disappeared as my father regaled us with a story about his golfing buddy who’d fallen in the pond trying to get his ball. It was light and comforting and I wanted more than anything to share this with the woman I loved.

My father and I cleared the dishes away and rinsed them before loading the dishwasher. Rules in this house meant the cook didn’t clean up after.

“How about we go into the den? The fire is going.”

I followed my parents into the den, a coffee in my hand, and saw the log fire I’d had installed, because I knew my

mother had always wanted one, was warming the room and creating a soft glow.

My father took his usual chair and my mother curled up in the corner of the couch, tucking her feet underneath her as I sat beside her.

“Enough stalling, son, time to talk.”

I grinned at my Dad and nodded. “Honestly, I don’t know where to begin. This isn’t easy.”

“Is she pregnant?”

I shook my head. “No, and if she was, it would make the happiest man alive.”

My mother blinked, knowing how opposed to kids I’d always been. “You love her?”

I nodded. “I do, very much.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

How did I even begin to explain this to them when it baffled my mind.

“Start at the beginning, son.”

“We met at an art gallery. She was a life model for a class. I asked her out and she turned me down flat.” My mother smiled, settling in like this was a fairytale.

“Then by some twist of fate, she ended up working for me. The attraction was there from the start. Honestly, I think I loved her from the first meeting. But she’d been badly hurt, and so I agreed to be her friend. We hung out at lunch breaks and chatted, and we got on so well. Then one night I found out she’d been living in her car.”

My mother pressed a hand to her mouth. “Oh no, that poor child.”

“She was too ashamed to tell me. But I made her come stay with me and offered her one of my units when it was finished, but the attraction was too strong. We began a relationship, but she was still skittish.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“It gets worse. Her ex had stolen all the money from her bank accounts, maxed out all her credit cards, and somehow got the rental contract changed on her apartment. When she caught him cheating, she was left homeless and penniless.”

“That scoundrel. He should be whipped.”

I hoped my dad thought that when he realized who the scoundrel was. “Agreed. She was living in her car for months but then something she said made me dig deeper into her ex-boyfriend.”

“What did you find? Did he have a string of women he’d done this to? I bet he did, men like that are a menace.”

I pursed my lips at my mother’s indignant expression but I knew I was about to devastate her because she wouldn’t want to believe she’d raised a man who’d behave that way.

“I don’t know about that, but do you want to guess what his name is?” I looked both my parents in the eye, and I could see the exact moment my father clued in.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Andrew, Ryker, what are you talking about?”

I angled toward my mom and took her hand in mine. “It was Beau, Mom. He was the one who treated Eden so horribly.”

My mother snatched her hand away and I tried not to be hurt by it, but it stung.

“No, he wouldn’t. Eden was the one who did all those things to him. She cheated with his friends and stole everything, and then threw him out on the streets.”

My mother was pacing in front of me now, agitation in every step. “No, Mom. It was Beau. I have proof.” I didn’t mention he was trying to blackmail me about it too.

My mom was shaking her head. “Why would you say these things? She has you turning on your brother.”

“Aurelia.”

I watched as my mother turned on my father. “No, it’s not true.”

“Mom, why would I lie? Come on, you know me. You know I’d never hurt you like this if I thought for one second I was wrong.”

“Because she’s convinced you. I know how women like that work. They use their wiles to manipulate men. I thought she was a nice girl, but I can see she’s just a gold digger.”

“Mom, please, you know I’m not the type of man to let myself be manipulated like that. You raised me better.”

“I thought I did.”

That hurt but I wouldn’t show it, my patience fading. I loved my mother, but I loved Eden too and wouldn’t have anyone speak about her in such a way. I stood angrily and faced the people I loved with my whole heart and who I knew I’d just hurt beyond reason. “I know this is hard to hear. I know you love him, but if you ever speak about Eden like that again, I’ll never set foot in this house again. She’s kind, and brave, sweet and strong, and she’s courageous and I love her. She wouldn’t even tell me she was sleeping in her car, for God’s sake. How is that a gold digger?”

“Ryker, don’t take that tone with me.”

I laughed humorlessly. “Really, Mom, you take issue with my tone but not everything I just told you about your precious firstborn?”

“Don’t twist this on me, young man.”

I’d never felt so disappointed in my life as I did right now. “I came here to tell you the truth, to explain how I found myself in this nightmare and ask for advice from the people I love but instead, once again, you chose him.”

“Son, calm down.”

I glare at my dad. “No, I won’t calm down. I’ve spent my entire life putting up with you making excuses for his horrible behavior. Watching you make excuse after excuse for him and

I'm done. Beau is a horrible human being, and I know that's hard for a parent to hear. But by making excuses, you've allowed him to become a man who'd lie and swindle a woman I love until she ended up on the streets. Do you know he told her that you favored me, that you treated him like he was an outcast all his life? That's the man you raised."

I breathed out, trying to rein in my temper. I didn't want to do this, and I'd hoped they'd listen to me and be the parents I needed for a change, not the ones who blindly believed him.

"Mom, Dad, I love you but I can't do this anymore. You need to wake up and see who he is. I don't know why you treat us so differently or if you just love him more but I'm done. Beau is dead to me."

"Ryker, we do love you."

My mom was crying now, and my father wrapped his big arm around her and it took everything in me to not do the same.

"Then you have a funny way of showing it. I've never lied to you and, for what it's worth, Eden has no clue. I'm going home to tell her now and I'm going to beg her not to walk away from me, as I suspect she might because who the hell would want this. I have enough evidence on Beau for her to put him in prison. It's up to her if she decides to do it. Either way, I'll support her."

I turned and strode to the door, feeling like my heart was being ripped out.

"Ryker, please."

I stopped and shook my head, not able to look at my parents. "I love you both but don't contact me again unless you plan to apologize and put this right."

I drove away from my family home, my hands shaking, my heart in pieces on the floor, and I knew I couldn't go back to Eden like this so I headed towards Beck, Amelia, and Xander's place. I needed my friends.

Eden



I WASN'T EXPECTING A NIGHT ON MY OWN, BUT WHEN RYKER apologized and said he had a late meeting, I decided to settle down with a book. I hadn't been much into romance books after Beau but now I was living with my very own book boyfriend I wanted to jump back into my favorite genre.

It was amazing how silent the apartment was without him here and, after a childhood filled with noise, I didn't care for it. Not that Ryker was loud, far from it. He was considerate and sweet, the perfect boyfriend and I felt incredibly lucky to have found him. People always said you found the one when you stopped looking, and that was definitely the case for me.

I jumped when someone knocked at the door, surprised I hadn't been alerted by the buzzer for the building. I wasn't expecting anyone but it could be one of Ryker's friends and I smiled at the thought. They were a great group, and I loved the banter between them all.

The smile died on my face when I swung back the door and came face to face with my worst nightmare. "Beau!"

He was leaning on the door frame, a smirk playing across a face I had once considered handsome. "Hey, baby, I missed you."

I cringed at his use of the word. I'd always hated when he called me that, yet when Ryker used any pet name on me, be it blondie, beautiful, or babe, I felt this warmth suffuse my skin.

"What do you want?"

I could feel my heart rate skittering up at the sight of the man who'd taken everything from me, including my dignity for a short while. His eyes narrowed and he pushed forward, moving past me before I could react. "Hey."

Beau shoved his hands in his pockets and swung towards me with a smug, knowing expression on his face that sent sudden chills of foreboding down my spine. "Baby, you were being rude not inviting me in and leaving me on the doorstep."

"Get out, Beau. You're not welcome here and I have no idea how you found me, but my boyfriend won't like it, and neither do I."

He moved into the kitchen, and I had no choice but to close the door and follow him. I wasn't physically scared of Beau, he'd never lifted a finger to me. His wounds were always emotional.

He ran his hand over the island where Ryker and I had eaten dinner last night and then he'd eaten me for dessert. I hated the thought of Beau sullyng that memory with his presence here.

"It's funny, isn't it, how people have a type."

Crossing my arms over my chest, I glared at Beau, determined not to show the man any weakness. "I have no interest in talking to you unless you've come to pay back what you stole from me."

He jerked his thumb at himself. "Me? Looks like you should be thanking me, baby. You seem to have landed on your feet. Gotta say I didn't realize you had it in you but maybe I backed the wrong pony in this race, and should have stuck with you to fuck him over."

I sighed and shook my head. "Stop with the riddles and say what you came here to say."

I'd get nowhere engaging with Beau. He worked on his own timeline and within his own set of skewed rules.

"I came to congratulate you and my brother."

Shaking my head, I rubbed my arm as a chill blew right through me. “What does your brother have to do with it?”

He laughed and it had a tinny, unauthentic sound to it that was all for show before he pinned me with a cool stare and delivered the blow he’d come here for. “I’d say a lot considering you’re fucking him and living with him.”

A buzzing sounded in my ears, but it was muffled as I tried to stay in the moment. My brain was struggling with what he’d said because he couldn’t possibly have meant what I thought. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Oh my God, you didn’t know?” His laughter is genuine now and infused with a cruel delight. “My spoilt baby brother, Ryker Cabot, is the man you’re playing house with.”

“You’re lying.”

I say it but my mind is spinning a mile a minute, trying to fit all of the fractured pieces together in my brain.

“Why would I lie?”

“Because you’re a nasty little man who sucks the life from others because he isn’t big enough or smart enough to make it on his own.”

Beau turns red, his jaw grinding and I wonder for a second as he stalks toward me if I made a grave mistake thinking he’d never hurt me physically. Although if what he says is true, I’m not sure a beating would be a match for the heartache I can already feel cracking my chest open.

I back up until I’m against the wall and then lift my chin defiantly. Beau lifts his hand suddenly and I flinch, but he reaches for his wallet and pulls out a small picture, shoving it under my nose.

“Here, you want proof, then look.”

I blink and look down, and though the picture is old, it’s clear who the two young men in the picture with Beau’s parents are. Tears obscure my view as I look at the smiling face of the man I love next to his mother, with Beau on the other side of his father, looking sullen as usual.

A rush of love for Ryker fills me, but it's quickly replaced by confusion. Did he know? Was our meeting planned or was it some twist of fate? And if he knew, why didn't he tell me? Most importantly, if he knew and didn't tell me, how would I ever trust him again? The brutal reality is I won't be able to trust or forgive something like that, not after what Beau did.

"I can see by your face that it's all sinking in now, baby."

The glee in his voice was so repulsive to me, especially as he was trying to smooth it over with some fake sympathetic look, which made me want to punch him.

Pushing the image back at him, I duck out from under his arm and move to the door, yanking it open. "Leave."

Beau saunters toward me as if he has all the time in the world and it takes everything in me not to scream at him. He stops in front of me, and I see it now, the similarities between them. But they're so subtle, you'd need to know what to look for. Beau is like the Wish version of Ryker in every way.

He grips my chin and bends close to me, kissing my cheek and I don't suppress the shudder that runs through me at his touch.

"I bet he doesn't fuck you like I did, baby. But if you ever want to come back, I might be able to forgive you."

I have never been a fan of violence. Growing up surrounded by bikers I've certainly seen my fair share of fights, yet his words and the way he thinks he has the right to put his hands or mouth on me in any way, sends a bolt of rage through me so strong that I snap.

I bring my knee up hard, catching him in his pathetic dick and enjoying the way his eyes cross and he yelps like the little bitch he is.

"Bitch."

Beau sinks to his knees, holding his junk and I bend down to him this time. "I'd rather die than ever let you near me again, and Ryker is one hundred times the man you could ever hope to be, and he fucks me so well I can't remember my

name afterwards. Not like your pathetic attempts, you two pump chump.”

He’s sweating now as he holds his dick and staggers to his feet. Hopefully, that little knee to the balls will stop the fucker from ever procreating and littering the world with his devil spawn.

“You’re going to regret this, Eden.”

“The only thing I regret is ever trusting you in the first place. Now get the fuck out.”

I shove him and, as he steps over the threshold, the picture flutters to the floor. I slam the door behind him and sink to my knees, my legs barely able to hold me. I can hardly catch my breath as it comes too fast, images of me and Ryker are flooding my brain, but now they’re all tainted by the man who destroyed me.

Pulling myself up, I feel my body go into fight or flight mode, the need to get away almost overpowering me. There’s a small kernel of my heart that wants to hear Ryker tell me he didn’t have a clue about our connection but how could he not? How could I not know? Am I really that stupid and gullible that men see me as an easy piece of entertainment?

I don’t have any answers and I’m terrified to find out, but I owe it to myself to find out, so I calmly wipe the tears that are coursing down my face and pack a bag. Then I wait for Ryker to return.

I sit at the island, feeling like my entire heart is dying, that breathing is a luxury I have no energy for. Losing everything to Beau almost broke me, but losing what I thought Ryker and I have will annihilate me. I knew it would. Right from the start, I knew if I gave him my heart he’d have the power to hurt me in a way that there’d be no recovery.

Now I wait and see if I was right to trust him or, if once again, I’ve been played by a rich man.

Ryker



“EDEN.”

I close the door and call her name, the silence in the apartment as unsettling as the darkness. I walk quickly into the kitchen and stop when I see her sitting silently on a stool at the island, the darkness surrounding her with just the light from the window behind her allowing me to see she’s there. A feeling of dread worms its way through me and I slow my step, hating that I can’t see her face properly.

I approach cautiously as if she were a wounded animal. “Eden, baby, why are you sitting in the dark?”

She puts her hand up to stop my forward momentum, her hand shaking. “Did you know?”

My gut roils, my body feeling like pins and needles have broken out all over my skin at her words. She knows. I don’t know how, but she’s somehow figured out who Beau is to me. I sigh and hang my head as shame and guilt flow through me. I could drag this out and pretend I don’t know what she means but she deserves better than that.

“Yes, I knew.”

A sob that splits my heart in two spills from her lips, and I want nothing more than to go to her and hold her and take her pain away, but I’m the one causing it. “Eden, let me explain.”

“How could you possibly explain why you lied to me about something like this? How long have you known? Was this all a setup to get one over on him?”

I heave a sigh and step forward and she scoots back, breaking my heart, and I let my hands fall. Closer now, I can see the devastation on her face from the small light coming from the open bathroom door.

“Eden, I never saw you as having anything to do with Beau. I fell in love with you, for everything you are and everything you do.”

She snorts. “Yeah of course you did. A man who could have any woman he wants chose some homeless chick to rescue.”

“That’s not what happened. You rescued yourself. I just gave you the steps you needed to help you reach the top.”

“And that’s you, the top. The great billionaire Ryker Cabot is the pinnacle.”

I shake my head in frustration as my words come out wrong. “No, of course not.”

“When did you know?”

I lean my hand on the island, so I don’t reach for her again, because I think touching her will result in a punch to the jaw, which I deserve but I don’t want to fight with her, ever. “When you first mentioned his name after our first night together. I wasn’t sure but I had my investigator look into it and he confirmed about a week later.” I don’t hold back because she deserves every bit of the truth.

“You mean the night you promised never to lie to me?”

“Yes.”

“And you what, just hoped I’d never find out or that by the time I did, you’d be bored anyway?”

Angry now, I stepped forward and gripped her shoulders, forcing her to look at me. “I’ll never be bored of you, Eden. I love you with my whole heart. None of that was a lie. I’d worship you until my dying day if you let me.”

Tears bubbled and fell down her delicate cheeks and I swiped them away, hating myself for causing this.

“Were you ever going to tell me?”

I drop my head and nod. “I was coming home to tell you. I’ve been at my parents’ place telling them.”

“Bet that went well.”

I had no intention of discussing my parents’ disappointing reaction with her right now. “They were as shocked as I was.”

“I guess Beau beat you to the punchline this time.”

“Beau?”

Eden shrugged off my touch and got up from the stool to get herself a glass of water, but I suspected it was to get away from my touch and that hurt more than I could possibly express.

“Oh, yeah. He took great delight in telling me and even offered to take me back.”

That bastard was dead to me. I’d use every available resource at my disposal to bury him for this. “Did he hurt you?”

Eden laughed but it lacked any real humor. “No, but I don’t think he’ll be using his dick for a while after I kneed him in the junk.”

I wanted to smile at that but I was still panicking inside over what this meant for us.

“Why did you wait to tell me? Why did you let me fall in love with you when you knew we could never work?”

“I’m a coward. I knew you’d react badly and either not believe me that I didn’t know or would be unable to accept it and walk away.”

“That’s not cowardice, it’s selfishness. You put your needs ahead of mine.”

I hung my head in shame as her words resonated. “Yes.”

“All my life I’ve watched powerful men use women like toys, and even after Beau hurt me like he did, I put my trust in you when everything in me told me not to do so. I hate you for

making me believe. You played me, Ryker. You sold me the fairy tale and I don't mean your money, I mean your heart. You showed me what it felt like to be cherished and adored and it was all a lie."

Tears are falling again and the hurt in her eyes almost brings me to my knees. Her voice is so low and flat, matter of fact, as she recounts the facts as she sees them. I almost wish she was screaming at me instead of this broken acceptance.

I can feel my own emotions getting the better of me now, and my voice is thick with it when I respond. "I do cherish and adore you, Eden. I've never loved anything or anyone like I do you. I've never believed in soulmates, but I do now because you're mine."

Eden shrugs and lifts the bag, I didn't see until now, from the floor. "It doesn't matter, does it? Whatever we felt is gone. I can't trust you, and if I can't trust you, how can I love you and be with you?"

"Baby, I promise I won't let you down again."

"Too little too late, Ryker. I can't even stand to look at you right now."

I stride around the island and haul her into my arms and she lets me, sinking her fingers into my sides as she holds me tight. I kiss her hair and let the scent of her wrap around me as I soak in the feel of the woman who owns my heart. "It's never too late, blondie. I know I hurt you and I'm so fucking sorry, but please don't give up on us. I love you so much."

We stand like that for I don't know how long, neither one of us willing to pull away and break the spell. As if we stand frozen in time long enough the pain and the outside world will forget about us and move on.

A siren in the distance breaks the moment and Eden pulls away and I drop my arms. She picks up the bag she dropped and, with a sad heartbroken smile that I know mirrors mine, walks toward the door.

"Don't go."

Eden shakes her head. “I can’t stay here with you. It hurts too much.”

“Then I’ll go. You stay here as long as you need.”

“I called Sally. She’s going to let me stay with her until I figure out what to do.”

“Will you be at work tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I need this job now more than ever.”

Her voice sounds haunted and small and I hate myself for doing this to her. I want to see her fight and scream at me, to show me her indomitable spirit isn’t broken. “Would you like to work from home or have me work from home?”

As much as I want to see her every chance I get, I don’t want to make anything hard for her.

“If I can work from home, that would be good. Thank you.”

“Let me walk you out and wait until your ride gets here.”

“No, I can’t be near you and Sally is waiting in the car.”

I shove my hands in my pockets and rock back on my heels as I watch her walk away, fighting every instinct to cling to her and beg her but I know the decent thing is to give her time.

“I love you, Eden. I need you to believe that and I’m not giving up on us. Not now and not ever.”

“You should. We just aren’t meant to be, Ryker.”

I shake my head. “I don’t accept that.”

“Stubborn billionaire still thinking he controls everything.”

I give her a sad smile and watch the door close on the woman I love. I lean my forehead on the door as I listen to her footsteps and the ding of the elevator. How could I have let this happen? How did I let the woman I love walk away from us? But deep down I know she needs time to process this.

My eyes snag on a picture on the floor and I bend to pick it up and see it’s of me, my parents, and Beau just after my

graduation. I look happy and carefree. The world was already mine at that point, as I'd already sold my first app and it made me a multi-millionaire. I see Beau looking sullen and annoyed and wonder what I could have done differently as a brother to stop him from hating me.

I slide down the door and sit with my knees bent, placing the picture on the floor in front of me as I spear my hands into my hair.

I have never hated someone like I do him in this moment and I hate him even more for what he did to Eden. Not just before but tonight too. He relishes in other people's pain and whether my parents ever see it, I can no longer allow any part of that into my life. Losing my parents would gut me, but it would be their choice, not mine. Losing Eden is something I can't comprehend.

Knowing I gave my brother the tools to hurt her tonight is like a blunt blade to the organ beating in my chest, a heavy feeling making me feel sick with it. So as much as I hate him, I have to take some responsibility for this and I have to fix it. I just have no idea how.

I pick up my phone and text the group chat I have with my friends.

RYKER: I FUCKED UP.

BECK: WHAT DID YOU DO NOW, FUCK KNUCKLE?

LINCOLN: SHE FOUND OUT DIDN'T SHE?

RYKER: BEAU TURNED UP HERE AND TOLD HER.

HARRISON: THAT FUCKING PRICK.

AUDREY: WHERE IS SHE NOW?

RYKER: SHE LEFT. SHE HATES ME.

LINCOLN: SUCK IT UP BUTTERCUP AND FIGURE OUT A WAY TO FIX THIS.

BECK: YOU HOME?

RYKER: YUP.

HARRISON: WE'RE ON OUR WAY.

LINCOLN: I'LL GRAB PIZZA.

AUDREY: I'LL BRING TEQUILA.

RYKER: I WANT TO BE ALONE.

HARRISON: TOUGH SHIT, DIPSHIT.

BECK: WE'RE GOING TO HELP YOU DROWN YOUR SORROWS,
AND THEN FIGURE OUT A WAY TO HELP YOU FIX THIS.

RYKER: WHEN DID YOU ASSHOLES BECOME EXPERTS IN
RELATIONSHIPS?

HARRISON: WHEN WE FUCKED OUR OWN SO BAD AND HAD
TO FIGURE OUT A WAY BACK.

BECK: HEY DOUCHE NOZZLE, I DID NOTHING WRONG.

LINCOLN: FINE, BECK IS PERFECT. THE REST OF US KNOW
A THING OR TWO ABOUT WINNING BACK OUR GIRLS AFTER
ROYALLY SCREWING UP, SO WE'RE LIFE EXPERTS IN LOVE.

AUDREY: COUNT ME OUT. I'M NEVER FALLING IN LOVE AND
I'M JUST COMING TO HELP PLOT BEAU'S DEMISE.

LINCOLN: COUS, YOU'RE AS BLOODTHIRSTY AS COUNT
DRACULA.

AUDREY: FUCK YEAH

HARRISON: AUDREY, WHEN YOU FALL IN LOVE I'M GOING
TO LAUGH MY ASS OFF.

AUDREY: NOT HAPPENING. I'M TOO SMART TO PUT UP WITH
MEN LIKE YOU.

BECK: YOU MEAN, HANDSOME SUCCESSFUL SEX GODS?

RYKER: SHE MEANS EMOTIONALLY IMMATURE ASSHOLES
WHO HURT PEOPLE.

AUDREY: RYK, DID YOU START THE TEQUILA WITHOUT US?

RYKER: NO, HAVEN'T TOUCHED A DROP.

BECK: SHIT, IT'S WORSE THAN I THOUGHT. SEE YOU
FUCKERS SOON.

I threw my phone aside and dragged myself to my feet, every movement felt weighted and heavy with grief. It felt like I'd lost her and maybe I had but I'd never accept that. I'd drown my sorrows tonight with my friends and then I'd do whatever it took to fix this and win her back, no matter how long it took, because nothing mattered without her.

Twenty minutes later my friends were walking into my apartment like they owned the place. Audrey was pouring tequila for everyone, Beck was rummaging through my cupboards for plates, and Lincoln was helping himself to my Scotch.

Harrison sat down beside me. "This bit sucks hard, buddy, but once you get through it, the prize is worth every second of pain you're feeling."

I side-eyed him and then let my gaze fall to my hands, too exhausted from everything tonight to hold my head up. "What if it can't be fixed?"

"You're forgetting who you are, Ryker. You're the man who made his first billion before he was twenty-five. You revolutionized the social media platforms and that doesn't include the work you do for the government that you think we don't know about."

I smirked and he shrugged. I knew my friends suspected that I had other secret contracts but I could never confirm or deny those.

"Here."

Lincoln shoved a glass of amber liquid at me as Audrey placed a tray of shots on the coffee table.

"Food first." Beck, ever the doctor, insisted. Like the kids we were inside, we all looked at each other and threw back our first shots.

Beck shook his head. "Why do I bother with you pricks?" Then he knocked back his own drink and slammed the glass down.

"Right, let's get to it. Spill everything."

I sighed and throw my head back looking up at the ceiling and noticing a crack that needed painting.

Audrey poked my leg. “Asshole, I left a date for this, so start talking.”

So I did. I told them about the confrontation with my parents, and how I’d left it with them to decide the next move. My friends let me talk and they listened and they offered advice.

“You did the right thing, Ryker. It was time they woke up and saw the truth.”

I knew Lincoln was right, but it still hurt. “I know but it still sucks.”

“I get that. Parental expectation and love are a fucked up dynamic sometimes. They’ll come around.”

I knew Harrison understood, his mother was a completely different kind of messed up.

“So, Eden? What are you gonna do?”

I shrugged at Beck’s question. “You could woo her. Send her flowers and shit.”

Audrey gave her cousin a haughty eyebrow raise. “How does Lottie put up with you?”

Lincoln grinned at the mention of Lottie. “True love.”

“More like brainwashing.”

“Focus. This is about Ryker.” Harrison snapped at them like the father he was.

“If you want my advice, you need to give her space. Let her process things and then talk to her. Eden has been through a lot. She needs some time.”

“I’m not sure I can do that.”

Beck looked at his drink as if he was reliving the pain of Xander leaving him and Amelia. “Audrey’s right. Time is what she needs, and space.”

I groan as the rest chime in agreeing and I know they're right, but I hate being away from her for even a second, let alone however long it might take for her to decide she wants to speak to me.

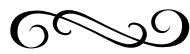
"Just concentrate on this court case with Mandy and let her know you aren't closed off if she wants to talk."

"Fine."

"Great. Can we eat now?"

I shook my head at Beck and smiled a little. These four were my ride or dies, the people I knew would help me bury a body if I needed to and they wouldn't ask questions. So perhaps I was luckier than I thought, even if it didn't feel like it right now.

Eden



“EDEN, SWEETHEART, COME ON. YOU HAVE TO WAKE UP.”

I pull my head from under the covers and blink my puffy eyes open as I look at Sally. Her worried face tells me all I need to know about how I look. It’s been two days since I left Ryker and my heart is in smithereens. I’d convinced myself I’d be able to work but the second I got here, I had fallen apart completely.

I couldn’t seem to go more than two minutes before bursting into uncontrollable tears that sucked the energy from my bones. My wonderful friend had handled it though, telling Ryker that I needed a few days off.

“Here, I brought you some food.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I don’t care. You will eat. You need the calories.”

Her strict mom tone pulled a smile out of me. “Okay, Mom.”

“Enough sass, eat up.” I saw the smile curve her lips at my smart-ass remark and hated that I had her so worried. She was a newly engaged mother of two, she didn’t need my drama and I’d force myself to get up and deal with life soon.

I picked up a fork and took a bite of the fluffy pancake as my stomach rumbled like a juggernaut flying down the freeway. “I’m sorry I’ve been such a pain.”

“You’re not a pain. We’re friends and that’s what we do for each other.”

“Are you off to work?” I glanced at the clock and saw that it was already eleven and frowned.

“My boss told me to stay home, paid, and take care of you.”

The fork paused halfway to my mouth. “He what?”

Sally nodded at the food for me to continue. “You heard me.”

“That controlling asshole.”

“He’s worried about you and if you saw the state of him, you’d be worried about him too.”

Indignant, I shoved the food away and grabbed the coffee instead, taking a sip and feeling more alive than I had since Beau’s little visit. “So, you’re on his side now?”

My friend patted my foot over the covers. “Of course not. I’ll always be on your side but you’re not the only one whose heart is breaking over this.”

I shrug off the concern I feel for the man I love and the overwhelming urge to get up and run to him and tell him I love him because it means nothing if I can’t trust him. I know Ryker loves me. I may have doubted it in the beginning but I know after his reaction that his feelings were real. I just don’t know if I can forgive him or trust him again.

“He should have told me.”

Sally purses her lips and cocks her head and I know some tough love is headed my way.

“Tell me something, if this was the other way around what would you have done?”

“I would have told him immediately.”

“Would you? Even knowing that the chances were high that he’d end your relationship before you had a chance to prove how good it could be?”

I pause, taking in her words and wonder if I really would have had the courage to tell him. “What are you saying?”

“That things aren’t black and white. He was, is, in love with you. Any fool can see that, and your connection was instant. Yes, he should have told you. Yes, he was wrong, but it didn’t come from a place of malice like Beau did, or greed, it came from a fear of losing you.”

“I know that, but it doesn’t change the fact he lied. He promised me he’d never lie, and he did. How can I ever trust him again?”

“Honey, I don’t pretend to know all the answers, but I know life is short and people you love can be taken away in the blink of an eye. Ryker was wrong to not tell you, but we both know if he had, you would’ve ended things before they started and you never would’ve gotten to have the time to get to know what a good man he is and what it feels like to be the center of someone’s world.”

“Maybe it wouldn’t hurt so much then.”

“Oh, sweetie, it would still hurt because know him or not, your heart knew him.”

I sniff as a tear slides down my cheek. I feel so torn and broken, I love him, I hate him. I want him and yet I can’t stand the thought of him because it hurts too much.

“Why him? Why did it have to be Beau’s brother of all people that I fell in love with.”

Sally wraps her arms around me and hugs me tight and I settle against her, wishing it was Ryker’s arm around me.

“How do I get past this?”

“One day at a time, but I think you should talk to him.” I shake my head and she stops me. “Not today but when you’re ready.”

“What if I’m never ready?”

“Honey, I think that man would wait forever for you.”

“Is it horrible that I want him to move on but also hope he doesn’t?”

“No, of course not. You’re staging an internal battle with your brain and your heart right now, and they’re two very strong characters.”

I know she’s right, and lying here crying or sleeping won’t help me either. I need to get up and get dressed, and then I have a call to make, which may be uncomfortable but something Beau said is ringing through my ears and I need to tell someone.

I shower and change feeling moderately better, then I call Audrey Kennedy and ask her to meet me. My knees are knocking as I walk up to the coffee shop close to her building and see her sitting near the back with two drinks and two plates of chocolate cake in front of her.

She waves and some of my nerves dissipate.

“Hey, I’m glad you called.”

She kisses my cheek and I hug her back, feeling the warmth from her and relaxing slightly. This woman is a force of nature but she’s also Ryker’s friend and will be on his side, which is kind of what I’m counting on.

“Thanks for agreeing to see me. I know this must be tricky for you.”

Audrey pushed a mug of hot chocolate toward me and I take a sip, closing my eyes on a moan.

“Better than sex, right?”

I open my eyes and grin, feeling lighter for the first time in days. “I’m not sure you’re doing it right if you think that.”

“Uh, I’ve had one too many duds lately. Seriously, most men can’t find the clitoris with a map and a fucking Sat Nav.”

I laugh and nod. “True story. Although not all men.”

I think of the sex Ryker and I had, and my body burns for him. I ache to feel him touch me. His mastery over my body was beautiful, and our connection so profound that I know I’ll never feel anything remotely like it again.

“Ugh, stop with that doe-eyed look.”

I sober and drop my eyes. “Sorry.”

“Hey, it was a joke. I know you and Ryker are both hurting right now, but I also know you will find a way back to each other.”

“I don’t know. I love him, I honestly never knew I could love someone so much, but I don’t know if I can forgive or trust him again.”

“I get that. He was an idiot but he’s also one of the best men I know. I don’t think anyone could have foreseen this happening and there’s no instruction manual for falling in love with your douchebag ex’s brother.”

“Talking of the douchebag. When he came over, he said something. It might be nothing but it’s nagging at me.”

Audrey sat up straighter and pinned me with a look now that would have frozen the sweat off Satan. “What did that little asshole say?”

“He said maybe he’d backed the wrong horse with me. He was implying I was playing a game with Ryker and using him for money, and it struck me as odd.”

Audrey tapped her lips. “Hmm, that is a little odd. Can you give me more context?”

“I don’t know. It felt like maybe something was at play, and he was the mastermind or controlling it in some way.”

“That does sound suspicious.”

“Yeah, it might be nothing but I thought I should mention it. I know Ryker has his court case coming up in a few weeks and whatever my feelings are for him, I know he’s not the man they’re trying to say he is.”

Audrey cocked her head slightly and I suddenly knew how it felt to be on the other end of the boardroom table. “Can I ask what made you just make the jump from Beau to the court case with Mandy?”

I blinked, not sure myself. “I don’t know.”

“Hmm. I think I need to do a little digging into Beau and his dealings. I always stayed out of it for Ryker’s sake, but now I think it’s time I poked my nose in a little more.”

“You won’t find anything good, I can tell you that.”

“No, I don’t suppose I will. Some people are rotten through and through.”

“No doubt, and I’m the mug who fell for it.”

Audrey reached for my hand. “No, don’t say that. Beau is a chameleon and adapts to his surroundings like the lizard he is. He played a part and manipulated you.”

“I bet it’s never happened to you.”

“You’d be surprised.”

I didn’t dig into that. I had to remember no matter how much I liked this woman, and I really did, she was Ryker’s friend, not mine. “You’re a good friend to him.”

“Oh, I know. Those boys are lucky to have me.”

I laughed at her confidence and the way she laughed at herself too. “Seriously, though.”

“Ryker is a good man. I know you’re confused and rightly so, but don’t lose sight of that. Don’t let the one wrong thing he did outshine all the good.”

With that, Audrey stood, and I followed suit.

The woman gripped my shoulders. “Eden, you’re a strong fucking woman and you’ve survived more than most these last six months, but don’t let what Beau did tarnish the best thing you ever had. I know this has knocked you, but I see you, and you’re not a victim. You’re a fucking queen. So, start acting like one and take back the control you think you lost. Forgive Ryker or don’t, that’s up to you but don’t let pricks like Beau tarnish your crown.”

She kissed my cheeks and left, every man in the room watching her as she sashayed away with her head held high. I wanted to be the woman she said she saw but I didn’t feel like a queen. I felt like the out-of-control pauper in this tale.

Yet, Ryker had always treated me like a queen. He'd seen something in me and maybe it was time to stop worrying about what I couldn't control, namely other people, and start with what I could.

I sent a text to Ryker asking for the keys to the apartment I'd rented from him. He responded immediately that he'd have them couriered straight over and would have my stuff moved for me by tonight. I thanked him and sat, digging into the chocolate cake I'd barely touched.

His response confused me, or rather my feelings toward it did. I asked him to do something and he had without question, and yet I wanted him to fight for me. To go against what I asked. It made me see in part why he might have been reluctant to tell me about Beau being his brother. A fact I could still hardly get my head around it. Two men so different they were night and day.

One who'd treated me with disdain and careless disregard and then tried to break me. The other who'd made me laugh and built me up, who made me feel beautiful and loved and strong. Who showed me my worth with his every action.

I felt a bubble of hope churn through me and the urge to run to Ryker and throw myself into his arms was strong, but first I needed to work on myself. I needed to learn to love myself again before I could fully love anyone else or even consider it.

Ryker



TAKING MY FRIEND'S ADVICE AFTER I DRANK WAY TOO MUCH tequila seemed like a bad idea, but it was all I had. Linc advised that I deal with Beau and stop him once and for all from trying to destroy my life. That was proving to be trickier than I expected. My brother was a slippery bastard, but I was determined to punish him for even thinking he could treat anyone like that, and most especially Eden.

His threats and warnings over the years slid off me like water off a duck's back and maybe I was part of the problem. Allowing him to use me for money and manipulate my love for my parents to give him what he wanted as long as he went away, but no more. I was on this and wouldn't give up.

Harrison advised I follow her lead and, in handing over the keys to her new apartment without a fight, I was doing that. Even though my gut said I should fight her on it or beg her to come home, I hadn't.

Seeing her coming and going from her new place had been both a knife to the gut and a comfort. A woman that hated me so much wouldn't want to live in the same building as me and she wouldn't still work for me. So, I took both those things as a sign that she still cared and that one day I might fix this.

Beck had told me to give her space and I was. It was three weeks since we broke up and I had nodded politely at work, eaten my lunch in my office, and gone through either Sally or another member of the team where necessary and appropriate to relay work things.

Audrey had surprised me the most by telling me that Eden had reached out to her and told her something Beau had said to her the night he blew up my life and hurt the woman I loved.

I didn't see the significance, but I trusted Eden with my life, and if it twigged her radar then maybe it was important, and she'd been right. It was two days until the case went to court when Audrey and Lincoln walked into the club office looking like excited kids.

"That smile normally means trouble for someone. Who did you fuck up, Aud?"

She slapped a sheaf of papers down in front of me and grinned as Lincoln poured us all drinks.

"What's this?"

"That, my friend, is the answer to your prayers."

I read the first few lines with a frown before I looked up at Audrey in shock. "No shit! How did you find this?"

Audrey took the drink Lincoln handed her and sat in the chair, crossing her ankles on the desk, and still somehow managing to look elegant.

"Well, what Eden said got my brain ticking so Lincoln and I decided to do some digging."

I glance at Lincoln who shrugs. Of all my friends he's the one who takes praise the least well.

"So you know when Beau was overseas, we kind of let it be out of sight out of mind? Well, a man like that doesn't do what he did to Eden once, they're pathological in their behavior."

My mother had said the same thing, which was ironic considering she wouldn't believe me.

"Turns out he's wanted in Italy and Greece for pulling the same shit, only he's been using aliases."

"Give them to me."

Audrey reels off four names and I log into my encrypted laptop remotely. My friends sit silently as my fingers fly over

the keyboard, and within twenty minutes the full extent of Beau's criminality is revealed. "Shit."

"What?"

"Two of the women he conned died in suspicious circumstances not long after their affairs with Beau ended."

Lincoln frowned. "You think he killed them?"

I shake my head slowly. "No, he wouldn't dirty his own hands but if he had something to do with it, it wouldn't shock me."

"Fuck, what a prick."

I blow out a breath. "Yeah, that's my brother."

"Don't do that, Ryker. We aren't responsible for our families. Look at my dad. He was a piece of shit and I'd like to think I'm nothing like him."

Audrey pinned Lincoln with a hard look. "You aren't, so stop it."

"What I mean is, don't take this on as a reflection of you."

"Yeah, I won't but I need to figure out how to go forward and what to do next."

"I say we bury that fucker."

I roll my eyes and grin at Audrey. She doesn't go soft when she can go hard on people who wrong her or those she cares about.

"Hang on, check if you can find anything linking Mandy or Monica to any of those names?"

"Oh, good idea."

"I'm not just a stunningly beautiful goddess, you know."

My fingers work fast and it doesn't take long to find payments from one of Beau's aliases to both Mandy and Monica. "Bingo."

"That piece of shit needs his balls in a vice."

Lincoln and I both wince at our friend's description. "I need to speak to Hudson."

Audrey groans. "That asshole."

"Listen, I know you don't like him but he's a good lawyer and he handled that shit for Lincoln perfectly."

"Fine, call the douchebag."

I place the call and quickly explain what we've found.

"Stop what you're doing and send me everything you have so far. This needs to go through the correct legal channels from now on if you want a conviction to stick."

"I understand. Can this help our case?"

"Absolutely, if we can find concrete proof of collusion and intent."

"I can send it now I know what to look for."

"I don't want this coming from you. Can someone else find it?"

I glance at Audrey and Lincoln. "Maybe."

"Good, keep your hands clean and leave this with me, but it will likely move fast if Interpol wants him. The FBI will want the first crack."

"Got it."

I look at Audrey. "Can your PI *find* this for us?" I use air quotes to show what I mean.

"My PI gets paid a shit load of money to do what I say, so yes."

"Do it."

Audrey grins and clinks her glass against mine and then Lincoln's. "To putting assholes in the ground."

I chuckle but I'm incredibly grateful to her, and to Eden for sparking this line of thinking by bringing what was said to Audrey.

Who knew it would be the thing that would get this case of Mandy's thrown out and my brother put behind bars.

THE LAST TWO DAYS WERE CRAZY BUSY AS I WORKED WITH the FBI on everything I knew, and a plan was set for how the coming events would go down.

A knock on my door has me looking up, my heart stuttering in my chest when I see her standing there looking like an angel. Eden is so beautiful that looking at her walking around these last few weeks has been almost crippling.

"Eden, what can I do for you?"

I stand from behind my desk and then don't know what to do. Should I stay or walk around and greet her. It's awkward as fuck and I hate that things between us are so strained. I sit again, feeling like a chump, and she offers me a small smile.

Eden holds her head high as she walks toward me, a confident sway in her step that I never noticed before. The skirt she's wearing is new and I miss the way I'd watch her get ready for work every morning, stealing kisses in between the rush.

"I wanted to wish you luck today."

"Oh, thank you. I appreciate that."

The court case that has been hanging over my head is due to start today, and I had come early to grab a few last minutes of normality. I know once things get going, it will be a shitshow. I'll be under the spotlight of the American people and my reputation will never be the same.

"Does Hudson think she'll settle?"

I nod. "He does, but I won't be bled by people like her or Beau anymore. I'd rather lose my reputation and know I did the right thing than pay her for something I didn't do."

"Beau?"

I watch Eden pale and curse myself inwardly. "Shit, I'm sorry. I should have never...."

Eden shakes her head and waves me off. “No, you should and you’re right. People like them need to know that it is not something they can get away with.”

I smile sadly, wanting nothing more than to pull her into my arms and bury my head in her neck and inhale her scent. Nothing feels right without her, everything has lost its shine. Food doesn’t taste as good, music annoys me. I can’t sleep or watch TV, and even the things that have always kept me sane don’t hold any interest.

All I do is work and bury myself in meetings trying to fix this mess so that I’m so exhausted when I get home, I crash. My parents haven’t been in touch and I hate that. I miss them. Eden, as always, seems to read my mind.

“Will your parents be there today?”

“No, we aren’t speaking.”

She looks horrified. “Because of me?”

“No, because of me.” I don’t elaborate because it doesn’t seem right somehow.

A ding on my calendar makes me stand and I button my jacket as Eden watches me, not quite masking the hunger in her eyes.

“I should go.”

She turns and I want to call her back. I want to tell her I love her and that nothing else matters but I don’t. I let her walk away from me again because, for the first time in my life, I don’t know how to proceed.

I meet Hudson at the courthouse an hour before we’re due to start. “Ready?”

He gives me a once over and I can tell he sees the dark shadows under my eyes. “Let’s do this.”

All my friends are waiting inside for me, including the women and Xander, who are now part of the only family I have left. I shake hands and receive countless hugs. The media isn’t allowed inside but they’re camped outside ready to begin

the witch hunt and I'm glad for the side entrance I was allowed to use.

"Mr. Cabot, I believe you wish to make a deal?"

I eye the legal counsel representing Mandy with disdain, his expensive suit unable to hide the shark beneath. This man might be one of the top prosecutors in the city but he's also a shady piece of crap that has built his career by destroying others in the same way he will try to do to me.

"Mr. Hart." Even his name is a joke, considering what he does for a living.

"Counsellor, shall we?"

Hudson steps in smoothly and I see him catch Audrey's eye before she rolls her eyes and turns away to speak to Lottie.

I follow the two men toward a private room set up for just this kind of thing. Mandy is with another woman and her eyes move over me as I walk in, and I suppress a shudder. She's dressed in a demure navy suit, her hair in a low bun and make-up flawlessly done to make her look like she's not wearing any.

Hart takes the seat beside her and I unbutton my jacket as I sit and let Hudson do his thing. If I say everything I want to say, this will blow up in our faces. I'm far too angry and emotional about things and I'd really prefer not go to court and fight this publicly.

Hart looks at Mandy like a man who's won, a smirk on his arrogant face. "What's your offer, Carmichael?"

"Drop the allegations and make a statement about how you were coerced into these baseless accusations."

"And what do we get in return? I'm thinking upwards of seven figures."

Hudson eyes me and I nod, crossing my leg over my knee.

My lawyer pins his gaze on Mandy now. "In return, we won't pursue charges of blackmail, extortion, and fraud against your client."

Hart looks like he might be having a stroke. “What the hell do you mean?”

“Miss Jacobs has been in a relationship with a man named Beau Standish, and they’ve colluded to blackmail and extort Mr. Cabot.”

I see Mandy go pale and fidget as Hart glares at her and then back at us.

“Do you have proof?”

“Yes, we have texts, emails, pictures of them together, and even an email chain where they discuss how they’ll make it happen. We also have video feed footage of Miss Jacobs lying naked on Mr. Cabot’s couch in his office and waiting for him to come in so she can seduce him. We also advise that, should you proceed, we’ll be filing a counterclaim for harassment toward Miss Jacobs and we do have the proof and the witnesses to back up our claim.”

“I need a moment with my client.”

Hudson and I stepped outside to give them a minute, but you would need to be totally deaf not to hear the shouting behind the closed doors. I almost felt sorry for Mandy, she was just a silly girl too lazy to work hard and with not enough self-worth to know when she was being used. Her vile behavior towards Eden and other female members of my staff quickly quashed that. “What do you think?”

“I think it paid off.” Hudson lifted his chin toward the door where Hart was storming toward us, and Mandy was rushing towards the exit.

“I assume we’re done with this farce now?”

“Miss Jacobs will make the statement if you agree not to go after her.”

“As soon as the statement is made, our dealings with Miss Jacobs are done.”

Hart nodded and walked off after his client.

“You know she might get swept up when we go after Beau?”

Hudson turned to me with a lethal grin. “I said our dealings. I didn’t say the authorities, and Hart is a fool to have missed it.”

I’m swept up in hugs from my friends as I head outside to watch Mandy make her statement. I stand with the people who’ve always had my back and Hudson, the new friend. The only good thing to come out of this is that I know I have someone on my team who I trust completely.

The journalists go into a frenzy when Mandy admits that the allegations were lies, and she was manipulated. Hart ushers her away and Hudson walks with me to the podium. I could make him read the statement we prepared but I decided at the last minute to make my own.

Cameras flash and I look out into the sea of people but only one set of eyes matters to me as I look back. Eden is at the edge of the crowd, huddled into her thick winter coat as the snow falls around us.

“The last few weeks have been hell for myself, my team, and my loved ones. I’m not an angel, I’m a man and that makes me fallible. I’ve made mistakes in my life, but I’ve never touched a woman without her consent or made sexual or inappropriate advances to someone I work with.”

The press are silent as they listen and record my words. “These allegations are a slap in the face for thousands of women all over America and beyond who do deal with sexual predators and unwanted sexual advances. It pains me that it ever came to this but, rest assured, CabMedia is a welcoming and friendly place to work and everyone is safe there. I’d like to thank my staff for their continued support, dedication, and patience. I want to thank my friends who’ve had my back and my extraordinary lawyer, Hudson Carmichael, for getting me through this. Lastly, I’d like to thank the woman who’s shown me what it is to love and to be loved, and I hope one day I can be the man she deserves.”

I catch her eye and it feels like a lifetime passes and a tome of unsaid words flow between us. Then she gives me a short

nod and a heart-breaking smile and leaves, walking away from me and leaving me feeling adrift.

The press throw questions at me, asking me the name of the woman, why my family isn't here today, and I ignore them all. Until this moment, I never considered that I might not be able to win her back but everything about what just happened feels final. I have no idea how I'm supposed to say goodbye to what we had or what she is to me, and I don't think I ever will.

Despair settles over me and I shake my head as Hudson ushers me away. I just need to get this next part over so I can hopefully move on and try and put this behind me.

“Is everyone in place?”

Hudson nods and I head to my office as he moves into the conference room where the police and FBI wait. I gave everyone the afternoon off as soon as the case was thrown out and this meeting was set by Audrey, posing as my PA. She's been by my side since we found out Beau was working with Mandy and the authorities got involved. The tip from Eden about him backing the wrong horse had clued us all in and turned our focus so we could do the correct math and follow the crumbs he'd left. I asked that Eden be left out of things as much as possible, and FBI Agent Fernandez said he'd try. As the father of two daughters, he understood my need to protect Eden from Beau.

I hear the elevator open and the footsteps of my half-brother. He's dressed in a three-piece suit and looking smug. He clearly hasn't seen the statement Mandy or I made, and that's not just luck. Xander spoke with his friend, who owned the agency he worked for, and she'd set up an actress to pose as a wealthy young widow. Beau always hung out at the same bars and it didn't take much to figure out where he'd be. She just happened to be there and catch his eye and, like a shark, he'd scented what he thought was blood in the water and was far too busy to check his phone. The FBI had been there as a backup to ensure her safety but it had worked like a charm. I'd made sure any alerts or messages sent to his phone were diverted to another number, and when Audrey called pretending to be my PA, Beau had taken the bait.

“Ryker, I’m surprised to see you today? Shouldn’t you be in court?”

Hands in his pockets, he saunters past me and I clench my fists with the effort it takes not to punch his arrogant face. He’s in my part of the playground now though, and he won’t be walking out with the same smile he walked in with.

I motion for the chair opposite mine. “Take a seat.”

“Not going to offer me a drink?”

“Sure. Brandy?”

“If that’s all you have.”

I pour him a double and hand it over as he regards me. His superior attitude has always flummoxed me and after today, I’ll never see him again. “Can I ask you something?”

He sits forward in his chair and gives me a faux caring look. “Of course you can, baby brother.”

I don’t know why he does this dance. He knows about me and Eden, he must know I know about them speaking, and yet he’s so cocksure of himself that he thinks he’s untouchable. “Why do you hate me and Dad?”

He sits back, his lips tweaking up at the corners. “Because, before you, it was just me and Mom and we were happy. She didn’t need you and I didn’t fucking want either of you. When Andrew came along, I was second best. Then they had you and nothing I ever did was good enough, so I decided to make my own path.”

“Mom loves you. She excuses everything you do, and Dad has done everything for you.”

“Blah blah, it’s all bullshit. Without you, she would’ve gone back to my dad and my life would’ve been perfect.”

“So, you’re a spoilt brat with mommy issues then?”

Beau laughs and I wonder if there’s anything good left in him and realize there most likely isn’t.

“I’m going to be the man who takes this little empire from you and, when I’m fucking your girl, who you stole from me,

I'll send you pictures.”

“Are you really that deluded, Beau? Nothing you could do to me would end in you taking my company from me, and Eden is too smart to ever go near you again.”

“Wrong, baby bro. When Mandy sues you for every penny you have, and this company falls, I'll be here with my investors to swoop in and take over. As for little Eden, she'll do as she's damn well told.”

My anger seethes like a poisonous snake through my blood and I want nothing more than to beat the man before me. “Eden doesn't do as she's told. She's strong and independent, and the smartest, most beautiful human being I've ever met.”

“Ah, little Ryker's in love.”

“I am. I love her more than life itself and I'd do anything to protect her from you, and my love for her will be your downfall.”

“I guess that little whore Eden sold you her lies?”

I jump over the desk and grab him by the collar, slamming him to his feet. “Don't say her fucking name ever again. Don't even think about her. She doesn't exist for you and the only lies are the ones you told.” I shove him away and he falls to the ground.

“Yeah, you got me. I stole her money and her home, and she isn't the first and won't be the last. When I do it to you, it will be the greatest day of my life. I'll take it all from you, Ryker, and maybe I'll even let you live so you can watch me do it.”

“So now you're a killer too?” Shock keeps me talking and my heart is hammering as he grins.

“Not personally. I have people for that.”

We've got what we need, and I nod at the camera in the corner of the room. “Enjoy prison, Beau.”

My door is flung open and the FBI swarm in and have Beau on his knees in seconds.

“You set me up.”

“You set yourself up, Beau. Mandy made a statement admitting she lied, and they have everything they need to put you away for all your crimes.”

“Mom will never forgive you.”

Sadness envelopes me at his words and I have to acknowledge it might be the truth. “Maybe not, but you’ve hurt too many people and I can’t stand by and let you hurt anyone else.”

“Such a fucking hero. I’ll get out and then you’re a dead man, Ryker.”

I don’t respond. Sadness fills me that it’s come to this. I know what it will do to my family, but I can’t regret it. Beau is a dangerous and deeply disturbed man who needs help. He’s cuffed and glaring at me when a ball of energy launches herself into my arms and the scent of jasmine fills my nose, causing a calmness to wash over me that I never hoped to feel again. I hold her as Beau spits bile and screams and then Eden pulls out of my arms. I watch in horror as she rushes the man I called brother, before pulling back her tiny fist and lets fly. Blood bursts across his face before the officers can stop her as she breaks his nose. I gently grab her around the waist and haul her backward.

“She broke my nose. I’m gonna sue. You all saw her.”

I see the officers looking away, trying not to laugh.

I smirk at Beau as she shakes in my arms from adrenaline. “I hope you rot, you needle dicked piece of shit. When you’re in prison being made some hairy killer’s bitch remember this moment and how the better man won.”

“Bitch, I should have killed you.”

“Get him out of here.”

We watch as Beau is taken away and then a sob erupts from Eden and I hold her, not ever wanting to let her go.

Ryker



EXHAUSTION LIKE I HAVE NEVER FELT BEFORE WASHES OVER me as I pour myself a large bourbon and sink into my couch. My tie is long gone and the buttons on my shirt are open at the collar, making me feel like I can breathe a little easier.

After Beau was taken away, I met with Agent Fernandez and handed over all the tapes from today and everything my investigator had found. In the melee, Eden had disappeared on me. That one hug she'd given me had been brief but tight, and for a second it felt like a door was opening for us, but then she'd lost it on Beau. After her breakdown, the officers needed me and I was pulled away before I could speak to her.

Beau would definitely see jail time according to Agent Fernandez and it made me sad for my parents. I personally didn't care what happened to him. He'd caused too much pain and hurt to those I loved to come back from it.

Audrey had held back any mention of the arrest through her connection with the media, and I had made it so there was a blackout on my network too. I couldn't control other companies, but I hoped it would be enough to allow my parents time to come to terms with things. They may have chosen him, and that hurt like a bitch, but I still loved them.

My main concern was how to approach Eden now or even if I should. Never in my life had I felt so unsure of which course of action to follow. I wasn't this person, but love had literally brought me to this place where I second-guessed everything, and I wasn't sure I liked it.

I'd given her space, but was it time to try and talk to her or would that send her running? She had every right to be angry with me, I got that, but had my actions killed any feelings she had for me?

I tipped back the warm, spiced bourbon and let it warm my chest and soothe the fractious feeling inside me. In the old days, I'd have found a woman at the club and blown off steam by fucking. Now, though, just the thought of touching anyone who wasn't Eden made me feel sick to my stomach.

Fuck this. I needed to speak to her and find out where her head was at. Standing, I placed the glass on the table and headed to the door. She might slam hers in my face, but I had to try, I couldn't just sit here like a loser.

I yanked open my door and stopped dead. "Mom, Dad, what are you doing here?"

My mother looked like she'd been crying, and my dad seemed to have shrunk in the weeks since I had seen them.

"Son, may we come in?"

I stepped back and ushered them in, holding myself back from hugging them like I normally would have. I loved them but I couldn't forget the hurt they had caused so easily.

I walked to the kitchen, putting space between us, my emotions at seeing them shaken to the core. I resented them and yet I was still the little boy who hero-worshipped his father and adored his mother.

"Would you like a drink? Water, coffee?"

I couldn't even seem to make eye contact with them and that needed to stop. I wasn't this person. I looked up at my father, who had his arm wrapped around my mom.

"No, thank you. Can we talk?"

I heaved a sigh and nodded, moving into the living room and taking the armchair, leaving them the couch.

"Well?" I knew my tone was harsh, and part of me wished I could curb it, but all my life I'd been watching my words so I

didn't tip the fine balance in our fucked-up family dynamic, and I wasn't playing those games anymore.

"We heard what happened with Beau."

"So, you're here to tell me what an awful brother I am? Because if so, you can leave. I don't want to hear it."

My father put his hand out and shook his head. "No, son. We're here to apologize to you. We were terribly wrong for the way we treated you. Not only growing up but when you told us about Beau."

Well, that shocked me into silence.

"We love you, Ryker. So much."

My heart broke at the tremor in my mother's voice, and I felt myself soften towards them.

"I know, Mom. I never doubted your love and I love you too. I just can't turn a blind eye like you can."

"I know, and you were right. We made excuse after excuse for Beau and all we did was allow his behavior to worsen to such a degree that we're ashamed of who he's become and who we've become because of it."

"Why did you do it, Mom?"

My mom sighed and blinked, and my dad's arm around her tightened as if he was bolstering her with his strength.

"Everyone says you parent your kids the same, but it's not true. You parent to the child and you adapt to them. Beau was always weaker emotionally, as a baby physically, too. He seemed to need me more, while you were strong in every way. Nobody wants to think their children are bad, so you make excuses for them, instead of parenting them. We became the parents he wanted us to be because the guilt of him not seeing his birth father ate me up. We should have been the parents he needed instead of the ones he wanted."

It was hard to process, not being a parent myself, but I understood the need to be something someone wanted not needed. Hadn't I been doing that since Eden left me?

“Thank you for telling me.”

“We need you to know how proud we are of everything you’ve achieved. We’ve done a lot of self-reflection these last few weeks. It can’t have been easy for you growing up with Beau, and us putting you in his shadow. What you’ve made of yourself is truly awe-inspiring, Ryker. You’re a man any parent would be proud to call his own.”

“It wasn’t all bad, Dad. My childhood was a good one, don’t think it wasn’t. You’re great parents to me and I love you both, and I know the sacrifices you made for us both.”

I rubbed my hands together as I leaned forward and wasn’t sure how to proceed now. Things wouldn’t go back to how they were before because some things, once said, couldn’t be taken back, but maybe we could move forward in some way. “Have you eaten today?”

My mom shook her head. “No, I haven’t been very hungry.”

I stood and walked to the kitchen to grab my phone off the side. “Italian?”

My mother’s smile was like the clouds lifting as she nodded. “That would be lovely.”

I quickly placed an order for a few different things I knew we all liked and hung up.

“So how are you and Eden?” My mom’s eyebrows lifted and I sat beside her, leaning my head on her shoulder like I had as a kid.

“She left me. When I got home after seeing you, Beau had been here spouting off. She was rightly angry I hadn’t told her so she left.”

Her hand gripped mine. “I’m sorry, sweetie. I could see how much you loved her.”

“I still love her. I don’t think I’ll ever love anyone else.”

My father leaned across my mom and patted my leg. “Then don’t let her get away. Women like that are once in a lifetime.” He gazed at my mother, and I could see a wealth of

love and understanding pass between them. “Believe me, I know.”

“I don’t think it’s as easy as that. I broke her trust and slapped her in the face with the worst thing that has ever happened to her. Not sure she can forgive me.”

“Eden is a strong woman from what I hear, and the one time we met her she struck me as smart, too. She might make you work for it, but if she loves you like you love her, then she’ll come around. Just be the man she fell in love with. Be yourself.”

“And then what? We have to navigate awkward family get-togethers with Beau when he gets out of jail?”

“I have a feeling Beau won’t be around for a very long while. When he contacted us, we told him we’ll be here when he wishes to right the wrongs he’s done and get his act together and until then, we won’t be having contact with him. He needs to stand up and be held accountable. He can’t do that with us allowing him to make excuses.”

“Wow, I wasn’t expecting that.”

My father nodded. “It was time. We can no longer allow Beau to disrespect our family or us.”

“And would you accept Eden? Because I’m telling you if I win her back, I plan on putting a ring on her finger as soon as I can.”

“Eden was never the issue, sweet boy. If you love her, we love her. That’s all you need to know, and we understand you won’t forgive Beau and we don’t expect it. Your relationship with your brother is separate from ours with him and ours with you and whomever you marry.”

I shook my head. “You’re right, I won’t be having a relationship with him. I can’t forgive some of the things he’s done or said.”

“And we get that.”

I could tell this whole situation was tough on my parents, but I was proud of how they were handling it and relieved that

I could have them in my life.

“Well, I have to win her back first, so any advice, Dad? You seemed to have done all right for yourself.”

“Son, I have tons of advice.”

The buzzer rang and I went to get the food and then my father regaled me with all the advice I might need. Some of it made me laugh, some of it was good, and most I wouldn't be taking, but the evening settled something in me. I felt like I'd put a full stop to the part of my life that allowed Beau to control my thoughts and actions in any way, and now I was forging a new relationship with my parents, a healthier, adult one.

Later that night after my parents had hugged me once more and told me they loved me and I'd reiterated we were moving forward, I lay in bed thinking about Eden.

I missed everything about her, her scent, the feel of her hair tickling my skin, the way she'd tuck her cold feet against my thighs. The smell of her cooking that made the apartment feel like home, but especially her laughter and the way she made me feel.

Tomorrow I'd be the man she met. I'd quit sitting back and being this unsure, almost timid version of myself and go after her like I had before because I wouldn't lose her. I wouldn't say goodbye to this woman, not ever.

The next morning, the office was awash with rumors about Beau and what had transpired. I had lifted the blackout and told Audrey she could call off the dogs. Now my parents knew it was time for the world to know who my brother was. I wouldn't hide behind my friends or my ability to make things disappear with my money.

I moved towards Eden's office and frowned when I saw it was dark. “Sally, do you know where Eden is?”

“She took some leave to go home and see her parents for Christmas.”

Fuck, in the shitstorm of my life, I'd forgotten Christmas was a few days away. “Oh, I see.”

“Ryker, may I say something without the risk of getting fired?”

I grinned at Sally. She was the best Executive Assistant I’d ever had, but more than, that she was becoming a friend. “You may.”

“Why the hell are you still here? Go get your girl back and make her listen to you.”

My grin spread across my face at her words, and I felt a fire in my belly as if the old Ryker was suddenly stretching after a long nap. “Call my pilot and have my plane ready to leave within the hour.”

Sally pumped the air with her fist. “Now we’re talking.”

An hour later I was on a flight ready to go and win back my girl, and this time I wasn’t taking no for an answer.

Eden



I STROKED A HAND OVER THE BIKE MY DAD BOUGHT ME THE day I turned sixteen. We had designed and worked on her together for months until she was exactly how I wanted her. Smooth black lines in a matte finish with glossy silver accents.

I hadn't been out on her for almost a year, and my timing meant I wouldn't today either. The ground covered in snow made it treacherous for a bike rider. My parents were a little more die-hard than me, but even they wouldn't ride in these conditions.

When I'd arrived last night, I'd spilled my guts to my mom over a bottle of wine, and she surprised me somewhat. Her tirade on the phone about rich men had stuck in the back of my mind after things went sideways with Ryker, but after talking and explaining every single detail of what Beau had done, how Ryker and I had come to be, and how I'd fallen in love with him and then found out he'd lied, her stance had shifted.

"Sweetheart, with every rule there's an exception and it looks like you found yours. If that man really treated you the way you say and loved you like you say, sending his own flesh and blood to jail to make things right for you, then you hold on tight to him."

"But he lied to me, Mom."

"He did and that was wrong, but I can see why he was afraid. Didn't you react exactly how he feared you would?"

"I guess."

“No, none of that. You own your actions, young lady. You lashed out and closed the door, reacting instead of thinking and I get it. What that Beau did to you was savage and if I ever get my hands on him, he’ll pray for death.”

I laughed at her protective momma bear routine, but I also knew she’d do it too. My mother would bury Beau’s body in the yard with help from her friends and then pop to the store and pick up veggies for dinner without missing a beat.

“So, you think I should have stayed?”

Her head cocked and she bit down on a chicken wing that my dad had made for us when we decided on girls’ night.

“I think you needed the space to find yourself again. To find your strength and trust in it, but now I think it’s time to listen to your heart.”

I’d gone to bed, replaying that conversation in my head. I thought about how I’d come out of my office to find everyone gone and stumbled into the conference room to find it filled with FBI officers.

Stunned, I’d been about to walk out when Agent Fernandez approached me and asked if I was Eden Sager. I’d confirmed I was, and he’d explained I could stay if I wished as Beau was in the building and they didn’t want me getting caught in the crossfire if he reacted badly to what was about to happen. Still confused, I’d watched on the monitor as Ryker and Beau spoke and the man I loved got a confession out of Beau I never would’ve expected.

The hate and malice inside Beau was hard to watch, especially as a lot of it was aimed at the man who’d saved me, loved me, and shown me how strong I was.

This morning, I woke up with the desperate urge to see Ryker. To close this gulf between us and thank him for being a man who could restore my faith in myself. Yet I couldn’t leave without coming in here and remembering who I was at my core, and that was a woman who was multifaceted.

I rode bikes and I swore like a sailor when I was with my dad and his buddies. I drew and painted. I studied hard, I loved

hard, and trusted people too easily and sometimes that got me burned but mostly, it allowed me to have the most amazing people in my life.

“Nice bike.”

I whirled so fast I almost lost my balance until a hand snaked out and steadied me, warm fingers ghosting over my skin.

“Wow. Careful, beautiful.”

My heart was pounding in my chest, as I blinked up at Ryker who’s standing in my father’s garage with me. “What? How?”

His warm chuckle spreads over me like honey on a warm day as his fingers fall off my hip, and I miss his touch instantly.

“Never known you to be tongue-tied, baby.”

I take a breath and try and compose my thoughts, but his soft endearments fog my brain. “How are you here?”

My eyes travel over him, hungry for every glimpse of this handsome man I love so much. Even in dark jeans, a green hoodie, and a leather jacket he looks commanding. Like he could equally slide his leg over my bike and ride with us or preside over a board of investors.

“Well, there’s this little invention called a plane.”

I shove him with my shoulder as he leans next to me against my bike. Something about Ryker always makes me want to curl up like a kitten in his lap. He makes me feel safe, loved, cherished, and desired all at once.

“You know what I meant, smartass.”

He holds his hand out in front of him palm up and I take it, linking my fingers through his and just that is enough for now to soothe my scattered mind.

“I missed you.”

A simple admission but one I feel in my bones. “You saw me yesterday.”

“You know what I mean. I hate this distance between us. I hate that I hurt you and I’m done giving you space.”

“Done, huh?”

His thumb strokes my hand and I shiver slightly. “Yep. I’m not leaving until you let me explain.”

“I missed you, too.”

I settle my head against his shoulder and close my eyes as I admit this to him. He sighs and I feel the tension in his body melt a little and I know I did the right thing telling him that.

“I’m sorry, blondie. I’m so fucking sorry for hurting you and keeping that information from you. You were right, I was selfish, and I wasn’t thinking about you when I did it. I only cared about what losing you would do to me. I had no right and I’m ashamed of that. I don’t know if you can ever forgive me, but I need you to know that everything we shared, everything I said to you, was true. You’re the love of my life, and whether you can forgive me and learn to trust me again, that won’t change.”

Tears filled my eyes at his heartfelt words. It wasn’t about trust or me not believing him at this point. I knew he loved me, I felt it in his actions. My heart knew his instinctively, long before my brain got on board and he never, not once, shied away from how he felt about me. When Ryker committed to me, to us, he did it with his whole heart. I owed him the truth too.

“When Beau did what he did, I think he shook my faith in myself. I didn’t know if I could trust my own judgment, so when I found out about you being Beau’s brother, it kinda confirmed that I couldn’t trust my instincts.”

“Baby.”

His voice was choked, but I squeezed his hand. “Let me finish, please?”

His lips pressed against my head. “Go on.”

“Everything was a whirlwind with us, and I think I needed this time alone to catch my breath and find myself again.”

“And did you?”

“Yeah, I did. I realized just because my instincts got it wrong with Beau, they didn’t get it wrong with you and what we have.”

“And that is?”

I lifted my head and found him watching me, with a look of hope, devotion, and adoration in his eyes. “Everything. You’re everything to me, and what we have transcends anything I’ve ever experienced. I love you, Ryker, and I hate that I hurt you.”

He stroked a finger over my face as he pulled me to stand between his legs and settled his arms around my hips, putting us almost face to face. I could feel the hard line of his cock straining in his denims as he pulled me closer and a flood of pure lust ran through my body, turning me liquid.

“I love you so damn much. It’s been physically painful not having you with me and being able to kiss you.”

“Then what are you waiting for, handsome?”

His lips tipped up into a sexy smirk. “I won’t let you down again, beautiful.”

“I know.”

And I did. I understood he hadn’t meant to hurt me, and that it was done for the right reasons. I also understood that life wasn’t black and white, there were shades of gray for us to navigate.

“I can’t promise I won’t fuck up, but I can promise no more secrets and that when I do mess up, which I will, it will never be intentional.”

“And I can promise no more running. Now shut up and kiss me.”

Ryker bent his head into my neck and licked a line up the back of my ear before biting down on the lobe, making my pussy hum.

“My girl hungry for my cock?”

There he was, my sexy, dirty-talking man. “Always.”

His head lifted and he crashed his mouth against mine and kissed me like a dying man needing water. My fingers speared into his hair as I fought to get closer, our tongues twining and stroking, his teeth nipping and sucking as I dragged his hoodie up.

Ryker shrugged his leather jacket to the floor and reached behind him, pulling his hoodie over his head in that sexy way men did. My hands smoothed over his warm firm chest, and I couldn't get enough of him. They wandered down and I undid his belt, my fingers grazing the hard ridge of his cock as I palmed his length.

“Fuck, that feels good.”

He bit down on my shoulder as his thumbs teased my nipples through my lace bra. I arched against him as I smoothed my hands over his warm skin.

My hand pushed his boxers down and I gripped the hard length of his velvety dick, my fingers eager on his body.

“Am I in danger of getting shot if your dad walks in here?”

“Maybe.” I gave him a sexy grin.

He paused where his hands were stroking over my denim-clad ass and then shrugged.

“Fuck it, totally worth it.”

I giggled, a wonderful feeling of freedom and elation filling me.

“Get naked, beautiful. I haven't been inside you for weeks and I need you.”

I shimmied my jeans down my legs and Ryker pulled my hoodie over my head, his eyes zeroing in on my beaded nipples behind the lace of my bra.

“So fucking sexy. Come here, baby.”

I moved into his arms and he lifted me, his jeans hanging onto his hips, the tip of his gorgeous dick sticking out of the top and making my mouth water. He spun me around and sat

me on my bike, looking at me like a platter of his favorite sweets.

“Please tell me no other man has fucked you on this bike.”

I raised a brow teasing him and loving the slightly feral look in his eyes.

“Eden.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “Nobody has ever fucked me on any bike.”

“Thank fuck.”

He bent his head and sucked a nipple into his mouth and my back bowed at the exquisite feeling. “Oh.”

His mouth popped off and he looked up at me through hooded eyes. “I should punish you for making me go so long without this sweet pussy.”

“Oh, what did you have in mind?”

“Maybe I’ll spank that sweet ass.”

“I thought you said punishment.”

Ryker’s eyes widened. We hadn’t tried that yet, but I liked the idea after seeing what I had at the club.

“My dirty slut wants me to turn her ass red. Well, then maybe when I get you home I will, but right now I need inside that tight cunt before I come all over your sexy bike.”

He didn’t even pull my panties down, just slid his finger along my seam, fucking me with his fingers, and rolling my clit, until I moaned, then his hand was gone and I felt the blunt head of his cock.

“I love you, Eden.”

My response was lost as he plunged into me balls deep, taking the ability to speak away as pleasure and fullness crashed over me. I gripped his shoulders, knowing I’d leave marks on his skin as he pulled out and drove back inside me, his crown rubbing against that place inside me that made heaven seem like it was here on earth.

“Fuck, you feel so good.”

Ryker kissed me deep, his chest moving against my nipples as he tugged my hair with his hand at my nape. The pleasure-pain made my body climb, tension and sensations building in me like a dam about to burst.

He pulled away, his head falling so he could watch his cock moving inside me. It gave me the chance to admire him in all his glory. Everything about him was sculpted for sex, his body a machine made for fucking me, but it was when he looked up at me with such love and heat in his eyes that my climax crashed over me.

“Oh God, oh.. oh...”

“You squeeze my dick so good, blondie, I can feel you fluttering all around me, trying to suck the come from me.”

I squeezed my pelvic muscles tight as my climax ebbed.

“Fuck, what did you just do?”

“What you said, trying to milk that climax from you, handsome.”

“I’m gonna fill you up, baby, so when we sit across from your parents later, my come will be dripping from you.”

“You really do love to live dangerously.”

“I really love you, baby.”

Then his thumb was working my clit and this time when I fell over the edge, I took him with me.

Our breathing was labored, sweat drying on our skin and I had never felt so free.

“Thank you for giving me space and loving me.”

“Thank you for forgiving me for being a dick.”

“You ready to meet my parents properly?”

“I guess I should meet the future grandparents of my kids.”

“Kids, hey?”

“Oh yeah, baby, I’m going to knock you up and watch you grow heavy with my child and then I’ll get to fuck a MILF.”

“Have we unlocked a breeding kink, Mr. Cabot?”

He kissed me lightly. “I told you beautiful, I have a ‘you’ kink.”

“You’re nuts.”

“About you.”

“Same, handsome. Same.”

CHRISTMAS THIS YEAR WAS VERY DIFFERENT THAN ANY OTHER. Travis came home with a woman he’d met through work, and she was sweet and quiet, but I liked her for my brother. What I liked more was watching my brother and my man bond over their love of Harrison Ford movies. It made my heart sing to know the people I loved saw in Ryker what I did.

My dad was a little horrified Ryker didn’t ride but Ryker was enthusiastic to learn and before I knew it, they were mocking up designs for a bike for Ryker. Christmas morning started with Ryker’s head between my legs and my hand over my mouth as I came, so as not to scandalize my parents.

Lunch was easy and I helped my mom set up a huge table of ham and all the fixings, and all the people from the shop came by and shared it with us like usual, only this time, I had Ryker with his arm wrapped possessively around me as he chatted with the bikers who’d been my surrogate uncles growing up.

I had no idea how he managed it, but Ryker even managed to get gifts for my parents and brother. An airplane ticket and hotel were booked for my parents to go to the Isle of Man, where the famous and dangerous TT bike race happened. My parents were ecstatic and I got the nod of approval from my dad across the table for that alone. For Travis, he got some first-edition book he’d been talking about, but it was my gift that blew me away.

He handed me a small box and I blinked up at him. “What’s this?”

He jerked his chin. “Open it.”

I lifted the lid on the small black box and frowned at the metal key. “What is this? Do you want me to move back in with you?”

“No. Well, yes, of course I want that as soon as you’re ready but that’s not what this is.”

“Then what?”

I could feel my parents watching us.

“That’s the key to your apartment but I’ve signed the deed over to you. It’s now yours and you can do with it what you will. It means that no matter what happens in the future, you’ll always have a home to call yours.”

Tears filled my eyes at the thoughtful gift, not the cost or extravagance of it but what it meant. He was giving me security and I don’t know how but I loved him even more for it.

“Thank you.” My voice was choked, and I heard my mom sniff behind me.

“Way to make us all look bad, Ryker.”

I laughed at my brother, but I could see he approved when he nodded.

“Not my intention. I just need my Eden to know she always has a home.”

That night I showed him exactly how much his gift meant to me and it couldn’t have been more perfect.

Epilogue One: Eden



I ADJUST THE STRAP ON MY RED BODYCON DRESS AND CATCH Ryker's eye in the mirror. Ever since that first date we had where he watched me spiral going from outfit to outfit, he has sat on the bed while I dress and watched me get ready. Sometimes things get heated and other times he just watches me with the look of a man in love.

“Will I do?”

He stands and moves to stand behind me, his hands cupping my upper arms as he bends to kiss the place where my shoulder and neck meet. I shiver at his touch and the sexy smirk he gives me.

“You steal the breath from my lungs, blondie.”

“Aww, that's almost poetic.”

“What can I say, you inspire me.”

More like the other way around. Ryker Cabot inspires me every day to be the woman worthy of him and a King needs a Queen so that's what I aspire to be. Sometimes when my crown slips, I have a wealth of wonderful women to help me straighten it.

Being around women, like Sally, Audrey, Amelia, Norrie, and Lottie has taught me a lot about who I am and what I should expect. The way the men they love treat them is nothing short of swoony, but I'd know because Ryker treats me the same way.

I wake up every morning feeling like I fell into one of my favorite romance novels. Ryker is attentive, sweet, romantic, funny, and dirty as hell and he loves me. I could not ask for more and even his parents are on board with us being together.

I don't think about Beau anymore because he has no bearing on my life moving forward. Living apart from Ryker for those few weeks taught me a lot, including how much I hated being away from him. So when we came home after Christmas I tore up my rental contract and moved back in here.

Now it's time to move things into the next phase.

"You know I don't like surprises."

I kiss his cheek as I sit beside him in the limo and love the rasp of his stubble against my skin. I shiver at the thought of it between my legs later. To say we fuck like bunnies is an understatement. I can't get enough of him and, luckily for me, he feels the same way. Unfortunately, it did make working for him slightly tricky, so now I work for Audrey in the creative department of Kennedy Enterprises. It gels my love of art with my head for business and I learn from her every day.

"You'll love this one, I promise."

"Fine, but next year I get to surprise you."

"Deal. Now smile, we're here."

We get out and I look up at the restaurant which is themed toward Ryker's favorite movie franchise: Indiana Jones.

The entire restaurant is set up like the film sets, with waiters and waitresses dressed as characters serving around us. Ryker is looking around with a huge grin as he keeps his hand on my back as we're seated.

"What do you think?"

"I love it."

"See, I knew you would."

"How did you hear about this place?"

I take a sip of the champagne that was already on the table waiting for us, feeling my nerves kick up. “It’s very hard to surprise a man who has, or can have, everything so I had some help. Xander knew about it from a friend in the business.”

“It’s perfect and so are you.”

God, this man, and the ease with which he loves me melts my heart.

I lift my glass. “To us.”

Ryker clinks our glasses together. “To us, beautiful.”

We dine off small plates of food either named after or styled after everything Indian Jones.

“How is your shoulder of lamb?”

“Divine, how is your salmon on whipped cauliflower cream?”

“Really good.”

We talk about the movie and my job, and our plans to buy a forever home close to Lincoln and Lottie and what we both want from it, and my man turns into a child when I bring up the bike my parents are designing for him.

When he found out I could ride, he immediately began lessons and ordered a custom bike from my parents. He was a big hit with them but I think that was because they loved how he loved me. As our plates were cleared ready for dessert, nerves once again fluttered in my belly.

“Baby, are you okay?”

“Yes.”

I blew out a breath as Ryker frowned, worry etching his handsome brow. “Eden, don’t lie to me or I’ll spank your ass raw. What’s going on?”

Spanking, it turned out, was totally my thing but my favorite was his dirty mouth. “Nothing, I promise.”

I’d been planning this for weeks, wanting him to know how much I loved him and the life we were building. I decided

to commit to him rather than sit back and wait for him to ask me.

I stood and his eyes followed me as I moved closer to his side of the table. Gracefully, I sank to my knees and his eyes went black with heat and desire.

“Baby?”

I produced the ring box from behind my back and his hand covered his mouth.

“Ryker Cabot, since the first day we met, you have challenged me. You make me better in every way. You support me, champion me, love me, care for me, and make me feel cherished. I know it wasn’t an easy start but I never want to wake up a day in my life without you.”

Ryker had fallen to his knees in front of me now and we faced each other, tears in both our eyes.

“Ryker, will you marry me and be my husband?”

“Fuck yeah, but only if you do me the honor of becoming my wife.”

Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a ring box and revealed a trilogy ring with three huge, brilliant-cut diamonds. I glanced at it and then back to my box, which held two diamond and platinum wedding bands.

“What, you were?”

“Yep, baby, and I need an answer.”

“Yes, yes, always yes, handsome.”

As we laughed, the people around us cheered but they all faded away the second his lips touched mine. Just like every time he kissed me, nothing else mattered because I was in the arms of the man I loved.

Epilogue Two: Ryker



I LOOKED AT MY BEAUTIFUL WIFE AND SHE SMILED AT ME AS Audrey, my best woman, finished her speech. I love you, I mouthed, and she responded in the same way with I love you, too. Vegas hadn't been the original plan but then neither had the pregnancy we were now delighted about.

We'd talked about kids a lot, and not just in the bedroom when I was filling her up. We both wanted three or four but we'd wanted to settle in our new home and have a decent year after getting married before they came along, but fate had other ideas and Eden was four months along with our daughter.

“Dance, wife?”

“Please.”

Eden had kicked off her shoes, the heels making her arches ache and, though they were as sexy as fuck, I didn't want my girl in pain. Holding her in my arms, we swayed back and forth to ‘She’ by Drake Milligan and I sang the words to her because they encapsulated how I saw her, how utterly amazed I was every morning to wake up and know this stunning woman was mine.

“You're so beautiful, Eden. I hope you know that today, and that I'll always love you and be the man you need.” I rub her tummy that's only slightly rounded between us, where our daughter grows. “And when our little girl comes, I'll fall in love all over again with you and the mother I know you'll be.”

“Ryker, don't make me cry.”

“Not trying to, beautiful. I just need you to know how lucky I feel that I get to call you mine. You walked into my life as a temptation and became my everything.”

Her fingers toyed with the hair at the back of my neck and I shivered under her touch, tiny bolts of electricity shooting over my skin.

“I think I was born yours, Ryker. Only fate could have found two souls like ours and kept pushing, even though the odds were against us.”

I bent my head and captured her lips, tasting the sparkling apple on her lips and something that was uniquely and intoxicatingly hers. Desire surged and my dick pressed against her as she laughed against my mouth.

“Someone is impatient.”

“Always with you, blondie.”

“Looks like your best woman and your lawyer are fighting again.”

I turned my head, my cheek still resting against my wife’s and saw Audrey and Hudson in a heated exchange. I still didn’t know what that was about, but I knew he wasn’t the asshole she believed, and I saw the way he looked at her when she didn’t notice. That man was in love, and I knew the look because I had it every time I looked at my wife.

“They need to figure their shit out. Hudson is a good man and Audrey is like a wounded animal around him.”

“I agree, and maybe they will one day, but not today.”

I let her slide down my body, looking down at my petite wife with renewed hunger, feeling all her curves. “Enough about them. When can we get out of here?”

Eden chuckled and gave me a coy look. “Not yet, but I did see a coat closet not too far away that might be empty.”

I slapped her ass, wincing when her father caught my eye and shook his head. Hank Sager was every inch the biker and I know he wouldn’t hesitate to bury me somewhere in the desert

if I hurt his baby girl. I got it, I knew I'd be the same way about any man who dared to make my daughter cry.

“Lead the way, wife, before your father castrates me.”

We rushed down the corridor and pushed through a door marked ‘staff’ as Eden held her dress off the ground. I could hear the music fade as we pushed into a small space and the door closed.

“Eden, this is a cleaning closet, not a coat closet.”

Her half smile was pure sin as she whispered. “Let’s make it dirty then.”

And we did.

Sinking to my knees and burying my head beneath swathes of taffeta and silk, I grinned at the fact that my girl had said her vows to me with her pussy bare beneath her dress. “Naughty girl.”

“You like?”

“I love.”

Then I ate my favorite dessert, sucking at her sweet folds until she came hard, her leg thrown over my shoulder, my tongue flicking against her pulsing clit. I caught her around the back of her thighs as she went limp, lifting her up to straddle my hips and unzipping my aching cock as I held her ready to take me.

Since the news of the baby, I'd been gentler and it wasn't always welcomed by my girl. She liked me rough and unhinged. Now, though, I had no such qualms. A base urge to claim my wife had me plunging into her tight, wet pussy as she clenched around me like a vice.

“Fuck, I love your cock.”

Her words made me savage, a beast freed from its cage, and I fucked her, my hands gripping tight to her as I slammed into her, moving her pussy up and down my needy cock.

“God, I love you, so much.”

“Oh, God, I'm gonna come again.”

“Soak my cock, baby.”

The first flutters were gentle and then she clenched me so tight I thought I might black out from pleasure or possibly die. Great spurts of my come erupted from my cock filling my precious wife with my seed.

Our breaths mixed as I kissed her all over her face. “Now that’s how you start a marriage.”

“Amen, handsome.”

Later that night when we had said our goodbyes, I took my time, worshipping my wife and making love to her until we fell asleep in each other’s arms. Her body draped over mine like a blanket and I knew I’d never sleep soundly again without her in my arms. We woke in the night reaching for each other, and she rode me slowly, sensuously to a powerful climax.

I WOKE TO EDEN KISSING MY CHEST, HER PUSSY STRADDLED over my morning wood and groaned, my hands going to her hips as I rocked against her. I opened my eyes and blinked, confusion shuffling through my half-asleep brain. I wasn’t expecting the newspaper she held in her hands.

“Um, what’s going on?”

“Well, husband, it seems we’re not the only newlyweds this morning.”

“Explain.” I frowned, holding her to me as I sat up, causing my dick to slip between her slick folds. My wife whimpered and the paper fell between us and there in full color was my best woman and my lawyer on the front page. Audrey was waving her hand at the camera sporting a huge diamond ring with the headline, **Empire Heiress marries mystery man in shock Vegas wedding!**

“Well, fuck, I guess they worked something out.”

“I guess they did.”

Eden wriggled and my dick notched at her entrance and all thoughts of anyone but her left my brain.

I threw the paper aside as I rolled my Eden beneath me and kissed my way down her body.

“Now, what do I want for breakfast?”

Her sexy moan was the best sound in the world and now I could hear it every day for the rest of my life.



THIS IS THE HAPPY EVER AFTER FOR RYKER AND EDEN. IF YOU want to read what happens to Audrey and Hudson, you'll find their story in [*The Enemy*](#), releasing February 2024.

Books by L. Knight

KINGS OF RUIN

[The Auction](#)

[The Consequence](#)

[The Unexpected](#)

[The Temptation](#)

[The Enemy](#)

About the Author

Lia Knight is a romance author of billionaire romance with lots of angst, and heat. Her heroes are super rich, demanding and know exactly what they want, so when they set their sights on the heroines in these books you know the chemistry will explode your kindle. Having written over forty books under a different pen name she wanted to give those rich, bossy heroes fighting for a story a chance have their say and find their HEA.

When she isn't writing, she is binging Yellowstone, The Big Bang Theory, and Bridgerton from her home in Hereford in the UK.

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