



UNDERGROUND KINGS

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AURORA ROSE
REYNOLDS

UNDERGROUND KINGS

BOOKS 1-4

AURORA ROSE REYNOLDS

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PRAISE FOR AURORA ROSE REYNOLDS

“Reading an Aurora Rise Reynolds book grabs you from the first word you read and does not let go until she wrings the last emotion out of you. I know that I can count on a story that will leave an imprint on my soul long after I read the last page.”

~Natasha Madison, *WSJ* Bestselling Author

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“When Aurora Rose Reynolds lowers the BOOM, there isn’t a reader alive that can resist diving headfirst into the explosion she creates.”

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world of outrageously alpha heroes and happily ever afters.”

~Author Rochelle Paige

ASSUMPTION

THE UNDERGROUND KINGS
SERIES: KENTON

ABOUT ASSUMPTION

as•sump•tion: a thing that is accepted as true or as certain to happen, without proof

They say when you assume that you make an ass out of you and me. Kenton Mayson learned this lesson firsthand when he made assumptions about Autumn Freeman and the kind of woman she is based on what little information he had. What he finds out is she's not only beautiful, but also smart, funny, a fighter, and exactly the kind of woman he wants to share his life with. Autumn made assumptions of her own about Kenton, and now he needs to prove her wrong in order to protect her and their future.

*To the man who showed me what love really is. I love you,
babe.*

PROLOGUE

I SEE YOU judging me. I know what you're thinking. She has to be a slut; she works at a strip club and takes off her clothes for money. Yes! I work at a strip club, and you may think I'm a whore for showing off my body, but this is a talent that has been forced down my throat since I was a young child. Look pretty and smile. I put on a show for those who choose to watch. However long I'm on stage, I'm not even me. It's what I imagine an out-of-body experience would be like—a performance, nothing more, nothing less. The people watching make assumptions about who they think I am or cook up a story in their heads of who they want me to be. I'm just another beautiful face.

Beautiful. I hate that fucking word. Who gives a crap if someone is attractive on the outside if they are dying inside? My whole life has been about what I look like. I swear, the only reason my mother kept me was to have a real-life, living, breathing doll she could dress up and control, which is the exact reason why I got as far away from her special brand of crazy as I could as soon as I became eighteen. That's also why I don't date. The first thing guys do is look at me and see a pretty face, a nice body, and an empty space where my brain's supposed to be. They have no interest in getting to know the person I am on the inside. They don't care that I volunteer my spare time, and they couldn't care less that I'm going to school to be an RN. They don't ask about my hopes, my dreams, or about where I see my life in twenty years. They don't care about me at all.

They just want someone pretty to follow them around and tell them how handsome they are, how special they are, while agreeing with everything they say. Fuck that! I did that for too many years. That's why I live inside books. At least there I can choose where I want to be—from the highlands of Scotland to a king's bed in a faraway land—and even if it's pretend, sometimes that's a lot better than reality.

LEAVING ON A JET PLANE

I LOOK OUT the plane window, my finger going to the glass, feeling the cold on my fingertips as I look down at the land moving quickly below me. It's funny how, from up here, everything looks so small. I've never traveled in a plane before today. The idea of being trapped inside a tin can while flying at six hundred miles per hour never appealed to me. I take a breath and look at the TV monitor that's in the seat in front of me. The small, animated plane on the screen shows that we're over halfway to Tennessee.

"Are you traveling for business or pleasure?" I turn my head and look at the guy sitting next to me. He's slightly overweight and balding, but he also has wrinkles around his eyes, giving him the appearance of someone who smiles often.

I debate with myself on whether or not to answer before replying, "Business."

His eyes drop to my mouth then to my chest as I fight the urge to punch him in the throat. I hate when men go from nice to creepy. I shake my head, turning away from him. I don't know why I even try.

I feel a hand on my bare leg and my head swings around quickly.

"Touch me again and I will rip off your balls and feed them to you," I tell him in a soft tone, trying not to bring attention to us.

He quickly removes his hand, swallowing hard. "I...I'm sorry."

I shake my head before turning my body away from his. I feel tears stinging my nose, but I fight them back. No way am I going to cry now—not when, just six hours ago, my whole world exploded and I didn't shed one single tear. I lay my forehead to the glass, closing my eyes. I still can't believe how fast my life changed...

I got up yesterday morning and went to the hospital like I always do. I work at one of the busiest ERs in Vegas. I've been working there since I finished school and was required to get my clinical hours for my RN. As soon as I walked into the building, I was loaded down with work. Weekends are always crazy in Sin City, but yesterday seemed worse than normal—two drug overdoses, three stomach pumps, and one gunshot victim. Later, I left the hospital exhausted, only to head to my real job—well, the one that pays me the money I need to live.

“Hey, Angel.”

“Hey, Sid.” I gave him a half smile as I walked into The Lion's Den, the gentlemen's club I work at.

Do I like working at a strip club? No. Does it pay my bills? Yes. The second I walk in the door at the club, I'm no longer me. My brain shuts off and my body takes over, the same way it used to when I was growing up and my mom forced me into pageants. I'm accustomed to being on display and used for my appearance. I wish life were different, but it is what it is.

Some people complain about being overweight or having acne; I hate being beautiful. I know it sounds stupid. I mean, why would anyone complain about being attractive, right? Here's why: men see me as an object and women see me as competition. No one is ever willing to give me a chance. They all judge me by what's on the outside, never taking a second to find out even the smallest detail about who I am.

I know I'm a walking cliché. I hate being beautiful, yet I work in a business where I put myself front and center to be viewed and judged.

The difference? For the first time in my life, when I get on stage, it's my choice; no one is forcing me to do it. I get up

there to earn the money so I can change my life in order to never be objectified again.

“Tired?” Sid questioned, following me. I have worked for Sid for the last three years. He is a friend of sorts; he’s also my boss.

“Yeah. I can’t wait until my clinical hours are over and I can start working at the hospital full time instead of having two jobs.”

“I don’t like that I won’t see your face all the time, but I know you need to move on,” he conceded.

“Some other girl will come in and you will forget all about me.

“Never, Angel.” His eyes moved over my face and he shook his head “You’re working VIP tonight.” He followed me down the hall towards the dressing rooms.

“Sure,” I agreed, already exhausted. I needed a shower and a bed, but I knew I was going to be there for at least eight hours, so I might as well suck it up.

“The guys coming in are important, so you need to make sure they’re happy the whole time they’re here.”

“I have done this before,” I reminded him, stopping outside the dressing room door to frown at him.

“Normally, I wouldn’t say anything—you know that. But I gotta go get on a plane, so I won’t be here to check on them.”

“I’ll make sure they’re taken care of,” I assured him.

“Thanks, Angel.” He kissed my forehead like he often did before walking away.

I watched him go for a second before pulling myself together.

“Oh! Look who’s here,” Tessa said as soon as I entered the dressing room.

I ignored her and tossed my bag into my locker before pulling my scrubs off. Tessa was a bitch; she was just like the girls I used to compete against in pageants. To her, life was a

competition, and she was determined to come out the winner, even if she had to throw everyone else under the bus on her way to the top.

“Mick said I could work VIP tonight,” she said to one of the other girls in the room.

I ignored her again, knowing better than to tell her that it wasn't happening. I was sure Mick had told her that...after she'd taken him in the backroom and given him something to convince him.

“Pixie said the guys coming in are some big time land developers, so you know the tips are going to be outrageous. Thank God, because I need to have my tits redone, and that shit is not cheap.”

I rolled my eyes and headed for the shower room. I had met a couple of nice girls during my time here, but most were just like Tessa—a whole lot of hair, tits, ass, and not much else.

I stood in front of the mirror and put on a coat of red lipstick before standing back, looking myself over. The VIP dress code was different than the rest of the club. The required outfit consisted of a sheer, black overlay bra, black silk panties, a black garter belt with sheer hose, and black heels. My long, naturally red hair was pulled back on one side by a large flower; the rest was loose and wavy, flowing down my back and over one shoulder. My creamy, white skin, red lips, and smoky eyes made me look almost like a sexy vamp.

“You ready, Angel?” Sid asked, pounding on the door.

“Showtime,” I whispered before opening the door.

“You look beautiful. I'm going to take you in there and introduce you before heading out.”

“Sure.” I followed him down the hall to the club. The Lion's Den is well known in the area for its exclusivity. The walls are painted a dark brown, and the booths are designed into the walls, making the space feel intimate. The stage is in the center of the room, with a single spotlight shining down on it. Every booth has a girl assigned to it, and VIP has two girls.

We aren't allowed to interact with the customers without being asked directly to do so.

The club is less of a strip club and more of a place for men to hang out and drink while having beautiful women tend to them. If they choose to, they can watch the girl in the center of the room put on a show. I have been on stage several times in the three years I've worked here. I haven't told Sid that I don't like it up there, but he normally put me in VIP or assigned me to a booth for the night.

"Why are you so worried about these guys?" I asked Sid.

"They're thinking about opening up a Lion's Den in one of the new casinos they're building."

"That's huge! Congrats, honey." I squeezed his bicep and gave him a smile.

"One day, Angel, I'm gonna take you away from this place. I wanna see that smile every day."

My heart did a little thud. Sid is a very attractive man, but he's not for me. I don't want or need a man. They get you all discombobulated, filling your head with a bunch of lies and then expecting you to follow them around. I did that once. I thought a man was going to save me from the hell I was living in. I gave him my virginity and my heart, and he gave me a child I wasn't allowed to keep and a heart so broken that nothing or no one has put it back together again.

I looked through the two-way mirror at the men around the table in the VIP room.

"All right," Sid said from beside me. "The man in the center at the table is John Barbato. He is the owner of three of the largest clubs in the city. The guy there on his left is Steven Creo. He's some bigwig on Wall Street and has backed more than half the new clubs and casinos opening on The Strip. The guy to the right of John has a location they're interested in purchasing."

"Got it. Who's working with me?" I asked him.

"Tessa. Mick said she would be the best out of the girls we've got on the schedule tonight."

“I’m sure he did,” I mumbled, looking back into the room.

“What other bouncers are on tonight?” I hated when Mick and Craig worked together. They were both more concerned about hooking up with the girls than what was going on out on the floor.

“Link’s here now.”

“Good.” Link was a good guy and a close friend. He also took his job seriously.

“All right, let me introduce you quickly before I head out.”

“Sure.” I followed him into the room. The men’s heads turned in our direction, and they were smiling.

“Guys, I want you to meet Angel. She’s gonna be your girl for the night. You need anything, you ask her and she will make sure you’re taken care of,” Sid tells them, gesturing to me.

“Nice to meet you,” one of the men said, smiling while the others nodded.

“Nice to meet you too.” I smiled back.

“Angel will be right back. Give me a minute, guys.”

“Sounds good,” the one who’d spoken before said. As Sid and I stepped away, I heard from behind me, “Do you think the curtains match the drapes?” and they all laughed. I hated that saying, and I’d sworn that, once I was free of this lifestyle, I would kick the next man who said it in the nuts.

“Okay, I gotta head out. I won’t be back for two weeks,” Sid said once we were standing in the hall.

“Have a safe trip.”

His eyes searched my face. His mouth opened and closed like he was going to say something, but instead, he shook his head, kissed my cheek, and walked off down the hall, muttering something under his breath.

Tessa came around the corner a couple of seconds later with a smug smile on her face. I hated to admit it, but she was beautiful. Her skin had a natural glow that made her look

healthy and youthful. Her hair was black and thick, reaching the top of her ass. Her eyes curved out at the corners, showing off her Asian-American heritage.

“You ready?” she asked, looking at me from head to toe.

I avoided rolling my eyes at her before stepping into the room behind her.

After we took the first orders, we stood back while the men talked. I learned a long time ago to zone myself out. We were there as eye candy and nothing else. There was a knock on the door, and I knew the drinks had arrived. Tessa answered it, opening the door wide, and the man who brought the tray in was someone I had never seen before. He looked to be mid-thirties, and he had long, shaggy, black hair and brown eyes.

When he set the tray down on the table in the corner, he turned and did something odd that had me watching him more closely. His hand went to his back as he looked over at the men, who were still busy talking. When his eyes came to me, he smiled before walking out of the room. I looked at Tessa to see if she had noticed anything strange, but she was busy handing out the drinks and flirting with the men at the table.

We stood to the side again once the men had their drinks. Every once in a while, they would ask me a question about the club, and I told them what I knew. About thirty minutes after they had their first drinks, I called and had more ordered. This time, when the guy came in, he did the same thing—hand at his back, looking at the table. I had no idea who he was, but I planned to find out as soon as the men left.

One of the men received a phone call and stepped out of the room, and when he returned, he had another man with him. They all sat down. This time when they called me over, they wanted a bottle of Chivas Regal Royal Salute Scotch. One glass of the stuff cost close to six hundred dollars, making it over ten thousand dollars for a bottle. I placed the order and waited for it to be delivered.

When the knock sounded on the door, I opened it up, and the same man from earlier came in and set the tray down. I watched to see if he would do the same thing he had done the

previous times. Sure enough, his head turned towards the table and his hand lifted behind his back, but this time, he lifted his jacket, pulling out something black.

It took a second for me to realize what it was, and by that time, it was too late. He let off four rounds in rapid succession then turned and fired another round, hitting Tessa. I screamed as he turned the gun on me, and before I could think, I ducked down and ran as fast as I could out of the room. I felt a bullet whiz past me as I turned the corner and another as I entered the main part of the club.

I spotted Mick. Right away, his eyes got wide, and I yelled at the top of my lungs, “HE HAS A GUN!”

Everyone started screaming and running in every direction. I ran into a solid wall, and when I looked up to see that it was Link, he wrapped an arm around my waist, turned, and pushed me behind the bar. I stumbled in my heels, falling to my knees and hitting the ground hard. I crawled under the counter and curled myself into a ball, shaking out of fear for my life. I listened as people screamed but didn’t hear any more gunshots. I don’t know how long I stayed like that, but it felt like forever until I heard police sirens.

“Autumn,” Link called, using my real name, snapping me out of my terrified huddle.

I peeked out from behind my hands as he crouched down in front of me. “Did you get him?”

He shook his head, putting out his hand for me to take. I shook my head no. I was safe; I didn’t want to move from that spot.

“Come on, Angel. He’s gone.” I shook my head again. “Nothing is going to happen to you. I promise you’re safe.” I swallowed against the lump in my throat, squeezing my eyes closed.

“Tessa?” I asked him. His eyes closed and his head dropped forward

“No,” I whispered, shaking my head. “No.”

“Sorry, Angel,” he said quietly.

“Why?”

“Not sure, but the cops are here. I need you to come out of there so you can talk to them,” he told me gently, holding out his hand again. I nodded, reluctantly taking it.

Even though I didn't like Tessa, she didn't deserve what had happened to her. None of the people in the room deserved what had happened to them. “I should have tried to help her.”

“Nothing you could have done,” Link said, and my eyes went from the floor to his. He shook his head, wrapped his beefy arm around my shoulders, and walked me over to a barstool.

I sat there until the cops came up a few minutes later and told me that they needed to talk to me at the station.

“Can she get some clothes on?” Link, who had given me the shirt off his back and hadn't left my side, asked one of the detectives.

“Sure,” the guy mumbled.

I slid off the barstool and dazedly walked to the dressing room. When I walked in, all the girls were there huddled together and crying. I didn't know what to say to them; most of them had been friends with Tessa. I felt horrible that they had lost their friend, but I was unsure if they would want me to express my condolences.

I walked to my locker and started to pull off my stockings when one of the girls came up to me, wrapping her arms around me. Shocked, I hugged her back, and more of the girls gathered around me. We all stood there silently for a few minutes. Most of the girls were crying while a couple mumbled about how everything would be okay. I wasn't sure anything would ever be okay again; I'd just watched five people die and was lucky to still be alive.

“I have to go with the police,” I told the girls when it didn't seem like they were going to let me go.

After a second, they all started breaking away from me one by one, giving me reassuring hugs.

“Call me if you want to talk,” one of the girls, Elsa, said, handing me a business card with her personal information on it.

I looked at it for a long second before nodding. I had never really been friends with any of them. Maybe that needed to change.

I went to my locker, pulling off my clothes before slipping on a pair of jean shorts, a black tank top, an oversized, grey sweater, and a pair of black flip-flops. I grabbed my bag, shoved everything from my locker into it, and left the room without a backwards glance.

Link was waiting for me outside the dressing room door, his back against the wall, his head tilted back, looking at the ceiling. I’ve known Link since I started working at The Lion’s Den. He’s a nice guy, with blond hair cut low to his head, tan skin, blue eyes, and a Southern drawl that made women fall to their knees. He used to flirt with me when I first started, but when I didn’t return any of the banter, he laid off and became a friend. He is one of the only people who knows about my past and the things I’ve gone through.

“You didn’t have to wait for me,” I told him, pulling my bag across my body.

“I’m not letting you go through this alone.” He pulled me into his side. I could feel tears stinging my eyes, and I fought them back. I wasn’t going to cry until this was all over, when I could do it alone while hiding under my covers with my face stuffed into a pillow...like I always did.

“Thank you.”

He gave me a squeeze, and I felt his lips at the top of my head.

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND WHY I have to leave the state,” I told Link, putting another pair of shoes in my bag. I had no

idea how long I would be gone, and Link had made it sound like I wouldn't be able to come back to Vegas for a long while.

“I hate to remind you, but you're the only witness, and from what the cops said, the guy is a killer paid by the mob to do hits on people.”

I sighed, looking around my house. I hated that I was leaving, but I knew it was for the best. I'd been at the police station for over eight hours, going over what had happened. Then I'd sat with a sketch artist. Somehow, the guy who had shot Tessa and those men had avoided every camera in the club. The cops had informed me that I needed to be extra cautious. I was the only witness, and they were concerned that he would come after me.

When Link had found out what they'd said, he'd made a call to one of his friends from back home in Tennessee and asked if he would be willing to let me stay with him until the police caught the guy. The man, Kenton, had agreed, telling Link that I would be safe. I hated that I was leaving my home, but if my only options were either death or moving, the choice was begrudgingly clear.

“I hope they get the guy fast,” I mumbled.

“Me too, but until then, you will be far away from here and safe.”

“Are you sure it's a good idea to have me stay with this guy? I mean, how well do you really know him?”

“We were best friends growing up. He's a good guy. You'll be safe with him.” I bit the inside of my cheek and nodded before going into the closet to get another suitcase. Might as well pack enough stuff to last me. Once I was all packed and ready to go, we got into Link's SUV and headed for the airport. I was nervous the whole way, feeling like something crazy was about to happen...

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, we're about twenty minutes out from our arrival destination. The weather in Nashville is mostly clear and sunny. The temperature is eighty-five

degrees. The pilot has now turned on the fasten seatbelt sign. Flight crew, please prepare for landing,” I hear through my sleep-ridden state and lift my head from the wall where I was resting it.

The memories of what happened yesterday leave my head as I wipe my mouth with the sleeve of my sweater before looking around to see that everyone is putting their belongings away. I make sure my seatbelt is secure before sitting back. My leg starts quickly bouncing up and down, and I rub the tattoo behind my ear, trying to think about something other than the plane landing.

Once we are on the ground, I wait until everyone is off the plane to make my way out into the terminal. I go to baggage claim and look around, but I have no clue what this guy looks like. All I know is that his name is Kenton and he is supposed to be picking me up.

I don't see anyone who looks like they're searching for someone, so I go to the conveyer belt and spot one of my bags as soon as I get there. I pull it off, stumbling back slightly from the weight as every guy here just watches me without offering to help.

I look around again, wondering if I'm supposed to call someone to tell them that I landed. I pull my phone out, click it off airplane mode, and send a text to Link, letting him know that I have arrived. He sends me a message back, letting me know that Kenton called and told him that he couldn't make it to pick me up and I should just catch a cab to his house. The door would be unlocked, and the address is in the message.

I shake my head, cursing under my breath, and almost miss one of my other bags going around the belt. Luckily, I catch it at the last second. I carry it over to my other bag and turn around just in time to see my last bag about to go through the tunnel. I run as fast as I can in my flip-flops and land halfway on the conveyer belt. My bottom half is being dragged along the floor as I grab the handle of my bag, pulling it back so hard that it flies over me, causing me to land on my back with my hands over my head.

“You must be Autumn,” I hear rumbled from above me.

I tilt my head back and look up at the man standing over me. He’s upside down, but even from my awkward position, I can tell that he is good looking. His chuckle makes me grit my teeth. I stand up, putting my bag on its wheels and dusting off my butt before turning back to face him.

“You are?”

He raises a brow at me, shaking his head, looking me over from head to toe. My body heats immediately under his gaze. I take my sweater off, wrapping it around my waist and clearing my throat.

“You are?” I ask him again, getting annoyed that he’s obviously finding this so funny, if the smirk on his face is anything to go by.

“Kenton.” He smiles.

“Those bags yours?” He nods towards my other two bags.

“Yes.” I blow some hair out of my face, looking into his amber eyes and wondering why the hell I feel so hot all of a sudden.

He looks away, going over to my bags while I take the time to look him over. He’s tall, much taller than my five six. His hair touches the edge of the black T-shirt he has on. He needed a cut a while ago, but judging by the dark scruff along his jaw, I can tell that he doesn’t care much about grooming. His shoulders are broad, tapering down to a lean waist. His thighs are thick, encased in a pair of dark jeans that have shredded around the seams, and his wallet is imprinted in the back pocket like he wears them often.

I look at his ass as he leans over. I can’t believe I’m checking a man out; I’m not one to be the slightest bit sexually interested in anyone. My eyes travel lower, looking at his feet, which are encased in a very large pair of black boots. I wonder absently if what they say about shoe size is true. I shake my head at my thoughts, dragging my bag with me towards him.

“I thought you couldn’t make it,” I tell him when I reach his side. My head tilts back to look up into his eyes.

“Yeah, change of plans,” he mutters, looking at me.

I wait to see if he’s going to say anything else. Apparently, he isn’t going to, so I shake my head again and lower my face towards the ground.

“You tired?” His voice is dark and rich, and it does something crazy to my insides. I nod, lifting my head. “Let’s roll. You can sleep when we reach the house.”

I don’t say anything else. Something is wrong with me. *Maybe I’m getting sick*, I think, putting my palm to my forehead. When I don’t feel anything, I start to follow him out of the terminal to the car park.

When we reach the parking lot, he stops and pulls a set of keys from his pocket. I hear the beep and look around, expecting him to be driving a large truck, a Hummer, or maybe even a tank. I never expected him to be driving a Dodge Viper. The black-on-black of the car only makes it look hotter. I look at my bags, wondering how we will get them in the car.

“It’ll be tight, but they’ll fit,” he mumbles, pulling my other two bags with him.

I can’t help but notice the flex of his muscles as he gets my bags into the car or the fact even his fingers are attractive. It takes some maneuvering, but he does get my bags to fit. I sigh, sitting down on the warm leather once we’re done.

“I’m just gonna drop you off at the house. I gotta head out for a bit, but you have free rein. Just make yourself at home. There’s food in the fridge and fresh sheets on the bed in the guest room.”

“Thank you for doing this,” I tell him, looking at his profile. He is seriously good-looking, and the butterflies in my stomach are making me feel anxious about staying with him.

“Don’t mention it. So...you and Link?”

It takes a second to decipher his words between the thickness of his accent, his smell, and the nervous energy I’m feeling. Being in his presence, my brain seems to have shut down.

“He’s a friend.” Shit, maybe I should have said that he was my boyfriend.

I look over at him again; he doesn’t seem to be as on edge as I am. He’s probably used to women swooning over him. My gut tightens with something, and it takes a second to realize what it is. My body freezes. Jealousy? Really? I must be going into shock or something. I don’t get jealous.

“How’d you two meet?”

“We work at the same club,” I murmur, squirming in my seat.

“Oh yeah,” he mumbles, his knuckles turning white from his grip on the steering wheel. I don’t know what that means, but the energy in the car changes, making me want to get away from him.

We drive in silence for the next half hour, the car winding its way through one small town after another until we go up what seems like the side of a mountain. The area is surrounded by forest on either side of the road. We drive for five more minutes before turning onto a dirt road that takes us deeper into the forest. I want to ask if he lives out here and about where he works—and a million other questions—but my mouth has gone dry and the energy in his car hasn’t gotten any better, so I decide to keep my mouth shut.

I’m going to be stuck with him for a while, so I figure there will be time for all of that later. I look ahead of us and squint as the image of a large house comes into view. It is a very large brick house. The front has two porches—one on the first floor, one on the second—and both wrap around the front of the house. It’s beautiful and expansive. I look over at Kenton again, gauging if I should ask him if this is his house. His jaw is ticking, and the vein in his neck is pulsing wildly. I have no idea what’s set him off, but I figure my best bet is to sit there quietly until he calms down. We park in front of the house, where there is no real designated parking place. He unfolds himself out of the car without saying anything, and I take it as my cue to follow him. By the time I make it to the back of the car, he has both of my bags out and is back on the

driver's side, sliding his seat forward so he can get to the bag in the back seat. Without a word, he carries two of my bags up the front porch and right into the house. I drag my last bag with me, following close behind him.

He sets my bags down at the bottom of the staircase then turns to look at me.

“Your room is at the top of the stairs to the right. There's a bathroom across the hall you can use. I have my own.” He runs a hand through his hair and looks me over again, anger apparent on his face. “I don't want random men in my house, so if you need to get off, take care of yourself.”

I blink at him as he continues.

“The code for the alarm is 4-5-9-3. Don't forget to set it when you're in the house. I don't know when I'll be back, but you'll be safe here.” Before I even have a chance to form a complete thought, he is closing the door behind him, shouting,

“Set the alarm!” I stand there for a few minutes, just looking at the door. Then I look around for an alarm but don't see one. Tears sting my nose again as I recall the look of disgust on his face when he told me to get myself off. I say a silent, “Fuck you,” and look at my bags then the stairs, shaking my head. I can cry once I get settled in the room.

I carry my bags one at a time up the stairs, and by the time I'm done, I'm so exhausted that I lie face-first on the bed, put my head under the pillow, and cry until I fall asleep.

THERE IS A pounding on the door, and I roll, falling off the bed and onto the floor.

“You didn't set the alarm,” I hear growled.

I stand up, pushing my hair out of my face, and glare at Kenton, who is standing in the doorway with his arms crossed over his chest.

“I looked and didn't see the alarm to set it.” I copy his posture, crossing my arms over my chest.

“You should have called and asked me where it is.”

I scoff. “With what? Magic? I don’t have your number.”

“You could have asked Link for it.” He shakes his head.

“I’m sorry, but if you wanted me to have your number, I figured you would’ve given it to me,” I retort.

“Did you eat?” he asks, changing the subject suddenly and throwing me off guard.

“Pardon?”

“Did you eat something?”

“No, and I’m not hungry. I’m just really tired,” I tell him, rubbing my face. All I want to do is go to sleep and forget about the last forty-eight hours.

“You need to eat something,” he chides, uncrossing his arms and placing his hands on his hips.

“Okay, don’t get me wrong. I’m really thankful for you looking out for me, but I have been taking care of myself for a very long time. I don’t want or need a babysitter.”

“Suit yourself.” He shrugs then looks me over again, his eyes lingering on my chest.

I glance down and groan. *Seriously?* My boobs are in my bra, hanging over the top of my tank top. I quickly adjust my shirt before narrowing my eyes on him.

He smirks, looking up into my face. “Make sure you set the alarm from now on. The panel is inside the room off the entry, first door to the right.”

“Got it.” My body is doing that hot thing again, and I wonder why it keeps happening when he’s around.

“All right, doll. Get some rest. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He lets his eyes linger on me for a few more moments and then shakes his head, stepping out of the room.

I go to the side of the bed and turn on the light before walking to the door and shutting it. I lean my head back, closing my eyes and breathing in deeply. I run a finger across the tattoo behind my ear before opening my eyes and looking

around. I can do this; I have lived through much worse and come out on top. I just need to get a plan in place.

WORD VOMIT

I T'S BEEN THREE weeks since I moved to Tennessee. Three weeks of living with Kenton, who I don't see very often, and when I do, he's usually leaving for work or coming in before going to bed. One of the longest talks we've had was the other day when he came in and told me that he had something for me and to meet him out front. I tucked my Kindle away and followed him out of the house, down the front steps, to a small VW Beetle.

"My cousin's wife just got rid of it. You don't have a car, and I know it's not an easy trek to town."

I looked from the car, to him, then back again.

"Here's the key. It has a full tank of gas, new tires, plus a tune-up," he told me, holding out the key between his large fingers.

"This is the part where you say, 'Thank you,'" he grumbled, looking at me then at the keys in his hand.

"Um...I... Thank you," I whispered, taking the keys from him with shaky fingers.

He nodded, looking like he was going to say something else, but instead, he left me standing there, looking at the car, dumbfounded by the act of generosity. No one had ever done anything like that for me before.

From that day on, I tried to help where I could. I tried to cook a couple of times, but that was a disaster, so I settled on showing my appreciation in other ways. I kept the house clean,

went to the grocery store if I noticed things running low, and even did laundry if I saw it piling up. He told me that I didn't need to do everything I was doing, but I ignored him. I knew he appreciated my help. He was always busy and seemed to be running himself ragged.

When we did have moments to talk, he smiled more and seemed more at ease with me. I lived for the stolen moments I had with him. It was stupid, but I felt like a lost puppy looking for a bone. I hated and loved that he made me feel like that. I had wondered for a long time if I had somehow become asexual. I hadn't been interested in a guy since my first and last boyfriend.

I WALK DOWN the stairs, going into the kitchen to grab some much-needed coffee. I just got off the phone. The hospital I worked at in Vegas has agreed to transfer my hours to a hospital they are affiliated with in Nashville. Then I called the hospital in Nashville, and they want me to start as soon as possible. My shift will be eleven to seven a.m. They told me that, after I'm on staff for a while, I can change up my schedule. It doesn't matter to me what hours I work, just as long as I'm working.

I'm on cloud nine; I can't wait to get back to work. Nursing is some-thing I love doing and am really good at.

I hit the bottom landing of the stairs and go around the corner into the kitchen. Kenton is standing at the stove on the phone. His back is to me, so I take a second to admire him.

Today's jeans are light blue and faded in all the right spots. His red T-shirt fits him snugly, showing off his muscles while enhancing his tan. His head turns towards me; his golden eyes hit mine and then do a head-to-toe sweep.

"You want coffee?" he rumbles out, his deep voice making my girly parts tingle.

I hear him say goodbye to whoever's on the phone before he sets it on the counter. His eyes look me over again and his mouth starts to twitch.

“You want coffee?” he asks again, this time a small smirk playing on his lips.

“I...um... Yes please,” I tell him, walking fully into the kitchen.

His house is older, the kitchen showing the wear and tear of having been around for so long. Everything is clean but in major need of updating. The cabinets are a light wood, and the counters are some old laminate that has started chipping around the edges. The fridge, stove, and dishwasher are white and desperately need to be replaced.

He hands me a cup of coffee, and I quickly add milk and sugar before hopping up on the counter, sitting across from him, praying that I don't continue to make a fool out of myself.

“What's your plan for the day?” he asks, looking at me from over the top of his coffee cup.

“I need to go shopping. I left all my work clothes back home and I just got a job in Nashville,” I tell him, smiling.

His cup lowers as his hand turns white on the handle. “Like I told you before, I don't want randoms in my house.”

My face heats and I take a breath, needing to make sure I understand what he's saying before I flip out and kick him in the balls.

“What do you mean by ‘randoms’?” I ask, keeping my voice light.

He studies me for a second like he's debating his next words.

Smart man.

“Guys from the strip club.”

Apparently he's not that smart. I take another breath as my stomach turns.

“Don't worry. I don't bring my work home with me,” I tell him, dumping out the almost-full cup of coffee into the sink. I

jump off the counter, putting the cup in the dishwasher before grabbing my bag and heading for the door.

I'm used to being judged, but for some reason, it coming from him makes me feel sick. I hate that he somehow has that kind of power over me. I hate that I want him to take a second to get to know me.

I get into the Beetle, telling myself that, as soon as I get back, I'm going to find out the value of the car he got me and give him the money for it.

I quickly ask Siri where I can find a store to buy scrubs, and once I have the directions pulled up, I put the car in drive, do a U-turn in front of the house, and head into town. First, I go to the scrubs shop and spend over five hundred dollars. *Who doesn't need cute scrubs?*

When I'm done with that, I go to a nearby nail salon and get a manicure and pedicure. Then I come across a small soul food restaurant and have barbecue ribs and homemade macaroni and cheese. For dessert, I have made-from-scratch peach cobbler with vanilla ice cream. Now that I can eat whatever I want without worrying about my appearance, I plan on eating everything I've been denied.

When I was growing up and competing in beauty pageants, there wasn't a week that went by that I didn't have a competition. My mom was very strict about what I ate. Everything was pre-measured and my calorie intake was no more than what was necessary to survive. I didn't even know what sugar tasted like until I turned sixteen. Then, when I moved to Vegas and my jobs all required me to have a certain image, I stuck with my old habits.

But now? Fuck that! I'm going to eat—and eat *everything*. After eating, I'm not ready to go home, so I go to the movies, buy a ticket, and sit in the dark theater alone, watching as a young woman is attacked by an evil spirit. Well, I think that's what it is... about halfway through, I fall asleep. I wake up to screaming and have no clue what is going on, so I get up and leave.

When I pull up in front of the house, the first thing I notice is Kenton's car parked out front. I really don't want to see him again, but I know I can't avoid going inside forever. I get out of the car, leaving the bags with my new work clothes in the trunk. He doesn't need to know what I'll really be doing. He chose to make assumptions about me, so he can continue to think what he wants.

I'm not going to try to change his mind. Yes, he's good looking, but I'm starting to see a pattern. He's a dick and judgmental. He's a judgmental dick.

I sigh, walking up the front porch, and as soon as I unlock the door and push it open, the smell of something cooking hits my nose. Even though I ate earlier, my stomach growls. I ignore my stomach and start for the stairs. I have a candy bar in my bag; that can hold me over until tomorrow.

"You're back," I hear from behind me as my foot hits the first step.

"Yep." I look over my shoulder at him. *Why does he have to be so good-looking?*

"I made dinner."

"Good for you," I say sarcastically, going up two more stairs.

"Look, I shouldn't have said what I said earlier." He sighs, and I wonder if he has ever apologized in his life.

"You shouldn't have," I agree, taking a few more steps.

"Will you stop for a second?" He lets out a huff, and I turn to face him, raising an eyebrow. "Come eat so we can talk. You're living here. I think it's only right that we get to know at least a little about each other."

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him to fuck off, but sadly, my manners are ingrained in me. I turn, walk down the stairs, and follow him into the kitchen.

"Will you get out a couple plates?" he asks, going to the oven. As soon as he has the oven open, the smell of baked chicken hits me, making my stomach growl again.

“You really should eat more,” he mumbles.

I turn to look at him and feel my temper spike.

“I did eat,” I tell him, pulling down two plates before getting two sets of silverware out of the drawer and setting them on the counter with a little too much force.

“I mean something besides rabbit food. You need to gain some weight.”

I take a breath and blow it out slowly, counting in my head from one to ten.

“Okay”—I turn my face to look at him—“I don’t know what’s wrong with the filter that goes from your brain to your mouth, and honestly, I really don’t care.” I turn around to face him completely. “I don’t appreciate you saying things to me about my job, my free time, or my eating habits. I appreciate what you’re doing for me, but it doesn’t give you the right to talk shit to me whenever you feel like it.”

I inhale deeply before letting out a breath, noticing that his eyes seem to have gone softer. Something about that look makes me feel better, but I finish with, “If you think that’s going to be a problem, I can find somewhere else to stay until I can go home.”

“You’re right. I shouldn’t have said that to you.” He shakes his head, running a hand through his hair before our eyes meet again. “Let’s start over.”

“Sure.” I nod, my insides twisting under his gaze. Every time he looks at me, I feel like he sees way too much.

He walks towards me, sticking out his hand.

“Kenton Mayson.”

I put out my hand for him to take.

“Autumn Freeman,” I tell him, and our eyes lock as his fingers wrap around mine. His touch sends tingles down my spine. I lick my lips, which have suddenly gone dry.

His eyes drop to my mouth before meeting mine again.

“Right.” His voice seems deeper than before and his eyes seem to have gone darker.

“Get the salad, babe.” He nods towards the fridge, dropping my hand.

My stomach flips at the word ‘babe.’ I ignore it and go to the fridge, pulling the salad out as he pulls some potatoes out of the oven, setting one on each plate before adding a golden piece of chicken as well.

“It’s a nice night. How ’bout we sit out on the deck?”

“Sure,” I agree. He finishes making our plates, adding butter and sour cream to the potatoes then adding salad to the dishes.

“Get the door for me.” I open the sliding glass door in the kitchen that leads to the deck. He sets the plates down on the table before coming back in, opening the fridge, and grabbing a beer.

“You want one?” he asks, holding up the beer. I shake my head; I’ve never had beer...or any kind of alcohol for that matter. “You don’t like beer? I got a bottle of wine if you prefer that.”

“I’ve never had it before.”

“You’ve never had a beer?” His voice sounds shocked, and I shake my head no again.

I have worked around alcohol since I was twenty-one, but I have also seen the way it makes people act and have never trusted anyone enough to be that unguarded around them. I watch as he goes to the counter, puts the beer to the edge, and pops the top off.

“Try a sip,” he orders.

I reluctantly take it. Why? I don’t know. Normally, I would have stood my ground a little more firmly. I put the bottle to my lips and tip it back. The bubbles and cold hit my tongue before the taste. I pull the bottle away, scrunch up my face as the flavor hits me, and hand the bottle back to him.

“Not a beer girl,” he assesses with a chuckle.

“It’s not bad, but it doesn’t taste good either.”

“It’s kind of an acquired taste. Do you like wine?”

“I’ve never had it.” I shrug, crossing my arms over my chest, feeling like I need to hold myself together. His eyes drop for a second before meeting mine again. “Most women like wine.”

I ignore that comment and watch him go to the fridge to pull out a bottle of wine. He goes to the drawer, pulls out a bottle opener, and starts to screw it into the top of the bottle. His arm muscles flex with every turn, and soon, there’s a pop and a hiss.

“I don’t have any wine glasses,” he says, pulling a coffee cup down. He pours a small amount into the cup, handing it to me.

I take it and put the cup to my face, giving it a sniff before placing it against my lips and tilting it back. This time after the taste hits my mouth, I smile.

“There you go. You like wine,” he declares, sounding proud.

I nod and start to wipe my mouth with the sleeve of my sweater. His hand moves towards me, his fingers curve around my jaw, and his thumb runs over my bottom lip, his eyes watching closely. He leans forward, making my stomach drop.

“Let’s eat before the food gets too cold,” he says. I nod, taking a step back trying to get myself under control. He fills the coffee cup with wine and waits for me to go outside before following me out onto the deck. I sit down on the iron chair as he sits in a plastic one across from me. I take a second to look around. The whole house is surrounded by trees, and it was built into a kind of valley. There isn’t much of a backyard. It all seems to be forest beyond the small area of grass.

“So how long have you lived here?” I take another sip of wine.

“About five years. I had plans to fix it up, but with my schedule, I’ve only had time to redo my bathroom and bedroom.”

“It’s a really nice house.” I take a bite of the chicken and moan when the taste hits my mouth. His eyes lock on me, making me squirm and lower my head.

“I like it. I really bought it for the view.” He takes a bite from his plate.

I nod. I bought my condo for the same reason. “This *is* a nice view.”

“Nothing better than coming out here at night with a cold beer and watching the sun set behind the mountain.”

“I’ll have to try that one day—minus the beer.” I lift my coffee cup.

He smiles, and for the first time, I notice a dimple in his right cheek. The sight of that dimple makes my stomach flutter.

“You should smile more,” I blurt like the moron he’s turned me into.

He smiles bigger, shaking his head while muttering, “*Cute,*” under his breath.

The rest of dinner is nice. We laugh and joke, and he tells me about his job and the people he works with. He never asks me about my work again, nor does he give me an in to talk about it.

By the time we are done eating, a chill has filled the air. Kenton goes back inside and gets me a sweater and the bottle of wine, and then he comes back out with a cigar. I drink wine while he lights his cigar, which smells sweet and has me leaning closer to him.

When he’s done smoking, I’m completely drunk for the first time in my life, and I’m laughing at everything he says.

“Come on, babe. Time to get you to bed.” He pulls me up from the chair, smiling, and I lift my fingers to trace his upturned lips.

“You’re really beautiful,” I tell him, wrapping my arms around his shoulders.

“You shouldn’t call guys beautiful, baby.”

I smile before frowning.

“My son was beautiful.” I am too drunk to notice that his body has gone solid against mine.

“Holding him was the only time I’ve ever been happy... until tonight. I was happy tonight.” I sigh, laying my head on his chest. I think I hear him mutter a curse, but my drunken state has me unsure.

“Up you go,” he says softly, putting his arm behind my knees and lifting me up.

I bury my face in the crook of his neck, enjoying his smell. I feel him laying me down, and then my shoes are being pulled off.

“Night, beautiful girl.”

“Don’t call me beautiful,” I mumble, cuddling deeper into my covers.

“Night, Autumn.”

I feel lips on my forehead and sigh, liking the way his lips feel against my skin.

I WAKE UP to the sun shining brightly through my window. I squeeze my eyes closed and put my hand to my head, which is throbbing. I can’t remember much about last night—just drinking wine and laughing a lot. Apparently, I’m not a drinker.

I keep my eyes closed as I get out of bed and stumble across the hall to the bathroom. I turn on the water and jump into the shower, letting the cool water run over me. By the time I’m done, my headache has lessened significantly. I get out and wrap a towel around myself, tucking it under my arms. I open the medicine cabinet and take a couple of pain pills before making it across the hall to get dressed.

When I’m finally downstairs, I feel almost one hundred percent. I pour myself a cup of coffee before heading to

Kenton's office. I need to get on the computer and print off the application for the hospital. Even though I got the job already, they still require me to fill it out.

My step falters slightly as I make my way down the hall. I can hear the sound of Kenton's voice. I don't mean to spy, but when I hear him talking about me, I can't help but listen.

"I would never take a stripper home to meet my mom, so your point is moot."

My throat starts to close as I walk closer. I stop in the doorway, taking Kenton in while his face is turned to look out the window. The phone's against his ear and his knuckles are turning white from the grip he has on it.

"Fuck off. She's a stripper," he growls into the phone.

A whimper I can't control climbs up my throat before I can stop it. His head turns my way, our eyes lock, and his get wide.

"Babe," he says then pulls the phone from his ear.

"Not you, fucker. I gotta go." He hangs up and looks at me. I want to run so badly, but my feet feel like they are glued to the floor.

"Babe," he repeats, looking at me with his eyes wide.

"I'm a lot more than a stripper." I raise my hand before flopping it down at my side when it looks like he's going to say something. "I'm a person with feelings. I have my own hopes and dreams. I don't know how you can judge someone so easily without knowing what they've been through."

His eyes go soft again, but this time, I don't let that stop me.

"Honestly, it makes me sad that you're so close minded, and I'm glad I now see who you really are." Tears clog my throat, forcing me to pause. His eyes have changed again, but I don't know what the look means.

"Unlike you, I gave you the benefit of the doubt. The difference is you proved me right more than once," I say softly, leaving him standing.

I go upstairs and change into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt before grabbing my bag. Then I leave. I get into the car and pound the steering wheel a couple of times when I realize I forgot to find out how much the car had cost him. I do not want to feel like he has something over me. I put the keys in the ignition, promising myself that I will look up the Kelley Blue Book value.

I do a U-turn in front of the house and just drive. I have no idea where I'm going, but there is no way I am going to sit around his house all day. I pull out my phone, thankful that I have my headphones already hooked in so I can make a call. I press Link's name as soon as I have his number pulled up on my phone.

"Hey, Angel." My stripper name makes me feel even colder for some reason when he answers.

"Hey. How are things?" I ask him.

"Good. Sid's worried about you. He wants you to call him, but like I told you before, I don't think it's wise to make any phone calls right now."

I need to call Sid, but I feel awkward phoning him for some reason.

"Can I come home?" I pull off the road when I reach a small gas station. I put my car in park, leaning my head back, trying to keep the tears at bay.

"What happened?"

"Nothing. I just want my life back," I fib

"Autumn, you know you can't. Not yet."

"Soon?" I ask on a whisper.

"Angel, I wish I could tell you the cops caught the guy or that they have a lead, but right now, they've got nothing. You're safe there.

That's a joke; I'm in more danger here than I was back home.

Why am I so upset about this?

“Did you hear me?” Link asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Sorry?”

“I asked how you and Kenton are getting along.”

“Oh, fine... You know, he goes his way and I go mine,” I answer casually.

“What are you leaving out?”

“Guess what? I got a job in Nashville at a hospital,” I say, changing the subject. I do not want to talk to Link about Kenton. They were friends long before I was in the picture.

“That’s good news, Autumn, but...” He clears his throat, and I can’t tell that he’s trying not to burst my bubble. “I know you’re a long way from here, but that doesn’t mean you’re one hundred percent safe.”

“Only you know where I am, right? So I should be okay.”

“Just be careful...and keep Kenton up-to-date about what’s going on,” he tells me.

“Will do,” I say, knowing that I won’t be doing anything like that at all.

“Call me if you need anything.”

“Okay. Talk to you later,” I say softly, hanging up the phone.

“May as well go get breakfast,” I mutter to myself, putting my car back in drive. I reach a small town after fifteen minutes, pull into the first restaurant I see, get out of my car, and head inside.

The place is small, with a total of five booths and a long counter that stretches the length of the diner, which has short barstools lining the front of it. I walk to a small booth in the back, pushing my bag across the seat before sitting down. The smell of bacon and eggs has my mouth watering.

“What can I getcha, sugar?” asks a pretty, older woman with dark- brown hair that’s in a bun at the top of her head as she pulls a pen from behind her ear.

“Coffee, pancakes, bacon, and eggs.”

Her head lifts, looking at me.

“A woman who’s not afraid to eat,” she smiles. “Be back with your coffee.”

As soon as she leaves, I take out my cell phone and pull up my Kindle app. Any time I need a break from reality, I read. There is nothing better than going on an adventure or imagining two people falling in love.

“What’s your name, sugar?” the woman asks, making me jump in my chair.

“Autumn. Thank you,” I say when she sets the cup down in front of me.

“I’m Viv. You got man problems?” she asks, sitting down across from me like it’s completely normal to sit with someone you don’t know and ask them such a personal question.

“Um...”

“Never mind. I see it in your eyes that you do.”

“I—” I start to tell her that I don’t when she cuts me off again.

“My mamma was able to see things, you know?”

“Sure,” I agree, because who am I to judge? For all I know, her mom could have a gift.

“Well, I can see things too,” she says. I watch her, wondering where she’s going with this. “The guy you like, well... He’s kinda an ass, like my old man used to be,” she tells me, leaning forward like it’s a secret between us.

“Um...”

“Well, you see, he doesn’t know what to do with what he’s feeling, so he’s an ass.” She shakes her head. “You hear what I’m sayin’?”

I have no idea what she’s saying, but she’s dead-on that Kenton is an ass, so I nod my head in agreement.

“Make him grovel. Whatever you do, you make him pay for being an asshole.”

“Got it.” I smile.

“Now, when you do forgive him”—she shocks me by grabbing my hand—“what you’re feeling right now will be worth it in the end.”

“Uh, okay,” I tell her, patting her hand.

“All right, now you just sit back and I’m going to feed you the best pancakes you’ve ever eaten in your life. Food makes everything okay.” She stands, leaving me wondering what the hell just happened.

Viv comes back a few minutes later with a plate overflowing with pancakes, bacon, and eggs. She sets the plate in front of me before taking a seat across from me again.

“So I take it you’re new around these parts?”

“I just moved here,” I tell her, my mouth watering from the smell coming from the plate.

“Did you move here to be with the ass?”

I can’t help but smile at her name for Kenton. “Um...no, and we’re not together. I mean, we have never been together.”

“Whatever—tomato, tomatoes.” She waves her hand at me, and I can’t help but smile at the way she messed up the saying.

“You got family ’round here?” she asks, sitting forward in the booth like my answer is really important.

“No.” I shake my head, taking a bite of bacon.

“Well, you need to come over and have dinner sometime. *My ass makes a mean brisket.*” She smiles, watching me take another bite. “Good, right?” she prompts.

“Very.” I nod, covering my mouth.

“You should come over next Sunday. We close the diner early that day and have a big Sunday meal with all the fixings. My daughter and my niece are a little younger than you, but I

would guess my nephew is about your age, though he doesn't always show up. I'm sure the girls would like to show you around. One sure way to get your man to mind is to find another man to show him you can have someone else if you want to," she rambles, and I can feel my eyes growing in size, so I cut her off.

"That's very nice, but—"

"No buts. Dinner's at three. We eat early. I'll give you my address. I expect to see you there," she says, standing up, and before I can come up with a good reason not to have Sunday dinner with her, her 'ass,' and their families, she disappears behind the counter and starts taking care of other customers.

I sit there for another hour, eating and reading on my phone. When Viv comes back, she gives me her address, cell phone number, and a very sweet hug. I leave the diner, get in my car, and head back to Kenton's. This time when I get there, his car is gone, and I breathe out a sigh of relief that I don't have to face him for a while.

I WAKE UP to the sound of pounding and the doorbell going off. I roll and look at the clock on my bedside table, seeing that it's after three in the morning.

"What the hell?" I mumble sitting up. My brain is still asleep as I stumble through my bedroom door and down the stairs. When I reach the front door, I look out the peephole and see a beautiful woman with dark hair and sun-kissed skin standing outside.

"I know you're in there! Open up!" she yells.

I turn off the alarm and open the door, leaving the night latch in place as I peek out the crack.

"Can I help you?"

"Can you help me?" She waves her arms around.

“Can *you* help *me*? Yes, bitch, you can help me by telling me what you’re doing in my man’s house,” she says, pushing on the door, the lock keeping her out.

“Your man?” I repeat, putting my weight against the door.

“Yes, *my* man.” She shoves the door a little harder and I’m surprised when I hear the sound of wood cracking.

“Look, if you’re Kenton’s girlfriend, then you need to call him. He’s not home,” I tell her, not liking the way my chest feels as the word ‘girlfriend’ leaves my mouth.

“I know he’s not home,” she says, pressing on the door again.

“You should call him or come see him tomorrow when he is here,” I suggest, trying to be reasonable.

“Let me inside.” She takes her shoulder and slams it into the door.

She is really crazy. What the hell?

She stumbles back and then runs at the door again like some kind of football player. This time, the door crashes open. I fall on my ass and she flies into the house, falling onto the floor.

“Are you fucking *insane*?!” I ask her, standing and feeling a bruise forming on my hip. I look at the lock on the door, seeing it swinging on the doorjamb.

“You wouldn’t let me in.” She rolls over, getting on her knees before standing up.

“That’s because Kenton’s not here, you psycho. Now get out before I call the cops.” I walk to the door, opening it wider, signaling for her to leave.

“No, I’m going to wait for Kenton.”

“You’re on crack if you think I’m letting you stay here to wait for him. Get out!” I point out the door just as lights beam through the house.

I look outside and watch Kenton pull up and park. He sees me standing in the door, and that’s when I realize that all I

have on is a T-shirt and panties—and it's not even a long shirt. His eyes slide from me to the woman in the house and then narrow.

“Cassie, what the fuck?” he growls at her, walking through the door.

“We need to talk,” she cries, taking a step towards him, only to stop when his eyes narrow further.

“You opened the door to her?” he asks, looking at me. I shake my head no, taking a step back from the look on his face. His head swings in her direction.

“You know what time it is?” he asks.

“Yes. I got home to find all my stuff outside on my front porch.”

“You came to my house and forced your way inside when I wasn't home?”

“All my stuff is ruined,” she whines on a huff.

“You okay, baby?” he asks as he turns his head my way, his eyes locking on mine. Heat boils under my skin at the endearment. I want to claw his eyes out.

“‘Baby’? Really? You call her ‘baby’? You never called *me* that!” Cassie screeches, looking at me.

“I wouldn't get too upset, honey,” I tell her softly. “I'm just a stripper and don't mean shit to Kenton.” My eyes go from her to him, and seeing his jaw ticking makes me feel better.

“Now,” I say happily, “if you two don't mind carrying on this love spat without me, I'm going to bed.”

I turn and head up the stairs, smiling when I hear Cassie yell, “Stripper?! A fucking *stripper* is living with you?”

I close my bedroom door and crawl into bed. I listen to the rumble of Kenton's voice for a few minutes, and then I hear the door close and the alarm being set. I hold my breath as I listen to feet pound up the stairs. I don't know how I know, but I can feel him standing outside my bedroom door. The hall is

silent for a few moments, and then he says my name. I ignore it, pulling the covers over my head.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

I hear a thump then the sound of feet moving away from the door, and I squeeze my eyes closed, blocking him out. No way am I buying into that again. I run my finger over the tattoo behind my ear, taking comfort in it.

It’s the only physical thing I have that connects me to my son. I wasn’t allowed pictures or any other reminders from the nine months I carried him or the few hours I spent with him after his birth. Not that I would need them—he was embedded in me, a piece of my soul that was taken from me before I was strong enough to fight for myself or him.

When I was sixteen, I met a guy. His sister used to compete in pageants against me, and he would show up at the competitions and sit in the crowd, looking annoyed about having to be there. He would growl at his mother, telling her how wrong it was what she was doing to his sister. He fascinated me. I wanted someone like him to fight for me or teach me how to fight for myself.

Not long after the first time I saw him, he found me in one of my favorite hiding spots. At first, he was rude and distant, only recognizing me as another snotty pageant girl, but then I told him that I hated it. I explained that I didn’t have a choice and what would happen if I didn’t perform.

After that, we met often. I trusted him. He told me what I wanted to hear—we could be together, he had an apartment, and he would save me from the life I was living. For a girl who was broken and didn’t know any better, he was perfect. It didn’t take long for me to fall in love with him and give him the piece of myself that was the only real thing I had to give another person. I thought he loved me too; I thought he was willing to fight for me. He used my weakness to get what he wanted. In the end, I learned a hard lesson. Not only did he not care about me, but when I ended up pregnant, he turned his back on me, allowing my mother to send me to a home for young girls to give birth to my son before being forced to give

him away. I pull my pillow over my face and cry into the soft material as images of my son flash through my head. I think I memorized everything about him during those few short hours. He was so tiny, weighing only six pounds. His small head was covered in dark hair and his eyes were bluish grey. I remember praying that I would be able to see them one day to know what color they turned out to be.

He had a birthmark on his right thigh. I looked at the small area of discolored skin for a long time while I held him. The shape was unique, just like him. Not long after moving to Vegas, I was walking down the street and looked into a tattoo shop window. I hadn't wanted a tattoo until one of the posters on the wall caught my eye and I saw my son's birthmark. I went inside to find out what it was.

The old guy behind the counter got on his computer and looked it up for me. He told me that the symbol was an Ankh, the origin was Egyptian, and it represented eternal life or the giving of life. I couldn't believe that his birthmark had that kind of meaning behind it.

I knew that my son was the one who'd actually given *me* life; he'd made me fight harder to get out of my mother's grasp. I had hated her before he'd come along, but after she forced me to give him away, I knew the kind of evil she really was and fought until I was finally free.

I MUST HAVE fallen asleep again, but when I wake up, I feel like I have only been asleep for an hour. The sound of the doorbell going off again registers, and I wait to see if I hear Kenton answer it. The house sounds quiet, and I hope the person at the door leaves. When the bell rings again, I let out a frustrated huff.

“Seriously?!” I yell as the pounding starts. I climb out of bed, stumble out of my room, run down the stairs, and swing the door open without thinking. The alarm starts going off and I run to the keypad, typing in the code quickly before turning and going back to the door.

“Can I help you?” I ask a guy who looks no older than twenty-one. He’s tall and lean with tousled, blond hair. He looks like he just came from the beach.

“Holy shit.” He looks me over from head to toe, and I groan when I realize I once again forgot to put on pants.

“Shit. Please tell me the carpet matches the drapes,” he mumbles.

I’m not sure if it’s the lack of sleep or the promise I made myself the last time those words were said, but I walk towards him slowly, swaying my hips, my hands going up to his shoulders. His eyes go wide when I touch him, and then I bring my knee up, connecting with his nuts.

He groans, his knees hitting the floor with a loud thud.

“What was that for?” he asks me in a breathy, high-pitched voice, holding his junk.

“That was for asking an inappropriate question. Weren’t you raised better than that?”

“What the fuck is going on?”

I turn at the sound of Kenton’s words. He’s standing on the stairs, wearing nothing but a towel. His eyes come to me then lower down my body. I make a mental note that, from now on, I will wear pants at all times. When his eyes stop on my hip, where I have a nice-size bruise from last night’s run-in with the lunatic, they narrow.

“How did you get that?” He looks at the guy on the floor then back at me. His jaw goes hard, and I put my hands up in front of me.

“That’s from your girlfriend last night.”

“He doesn’t have a girlfriend,” the guy I kneed says, whimpering as he stands.

“Why’d you knee Justin in the nuts?” he asks, walking the rest of the way down the stairs.

I try to take my eyes off him, but they feel glued. His wet hair is dripping onto his body. His abdominal muscles flex

with each step. The deep V of his hips disappears beneath the small towel that is also showing off his well-endowed package. He walks past me and goes to the couch in the next room, coming back with a blanket in his hand. I don't even have a chance to think as he wraps the blanket around my waist. I slap his hands away from me, taking a step back to glare at him.

"Oh shit. I'm in love," the guy named Justin declares, smiling at me.

"Why are you here, Justin? I told you I would be at the office late," Kenton growls, taking a step in my direction. I take another step away from him.

"I know, but I needed to talk to you and it couldn't wait."

"You should have called," he scolds.

"I did. You didn't answer."

"Fuck me." Kenton looks at me like he wants to say something, but I shake my head no and take another step towards the stairs.

"You're leaving already?" Justin asks, looking at me with a big, cheesy smile on his face. "We're basically past second base. You touched my junk. It's only fair I get to touch yours."

I can't help but smile at the guy. I see it now. He's not pervy, just strange and kinda cute in a brotherly kind of way.

"Sorry. No, I need my beauty sleep, and I work tonight." I shrug, smirking.

"You don't need sleep, my love. You're ahead—"

Kenton smacks him in the back of his head before he can finish, and I can't help but smile at him again.

"Nice to meet you, Justin," I tell him, really meaning it. "You too, Copper." He grins back.

"You know you're still not safe, Autumn. I don't think it's a good idea for you to be working," Kenton says. I look at him, my eyes narrow, and I growl.

“I’m safe and going to work, *ass*, so get over it.” His jaw starts to tick a little faster and his hands ball into fists.

“Tell me the name of the place so I can check on you.”

“I don’t need you to check on me.”

“Tell me or I’ll have Justin do a run on you and I’ll know everything about you down to your last fucking period,” he growls, taking a step towards me.

“Ass!” I yell, glaring at him.

“Tell me,” he roars, leaning forward, and I can feel the anger rolling off him.

“Vanderbilt,” I say, but I pronounce it ‘Vander’s Belt,’ hoping he doesn’t catch on that it’s the hospital. I don’t know why I don’t want him to know what I’m really doing. I almost feel like he hasn’t earned the right to know.

“We need to talk,” he says, his tone softer, but the growl is still there.

“We don’t,” I assure him, pulling off the blanket and tossing it at him as I walk up the stairs. I hear Justin laugh and Kenton growl something about spankings under his breath before I close the door to my bedroom, smiling.

ONE TEQUILA, TWO TEQUILA... FLOOR

“SO WHY THE hell did you want to move to Tennessee?” Tara asks. I’ve been working at the hospital for about two weeks now, and I’ve been Tara’s shadow since the day I started in the ER. Tennessee is nothing like Vegas. Not only are the people different, but the ER here is much calmer. I look at Tara and smile when she raises an eyebrow at me. One thing I learned quickly is that people here have no problem getting in your business or asking personal questions.

“I just needed a change.” I shrug, putting away another patient folder.

“I can understand that. I need a change, like a nice sandy beach and a hot guy to wait on me hand and foot.” She smiles, her head tilting back like she’s imagining herself on a beach right now.

“Autumn, Tara,” a deep voice says. Tara and I look up and smile at the same time.

“How are you ladies this evening?” Dr. D, or Derik, asks. He’s a very, very attractive black man; sadly, he is also very, very gay and has an even hotter boyfriend.

“Good,” Tara and I say in unison. We laugh, pointing at each other and calling out, “Jinx!”

I’ve found myself laughing a lot more often since I started working here. In general, I find myself a lot happier period. All of my coworkers are very nice and easy to get along with. So far, I haven’t met anyone who is petty or mean.

The one thing that hasn't changed is my relationship with Kenton. I can't get over the amount of anger I feel towards him. Maybe it's stupid and immature on my part, but he hurt my feelings when he said all that to whomever he was talking to on the phone. Worse, I'd thought he'd been starting to like me.

"What are you girls doing this weekend?"

"I need to sleep," I say, closing my eyes for a second. "My body hasn't adjusted to this schedule yet. I swear, if it weren't for coffee, I would be lying facedown on this desk right now." Plus, if I slept, I could continue to avoid Kenton.

He's left me a note daily and somehow got my cell number, so he's started texting me. He never says much. Mostly, he asks how I am, if I need anything, and if I am settling in at my job. I never answer him. I can tell that he is becoming frustrated. I have no idea how to face him, so I do the easiest thing and avoid him like the plague.

"Sleep is overrated. You two should come out with me and Stan this weekend. There's a club that just opened up downtown. We could go out, have a couple drinks, and dance. Wouldn't that be fun?" Derik asks.

I look at Tara, who nods her head, and I quickly agree. I need to start acting my age. I should be having fun and going out, and now that I have a few people I trust, I have a reason to do that.

"Sure, but I won't be staying out late. I have dinner plans with a friend on Sunday in the early afternoon," I tell them. I've had dinner with Viv and her family the last two Sundays, and now, she expects me to be there. Her daughter is really sweet. Plus, her niece is supposed to be coming this weekend and Viv really wants me to meet her.

"That's fine. Two drinks tops." Derik smiles and the desk phone rings.

Tara picks it up and stands suddenly.

"Got it," she says, looking at Derik.

“When?” she asks and listens for a few more seconds before hanging up the phone. She leaves from behind the desk and I follow her.

“The ambulance is in route. Male, thirty-four, gunshot wound to the right shoulder. He’s conscious and may need a transfusion. We need to get everything set up. The ambulance is five minutes out,” Tara says, and all three of us run down the hall to prepare the trauma bay before the patient arrives. The ambulance pulls in and what I least expect happens. The guy is conscious, laughing, and joking with the EMTs like this is a routine occurrence for him. He hasn’t lost enough blood to need a transfusion, and it doesn’t appear that the bullet hit any arteries; it was a clean in- and-out shot. All he’ll require is a few stitches and an overnight stay in the hospital.

“Are you sure you two don’t want to give me a sponge bath?” Finn, our bullet wound patient asks.

I laugh, shaking my head at him, but Tara doesn’t seem so sure about turning him down. His tall, lean body, boy-next-door good looks, and easy smile definitely make him swoon-worthy.

“Not tonight, handsome,” Tara tells him, batting her lashes.

His hand goes over his heart as he flops back down in the bed and winces, “You wound me, Blondie.”

“I’m sure your ego will be okay.” She smiles.

Tara is really beautiful. She has that whole Southern belle look going for her—long, blond hair, big, blue eyes, and a cute personality. Actually, looking between the two of them, I see Ken and Barbie.

“You need to be careful with that shoulder,” I scold Finn as he winces again when he sits up.

“I could go home with you and you could look after me.” He grins, making me roll my eyes.

“Sorry, but I promised my roommate I wouldn’t take my work home with me.” I start laughing, thinking about Kenton

and what he would do if I showed up with a guy who had a gunshot wound.

“Your roommate sucks,” Finn mutters.

“Tell me about it,” I reply with a smile.

A second later, my body goes solid when the voice behind me hits my ears.

“What the fuck is going on, Autumn?”

I close my eyes slowly, hoping that I’m wrong. When I turn my head, four large guys are standing near the door and none other than Kenton is standing in the middle of them.

“Autumn?” one of the guys says. My eyes go to him and he smiles

“Shit, boss. This is the Autumn who works at ‘Vander’s Belt’?” He laughs loudly, his eyes going back and forth between Kenton and me.

My eyes shift back to Kenton, seeing his jaw tick.

“Um...” I mumble, taking a step back.

“Vanderbilt,” Kenton pronounces, his voice a low rumble. The anger in the one spoken word rolls against my skin, creating goose bumps.

“Do not fucking move,” he demands when I start to take another step back.

My body freezes in place as I watch him move towards me, his eyes locked on mine. I feel stuck in place under his glare.

When he’s within touching distance, his hand wraps around my bicep and his mouth comes to my ear.

“No more fucking ignoring me,” he growls.

If the wetness in my panties is anything to go by, I like his aggression. I look at Dr. D, who is looking at Kenton with his mouth hanging open, and when his eyes come to mine, he bites his lip. Apparently, he is not going to be any help.

Kenton drags me out of the room and down the hall. He stops at the first door we pass, and his hand that's not holding me goes to the handle. Finding it unlocked, he leans into the room before tugging me in with him.

"What are you doing?" I ask when I get over the shock of seeing him here.

"You said you worked at a fucking strip club," he says, letting me go.

"I never said that." I shake my head, crossing my arms over my chest, watching him pace back and forth in front of me like a caged beast.

"You're a nurse?" He stops across the room, watching me. His eyes travel from the top of my head to my sneaker-covered feet.

"I am, but it changes nothing," I hiss, leaning forward.

He storms towards me and I retreat until my back hits the wall. Before I can register the move, his mouth is on mine, his hand twists in the hair at the back of my head, and I gasp. He takes the opportunity to lick into my mouth. I try to fight him; I try to pull my mouth away, but his grip on my hair tightens. When he bites my tongue, I lose it.

I kiss him back, and all the anger I feel towards him goes into that kiss. I bite his lips, bottom then top, and claw my nails through his hair. He growls down my throat, his big body pressing me harder into the wall. We each fight for dominance, but he wins, pinning me in place, his body overtaking mine.

When he pulls his mouth from mine we're breathing heavily, both still holding each other close. I can feel every hard inch of him pressed to every soft inch of me. He places his forehead to mine and it takes a few seconds to come back to myself. My eyes open, meeting his.

"This changes nothing," I tell him quietly, my lips still tingling from his kiss.

"You're right." He takes a breath, his lips moving closer to mine. "*You* fucking changed everything."

“Back up.” I push against his chest only to have him press harder into me.

“You don’t get to push me away. You don’t get to lie to me, even if it’s by omission.”

“I never lied to you,” I mumble, looking away from him.

“‘Vander’s Belt’—that’s not a fucking lie?” His hand comes up to my cheek, forcing my eyes back to him.

Okay, so I might have fibbed, but it wasn’t a lie.

“You’re an asshole,” I tell him, still pushing against his chest.

“Call me what you want, but I know you feel this thing between us too. Don’t fucking lie to yourself.”

“The only thing I feel towards you is anger,” I growl.

Then his mouth comes back down on mine, stealing my breath. This kiss is more punishing than the previous one; and I whimper when he pulls away. My hands, which were trying to push him away, are now wrapped into his T-shirt.

His mouth goes to my ear.

“If I stuck my hand between your legs, your pussy would be wet and wanting.” I squeeze my eyes closed, trying to get rid of that image. My eyes fly open when his hand cups me over the thin material of my scrubs.

“So hot.” His fingers press harder, and I stand on my tiptoes, trying to get away from what he’s making me feel. Part of me wants to jump up, wrap my legs around his hips, and grind myself into him. The other part of me wants to kick him in the nuts and scream in his face for having the power he has.

Kenton

I LOOK DOWN into her big, blue eyes and groan. Fuck me. She is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever looked at. She’s perfect, and I don’t just mean on the outside; I mean on the

inside too. She's sweet in a way that is hard to believe, especially coming from her lifestyle.

I tried to keep my distance after I picked her up at the airport and got reminded of what she did for a living, but when she was around, I couldn't help but want to soak up a little bit of her time. She's not what I expected. She's not what I wanted, but fuck me if she's not what I need.

From the moment I saw her, I wanted her. I walked into the airport knowing that she wasn't expecting me. I'd messaged Link earlier in the day telling him to let her know I wouldn't be picking her up. I'd had a lead on a case and thought I wouldn't make it in time, and I didn't want her waiting for me.

When I spotted her long, red hair in the crowd, I watched her run for one of her bags. I couldn't help but laugh when she fell forward and landed on the belt before being dragged with it. She didn't give up though. She pulled it off the conveyor belt over her head, falling backwards with the weight of it. She was cute.

When we got into the car and I sat down next to her, the doors closed and her smell suffocated me. Her long ass legs in her shorts made it hard to concentrate on the road, and then I asked her about how she knew Link. I may get around, but I didn't like the idea of her being with someone who was a friend for some reason, and then she reminded me that she worked at a strip club, throwing all ideas of getting to know her out the window.

I look over her face again and shake my head. I have fucked up with her in ways that even thinking about them makes me sick. I don't have an issue with strippers in general, but I know what happens at strip clubs. I do understand that not all women are the same and there are dancers who work in clubs to make money and nothing more, but I also know that there are some who go home with men at the end of the night or are willing to go a little further in order to make a little extra cash.

"Step back," she says, and I shake my head, pressing deeper into her.

She smells like flowers or something sweet. I have wanted to be this close to her for a long time. Now that I've got her where I want her, I'm not backing off.

"Why are you doing this?" she asks softly, squeezing her eyes closed.

"I want you. I want to get to know you."

"No," she breathes, shaking her head.

"Yes." I press her harder into the wall.

"The things I know about you, I don't like."

I know she's just being honest, but it doesn't mean that it makes my chest ache any less. I don't know her well, but the parts of her she has let me see have been sweet, feisty, and so fucking cute that I have had to stop myself from kissing her when she laughs or does something that makes me smile.

The look in her eyes when she walked into my office when I was talking to Nico on the phone still haunts me. I know that my cousin was trying to make me see that I was interested in her, but I didn't need his help with that. I knew I wanted her; I just didn't know how I could deal with my jealousy. The thought of men looking at her or touching her makes me feel homicidal.

When she spoke, her words tore me open. I knew that, regardless of my own fears, I needed to find a way to deal with it or I'd lose her before I ever even got to have her. Then I went to Nico's house and saw him with Sophie and how close they had gotten. The way she looked at him like he had the power to turn on the sun had me feeling jealous. I wanted that for myself.

Nico was right in telling me to get my head out of my ass. He told me that if I wanted something, I had to take it; I couldn't ever let anyone or anything hold me back. I want Autumn more than I've wanted anything before. I wanted her even before I knew she was a nurse. I would be proud to take her home to meet my family. My parents and sister would love her.

"Give me a chance."

“I can’t. You’ve already said so many cruel things to me. I can’t willingly open myself up for more of that from you.”

“You know the night I made you dinner, when you told me it was the first time you had been happy in a long time? You weren’t the only one who felt that,” I gently confess to her.

“I was drunk. Isn’t everyone happy when they’re drunk?” I laugh and her eyes meet mine.

“Don’t lie to yourself.”

“I’m not. You’re lying to yourself. I’m a stripper, remember? I may not be one now, but I was. I can’t change that.” She shakes her head, causing her hair to slide against my skin.

How many nights have I lay in bed thinking about her hair spread out around her while she sleeps or hanging over me as she rides me to completion?

“I shouldn’t have said what I said. I should’ve been man enough to admit what I was feeling for you. I said some fucked up shit in order to cover up how I really felt.”

“I don’t know,” she says, confusion lacing her voice.

“We’ll take it slow. I just need you to stop avoiding me. I need to be able to talk to you, to see your face,” I practically beg, pushing her hair out of her face.

“Friends?” she suggests with a tilt of her head.

“More than friends, baby, but we can start out as friends.” I lift her chin to look into her eyes.

Autumn

OUR EYES MEET and I shake my head. Friends? Can I be friends with him? Probably...and it would *probably* be the stupidest thing I’ve ever done.

His hand runs along the underside of my jaw, his thumb touching my bottom lip.

“I don’t know,” I repeat, closing my eyes.

“Why?” I don’t know if I’m asking him or myself, but I just don’t know why I feel this pull towards him.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” he asks, leaning into me. Heartbreak is the first thing that comes to mind.

“Autumn?” I jump at the sound of Derik’s voice and lean around Kenton’s wide frame so I can see the door. My eyes meet Derik’s, and then his go to Kenton before settling back on me.

“Sorry, but I gotta go and can’t leave Tara on the floor alone,” Derik says.

“I’m coming right now,” I tell him, trying to duck away from Kenton, whose hold on my hip tightens.

“I’ll see you Saturday night,” Derik says, closing the door.

“What’s Saturday night?” Kenton asks, and I feel his fingers dig into my skin.

“We’re going out,” I tell him, trying to step away again.

“A date?” The word ‘date’ spits out of his mouth like it tastes bad.

“We’re going to a club or something.” I shrug, attempting to move again.

“What club?”

“I have to work. I don’t have time to play Twenty Questions with you right now,” I state, finally wiggling out of his embrace.

“You’ll have dinner with me on Sunday,” he says rather than asks.

“I have plans.”

“With who?” he growls, his jaw grinding.

“Viv,” I tell him exasperatedly.

“Viv?” He raises an eyebrow at me.

“Yes, Viv. Now I really need to go.” I put my hand on the doorknob to open it.

“Don’t think we’re done talking,” he says close to my ear, startling me. I look over my shoulder and our eyes meet. I nervously lick my bottom lip and his eyes drop to my mouth. He leans in, and I’m frozen in place. His mouth softly brushes mine and he leans back, looking at me again.

“See you at home, baby,” he whispers, making it sound almost like a threat. He smiles, showing off the small dimple that fascinates me.

I inhale a deep breath and nod. My insides are going crazy, my heart beating double-time.

I walk down the hall towards the nurses’ station, trying to ignore the fact I can hear his boots behind me. I spot Tara, and her eyes go big when she looks over my shoulder. When they come back to me, she smiles an odd smile and I shake my head in a slight move, letting her know to hush.

As soon as I make it to the desk, a bell goes off and I practically yell that I’ll go check on the patient. Tara doesn’t say anything. She just nods, and I make my way quickly down the hall to the patient’s room. I take my time in the room, making sure everything’s taken care of before going back to the nurses’ station. I walk around the corner and see that the area’s empty except for Tara. I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding.

“Who the hell is Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome, and where the hell did he take you?” Tara asks as soon as I take a seat. I try to think of a way I can avoid answering that question before looking at her. “Please tell me you are sleeping with him regularly.”

“Oh God.” I cover my face with my hands.

“What? Oh no... Please tell me he isn’t one of those guys who look all hot and yummy, but then you get to the package and get a surprise...and it’s *not* a good one.” She sits back in her chair, shaking her head in disappointment.

“He’s just a guy who’s been letting me stay with him,” I tell her, hoping she’ll drop it.

“So, you’re not together?” Her eyebrows come together in confusion. “I would’ve sworn he was your man with the show he put on earlier.”

“Nope.” I shake my head frantically.

“Sooo...you live together, but you’re not together?”

“Yes.”

“How the hell can you live with someone who looks like that and not jump their bones?” she asks, dumbfounded.

“He’s an ass. Trust me—it’s not as hard as you think it is.”

“I can see that.” She nods in understanding, her eyes searching my face. “You know he wants you, right?”

“No, he doesn’t.”

“Oh hell yeah, he does. You should have seen the way he was looking at you and then the way he was watching your ass when you guys were walking down the hall. He wants you, girl, and he doesn’t look like he is the kind of guy you can put off for very long. Not only that, but why in the world would you want to put him off in the first place? If I were you, I would be waiting for him naked on my hands and knees when he got home and walked through the front door.”

“Can we not talk about this?” I ask pleadingly. The images that are now in my head of Kenton and me have started a small throbbing in my core.

“Are we still going out Saturday?” she asks, reading my face.

“Yes,” I respond immediately.

“Good. I need to get out.”

“Me too,” I say softly before getting back to work. The rest of the night I spend quietly trying to think of a way to avoid going home.

“OH MY GOD, you have to try this,” Tara says, shoving a drink in my face.

We got to the club about ten minutes ago, and after making it inside, we fought our way to the bar for a drink and to wait for Derik and his boyfriend to show up.

“What is it?” I ask, leaning away from her before taking the drink from her hand.

“An All-American Root Beer. It’s so good. You can’t even taste the Jack,” she promises.

I put the straw to my lips before taking a small sip. She’s right; it’s sweet and I can’t taste any kind of alcohol.

“It’s really good!” I shout close to her ear.

She takes the drink back from me, lifting it up to the bartender while holding up two fingers. He nods in understanding as Tara sits back down next to me.

“So, how have you and Mr. Hot Guy been?”

I bite my lip and think about that question. How are Kenton and me? Well, I’m still trying to avoid him, and he seems more determined than before to *not* let me avoid him. Before, he would leave me notes or texts, but now, I have to deal with him face to face.

Like last night. I went downstairs to get something to eat, and when I walked into the kitchen, he was there. I couldn’t exactly leave without making it obvious that I was dodging him, so I went about making myself a sandwich. The only problem was that, every time I turned around, his body would rub against me or his mouth would come close to my ear when he spoke. No matter what I did, he was there in my space. By the time I left the kitchen, I was a huge mess and had to take another shower. I still can’t figure out why he affects me the way he does.

“Earth to Autumn.” Tara snaps her fingers in front of my face

“Sorry,” I apologize, shaking the thoughts away.

“So are you going to answer me?”

“We’re fine.”

“Just fine?” She raises an eyebrow.

“I don’t know, honestly,” I tell her with a shrug as the bartender puts two drinks in front of us. I slide my money across the bar before Tara has a chance to pay for them.

“Well, he looked pissed tonight when I picked you up.”

I take a drink and smile around my straw. He was pissed. I had spent most of the day in bed. Then I’d gone down to the kitchen around five and made a frozen pizza. Kenton wasn’t around, so I went back upstairs after eating. I read for a while then sent an e-mail to Sid, who I couldn’t bring myself to call. Around eight, I started getting ready to go out, knowing that Tara would be there to pick me up at nine thirty.

When I walked out of my room a little after nine, Kenton was at the top of the stairs, his foot on the top landing. His head turned, our eyes locked, and my body started to vibrate from the look in his eyes. I wouldn’t even call it hunger; it was more than that. His eyes took me in and his jaw started ticking.

I knew what he saw; I had on a black, strapless dress that formed to my body like a second skin. Black pumps wrapped around my ankles, lifting me up on four-inch spiked heels. My hair was up on top of my head with little pieces out framing my face. I had on minimal makeup but dark red lipstick.

“H—” I started to greet him when he looked up at me again, but he opened the door to his room and slammed it closed behind him. I stood there for a second, and then I flipped off his closed door and made my way downstairs. When Tara arrived at the house ten minutes later, Kenton came barreling downstairs like a caveman.

Before I could get out the door and close it behind me, he pulled me inside by my hand, shut the door, and then kissed

me. It was not a sweet kiss; it was rough, aggressive, and it left me panting. When his mouth left mine, his eyes were heated and still glued to my lips.

“It didn’t come off,” he mumbled. I had no clue what he was talking about as his thumb swiped my bottom lip.

“*Fuck!*” His eyes came to mine, and I was frozen in place; all I could do was stare at him. “Why won’t your goddamn lipstick come off?”

“It’s smudge-proof,” I whispered, shaking my head out of my daze. I took a step back, and his eyes narrowed.

“I don’t like it,” he growled.

“What?”

“Your hair, those heels, and that mouth.” He shook his head then ran a hand through his already messy hair. “I don’t like it.”

My eyes narrowed and I opened the door.

“Too fucking bad,” I snapped over my shoulder as I went down the porch steps. I opened the door to Tara’s car, getting in quickly and slamming it closed only to look up as he roared loud as fuck as I put on my seatbelt.

“So, what did you do to piss him off?” Tara asks, bringing me out of my thoughts once again.

“I have no clue. That man is confusing. One minute, he’s kissing me, and the next, he’s complaining about my lipstick.”

“What’s wrong with your lipstick?” Derik asks, joining us at the bar

“No clue,” I repeat, giving him and Stan a hug.

“Good, ’cause you look hot and your lipstick is hotter,” Stan says, leaning across the bar to call the bartender over. I give him a small smile before going back to my drink.

“So how’s Mr. Rough and Rugged?” Derik asks, taking the beer Stan is handing him.

“Who?” I ask.

“You know, the guy from the emergency room,” he clarifies.

“That’s who doesn’t like her lipstick,” Tara adds out of nowhere.

“I’m sure he doesn’t,” Stan says with a knowing smile.

“What’s wrong with my lipstick?” I run my fingers over my lips, wishing now that I hadn’t worn it.

“Girl, you are not stupid. I don’t have a penis, but even I know that, when a man sees a woman who looks like you wearing red lipstick that makes her lips look even fuller, all he can think about is shoving something between them.”

“You did not just say that.” I frown at her.

“It’s the truth, girly,” Derik says. Images of some of the women I have seen in Vegas, the ones who sell themselves, flash through my head, all of them with their bright red lips and bedroom eyes.

“I need to go to the bathroom.” I stand and don’t even wait for Tara when she calls for me. I run into the bathroom and frantically wipe at my lips, trying to get the color off.

“Autumn, stop it. What are you doing?”

Tears spring to my eyes and I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to fight them off. I wipe my mouth again and again, but the color won’t come off no matter what I do. *Stupid smudge-proof lipstick!*

“Autumn, please stop,” Tara says more quietly this time, her hands going to mine at my lips.

“I just want it off.”

“You know men will think the same thing whether you’re wearing lipstick or not. Some guys are assholes. You’re beautiful and sweet. Please don’t let something as stupid as lipstick fuck with our night out.”

I take a second and let her words sink in, and I let out a long breath.

“Thank you,” I tell her, pulling the tissue away from my mouth.

“We’re friends, and that’s what friends do.”

It feels good to be friends with a woman, someone who knows what I’m going through, someone I can talk to about the stupid things like I’ve seen women on TV talk to each other about.

“Now, are you ready to finish our drinks?” she asks, making me smile.

“Yes,” I say immediately. I look in the mirror, quickly making sure I look okay before following her out of the bathroom.

When we reach the bar, Derik and Stan have disappeared.

“Do you see them anywhere?” Tara asks, stretching to try to see over the crowd on the dance floor.

“No.” I look around, but there are so many people here that I can’t even move without bumping into someone.

“Oh wait, I think I see them.” I grab Tara’s hand and start to lead her through the crowd to where I think I spotted Stan and Derik.

I look back over my shoulder when she stops dead in her tracks, causing me to teeter in my heels. I start to ask her what’s wrong, when she yells at the top of her lungs,

“I love this fucking song!” I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing at her. The song is ‘Sexy and I Know It,’ and as much as people like the song, I really doubt anyone actually *loves* it.

When she starts dancing, I can’t hold it in and start to laugh. Her long, blond hair is flying all over. Her face is a mask of concentration and her hands almost look like she’s doing the hand jive.

“Dance with me!” She throws her hands in the air and spins around, closing her eyes.

I look around, seeing that everyone around me is dancing; no one is even watching what Tara's doing. I start to move my hips a little, but apparently that's not enough for Tara, who grabs both of my hands and starts spinning me around with her.

"Tara, stop!" I yell as we fly around in circles. My feet are barely keeping me upright.

"Stop being a party pooper and dance, bitch!" she yells back at me. Without warning, she lets my hands go and starts wiggling all over the place.

I laugh but join her wiggling, and then I bump my hip with hers when the song changes to Ke\$ha's 'Your Love is My Drug.' We start jumping around, throwing our hands in the air, and spinning in circles.

I'm laughing so hard and having so much fun that I don't even realize that I'm in the middle of a giant crowd of people and they've all stopped to watch us. When the song ends, we both stop immediately and look around.

"Rock on!" Tara yells, making me lower my head and whisper a quiet, "*Oh my God,*" to myself.

"You only live once. Fuck it," Tara says, shrugging before grabbing my hand and pulling me with her to the bar.

"Hey, there's Derik." I point to the other side of the bar, where Derik and Stan are sitting, both of them with large smiles on their faces.

"You two looked—"

"Crazy, I know," I cut him off, taking the bottle of water from his hand and drinking it in large gulps.

"I was gonna say *hot*, girl," Derik corrects with a laugh.

"Happiness is a good look on you, kid," he tells me, pulling me into his side.

I take a breath, realizing that I *am* happy—really fricking happy.

“You want another drink?” Tara asks, calling the bartender over.

“I don’t know.” I look around at all the people who are having a good time and then out on the dance floor at all the people still dancing and laughing. *Screw it. I want to live a little.* “What are we drinking?”

“How about tequila?”

“Never had it.” I shrug, watching as the bartender makes his way towards us.

“Seriously?” Tara asks, looking at me with wide eyes.

“Seriously,” I repeat.

“Okay, you have to have a shot.”

“Why?”

“You are not an adult until you’ve had tequila,” she tells me, her voice all serious.

“Is this a rule?” I ask with a smile as she gives the bartender our order.

“One of many.” She looks at me and smiles. “Body shots are another, but we’ll get to that another time.”

“I’m never doing body shots.” I roll my eyes at her.

“A couple shots of tequila and you will do a whole lot you never thought you would.” She hands me a little glass of clear liquid and a wedge of lime.

“Lick your hand,” she instructs. I do, and she picks up a saltshaker, dumping some onto my hand.

“Lick it, shoot it, suck it.” She nods, and I shake my head but follow her directions.

The salt is grainy on my tongue as I close my eyes and shoot back the tequila. The cool liquid burns down my throat, making me gasp for air. My hand is suddenly shoved towards my face and I cram the whole piece of lime in my mouth, pressing it up against the roof of my mouth, and then I chew on it to try to get rid of some of the heat.

I open my eyes when I hear laughing, and I pull the lime out of my mouth and look around.

“What’s wrong?”

“You’re not supposed to eat the whole lime.” Tara laughs and Stan shakes his head, smiling. “Watch me, and then you’re going to do it again.”

“Okay.” I watch as she does exactly what I did, but in the end, she just puts the fleshy part of the lime into her mouth.

“Voila,” she says, taking a bow. “Now, it’s your turn.”

“Okay, but this is the last one,” I tell her, taking the salt from her hand while she gets the tequila from the bartender. I do the shot just like she did, the burn filling my chest as I shove the lime between my lips.

“Holy cow,” I breathe out.

“Now, let’s dance!” she shouts, and before I can tell her yes or no, she’s dragging me out onto the dance floor.

“OH GOD, KILL me now,” I moan, covering my face. My head feels like it’s going to explode, my stomach feels like a million bubbles have taken up home in it, and my body feels like it’s been run over by a sixteen-wheeler.

“Go back to sleep,” a male voice that sounds like Kenton’s says and my body goes rigid.

Praying I’m wrong, I peek out from between my fingers. Nope, not wrong. *What the hell happened last night?*

“What are you doing here?” I ask, not sure I want to know, seeing how I’m wearing nothing but a sheet, his body is naked at least from the waist up, and his arm is draped across my stomach, his frame plastered to the length of mine.

“Sleep.” He squeezes my waist and my stomach slightly contracts. I try to remember last night, but my brain is coming

up with nothing. My whole night is blank after my second shot of tequila.

“Stop thinking and sleep.”

“I have to get up,” I tell him, trying to lift his giant arm. My body feels so weak that I stop trying after a couple of seconds.

“You were up all night. You just went to bed two hours ago. You need to sleep. I need to sleep, so stop moving around.”

My eyes widen when I realize that his very evident erection is pressed up against my leg.

“I can’t remember anything,” I tell him, covering my face.

“Seeing how you drank a shit-ton of tequila last night, that’s not surprising,” he mumbles sleepily.

“Please don’t say that word.” I shake my head. Just the thought of that drink alone has my body ready to revolt. “How did I get home?”

“I’ll tell you every embarrassing detail from the time you texted me until now when we wake up later.”

“Oh God, I texted you?” I groan.

“You did. Now, go to sleep.”

“I feel sick.”

“You have nothing left if your stomach,” he says on a sigh.

“What do you mean?”

“You were sick all night.”

“This just keeps getting better and better,” I whisper.

“Sleep, babe,” he says quietly as I feel his lips against the bare skin of my shoulder; the touch has my pulse picking up.

“Why am I naked?” I ask, concentrating on the feeling between my legs. I sigh in relief when I don’t feel any tenderness or anything that would lead me to believe I did anything stupider than drink too much and send drunken texts.

“You were sick and I put you in the shower last night. I tried to give you a shirt, but you wouldn’t take it.”

“Oh,” I say, squeezing my eyes closed.

“Don’t worry. I didn’t see anything. *Much*,” he says quietly, and I can hear a smile in his voice.

“I’m never drinking again.”

“Why?” he asks, sounding surprised. “You had a good time. You just don’t know your limit. I will be having a talk with Tara. No way should she have given you shots of tequila on your first night out drinking.”

“You are not talking with Tara.” I shake my head, imagining him talking to her. I can see it now—it would be a lot of yelling and none of it nice.

“We’ll talk about it later. Right now, we’re going to sleep, and then later, we’re going to my Aunt Viv’s house for dinner.”

“Your aunt?” I shake my head in disbelief.

“Yep, my aunt.”

“How in the hell does this stuff happen to me?” I question as my stomach gurgles loudly.

“You’ll be okay. You had some Tums a little while ago.” He squeezes my side, and I’m pretty sure my life is like a really bad Lifetime movie.

“You can go to your room,” I tell him after a few minutes.

“No, I’m comfortable.”

“I’m not,” I whine.

“Go to sleep, Autumn.”

“I can’t.”

“You can.” He squeezes me again. “Close your eyes and go to sleep or I will give you something that will put you to sleep.”

“You didn’t just say that.”

“Sleep,” he growls.

“Can you at least move your arm so I can move?” I pull the sheet up higher on my chest, lifting my head slightly to see if I can spot a shirt anywhere near me.

“Jesus, you’re a pain in my ass.” He flings his arm behind him and pulls a piece of fabric from behind his back.

“Why do you have this?” I ask when I see that it’s a shirt.

“I just told you. I tried to put it on you last night, but you refused.”

“Oh,” I whisper, slipping the shirt on over my head and then shimmying it down under the sheet.

“Now, lay your ass down and go to sleep.” He tugs me back onto the bed, not giving me a choice. I turn my back to him and try to scoot away, but it feels like it takes all of my energy to move an inch. I close my eyes as he pulls me into him. My ass curves into his hips, his arm wraps around my waist, and his bicep slides under my head like a pillow. I try not to think about how it makes me feel to be so close to him. I try to tell myself that I don’t feel incredibly safe and comfortable. Before I can convince myself that I hate how I feel, I fall asleep.

I WAKE UP slowly and take notice that I don’t feel the warmth of Kenton behind me, and I open my eyes, wondering if I dreamt the whole thing. I lift my head slightly and look at the clock.

“Shit,” I whisper, seeing that it’s eleven already. I take a deep breath and smell Kenton’s cologne. I lift some of my hair to my nose. The smell is so strong that my stomach flips over.

I take my time sitting up on the side of the bed, and I see that a glass full of water, two Tylenols, and a few Tums have been set on the nightstand. I don’t want to think that it’s sweet that he thought about how I would feel when I woke up and made sure to leave them where I would find them before I got out of bed, but I can’t stop thinking about it as I take the pills.

I get out of bed and look down at myself, noticing that I'm not wearing one of my shirts, but a shirt I'm sure belongs to him. I walk to the dresser and get a pair of panties and a bra before going to the closet and grabbing a pair of shorts, a tank top, and an oversized sweater. I open my bedroom door, looking both ways before running across the hall to the bathroom.

Once inside, I quietly shut the door and turn to look in the mirror. I cover my mouth with my hand when I see myself. My hair is sticking out all over my head. My eye makeup is smeared around my eyes and down my cheeks, and my freckles stand out due to how pale I look

"Kill me now," I whisper to my reflection as I grab a couple of makeup remover cloths from the drawer and wipe my face. When I'm done, I start the shower and step inside. I look down when I feel something soggy under my feet. My dress from last night is on the shower floor, sopping wet, so I pick it up and ring it out before tossing it over the shower rail.

I don't know what happened last night, and I can't help but be thankful I don't remember anything. I can only imagine the kind of fool I made out of myself while drunk. I get out of the shower and quickly get dressed before french braiding my hair and putting on some mascara, blush, and lip gloss.

As I'm picking up my clothes from the floor, my eye catches my cell phone sitting on the back of the toilet. I pick it up, looking at the black screen, afraid to click it on. I say a silent prayer that I didn't actually text Kenton last night and that he was just joking when he told me what I'd done. I press the round button before sliding my finger across the screen.

The picture that is now my background has me almost dropping the phone into the toilet. I'm lying across the bar at the club we were at with my dress up around my waist. A guy has his back to the camera and his upper body is bent over me, his face near my stomach.

"Please, no," I whisper, and my shaky fingers press the icon for my text messages. As soon as the screen changes, texts between Kenton and me pop up.

“No, no, no...” I chant, reading the messages.

Me: Why do you hav to so hot?

Kenton: Where are you?

Me: da clubs lol

Kenton: What club?

Me: I wants to kis you all ovr

Kenton: Dammit, tell me where you are.

Me: I asj Tara shesnice.

Kenton: I'm on my way.

Me: howz that

Me: Yoi kisz god

Kenton: Go to the bar and ask for water.

Me: Tequeda is like watber

Kenton: Baby, I need you to find somewhere to sit down until I get there.

Me: Sitty with a nicews guy

Kenton: Where's Tara?

Me: herre

Kenton: Parking now.

I close my eyes and bite the inside of my cheek hard, trying not to cry from embarrassment. I'm never drinking again.

NOT MY ASS!

AFTER I READ the text messages in the bathroom, I try to sneak back into my bedroom, planning to hide out until it's time to go to Viv's house for dinner. Unfortunately, as soon as I make it back into my room, Kenton knocks on the door.

I think about not answering, but I don't want to be mean after he so obviously took care of me the night before. As soon as I tell him to come in, he pushes the door open, carrying a cup of coffee in one hand and a bagel in the other. I don't know how to react to him being sweet. Since the day I met him, things have been a roller coaster, and I'm not someone who likes amusement parks.

"I want you to try to eat something," he says, walking around the bed.

"Thanks, and thank you for taking care of me last night," I tell him, taking the coffee from his hand as he sets the bagel down on the bedside table.

"How's your head?"

"Better. Thanks for the Tylenol."

"You're welcome." The small smile he gives me has my eyes dropping to his mouth. I take in his face, the scruff along his jaw, and the way his hair hangs, touching the collar of his shirt.

"You need to shave," I blurt and look away, but my eyes go back to him when his laugh hits my ears.

“You think so?” he asks, rubbing his hand along his jaw. I want to lean forward and touch his face to see what it feels like against my skin.

“You might like it,” he mumbles, his eyes dropping to my thighs. I don’t know if he’s thinking what I am, but the thought of the rough scruff on his jaw running along the inside of my thighs has my hands shaking.

“Eat. We’ll head out in a couple of hours. I got some stuff to take care of before then, but come find me in the office,” he says, his voice sounding deeper than before.

I nod, not able to say anything. I have a feeling that any words that might come out of my mouth right now would be incoherent anyways.

He looks at me again then stands, shaking his head. I watch him as he walks to the bedroom door, stops at the threshold to look at me over his shoulder before tapping the doorjamb twice, and then leaves the room. I let out a long breath, wondering what the hell I’m going to do. I’m drawn to him. He scares the shit out of me. I’m never like this and don’t know what to do with the jumbled mess my emotions are in.

“YOU OKAY?” KENTON asks, and I look from the house in front of us over to him and nod before I start to open the door to his car.

“Wait here while I come around,” he says, unfolding his large body from behind the driver’s seat.

I watch him walk around to the passenger’s side of the car. Watching him move is fascinating to me. He reminds me of a lion or a bear, his movements fluid, even with his large mass.

He opens my door and I get out, running my sweaty palms down the front of my shorts as I stand. As soon as I clear the door of the car, his hand goes to the small of my back and he leads me up the front porch. He doesn’t even knock or ring the bell; he just opens the screen door and walks us into the house.

My feet stop inside the front door. I didn't tell Viv that Kenton was going to be bringing me, and I don't want her to think that I'm rude, even if they are family.

"What's wrong?" he asks, his eyebrows coming together.

"I feel bad. I should have called and told Viv what was going on. I don't like springing this on her," I tell him, fidgeting with the ends of my sweater.

"I called her this morning and told her I was coming," he assures me

"Oh."

"It's all good. Come on." He grabs my hand, pulling me along with him. When we clear the front hall, we walk into the large living room, where more than a dozen people turn to look at us.

"Crap," I whisper and then glare at Kenton when he starts to laugh.

"Autumn, you're here! And look! You brought the ass," Viv says, walking towards us. I feel my eyes go wide at the word 'ass' and start shaking my head at her.

"Oh, honey, trust me. I know this one's an ass." She pats Kenton's cheek, smiling up at him.

"Thanks, Aunt Viv." He laughs, kissing her cheek. When she comes to me, her hands go to my face, her eyes look me over, and she smiles, shaking her head. I have the urge to bite my lip. I know what she's thinking, and she is oh-so wrong.

"Is Mom here?" Kenton asks her, and I look over at him, feeling suddenly like I might be sick.

"Yep. She's outside with your uncle."

"I'm gonna go get my mom, baby. I'll be right back," he tells me and starts to move away.

"No! I mean...don't do that. I...um, I need to go back to the house," I say quickly, trying to plan my escape. "You guys have a nice dinner and I'll just reschedule."

"Oh, nonsense," Viv says, waving her hand around.

No way do I want to meet Kenton's mom, and there is nothing anyone can say that will convince me differently, I think, feeling the panic rise.

“Honey, I’m so glad you’re here,” a woman says, walking into the room. I take her in. Her dark hair is shorter than Kenton’s. She’s petite; I would guess close to five one. She’s wearing a long, flowing dress and a blue jean vest with a wide belt wrapped around her waist. My eyes close and my head falls forward. Now I have no way to get out of this without looking like an ass.

“I thought Aunt Viv filled you in on what was goin’ on,” Kenton says as he picks the woman up off the floor, giving her a hug.

“She did. Well, kinda. She said you were bringing someone to dinner, and I told her if it was Cassie, I was not going to be happy,” she says, and Kenton chuckles as he sets her on her feet.

“I didn’t come with him,” I blurt like an idiot, causing the woman’s eyes to come to me. “I mean...we drove together, but we didn’t come together.” I lower my head and shake it back and forth. “I mean, we’re not together. Viv asked me to dinner a few weeks ago, and I’ve been coming every Sunday since.” *Shut up! Shut up, you idiot,* I tell myself. Sadly, I don’t even listen to my own warnings. “Kenton and I just live together. That’s all.”

Viv gives my arm a squeeze and Kenton’s mom looks like her eyes are going to pop out of her head. When I look at Kenton, his eyes are soft as he smiles and shakes his head.

“Mom, this is Autumn. Autumn, this is my mom, Nancy.”

“Hi. It’s nice to meet you,” I tell her, sticking out my hand. *Nope, this isn’t awkward at all.*

“You too, honey.” She pulls me in for a hug then looks over at Viv and smiles. Viv smiles back, and I can see the wheels in her head are turning.

“I’m gonna grab a beer and go outside with Uncle Maz.”

“Sure, honey. Go on,” Kenton’s mom says. I want to grab him and have him take me with him. His eyes come to me and light up, and something about the look has me taking a step back.

“I’ll be outside, baby,” he conveys sweetly, taking a step towards me, and before I can step back again or duck, his hand slides around my waist and his mouth lands on mine in a kiss that forces all the oxygen out of my lungs. When his mouth leaves mine, my fingers go to my lips.

“Okay, ladies. Take care of my girl,” he says, pulling his eyes from me. His hands give my waist a slight squeeze, and then he turns around and walks towards the kitchen before I can ask him what the hell that was.

“So, it’s a small world, huh?” Viv snarks, looking over at Nancy then back at me. “I didn’t know your ass was my nephew.”

“He’s not my ass. I mean...sorry. Your son’s not an ass or anything like that,” I say, looking at Nancy, feeling my pulse race, and wishing I could teleport out of the room.

“Honey, I know my son, and I know he can be a little rough around the edges, so please don’t feel bad for calling him an ass.” She smiles with a twinkle in her eyes. “So, how long have you been seeing each other?”

“Oh, no, we’re not.” I shake my head frantically, looking between the two of them.

“Really?” She tilts her head to the side, studying me.

“No, we’re not together,” I insist and then glance at Viv, who is wearing a very large smile.

“That’s interesting. Don’t you think that’s interesting, Nancy?”

“Very,” Nancy says with a smile. I look at the two women and can tell that they are both up to something. Between them and Kenton, I don’t know what I’m going to do.

“So, Viv said you used to be a dancer. Is that right?” Nancy asks while we’re sitting at the dinner table a short time

later. I start to choke on my sip of tea. Kenton pats my back, and I wipe my eyes with my napkin, trying to figure a way out of this.

“She was, and in Vegas no less,” Viv confirms.

“Maybe we could have her teach us some moves.”

“Oh, God,” I breathe into my napkin, feeling my face heat up.

“There is nothing to be embarrassed about, child. Hell, if I looked like you, I would never wear clothes,” Nancy says, and I hear a few chuckles.

“This is not really happening,” I chant to myself, looking over at Kenton, whose whole body is shaking with the force of his silent laughter.

“This is not funny,” I hiss.

“It’s pretty damn funny.” He pulls me to him by the back of my neck, putting his lips to my forehead.

“Stop,” I tell him quietly, pushing at his chest, not wanting to cause a scene in front of his family.

He smiles again and shakes his head. I pull away and look around the table at everyone watching us. My eyes land on Kenton’s dad’s. When his go soft and he smiles, my anxiety eases somewhat.

I found out earlier that not only is Viv sweet, but Kenton’s mom is really funny and his dad is like a giant teddy bear who often shakes his head when his wife says something a little crazy, pulls his daughter Toni into his side to kiss her hair when she’s close, and pats his son on the back when he approves of something he says. I smile back at him before lowering my eyes to my plate.

The rest of dinner is a blur, and before I know it, I’m saying good-bye to everyone and getting into Kenton’s car.

“Did you have a good time?” Kenton asks.

I roll my head in his direction and glare.

“Did I have a good time? Really?”

He starts to chuckle as he starts the car. I roll my eyes, laying my head back against the head rest.

“My aunt loves you, and my mom already adores you,” he says softly as I feel his hand on the bare skin of my thigh.

I pick up his hand, putting it back on his side of the console as he pulls out of the driveway.

“Your whole family is very sweet,” I tell him, watching as the corner of his mouth lifts up.

“I thought for sure we were making progress,” he says, taking his eyes off the road to look at me with his lips twitching.

“You thought wrong.” I turn my head away from him, watching out the car window as the scenery quickly flies by.

“You work tonight?”

“Yep,” I answer shortly.

“What time?”

“I gotta be there by eleven.” I roll my head on the headrest in his direction.

“You gonna take a nap?” he asks, his long fingers tapping on the steering wheel.

“Probably.” I shrug. “I haven’t really been able to get used to this schedule.”

“Can you get on a different shift?” He sounds concerned.

“If a spot opens up, I can ask to transfer,” I say, shifting against the leather of his seat.

“You gonna do that?”

“Maybe. The thing is...I really need to think about what I’m going to do. I love Vegas and everything, but this is the first place I have felt at home. I love the people and the lifestyle here. I feel a lot more relaxed than I used to, and I think I might see if I can find an apartment and move here permanently.” I don’t know why I just said all that out loud. Up until now, it was just a thought rolling around in my head.

“You have a place to stay as long as you want.”

“Thanks,” I whisper, my heart squeezing.

“You can’t move out for a while though,” he says, and his jaw starts ticking. “I talked to Link, and the cops are still tracking the guy.”

“I know. He told me,” I say, feeling a chill slide down my spine

“Nothing’s going to happen to you.”

“The whole thing doesn’t even feel real.” I shake my head. Every time I think about what happened, I can’t believe how lucky I was.

“It’s very real. Five people were murdered. Don’t ever forget that,” he growls, his knuckles turning white on the steering wheel.

“I will never forget it,” I whisper softly, my hand moving to his jaw, wanting to comfort him, but right when I’m about to touch him, I start to pull away, realizing what I’m doing. Before I have a chance to move away completely, his hand catches mine, pulling my fingers up to his mouth, where he places a gentle kiss.

“Stop fighting this,” he says gently. He drops my hand to his thigh, where he covers it with his own. The harnessing warmth of his thigh under my palm has my breaths increasing. “Stop fighting us.”

“There’s no us,” I tell him, shaking my head, trying to pull my hand away.

“You’re so fucking stubborn.” He tightens his hold on me.

“And you’re an ass,” I growl, and the car jerks to the right, onto the side of the road.

My body goes forward when he slams on the brakes. His hand goes to my seatbelt, and as soon as he presses the button, he pulls me over and onto his lap. One hand goes to my waist and the other to the back of my head and into my hair, forcing my head to the side.

“Stop,” I hiss, trying to wiggle free.

“No. Every time I knock one brick out of place, you put ten more in its place,” he seethes.

“Let me go.”

“If I have to keep kissing you to prove there is something between us, then fuck it.” His hand in my hair fists tighter as he pulls my head back, holding me immobile. “I told you before not to fucking lie to me.”

“Please.” I don’t know if I’m asking him to kiss me or stop what he’s doing, but the second the word leaves my mouth, his comes down on mine, possessing me with his kiss. I let go, completely drowning in him and his taste. My hands go to his long hair, gripping it between my fingers.

I whimper into his mouth as his other hand skims the underside of my breast. I’ve never wanted anyone like I want him. He makes me feel again—something I haven’t done in a long time. Something about him makes me want to open up, but the part of me that clicked into place to protect myself when they took my son was so strong I didn’t know if anyone would be able to get to the real me again.

“Every time I get my mouth on you, you melt,” he says against my lips when he pulls his away from mine. “I know you’ve been hurt.” I close my eyes, turning my face away from him. “I know you don’t want to hear it, but I won’t stop until I have you.”

I shake my head. He turns my face back towards him, placing a soft kiss on my forehead then my lips before lifting me off him, setting me back in my seat, pulling my seatbelt around me, and buckling me in place. We drive in silence for a long time. I don’t know what he’s thinking, but all I can think about is what would happen if I gave him a chance. Then I wonder if Link told him what happened to me.

“Have you talked to Link about me?” I ask, looking over at him. I don’t like the idea of him learning things about my history from someone else.

“To be honest with you, he offered to tell me about you.” He looks over at me, his hand coming to my thigh and giving it a squeeze before his eyes go back to the road. “I want you to be the one to tell me. I want you to trust me with whatever it is that has forced you to put up those barriers around yourself.”

I let out a long breath, one I didn't know I was holding.

“I want you to come to me, Autumn,” he says softly. Those words make my heart break a little. I wasn't sure I would ever be able to go to anyone ever again. I close my eyes and fight back the tears that've started stinging my nose. When we get to the house, he says a quiet goodbye, telling me that he has some business to take care of. I nod, go into the house, and straight up to my room, where I crawl into bed, pulling the pillow over my head so I can cry.

DONE, I'LL GIVE HER CRAZY (OOPS, DID I DO THAT?)

“WE HAVE A Life Flight coming in,” Tara says, coming into the room where I’ve been taking care of a patient. I automatically stop what I’m doing and follow her.

“Derik has already started getting things ready. The victim is a young male suffering head trauma,” she says as we hurry into the emergency room.

As soon as the helicopter lands on the roof, Tara and Derik are out of the room, meeting it, while I stay behind and make sure we have enough supplies and everything is in order. When they arrive at the room, my world feels like it closes in around me. A little boy no older than ten is strapped to the gurney. His neck is in a brace, his face is cut and swollen, and his head is bandaged, blood seeping through the white gauze they’ve used to protect the wound. All I can see is my son. He would be about as old as the boy is. My brain tries to tell my body to move, but I can’t. I’m glued to the floor.

“Autumn, I need you to come over here and help me transfer him,” I hear Derik say, but all I can do is stare.

“Autumn!” Tara shouts, and my eyes go to her as she shakes her head and then nods towards the young boy, asking me a silent question. I shake my head in response.

“Autumn, I need you to pull it together. We need to help this little guy get better,” Derik says gently.

My eyes go to him and I swallow the bile in the back of my throat, turning my emotions off before I start to work on

autopilot. For the next twenty minutes, we do everything we can to help save the boy before he is taken into emergency surgery.

“What happened in there?” Tara asks, sitting down next to me on the bench outside of the emergency room.

I shake my head before looking over at her.

“I have a son.” I close my eyes before opening them again.

“I *had* a son,” I whisper, correcting myself bitterly. “I put him up for adoption when he was just hours old.” I look down at the floor, seeing small drops of blood on the tops of my shoes.

“He would be about the age of that little boy. I’m so sorry I freaked. I...” I take a breath, closing my eyes.

“I’ve never even thought about something like this happening.” I feel an arm go around my back and Tara’s head lean against my shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers.

I nod as tears fill my eyes. I never once thought I would have to help a child.

I’m so stupid.

“All I could think about when I saw that boy was my son lying there.”

“Honey,” she moans painfully, making me bite the inside of me cheek. Taking comfort from people is something new to me. Hell, having someone care enough about me *to* comfort me is something new to me.

“I think I need to leave for the night,” I tell her when I feel tears begin to fall from my eyes.

“I’ll see if I can get someone to come in. I just don’t think I’m going to be a lot of help right now.” I breathe through my tears.

“Rach needs hours. She’ll come in. I’ll give her a call now,” Tara says softly.

“Thank you,” I whisper, wiping my face. I never cry in front of people. I was never allowed to show emotion like that. One of my mother’s favorite sayings was, “*If you want to cry, I will give you something to cry about,*” and she often kept her word.

“Go home and sleep, girl, and I’ll see you tomorrow,” Tara assures me, rubbing my back.

I stand, giving her a quick hug before I make my way to the front desk. I grab my bag and head out to the parking lot. Once I have my car door unlocked, I toss my bag into the passenger’s seat, get behind the wheel, and shut the door. I lean my head back and close my eyes. All I keep seeing over and over is the little boy, his face bruised and battered from the car accident he was in. I can’t even imagine what his parents are feeling right now. I turn the car on, more tears filling my eyes.

I don’t even know how I make it back to Kenton’s. Once I let myself into the house, I quickly set the alarm before heading upstairs. When I reach the top landing, Kenton’s standing in his bedroom door. His shirt is off and the pajama pants he’s wearing are barely hanging on his hips. I look at the hand he has resting against his thigh, seeing that he’s holding a gun.

I look up at his face again. This time when our eyes meet, his are concerned. Something inside me snaps and I run to him, seeing surprise on his face right before I shove mine into his chest and my arms wrap around his waist as I sob loudly.

“Baby?” he whispers, pulling me harder against him. I’m grateful that he doesn’t say anything else for a long time; he just stands there holding me in his arms, offering me comfort.

“Come on. Let’s lay down.” He pulls me with him to the bed, sets me on the edge, and then lays his gun on the nightstand before going to the dresser. I watch as he pulls out a shirt before coming back to me.

I take the shirt from him as he turns around, giving me a little privacy to change. I pull off my scrub top quickly, tug his shirt on, and then kick off my shoes along with my pants. I

scoot up the bed as he turns back around. He climbs into bed and his big body wraps around me, holding me against his chest.

“Talk to me,” he says as his hand slides through my hair.

I take a breath, my heart beating out of my chest because of what I’m going to tell him.

“When I was sixteen, I got pregnant,” I whisper, feeling his muscles tighten. “When my mom found out, she sent me away to a home for girls who were expecting.” Tears begin to fill my eyes again, so I squeeze them tightly, trying to fight them off.

“The day I had my son, I got to spend two hours with him before they took him away from me.” I feel a knot form in my throat, making it hard to breathe. “I never wanted to give him up.”

“Fuck,” Kenton rumbles, pulling me closer to him. Feeling the strength in his arms gives me the courage to continue.

“A little boy was Life Flighted in tonight.” I close my eyes, seeing the child in my head. “When I saw him, all I could think about was my son, who would be close in age to him.” I open my eyes and tilt my head back to look up at Kenton. I can barely make out his image with the moonlight shining through the window. “Sometimes when I’m out and I see a little boy, I wonder if it could be him. Logically, I know it’s not, but my heart still hasn’t accepted that he’s lost to me after all these years and I will never see him again.”

“I can’t imagine that’s something easy to accept,” he says softly, running a hand down my back. “Why didn’t your boyfriend help you find a way to keep your son?”

“He didn’t want me or a child. When I told him I was pregnant, he told me he didn’t want to have a kid and he was breaking up with me.” I cry a little harder, reliving the devastation I felt back then. “He was happy when my mom contacted him, telling him that she was forcing me to put the baby up for adoption and he needed to sign the papers.”

“That’s fucked up, baby.”

“I know,” I whisper. There is nothing else to say. Kenton now knows some of my past— really, the worst of it—and I wonder what he’s thinking about as he holds me until I cry myself to sleep.

I WAKE UP feeling cocooned in warmth. It takes a few seconds for last night to come back to me and to remember that I willingly climbed into bed with Kenton. I can only imagine what he thinks of me now. I try to lift my head, hoping I can sneak away from him, but his giant hand is wrapped around my hair, holding me in place. Between that and his leg over mine, I can’t move at all.

“You’re not sneaking out on me.” His voice is gravelly with sleep, and I close my eyes, trying to think of what I need to say.

“I’m sorry about laying all that stuff on you last night.” I hide my face in his chest.

“I’m glad you came to me. I’m sorry about your son. I can’t even imagine what you’re going through.” He takes a breath, pulling me closer to him. “If you want, I can find him for you.”

“What?” I ask, caught off guard.

“It’s what I do, baby,” he says completely seriously, and my heart does a double thump at the sweet offer.

“It was a closed adoption,” I whisper, tears filling my eyes again

“Doesn’t matter.” He shrugs.

“What do you mean?”

“I have ways of finding people. You say the word and I’ll find your boy for you.” The building tears begin to fall as I think about finding my son.

Then I wonder what I would even do with the information. Would it hurt more knowing where he is? Could I even handle it?

“I don’t know,” I mumble. “I would like to know if he’s happy, but I don’t know if I could handle seeing him or knowing where he is.”

“I get that.” He gives me a gentle squeeze. “You don’t need to decide right now. The offer has no time limit on it.”

“Thank you.” I unconsciously rub my face against his chest, breathing in his unique smell. His warmth and smell have me wanting to get even closer to him.

His hand in my hair pulls my head back as the leg he has over mine moves to between my legs. His eyes search my face for a long moment before his face lowers and his mouth gently touches mine.

“I can’t get enough of your mouth,” he says against my lips, kissing me again. The hand I’m resting between us starts to inch towards his torso, but I stop myself.

“Touch me,” he says, grabbing my hand and pulling it to his chest.

His skin is so warm, and the light scattering of hair he has on his chest prickles against my fingers. His hand on top of mine moves to my hip then down the curve of my ass, pulling my hips closer to his. I can feel his erection hard and long between us. I start to breathe heavily; I feel like I can’t get enough oxygen into my lungs. My hand on his chest travels up to his hair at the back of his head, running it through my fingers as his mouth travels from mine, down my cheek, and then across my neck, the scruff on his jaw scraping against my sensitive skin.

“Jesus, you smell good,” he rumbles against my throat as his tongue touches me there. I tilt my head farther back, pressing my thighs together, trying to alleviate the ache that is building between my legs.

“Shit,” he groans.

My eyes open and I look at his face, wondering why he’s stopping, and then I hear his phone ringing.

“Don’t lose that look,” he orders as he quickly twists his upper body away from mine before turning back over, holding

his phone in his hand. His eyebrows go together and he shakes his head, sliding his finger across the screen.

“This better be fucking good,” he growls, looking at me. His eyes narrow on me when I hear Justin’s voice say something about pulling the stick out of his ass, making me smile.

“Do not fucking encourage him,” he says, shaking his head when I laugh harder after hearing Justin yell through the speaker that Kenton stole me away from him and he’s going to find a way to win me back.

“Did you call for a fucking reason, or are you just callin’ to piss me off?”

I can’t hear Justin’s response, but I can tell that Kenton doesn’t like it by the look that comes over his face as he listens.

“Fuck,” he clips, dropping his head.

“Yeah, I’ll be there soon.” He pulls the phone away from his ear before dropping it to the bed next to my head. “I gotta head out.”

“Okay.” I bite my lip, wondering what I’m supposed to do. This whole thing feels surreal to me. I don’t know if I want to kiss him again or run away and pretend like nothing happened.

“You gonna be okay?” His question hits my chest and I feel my face go soft at his concern for me.

“I’ll be okay,” I assure him quietly.

“You workin’ tonight?”

“Yeah. I feel bad about what happened last night and leaving early. I don’t want them to think I’m flighty. I really like working there,” I say, absently rubbing the sheet between my fingers.

“Did you talk to Tara last night?” I nod yes and his fingers run over my cheek. “You’re good then. That bitch is crazy. She would never let them think less of you.”

“Don’t call her a bitch,” I say defensively.

“I mean ‘bitch’ in the nicest way possible.” He smiles, dropping his face towards mine.

As soon as our lips touch, his hand goes to the back of my head, holding me to him while controlling the kiss. When he pulls his mouth from mine, I can’t help the whimper that escapes.

“When’s your next day off?” he asks through heavily panted breaths

“The day after tomorrow,” I reply just as breathlessly.

“I’m taking you out.”

“Like a date?”

“Exactly like a date.”

“Um...” I say, not knowing how to respond.

“It’s not up for debate. We’re going out.”

“Excuse me?” I narrow my eyes.

“You need to ask me if I would like to go out with you.” No way am I going to let him boss me around. He rolls until I’m on my back and one of his legs is between mine. His hands capture mine, bringing them above my head. Then he bends his head and whispers into my ear, “Autumn, will you have dinner with me?”

“Maybe.” I smile when he growls against the skin of my neck.

“Please?” he asks, his tongue snaking out to touch my sensitive flesh. My body arches back. Having him cover me is doing crazy things to my body. I don’t know if I want to pull him closer or push him away only to climb on top of him. My hands run down his back, feeling his smooth skin under my fingers.

“So, what do you say?” he asks, his hand running down my bare thigh.

“What?”

I feel the vibration of his laughter before he pulls away so I can see his face.

“What’s your answer? Am I taking you willingly, or do I need to force you?”

My eyes drop to his mouth and he smiles.

“I guess I could suffer through a date with you. Who am I to pass up free food?” I ask with a straight face.

His hands go to my sides and he starts to tickle me. I have never been tickled before and it catches me off guard, making me scream in horror.

When he realizes that I’m not shrieking playfully, his body stills and he looks down at me in question. Tears fill my eyes again and I don’t even know what to say.

“It’s okay,” he says gently, removing his hands from my sides and sliding them into my hair. “We can talk about what just happened another time.”

No way am I going to tell him about my childhood. Instead of saying that, I just nod. His eyes search my face, and I know he doesn’t like what he sees when his jaw starts ticking.

“I gotta go or I would make you talk to me.”

“Go. It’s not a big deal.” I push his chest and he shakes his head.

“Fuck me.” He drops his head before lifting it again, his eyes looking me over. “Just like that, you replace those fucking barriers.”

“You need to go,” I say, really wanting to be away from him and how exposed I feel.

“Swear to Christ, if I didn’t know that the reward would be worth it, I wouldn’t waste my fucking time with this bullshit.” His words are like a slap in the face and I flinch, closing my eyes for a second before opening them back up.

“Get off me,” I say softly, and he presses me harder into the bed.

“Shit, I di—”

I cut him off, shoving at his chest and yelling at the top of my lungs, “Get the fuck off me right now!” I wiggle around, trying to break free. Not being strong enough to get him off me has tears of frustration forming in my eyes.

“Please get off me,” I whisper, closing my eyes. My body loses its fight, knowing that it’s pointless; he has all the power.

“This isn’t over,” he says quietly, kissing my forehead.

I don’t say anything; I just wait until I feel him get up. As soon as his weight is off me, I jump out of bed and look around for my stuff from the night before. I quickly grab it and open his bedroom door. Then I shut it behind me and run down the hall to my room, slamming and locking my door behind me.

I drop the clothes in my hands to the floor before I go to the closet, pull out a bag, and start to pack. I need to get out of here. My heart is wide open with him. Somehow, he has maneuvered through my defenses and now has the power to hurt me, and he isn’t someone I trust with that power.

He has proven on more than one occasion that he can be an ass. How can I possibly put myself out there to be hurt by him again? I hear him coming down the hall and brace myself.

When his fist pounds on the door, I close my eyes before yelling, “Go away!”

“You even think about leaving me, Autumn, and I will hunt your ass down and spank the shit out of you.” He pauses and his voice gentles. “I don’t have time to talk to you right now, but we will be talking about what happened.”

What is happening to me? The sound of his voice has me dropping my bag onto my closet floor.

“I’ll text you later, baby,” he says softly.

I walk to the bed and lie down, pulling some of my hair to my face to smell it. Just like the last time I slept with him, his scent is clinging to my hair. I need to get it together; I need to stop running from him. I have a feeling that, if I do get away from him, it would be the biggest mistake of my life, and I have made enough mistakes to last a lifetime.

I stand and go to the window to make sure he's gone before I go downstairs. I need my phone out of my bag, and I left my purse in my car last night when I came home. I pull on a pair of shorts and leave my room. I turn off the alarm before opening the front door. The second I hit the front porch, a silver convertible pulls up. I squint my eyes, trying to see who it is, and when I recognize the driver, I run to my car, open my door, quickly grab my bag, and run back to the front porch.

"Do you ever wear clothes?" Kenton's ex, Cassie, yells.

I want to tell her no, but instead, I run into the house, dropping my bag next to the door. I almost have the door closed when it's pushed open and Cassie grabs a handful of my hair.

I have never been in a fight in my life. I have been beaten many times, but I've never fought back, knowing that the consequences would be a lot worse if I did. My body freezes, and then my adrenaline surges. I turn around and smack her across her face. Her hand goes to her cheek, and her eyes widened then narrow.

"You bitch," she says, smacking me back a lot harder than I hit her.

"I'm a bitch?" I shake my head in disbelief.

"Get out of this house right now," I say with a scary calmness, holding my stinging cheek. *I'm too old for this crap.*

"How does it feel knowing you're sleeping in a bed I picked out...that I fucked him in?"

Okay, so that didn't feel good, but I keep my face neutral, not wanting to give her the satisfaction of knowing that her words affected me.

"Get the fuck out," I tell her, leaning forward and pointing at the door.

"You're sleeping in my bed with my man and you want me to get out?" She lets out a laugh then looks me over.

"He's not yours," I hiss.

“He will always want me!” she shrieks. “Why do you think he hasn’t changed the bed or redecorated?”

Wow, this chick is crazy, but her telling me about her and Kenton in that bed over and over again is grating my nerves. I turn and run up the stairs as fast as I can. I hear her following me, but I’m on a mission.

I run to Kenton’s room, locking the door behind me. My eyes land on the bed, which is still messy from this morning. I look around and see that he has a large sliding glass door in his room that leads out onto the upper balcony. Cassie starts pounding on the door, and I quickly look at it before running to the bed to toss the covers, sheets, and pillows onto the floor.

The bed is queen-sized, so even with the weight of the mattress, I’m still able to pull it off the bed, pushing it to the side. I see that the side rails hook into the headboard and the slats are what keeps the mattress up, so I toss the slats aside then pull up on the side pieces. The bed falls apart, the footboard falling to the floor and the headboard hitting the wall.

I go to the foot of the bed and pick up the wooden piece, carrying it over to the balcony. I open the sliding glass door and haul the footboard over to the railing. Seeing Cassie’s car parked right under me, I say, “Fuck it,” and toss it over. It lands in her back seat, making me smile. I do the same with the two side rails; these miss and land near her car on the ground.

Cassie has no idea what’s going on; she is still pounding on the bed- room door. I go to the headboard, and with this piece being much heavier, I scoot it across the hardwood floors and out onto the balcony. I lift it over the railing, where it teeters before falling over the other side; the loud crunching sound of glass and metal soothes my temper.

I hear Cassie yell something as she leaves the door. I quickly get the mattress, pushing it out onto the balcony before tossing it over the edge too. With my adrenaline pumping like never before, I look down and watch as it floats like a feather

in slow motion, landing with a little bounce on the hood of her car.

Cassie starts screaming at the top of her lungs then pulls her phone out of her pocket.

“Shit,” I whisper. I know she’s calling the cops. I start wondering where I should hide when the house phone starts ringing. I see the phone on the nightstand light up, and I debate if I should answer it or not when it stops ringing only to start up again. My gut clenches, and I know without a doubt that it’s Kenton calling.

“What in God’s name is going on?” I hear from outside, and I close my eyes.

Are you kidding me? Why me? Why does this stuff always happen to me?

I walk to the balcony door and look out over the railing, seeing Nancy and Viv. Both are standing near Cassie, who is still on the phone. Viv looks up and I start to duck, but I’m too late; our eyes meet and she smiles.

I run to the phone when it starts ringing again. I don’t really want to talk to Kenton, but right now, he’s the lesser of two evils.

“Hello,” I answer, trying to make myself sound like I didn’t just toss his bed outside and that his mom and aunt aren’t downstairs probably wondering how to get me out of his house before I go crazy on him as well.

“Babe,” he answers back, the one word said in a tone sounding slightly humorous and slightly pissed.

“How’s it going?” I ask, looking around his room, taking it in for the first time. If Cassie did help decorate, she did a crap job. There are two nightstands, one on each side of where the bed used to be. Both are older; the matte black paint is chipping away. The dresser in the corner of the room is in pretty much the same shape.

There is nothing else in the room—no rugs, no curtains; the room is bare except for the furniture. It’s a great room. The beige paint on the walls looks new, with beautiful, dark wood

floors throughout, large windows that look out over the forest, and the sliding glass door that leads to a large balcony I can imagine having my coffee out on in the mornings. The urge to make over his room hits me when I hear his voice growl down the line.

“Are you listening to me?”

“Um...”

“I asked if you really just tossed my bed over the balcony and onto Cassie’s car,” he says in the same amused-slash-angry tone.

“Oh, I...” I try to come up with some other reason why I would have done what I just did without making it seem like I may be insane.

“Do not fucking lie,” he says, cutting me off before I can even think of something to say.

“I wasn’t going to lie,” I snap, knowing that I was perhaps going to fib a little about what happened, but I wasn’t going to lie.

“Autumn,” he rumbles out.

“Okay, yes,” I huff out, annoyed.

“I tossed your bed onto her car. Well, really, I tossed her bed *into* her car, so I was just helping her move it out.” I press my lips together knowing how stupid that sounds.

“You were helping her move it out,” he repeats, and I can’t figure out if he’s growling or laughing. “What the hell happened?”

“I went to my car ’cause I left my bag in the passenger’s seat last night and I needed my phone. When I was outside, she pulled up. I tried to get into the house and lock the door, but she grabbed my hair. I may have smacked her, and then she may have smacked me back. She started telling me about you and her in your bed, and I may or may not have gotten pissed, ran up to your room, and threw your bed over the balcony onto her car. Oh, and your mom and aunt might be outside right now.” I whisper the last part, out of breath.

“You were jealous,” he says, sounding slightly surprised.

“No, I was pissed,” I correct.

“If you weren’t jealous, why would you care what she said to you?”

Okay, I’m not going to answer that question. “I’ll buy you a new bed,” I tell him, hoping to end this conversation.

“This isn’t about the bed, Autumn. This isn’t even about Cassie. This is about you realizing what you’re feeling and accepting it.”

I feel myself heat up. I know what I’m feeling. I just don’t know if I can trust him with these feelings.

“Autumn, are you in there?” I hear from outside the bedroom door, and my head drops to look at my feet.

“Your mom’s outside the door,” I whisper into the phone, looking around the room for somewhere to hide.

“So answer the door,” he tells me with an implied, *Duh*.

“I can’t answer the door. She was outside with Cassie,” I hiss, going over to one of the other doors in the room. As soon as I swing it open, I see that it’s a large bathroom with a Jacuzzi tub and walk-in shower.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking for somewhere to hide,” I tell him without thinking, walking to the only other door in the room, and as soon as it opens, I see that it’s a large, very organized closet.

“You’re looking for somewhere to hide?” he repeats, laughing.

“Autumn, I know you’re in there. Open the door.” I close my eyes and lean my head back. I have no idea what I’m going to do, but it’s time to face the music. I take a breath and walk to the door. I click open the lock, pull the door in a crack, and peek out.

“Hey. Is everything okay?” I ask, seeing not only Nancy, but also Viv standing outside the bedroom.

Nancy smiles and Viv's mouth twitches.

"Looks like there was a little bit of an accident," Nancy says, and Kenton starts laughing.

"I'm hanging up," I tell him, annoyed that he is finding this situation so hilarious.

"I'm on my way home," he warns me, and I hear the line go dead.

"Oh, great," I sigh, pulling the phone from my ear. I start to toss it on the bed when I remember that the bed is no longer there, so I squeeze it in my hand.

"Did Cassie hit you?" Nancy asks, her eyes zeroing in on my cheek.

My hand naturally lifts to my cheek and I swallow. "Um... the thing is...she pulled my hair, so then I smacked her, and she smacked me back."

Yes, the chick is crazy, but I'm at fault as well.

"Are you okay?" Viv pulls me into a hug, and I feel Nancy put her arms around us both.

We stand there for a few moments. I didn't think they would be offering me comfort after what I just did.

"Oh, isn't this just fucking sweet? Seriously, she hit me and trashed my car and you're fucking coddling her?" Cassie yells.

I pull back from Nancy and Viv before facing her. Her face is red with rage, but there is no mark on her cheek from where I smacked her.

"The cops are on the way. I hope you know you're going to jail for what you did."

Shit, she's right; I'm probably going to jail for what I did. Then I'm probably going to lose my job when I have to tell them why I can't show up to work tonight.

"Why are you here, Cassie?" Nancy asks her.

“I needed to talk to Kenton.” She shrugs, glaring at me again.

“You know he’s at work, so why are you really here?” Viv asks, stepping in front of me.

“Well, if you really must know, I wanted to tell him about the woman he has living with him. Did you know she’s a stripper and was letting random men do body shots off her at a club downtown?”

My stomach drops at her evil tone. I have no idea how she could possibly know about that.

“It’s all over YouTube.” She smirks, reading my face. “Yep, your whore face is all over the Internet.”

I feel bile crawling up my throat as I look over at Nancy and Viv. I honestly don’t care that people are going to see me acting stupid and drunk, but I do care that the guy in Vegas could somehow see it and know where I’m now staying. I hate the idea of bringing danger to not only Kenton, but everyone else around me—people I really care for and consider friends for the first time in my life.

“Did you do it? Did you post that video?” I ask, ready to push her ass down the stairs.

“Cassie, why the fuck do you keep showing up at my house?” Kenton asks, walking up the stairs.

Butterflies erupt in my stomach when our eyes meet, and then his eyes go from soft to hard when they lock on my cheek.

“She fucking hit you?” he growls. He must have forgotten that I already told him about our little exchange. His head swings to Cassie, the look on his face forcing her to take a step back.

“You hit her?” he asks.

“Don’t you fucking dare, Kenton Mayson. She is not the fucking victim in this situation. She hit me then trashed my car.”

“You came to my house and hit my woman, and now you want to point fucking fingers? I told you to never show your face here again. I told you we have not one fucking thing to talk about.”

I suddenly feel faint. *His ‘woman’?* I didn’t think I was his, but he just said that I am, and he said it in front of his mom and aunt. I’m not going to explore why that made me feel all squishy and warm inside.

“Now, for the last fucking time, get the fuck out of my house.”

“Wait! She can’t leave!” I shout, grabbing Kenton’s arm.

“I’m out of here,” Cassie hisses and hurries down the stairs. I start to run after her, but an arm wraps around my waist and my back hits the solid wall of Kenton’s chest.

“Let her go, baby.” His lips brush my ear as he speaks.

I shake my head and he squeezes me tighter.

“No, she can’t leave! She said there was a YouTube video of me from the bar the other night. I don’t know who put it up, but maybe she does.”

His body goes tight behind me and he lifts me, swinging me behind his back before running down the stairs. I look at Viv and Nancy before following behind him.

The second I reach the front door and swing it open, I see Kenton pacing back and forth, talking on the phone to someone. Cassie is next to her car trying to lift the mattress off of it. Just as I take a step out onto the front porch, two police cars pull up the driveway. Kenton’s head swings my way, and he lifts his hand and motions for me to come over.

I look at the cop cars then at Cassie, who is glaring at me while trying to lift the headboard. If things were not so messed up, I’d be laughing at her. I walk to Kenton. His voice is a low rumble when he tells the person on the phone to track the video and have it removed. When he hangs up, his hand goes to the bottom of my shirt and he pulls me until I’m forced to step closer to him.

“Justin’s on it. He should have the video down in a couple of hours.”

When his arms wrap around me, mine automatically do the same, and I lay my head against his chest.

“Don’t worry, baby. Everything will be okay,” he says right before I feel his lips at the top of my head.

I close my eyes, soaking in the feeling only he gives me, but the moment is broken when I hear someone clear their throat. I open my eyes and turn my head. A cop is standing there, his mouth curved into a slight smile. I don’t know what he could possibly be smiling about, but his eyes go from me, to Kenton, then over to Cassie, and he shakes his head.

“Looks like you got a little bit of a situation on your hands here, Mayson,” he says, tilting his head towards Cassie and her car, where there is another cop talking to her. “Wanna tell me what happened?”

“Cut the shit, Ford. You know that woman is crazy as hell,” Kenton says, and I bite the inside of my cheek, wondering if it’s wise to talk to a cop like that.

“You were warned about her. Everyone told you to be careful when you got with her, but you are so fucking stubborn you had to find out that shit for yourself. Seems to me you have been taught a valuable lesson,” Officer Ford says as I try to pull away from Kenton, who only holds me tighter.

“So what happened?” he asks again.

“Cassie showed up here not long after I left to head to the office. She pushed her way inside.”

“So how did the bed end up in her car?” he asks, looking at me.

“I may have lost my temper,” I whisper. Officer Ford smiles then shakes his head before looking at Kenton.

“I want her arrested!” Cassie screeches, and I look in her direction, seeing her pointing at me. “I want to press charges.”

“Shit, this is going to be a lot of paperwork,” Officer Ford grumbles, shaking his head.

“She pushed her way into my house and attacked my woman. If she presses charges, I will do the same,” Kenton says only loud enough for me and Ford to hear. “I will pay for the damage to her car, but I want her gone and to understand that, if she comes back, I will no longer be nice about keeping her away.”

I don’t know what he means by that, but it doesn’t sound good.

Officer Ford nods and walks over to where Cassie and the other officer are talking. I watch as he says something to Cassie. Her eyes narrow before getting big, and she turns her head to glare at us.

“Go wait inside with my aunt and mom, baby, while I take care of this,” Kenton says, and I wonder if he saw the look Cassie just shot at both of us.

“I’m sorry about this,” I tell him. “Maybe I should find somewhere else—”

“You even think about running out on me now and I swear to Christ I will blister your ass,” he says, cutting me off.

“Your family,” I say softly, reminding him that we’re not the only ones he needs to worry about.

“My family is safe and so are you.”

I don’t know if that’s true, but I do feel safer with him than I would anywhere else. Plus, I have a feeling that, if I did leave, he would do exactly as he threatened. What I don’t understand is why that thought alone has a dull ache beginning to throb between my legs.

“She’s agreed to not press charges if you agree to pay for the damage to her car,” Officer Ford says, walking back up to us.

I look over at Cassie and then at the car. I have some money saved up and can afford to have it fixed. I don’t want Kenton paying for the damage when this was all my fault to begin with.

“I’ll pay for it,” I tell Ford.

“You’re not paying,” Kenton says, shaking his head. I narrow my eyes and try to step away from him so I can fully have it out with him “She’s my ex. If she hadn’t shown up, this wouldn’t have happened.”

Well, he has a point, but if I hadn’t thrown the bed over the balcony into her car, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation.

“Go wait inside with my mom and aunt while I get this sorted,” he says again, his arms releasing me.

His tone and bossy attitude have me wanting to punch him in the stomach. My hands ball into fists at my sides, and his eyes drop to them before meeting mine again as a smirk appears on his face.

“You gonna hit me?”

I shrug then look at Officer Ford.

“Would you arrest me?” He smiles and shakes his head. I look back over at Kenton and grin.

“Jesus, you’re cute when you’re pissed,” he says, catching me off guard. Something about that statement only serves to make me madder. “Now, stop fucking around and go wait inside.”

Without thinking, I kick him in the shin, turn around, and run as fast as I can up the stairs and onto the porch—right into his mom.

Crap.

“Child, I’m starting to wonder if you need anger management,” Nancy says, grabbing my hand, pulling me inside the house, and closing the door behind us.

“I’m not normally like this,” I mumble, lowering my head when I see Viv smile.

“I don’t know what is going on with you and my son, but you’re good for him. He needs someone to put him in his place and keep him on his toes. His life is so serious and revolves around people listening to him and doing exactly what he says

when he says it. I don't know about you, but that would get old." She shakes her head, smiling.

I don't want to get their hopes up about Kenton and me, so I decide to change the subject and avoid the topic, even though I have a feeling that I'm not going to be able to avoid it much longer.

"So, what brings you guys to the neighborhood?" I ask casually, leaning back on my heels. I bite my lip when Viv starts to laugh, looking over at Nancy.

"Well, Kenton called and said you needed company."

A light bulb goes off in my head and I know exactly what happened. He thought I was going to run off, so he sent for backup. The door opens and Kenton walks in. I'm surprised by the smile that lights up his face when our eyes meet.

"Tow truck's on the way," he says, walking towards me. I look around, trying to find an escape route. He looks at his mom and gives her a grin.

"Can you start some coffee while I talk to Autumn?" he asks her.

She looks at me and her eyes sparkle when I start shaking my head at her.

"Sure, honey," she tells him, turning towards the kitchen.

"Viv, let's go make coffee," Nancy says with a smile.

Viv's eyes come to me and she smiles, shaking her head.

"No!" I semi shout.

"You should really spend some time with your son. I can totally make the coffee," I tell them, starting to head towards the kitchen. I feel myself being tugged back by the hem of my shirt. When I look over my shoulder at Kenton, I glare.

"We need to talk," he informs me.

"We'll be in the kitchen," Nancy says, Viv following close behind her.

I close my eyes, letting my head drop forward.

“Thanks, Mom,” Kenton says as I turn around to face him and my shirt twists around my stomach. His eyes drop to my mouth and he takes a step towards me. I try to take a step back, but his hand, which is still wrapped around my shirt, prevents me from going far.

“You kicked me,” he says quietly, his mouth brushing mine, leaving me paralyzed.

“Sorry,” I say, getting lost in his eyes.

“Are you really sorry?”

“No,” I whisper, watching his eyes grow dark.

“I didn’t think so.” His tongue touches my bottom lip, making me gasp as his teeth give my bottom lip a punishing nip and tug. My hands lift to his hair, pulling it at the roots, as his hands slide down my sides and over my ass, where he gives me a squeeze.

The feeling of his hands on me has me jumping up without thinking and wrapping my legs around his waist. He groans, pulling my hips tighter against him. My back hits the wall and I whimper. His mouth leaves mine and travels to my ear, nipping it before his lips make their way down my neck, licking and biting along the way. When his mouth comes back to mine, my hips grind against him, trying to get some friction.

“Coffee’s ready—oh! Crap. Sorry,” I hear Viv say. My eyes open, my teeth release his bottom lip, and I look over his shoulder, seeing Viv heading back into the kitchen. His hand cups my cheek, pulling my attention back to him.

“I hate that she hit you.” His words and the look in his eyes as he studies my cheek make my heart start to pound harder.

“I’m okay. I’m sorry about your bed,” I tell him. Now that I’m not in the moment anymore, I feel bad for having lost my temper.

“I needed a new one anyways.” He smiles, and my fingers go to his cheek, pressing into his dimple.

“We good now?” he asks, and I know he’s talking about this morning.

I fight myself on what to say. I need to be honest with him. He scares me, but not exploring this thing with him scares me more. I look over his shoulder before my eyes search his face.

“I know you didn’t mean it like you said it. You’re the first person in a very long time I find myself opening up to.” I cover his mouth with my hand when it looks like he’s going to speak.

“You’re also the first guy since my first that I have been interested in. I feel vulnerable when I’m with you, and I hate that your words have the power to crush me, but they do,” I confess softly.

His hand comes to mine, pulling it from his mouth, and he kisses my palm before placing it against his chest.

“I say shit I don’t mean sometimes. It’s no excuse and I’ll work on it, but you need to work on opening up to me.” His eyes search my face before his lips brush mine again. “You’re so fucking fearless that I forget how fragile you are.”

The words gently spoken against my lips cause my eyes to slide closed.

“I’m not fearless,” I tell him, resting my forehead against his. “I’m afraid all the damn time.”

“Nah.” He shakes his head. “You’re a fucking warrior.”

6

ANNOYING ROOMIES AND BAD GUYS

WHEN I PULL up to the house, it's just after seven in the morning. Yesterday, after the tow truck showed up and Kenton left to go back to work, Viv, Nancy, and I sat around the kitchen drinking coffee and chatting for a few hours. When Nancy asked about the video Cassie had been talking about, I cringed but told her and Viv what had happened and the real reason I was in Tennessee. Nancy was visibly upset about it, and I immediately told her that I would leave if she felt uncomfortable with me being here with her son.

The second the words left my mouth, she grabbed my face between her hands and I watched as tears slid down her cheeks. My heart broke when she looked into my eyes and spoke.

“This is exactly where you’re supposed to be. This is the safest place for you. This is where my son wants you. This is where we want you, so this is where you will stay.”

I started crying and buried my face in her chest, taking something from her I never received from my own mother—comfort. I hated crying, but something about crying while she held me healed a small piece of me. That lost, lonely little girl who was never allowed to show emotion was finally able to cry until she couldn’t cry anymore.

I shake my head, clearing the memory, and slide my key into the door. All I want to do is take a shower and go to sleep. I’m exhausted from being up early and not having a nap before

going to work. As soon as I can, I'm going to have them change my schedule. There is just no way I will be able to keep this up.

I make my way upstairs and head right to the bathroom. I take a quick shower and wrap a towel under my arms, not even bothering with brushing my hair. I pick my clothes up off the floor and head to my room without turning on the light. I toss my stuff in the direction of my closet before pulling off the towel and begin climbing into bed.

“How was work?”

I scream when I hear Kenton's voice. I jump off the bed and run to the closet, going inside and shutting the door.

“Why are you in the closet?” Kenton asks, and I can tell that he's laughing.

“Why are you in my bed?” I ask through the closed closet door while trying to find something to put on in the dark.

“Someone threw my bed outside.”

“*Shit!*” I whisper, closing my eyes.

“I'll sleep on the couch downstairs,” I tell him, pulling a hoodie on over my head.

When I open the closet door, I find a shirtless Kenton sitting on the side of the bed, wearing a pair of cut-off sweats that have seen better days. Somehow, I find the strength to pull my eyes from him and walk to my dresser, pulling out a pair of cotton Victoria's Secret panties and slipping them on under the hoodie.

“Where is your sexy underwear?”

“What?” I ask, my face heating up from the look in his eyes.

“You know. Silk thongs, lacy shit—where are they?”

“I don't wear those unless I have to. I would rather be comfortable,” I explain. I know that a lot of women go gaga over sexy panties, but I couldn't care less. I hate the feeling of something crawling up my ass all day.

“I have to tell you. I have seen you in those things three times now, and all three times, that damn underwear has done more for me than any skimpy shit I’ve ever seen.”

“Can we never talk about you and what you’ve seen other women wear please?”

He smirks, his eyes running down my legs. “Come to bed.”

“No.” I shake my head, looking at the door.

“You try to sleep on the couch and I’m dragging your ass back up here to bed,” he threatens.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Afraid you won’t be able to keep your hands off me?” He smiles.

“You wish.” I roll my eyes, knowing that is the exact reason why I don’t want to get into bed with him.

“Come on, babe. I can tell you’re tired.” I look at the bed then him. I am really tired. I open my dresser, pull out a pair of shorts, put them on, and walk over to the opposite side of the bed before getting in. I hear his laugh as he lies back down, shutting off the light. I put my back to him and close my eyes.

I’m just about asleep when I feel him put his hand around my waist, and he pulls me across the bed to him so his body curves around mine and his hand can wrap in my hair.

“What are you doing?” I ask him sleepily.

“Sleeping,” he says softly, kissing the back of my head. I know I should get up and leave or at least put up a little bit of a fight about cuddling with him for the third night in a row, but I can’t. I feel too warm, too comfortable, and way too exhausted to fight what I’m feeling.

I feel him kiss me again and his hand go a little tighter, and I’m pretty sure I hear him whisper, “She’s getting it,” as I fall asleep.

I WAKE UP in complete darkness. My first thought is how great I feel. I have forgotten what it feels like to wake up after

a good night's sleep. It takes a second to realize that it's pitch black in the room. I sit up quickly and look at the clock on the bedside table, and my heart starts beating out of my chest when I see that it's four o'clock.

I missed work!

I jump out of bed and run to the door, swinging it open only to be bombarded with bright daylight. I look over my shoulder into the room and see that there are now dark, wooden blinds on the windows, whereas before there were only sheer curtains. My heart, which was already beating hard, starts to beat harder. Kenton put in blinds while I was at work, knowing how little sleep I've been getting. That was sweet. Really sweet.

I go to the bathroom, quickly taking care of business, and then head down to the kitchen. As soon as I make it around the corner, I'm surprised to see Kenton there, wearing the same cut-off sweats he had on last night and a pair of sneakers. His head is back, his throat working vigorously while he downs a bottle of water. The ends of his hair are dripping with sweat along with his bare chest.

I stand there captivated by him; I can't pull my eyes away no matter how hard I try. Just watching him drink water is making the space between my legs get tingly. When the bottle's empty, he pulls it from his mouth, the back of his hand goes to his lips, and he swipes them. As soon as his head turns, his eyes land on me and a look I'm starting to become familiar with fills his eyes.

"How'd you sleep?" he rumbles.

I stand there staring at him, trying to comprehend what he just said over the lustful haze that's filling my head.

"You put up blinds," I say when I finally find my words and then want to smack myself for being an idiot.

"I know how tired you've been," he says, his eyes going soft.

"That was very sweet, and I actually slept really great. When I woke up, I thought I'd overslept and missed work."

His smile makes the breath catch in my throat.

“I thought you would be at work,” I tell him, trying to think of something else to say besides, “*Please kiss me.*”

“Yeah. I have to leave for a couple of nights. Justin has a lead for me, but my flight isn’t until after midnight, and I wanted to make sure you would be okay being here alone.”

My heart plummets. I don’t want him to leave, but I know his work is important. Plus, I would look really stupid if I were to beg him to stay.

“I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me.” I wave him off, trying to do the same with the feeling of loneliness starting to fill my chest. I’ve forgotten what that feels like; I haven’t felt it since I moved here.

He shakes his head and takes two long steps until his body is crowding mine.

“I like worrying about you.”

“Why?” I ask softly, my eyes drawn to his mouth.

“Honesty, I don’t know.” I look at him and my hands go to his chest when I feel like I might fall over from the heat in his eyes.

“What I do know is I want this”—his finger presses lightly into my chest above my heart—“more than I’ve wanted anything, and that right there tells me everything I need to know.”

“Oh,” I breathe. The words aren’t deep or particularly meaningful, but something about the way he said it, with such sincerity, has me leaning deeper into him.

His hand goes to the back of my neck and the other around my waist. I expect him to kiss me, but instead, he just pulls my head into his naked chest and the rest of me tighter against him.

We stand there for a long time with our arms wrapped around each other. I want to ask what he’s thinking, but I’m too afraid to break the moment. Instead, I listen to the sound of his heart beating rhythmically against my ear as I memorize

the thud and double beat along with the way his chest feels when it expands against my cheek. This is a moment I know I can recall the next time I need comfort.

“When I get home, we have a date.”

“Maybe.” I smile as I hear his low growl.

“I’m not even pissed that you wanna fuck with me right now.” He pulls my head away from his chest, his hands go around my neck, and his thumbs slide under my jaw, tilting my head back. His mouth lowers and my eyes start to flutter closed.

“Every time you fuck with me, it makes me wanna fuck you. One day, we’re going to get to a point in our relationship where you’ll say something to set me off and I’ll bend you over right where you stand and punish you for misbehaving or talking back.”

My clit starts to pulse. I can feel my breathing increase, my chest meeting his on each deep inhale. He closes the gap between us, his lips touching mine. When his tongue touches my bottom lip, my eyes close and I get lost in his kiss. By the time he pulls his mouth from mine, I’ve never hated clothes more than I do right now. I have the urge to take off my sweatshirt and plaster my chest against his.

“I gotta shower,” he says, resting his forehead on mine.

“Sure.” I nod, my eyes still closed.

He chuckles and shakes his head against mine.

“If you don’t wanna come shower with me, baby, you need to hop off.”

I open my eyes, seeing that my fingers have somehow gotten tangled into his hair and my legs have wrapped around his waist. I bite my bottom lip, place my hands on his shoulders, unwrap my legs, and hop down.

“Sorry.” I shake my head, trying to clear my needful haze.

“Don’t apologize.” He kisses my nose then forehead. “I’ll be back down to say goodbye before I leave.”

“Okay.” I nod again.

His hand goes to his chest then runs down his abs. My eyes follow its movement until they drop lower, seeing his very apparent erection outlined through his sweats. My eyes get big and lift to his when he starts to laugh.

“Jesus, you’re cute.” He shakes his head, running a hand down his face.

“I gotta go before you end up on the counter.” His voice sounds deeper than normal, and I nod again.

“Baby, you gotta move,” he says, his hands fisting at his sides.

My gaze drops to his hands before shooting back up to his eyes when he growls. I don’t know what’s going on, but I immediately step aside so he can get out of the kitchen. I watch him walk away, his head bent as he mumbles something under his breath.

“Coffee,” I whisper to myself.

I PULL UP to the house, seeing a strange car parked out front. My pulse starts to speed up as I wonder who it could be. Kenton messaged me when I was at work, letting me know that he had arrived at his destination safely. I didn’t ask where he was; I figured that, if he wanted me to know, he would tell me. I worry that he’s in danger, and maybe his leaving has something to do with my situation. I don’t want him hurt because of me, but I trust that he knows what he’s doing. After all, he’s been doing it for years without incident.

I slowly pull into the driveway, trying to angle the car in case I need to make a quick escape. As soon as I’m able to see the front porch, I spot Justin sitting on the top step with a black duffel bag at his side and his head bent towards his phone. His head comes up when I get out of the car and slam the door.

“Hey ya, roomie,” he says, giving me a goofy smile.

“Roomie?” I ask, looking at the bag next to him and then noticing the sleeping bag he has along with it.

“Yep. Boss man told me to stay here with you,” he says, pointing a finger at me while standing. “I’m here until he gets home.”

“That’s not necessary.” I start shaking my head frantically. Justin seems like a nice kid, but I’m not sure I can deal with him for more than a few minutes without wanting to strangle him.

“Aw, come on! It’s going to be a great time. If you’re nice, I’ll let you paint my nails. I even brought my own color,” he says, pulling a bottle of black nail polish out of his pocket.

“I’m not painting your nails,” I huff out, wondering why the hell he would be carrying it around with him in the first place.

“Okay, you don’t have to. I can do it myself.” He shrugs, putting the bottle back in his pocket before bending down to pick up his bags.

“You don’t need to stay here,” I repeat.

“Have you met my boss?” He raises an eyebrow. “He is scary. If he calls and says, ‘Justin, I need you to stay with Autumn until I get home,’ I say, ‘Okay, no problem, boss man.’”

“No offense, but I think I’m just as safe alone as I would be with you. Actually, I think I’m better off on my own. If you’re here, I have to worry about both of us.”

“You should never judge, sweet cheeks. I was a sniper. I know how to kill someone with one finger, and I guarantee nothing will happen to you while I’m here.”

Wow, okay. Didn’t see that coming. So I’m probably safer with him, but I still don’t want him here.

“I think I should call Kenton,” I tell him, pulling out my cell.

“He’s gone to ground,” he singsongs.

“What does that mean?”

“It means he is unavailable until he’s available.”

“But what if you need to talk to him? What if *I* need to talk to him?”

“If there’s an emergency and he needs to get back here, there’s a code,” he says conspiratorially.

“What’s the code?” I ask, watching as he pulls out a set of keys from his pocket, opening the front door.

“No way, Sweetcheeks. You don’t need to know the code.”

“What is it?” I put my hands on my hips, glaring at him.

“I can’t tell ya.” He shrugs, stepping into the house, and as soon as he’s inside, he turns, grabs my arm, and drags me with him.

“Now, boss man said I have to be on my best behavior and to not say anything stupid or try anything on you...unless I want to see what it feels like to be neutered. I thought that was taking things a little too far, but he didn’t feel the same.” He smiles, walking into the living room to set his bags down.

“Also, I’m sorry to say you’re going to have to keep your hands to yourself and control the urge to molest me.” He flexes his arms, and I close my eyes and groan.

“I’ll try to control myself,” I say, opening my eyes, wondering if there is a way out of this.

I’m going to kill Kenton.

“That would be appreciated. I wish things were different, but I like my balls just the way they are. Plus, I don’t think you want to explain to my mom why I can’t give her grandchildren.”

Oh, God. Maybe I should make a move on him to save the world from him reproducing.

“I need to go to bed,” I tell him, shaking my head.

“I’ll be here.” He pulls out some kind of gaming console from his bag and sets it on the coffee table. Then he pulls out a

controller and some wires, but what I don't see are clothes.

I watch him for a few minutes as he connects the system to the TV, and after he has everything hooked up, he sits down on the couch, pulls out a pair of headphones that have a mic, puts them on, and then turns on the game.

The second it loads, the loud sound of guns firing fills the room and men wearing camo appear on the screen. I look at the TV then at Justin and shake my head before leaving the room. I don't care if Kenton has gone to ground; I need to text him to let him know that I'm going to kill him when he gets home. Then I need to go to bed. I go upstairs, pull out my phone, and send Kenton a text.

Me: I hope you make it home safely so I can kill you when you get here.

I press send then bite my lip, wondering if I should apologize. I know he has my best interest at heart, but I do not want a babysitter. I toss my phone on the bed, grab some clothes from the dresser, and make my way across the hall to shower. When I get back to my room, I go directly to my phone and press the button, seeing that I got a text back.

Kenton: Sweet dreams, baby.

That's it? He didn't even address my threat. I huff out a breath, shake my head, toss the phone onto the bed, and pick it right back up to send another text.

Me: Ditto.

I hit send then feel stupid, wondering if I should've just left it alone.

I WAKE UP in complete darkness for the second morning in a row. My first thought is Kenton. I miss not having him hold me. I don't know how it's possible to miss sleeping with someone after only having it for a few nights, but I do. I stretch out and look at the clock. It's three thirty. I need to get

up, send some e-mails, and pay a few bills before I have to get ready for work.

I got an e-mail back from Sid the other day, and I could tell even through e-mail that he was upset I hadn't called him. Link also told me that I should try not to have too much contact with anyone in Vegas. He's worried I could somehow be tracked. I think this is a little over the top, but what do I know?

I don't miss home as much as I thought I would. I really don't miss my old life at all. I know that Link can tell that I'm thinking about moving to Tennessee. The last time I spoke with him, he told me that he would be willing to have my stuff packed up and sent out to me if that's what I want. The idea of making this my permanent home is exciting and scary. I just want to make the right choice.

I get out of bed and pull on a pair of sweats before opening my door. The first things I hear are explosions and yelling coming from the living room below. I slept for over eight hours, and I wonder if Justin sat downstairs playing that game the whole time. Then I wonder how the hell he's supposed to 'look out for me' when he probably wouldn't hear if someone were to break down the front door.

"I made coffee!" Justin yells over the TV as soon as I make it to the bottom landing. I wonder how the hell he heard me when the stairs didn't even squeak.

"Told you—you are safe with me," he teases loudly as soon as I finish my thought.

I shake my head and walk into the living room, seeing that the whole space is covered with food wrappers and open bottles of soda. I have no idea how he consumed so much food in such a short amount of time. I take a seat next to him on the couch, pull a bag of Doritos from the coffee table to my lap, shove my hand in the bag, pull out a handful, and stuff my face.

"What game is this?" I ask through a mouthful while watching a guy get his head blown off.

“Call of Duty,” he mumbles.

“These fuckers are campin’!” he shouts into the mic while the guy on the screen looks around him, trying to find whoever is shooting at him.

Before I know it, I’m yelling at the TV every time Justin gets shot at. I get so lost in the game that I don’t even realize how late it is until I look at the clock and see that it’s already after eight at night and I haven’t done anything with my day besides eat junk food and lie on the couch.

“I gotta get ready for work,” I tell Justin.

He grunts and nods. I get up and go to the office to get online. After I pay my bills, I check my e-mail, and the first one is from Sid.

Angel,

There is so much I should have told you, so many things I should have said. I want to hear your voice. Please call me. My number hasn’t changed.

XX Sid

I close my eyes and lay my forehead against the desk. I do not want to deal with this, but I know I need to let Sid know that there’s nothing between us and never will be. I feel bad, but I know I’ll feel worse if I let him believe even for a second that I felt anything for him.

“What’s going on?”

I lift my head and look at Justin, who is standing in the open doorway of the office.

“Nothing.”

“It’s something,” he says, coming in and setting a cup of coffee down on the desk in front of me as he takes a seat and raises an eyebrow.

“Thanks.” I take a drink of the coffee and sigh with happiness.

“So, what’s going on?” he repeats, and I know there is no way he is going to let it go.

“My old boss sent me an e-mail and wants me to call him.”

“That’s nice,” he says, leaning back in the chair.

“I think he believes there’s something between us,” I say quietly, shaking my head.

“Boss man won’t like that.” He smiles, rubbing his eyes.

“Kenton won’t care.”

“I beg to differ, sweet cheeks.” He shrugs. “I’ve known Kenton for a long time and have seen plenty of women come and go—”

“I don’t want to know this,” I cut him off, feeling a ball of jealousy beginning to form in the pit of my stomach.

“Do you want to know how many times I came to stay when Cassie was living here and Kenton went out of town?”

“No.”

“Do you want to know how many times he asked the guys to swing by her job to check on her or any of the other women he’s been with?”

“No,” I repeat again, that warm feeling settling in.

“Do you know how many women he’s become possessive over?”

“No,” I whisper.

“The answer to all of the above is *zero*. You are the first woman to have him tied in fucking knots, and I know you’re going to say it’s because he’s looking out for you, but I guaran-fucking-tee it that’s not the reason.”

“Please don’t say anything else,” I mumble.

“Why are all women the same?” He shakes his head, running a hand through his long hair. “Women are always talking about how men are so afraid to commit when the truth is you guys send the most fucking confusing signals. One minute, you want us, and the next, you’re running away.”

I raise an eyebrow and he shakes his head again.

“E-mail your boss and let him down easy. If you don’t and Kenton finds out about him, *he* will let him know and won’t be nice about it.”

“I think you’re blowing this out of proportion.”

“You think so?” He smiles and gives a small, humorless laugh. “Kenton had one of his best friends by the throat for calling you a sweet piece a few days after they saw you at the hospital. It took three dudes to pull Kenton off him. I’ve never seen him react like that over a female.”

I have no idea what to do with that information. I’m not even sure I want to know what all of that means exactly.

Justin continues. “All I’m sayin’ is whether you want to be or not, you’re his, and he won’t like your ex-boss sniffing around.”

“Did you beat the game?” I ask, trying to change the subject.

“You never beat Call of Duty.” He smiles then looks out the window

“Have you heard from him today?” I ask softly, thinking about everything he just told me and really wanting to talk to Kenton. I want to know that he’s okay. I really want him to know that I’m thinking about him and miss sleeping with him.

“Not after your text last night, though I’m surprised he messaged you back. But that only proves my point—you’re the exception.”

“You know I sent him a text?” I ask, surprised and slightly annoyed while ignoring everything else he just said.

“His phone goes thorough my computer. I get all his messages. It’s easier than waiting for him to send me the info I need. In this business, a second can mean the difference between landing a case and getting hurt.” He stands up and leans on the side of the desk.

I don’t want him hurt, so I’m glad they’re taking every precaution necessary. Then I wonder what kind of texts Kenton gets daily where he needs that kind of precaution.

“Oh God,” I whisper in horror when I realize that Justin probably saw my drunken texts to Kenton. “Do you read all his personal messages?”

He smiles and nods.

“Yeah. The ones from his mom are the best.” He starts to laugh, and I can only imagine the kinds of texts Nancy sends Kenton.

I’m sure they’re something like, *Did you eat your vegetables? Are you taking your vitamins? Do you have clean socks and underwear?*

“I like Nancy.”

“She likes you too,” he says softly, making me wonder what he knows.

I look away and try to swallow the lump in my throat.

“I’m gonna go back out and finish my game while you send your e-mail.”

“Sure.” I try to smile, but I know that it’s one that doesn’t meet my eyes. I wiggle the mouse around until the screen lights back up and press reply on Sid’s e-mail.

Sid,

I don’t want you to think that I haven’t appreciated you or your friendship over the last few years. I also don’t want you to think that I don’t care about you, but I don’t think we have anything else to talk about.

I wish you all the best, Autumn

I press send and hope that he understands. I know he may think that he cares about me or wants a relationship with me, but I’ve had a front row seat to Sid’s dating life over the last few years, and if he really wanted something serious with me, I doubt he would’ve paraded all of those women in front of me.

I close down the computer and yell to Justin as I’m passing the living room that I’m going to get ready for work. He says

something back that I don't really understand due to the loud sounds coming from the TV.

Kenton

“FUCK, MAN. GOOD to see you,” Link says as soon as he spots me when I exit the airport.

I pull him in for a one-armed hug and pat him on the back, and he does the same before we separate. He pops the trunk for his SUV. I toss my duffel bag in and then walk around and climb into the passenger's seat.

“I wish you were here under different circumstances,” he says, running a hand over his head and using the other to start up the car.

“Me too, brother.” I pull out my phone and see a message from Justin letting me know that he's at the house and Autumn is home safe from work. I don't think it'll be long before she messages me, telling me off about Justin being there.

“The police really wanted to call Autumn, but I told them she's in Europe and I would get a message to her as soon as possible,” Link says.

“Fuck,” I clip. “I don't want her to know her place was broken into.”

Yesterday, while I was still wrapped around her in bed, Justin called and woke me up to tell me that Link had been trying to get ahold of me to let me know that Autumn's condo had been broken into. I didn't want her to know what was going on, but I needed to see for myself if I could find out what had gone down and if the break-in had anything to do with the shooting at the club.

“Chances are the two things are completely separate. Someone probably noticed that her place has been empty for a while and wanted to see if they could find anything worth pawning,” Link deduces.

Those are my thoughts too, but I'm not going to chance it. I know the local PD is trying to find out what's going on, but they're taking way too fucking long.

"I'm not leaving this shit to chance. While I'm here, I need to see the tapes from the night of the shooting."

"They're at the club," he says, pulling onto the highway. "Sid's there tonight. He'll let you look them over. I figure you can sleep for a while, and then we can head to the club later."

"Sounds good."

We drive in silence for a few minutes, and I know that he's dying to ask about Autumn. I'm just waiting for him to say something, hoping it doesn't piss me off when he does.

"How's Autumn?" I smirk, looking over at him.

"A pain in my ass."

"She got to you, didn't she?" he asks softly, tapping his thumbs on the top of the steering wheel.

"Yeah, man." I shake my head. "She's not what I expected."

"She's thinkin' about movin' to Tennessee."

"I know," I reply, feeling a hint of jealousy that she talked to Link about it.

"Don't hurt her, man. She's a good woman," he says. I feel a growl start to vibrate my chest. I know there's never been anything between them, but that doesn't mean it doesn't piss me right the fuck off that he feels like he can look out for her.

"Don't," I say, hoping he gets it.

"There's a lot you don't know."

"I know she has a sadness inside her that she tries to fight, but it's so deep that she gets lost in it and has a hard time finding her way out. I know she freaks when she's tickled and has a hard time letting people in. I know she has a boy she lost, and the loss still haunts her. But I also know that she smells like flowers, loves to be held even if she denies it, is cute as fuck when she's angry, and is funny as hell when she

lets down her walls. I may not know everything, but I know enough that I want to know more,” I tell him, hoping he gets that this isn’t some passing fuck to me.

I also hope that he understands that, yes, he may know more than I do, but she is mine to worry about now. I don’t like explaining myself to people, but I want him to comprehend that she is not a conquest; she is mine, and I take looking out for her very seriously.

“When she’s ready for me to know everything, she will open up to me.”

“Right,” he replies, no sarcasm to be found in his tone.

“Tell me about Sid.” I know that Autumn worked for him, but I don’t know what kind of man he is or if he keeps his business on the up- and-up.

“He’s a good dude. I’ve known him for the last five years. He’s good to the girls at the club, always willing to help them out.” He pauses and takes a breath. “He has a soft spot for Autumn.”

“Have they had a relationship?” I grit out.

“Autumn doesn’t date. Sid’s been tryin’ to get in there for years, but she hasn’t ever clued in or returned any of his feelings.”

That makes me feel somewhat better about meeting him, but it doesn’t mean I want to sit back and have a beer with the guy.

“Do you think he was in on what went down?”

“Nah. He wouldn’t put anyone in that kind of danger. He knew three of the men who came into the club for the meeting, but the fourth was not someone he planned for. From what I understand, the fourth man was a guy by the name of Terry Waters. He was the owner of two of the largest strip clubs in Vegas. The police had been working on building a case against him for sex trafficking and prostitution.”

“Jesus.” I shake my head, wondering what the fuck to do with this information.

“They think he was the target,” Link explains, and I see that his knuckles turning white on the steering wheel.

“So the rest were just casualties?”

“Basically.” He shrugs. My phone beeps and I click my messages, seeing that it’s from Autumn. I smile before I even read her message. I know she’s pissed about Justin being there, but I want to make sure she’s safe while I’m out of town and don’t want her at home alone. I don’t think the shooter has any clue where she is, but I know that Cassie is still on a rampage. The good news is that, as soon as Cassie gets my message from Finn, she will no longer be an issue, but until things get sorted, I don’t want her fucking with Autumn while I’m gone, especially after I found out that she’s the one who posted the video of Autumn on YouTube after they’d been at the same club.

Am I pissed that Autumn was letting some guy do body shots off her? Hell yes, but I know she was completely smashed when it happened. I also acknowledge that she never had a chance to experience that kind of thing before. Do I wish it had been me licking salt off her tight, little body? Fuck yes, I do, but I know only me and my mouth will be allowed to touch her from now on.

I look at the message from her and laugh before quickly replying. We pull up to Link’s apartment and I realize that I’m fucking beat from the last few days. Autumn’s schedule has mine all fucked up.

A few minutes later, I’m already toeing off my boots, ready to collapse on his guest bed, when he tells me from the doorway, “I have some shit to take care of, but I’ll be back later, and we can head to the club then.”

“Sure, man. Thanks,” I tell him. Then I listen as he walks down the hallway and shuts the front door. I pull out my phone, see that she replied with one word—*Ditto*—and smile and close my eyes.

“Sid, this is Kenton. Kenton, this is Sid,” Link introduces us later that night.

I look Sid over, and the first thing I notice is how put together he is. I imagine that he spends more time getting ready than most women do. His suit is tailored, his hair is combed over to the side, each piece styled just right, and his fingernails even look manicured.

“Nice to meet you.” He sticks out his hand and I grasp it with one of mine, giving him a firm shake.

“You too.” I nod, looking around inside the club, understanding from the decor where it got the name The Lion’s Den.

“Kenton needs to see the tapes from the night of the shooting,” Link says, bringing me back to the conversation.

“You working with the police?” Sid asks, looking me over.

“Kenton’s the friend I was tellin’ you about,” Link informs him, and Sid’s eyes come back to me.

“You think you can find the shooter?”

“I’ll do what I can.” My main concern is Autumn and keeping her safe. I don’t care about any of the other shit.

“Follow me.”

We walk down a long hall and into a dark office, where there is a large desk in the center of the room and large computer monitors lining one wall.

“We didn’t get the guy on tape. He avoided all the cameras in the building and the two outside.” He starts up the tapes from the night of the shooting.

There are no shots of the man in question, but there are images of Autumn running through the club, and even through the grainy images, I can see the terror on her face.

“Where were the bouncers?”

“Two were out front and one was at the door,” Sid answers.

“Did they see the shooter?” I ask, looking at the different screens to pinpoint the security on duty.

“No.” He shakes his head then looks at the screen paused on a picture of Autumn.

“How did he get the drinks that were being delivered to the private party?”

“That’s something we haven’t been able to figure out. The bar registered and filled the drink orders but never had them delivered.”

“So someone who works for you was in on it?” I ask, trying to get him to see that he can’t trust anyone right now.

“I’m not sure,” he says, running a hand down his face. “I want to say I trust everyone who works for me, but unfortunately, I can’t.”

“I’m gonna need to talk to the other bouncers,” I state.

“Both the guys who worked that night are on now. You can use my office,” he offers.

“Thanks,” I tell him before he heads out of the room to bring the guys back.

“What are you thinking?” Link asks.

“How well do you know the guys who were on that night?” I ask instead.

“We’re friendly, but not friends,” Link says as I lean against the side of the desk, looking at the still image of Autumn.

I hate that she’s involved in this shit. I don’t like the idea of someone on the inside being involved in what went down. That means that they know who she is—and possibly *where* she is.

“My guess is that one of them has something to do with the shooter being a ghost. Have you told anyone where Autumn is?”

“Hell no.” Link shakes his head, his eyes coming back to me. “I haven’t even told Sid that information. He told me he e-

mailed her and she wrote back, but she didn't let him know where she was."

That makes me feel marginally better, but I still don't like the idea of her being in contact with the guy.

"When the guys come in, we're going to play it cool. I'm going to ask some questions about what went down and see if they have any leads for me. Most of the time, when someone is involved in something like this, they try to make up for their sins by overly playing the good guy."

"I'll follow your lead," Link says, and he does just that. He's the guys' source of familiarity and comfort. It doesn't take long for me to figure out that Mick is hiding something. After about twenty minutes, I thank them for their time and let them know that I will be around if they remember anything else. As soon as the office door closes, I look at Link, who shakes his head and closes his eyes.

"I'm gonna let Sid know we're out."

"I'll meet you outside." I head out the front of the club and pull out my phone to send a quick text to Justin to let him know what's going on. With this new development, I'm going to need his skills to pull up some info on Mick.

About an hour later, Link and I are in his home office, sorting through the information we obtained at the club, when I receive Justin's email.

"What does it say?" Link asks, looking over my shoulder at the report Justin sent me on Mick.

"From what Justin was able to find, old Mickey-boy has been having money problems. He was three months behind on his rent, had about ten thousand dollars worth of credit card debt, and took a title loan out on his car in the amount of two thousand bucks. Two weeks before things went down at the club, he deposited thirty thousand dollars cash into his account. Did he say anything about hitting the lotto or winning at the casino?" I spin the chair around and lean back.

"Nah, he never said anything like that," he mumbles.

"If he had, would he brag about it?"

“Mick?”

He nods. “Hell yes, he would brag about it.”

“Looks like we need to have another talk with him.” I shake my head and look up at the ceiling. After letting out a long sigh, I stand and we head out to Link’s SUV.

We park across the street from Mick’s place and wait for him to show up. About two hours after we arrive, he pulls into the driveway, and Mick and a stumbling blonde get out of his car and start heading inside. I get out of the truck and slam the door closed, and when Mick turns in my direction, even in the dark I can see his eyes widen when he spots me and Link walking across the street.

“What are you doing here?” he asks, taking a step back towards his closed door.

“Darlin’, you’re gonna need to call a cab,” I tell the blonde.

She nods, pulls her phone out of her purse, and starts walking away without saying a word.

“What are you doing here?” Mick repeats, watching his date walk to the end of his driveway.

“Open the door. We need to talk.”

“I’m not letting you in.” He looks at Link then back at me and swallows.

“You can either open the door and we’ll talk about this shit inside, or you don’t open the door and I call the cops, tell them what I know, and we can see what they think. What do you think they’ll say when I tell them you deposited thirty grand cash into your account? Do you think they will wonder how a bouncer at a club was able to get that kind of dough?” I ask, creeping closer to him, watching him swallow thickly again.

“Link, you’re cool with the local PD, right?” I ask, looking over my shoulder at him.

“I have a few friends on the force,” he replies, pulling out his phone.

“We can talk inside,” Mick mumbles, pulling out his key and opening the door.

As soon as we get inside, I notice that everything is new, from his couch to his kitchen appliances.

“Nice place,” Link voices loud enough for me to hear.

“Can we get this over with?” Mick says, walking into the kitchen. He grabs a beer from the fridge, holds one out to me, and then offers one towards Link.

I shake my head, and Link does the same.

“Let’s talk about how you got thirty thousand dollars,” I say to start.

“I won at the casino.” He shrugs, looking away.

“You don’t want to lie to me.” I take a step towards him while blocking the kitchen exit. “Now tell me how you got the thirty grand.”

“I can’t tell you that.” He retreats as I take another step towards him. “You don’t understand, man.” His head drops forward, his hand going through his hair. “These dudes are fucking scary... A lot fucking scarier than you. They’ll kill me.”

“You’re right. They will, but they’ll probably do that anyways.” I lean back slightly and pull out my phone from my back pocket so I can bring up the message from Justin. “The men you’re protecting are part of Lacamo, one of the biggest crime families in the United States. You mean nothing to them.” I show him the email with a sketch of the suspect along with a picture of one of the most notorious Mob hit men, who matches the sketch perfectly. “I’m guessing you have no real understanding of what you’ve done.”

“I didn’t know what was going to happen.” His face pales as he looks over the pictures.

“Have you told them about Autumn?”

He shakes his head, but his eyes don’t come back to me. Fury fills my veins as I realize the kind of danger my woman’s in now.

“You piece of shit,” I growl, shoving him into the counter. My hand goes around his neck and I can feel his pulse beating against my fingertips. I know that, if I squeeze his throat a little tighter, one less asshole will be breathing. “You’re gonna tell me exactly what you told them and how you get in contact with them.”

“I only told them her name,” he chokes out, my hand going tighter. “I never told them anything else about her, I swear.” His nails claw against my hand and his feet skid against the floor, trying to get leverage.

Link’s hand on my arm is the only thing that stops me from killing the fucker where we stand. I take a step back while shoving him away. I run a hand through my hair, trying to compose myself enough to think of my next move.

“Call in your friend from the local PD and tell them to pick up this piece of shit,” I say, looking over at Link.

“I told you what you wanted to know. Please don’t call the cops,” Mick whines. I turn my head in his direction and he lowers his eyes.

“As much as I want to leave you here and let you get what you deserve, you may be the only one who can stop these sick fucks, so that means I need to keep your punk ass safe until this shit’s taken care of.” I scrub a hand over my mouth as Link makes a call to his friend.

It takes two hours to get everything settled with the cops and Mick to be taken into custody. When we leave the local precinct, we make a plan to go to Autumn’s condo to have a look around. Once inside, I can tell that the person who broke in wasn’t looking for shit to pawn. Everything that has any value is still here. The only things gone through are papers, which tells me that whoever broke in was looking for information.

“Nothing here will point them to Tennessee,” Link says, shoving a stack of papers into the desk.

“True, but she needs to change her number and stop using her e-mail. I don’t want whoever this is to have any way to

track her down.”

“You gonna tell her what’s going on?” he asks quietly.

“I don’t have a choice.” I look around again before walking over and opening her balcony door.

The sun is just starting to set over the mountains, causing an orange-and-red glow to fill the horizon. After taking a seat in one of her deck chairs, I pull out my phone and send a text to Justin, telling him the latest development. Then I send a message to Autumn, letting her know what time my flight would arrive so she would be dressed and ready to go out. I also tell her to make sure to wear the red lipstick she wore to the club.

Just thinking about how she looked that night causes my cock to jump. I need to see how fucking long it would take to kiss that red off her mouth. Looking out at the sunset again, I can’t help but smile. I’m not buying a new bed for my room until she’s willing to help me pick it out and share it with me. Until I can convince her to move into my room, we will be staying in hers. I look down at my phone when it beeps.

Justin: Autumn is safe in bed. I’m running a cross-check on the names you sent. As soon as I know anything, I’ll send you the info.

I know Justin is a good kid, but I still hate that he’s there with her right now instead of me, even if I’m the one who ordered him to. I beat back the jealousy I feel and focus on what I need to do next.

Me: I get back tomorrow. Cancel all her e-mails/accounts and change her number. Now.

Justin: Already on it.

I look over my shoulder when I hear Link come out. I know he’s gonna want to know my next move, but until I get more info, my hands are tied.

“You good?” he asks, taking a seat across from me.

“Yeah.” I lean back, closing my eyes. “I need to make a few calls and see if I can get some info from a friend of mine before I head home.”

“I don’t envy you right now, man,” Link says.

I open one eye, look at him, and smirk. A pissed-off Autumn is a thing of beauty, and she’s going to be riled as hell when I get home.

A WHOLE LOTTA LIKE...

“WHY’S MY PHONE off and my e-mail not working?” I yell as I stomp into the living room, where Justin is still playing Call of Duty. I don’t know how I know, but I know he has something to do with it.

“You’re gonna have to wait to talk to boss man,” he mumbles, never taking his eyes off the TV.

“I’m asking you, so tell me why my phone is off, I no longer have an e-mail, and even my Facebook is gone...and I haven’t gotten on that thing in over eight months!”

“About that—you are not very photogenic. I think you should take some classes or something.”

“Are you frigging serious right now?” I pick up one of the throw pillows off the couch and start hitting him over the head with it.

“Stop! You’re making me lose the game!” He grabs the pillow out of my hand, tossing it across the room.

I start to run for it but then turn to see that he’s not even moving from his spot on the couch. My eyes travel from him to the TV then his Xbox.

“You better not,” he says, standing.

I lunge for the game system, ready to rip it out of the wall, when I’m tackled, but somehow, Justin flips us, taking the brunt of the landing, making me land on top of him, my thighs on either side of his waist. I reach for the pillow on the floor next to me and start to lift it above my head.

“What the *fuck* is going on?”

I close my eyes and press my lips together when I hear Kenton’s voice, and when I open my eyes, I glare at Justin before standing up and facing the door of the living room. I fight the urge to run to him when our eyes lock. I’ve missed him these last few days, and he looks even hotter than normal with the extra scruff darkening his jaw, making it appear squarer.

“I asked a fucking question. What the fuck is going on?” he asks, taking his eyes off me, pinning Justin with a ferocious scowl.

“That’s what I want to know.” I cross my arms over my chest and glare first at Kenton and then at Justin, who glares back at me as he goes to stand next to his boss.

“Your girlfriend’s crazy,” Justin mumbles to him loud enough for me to hear.

“Shut up,” I hiss.

“No, you shut up,” he retorts immaturely.

“No, you shut up,” I repeat, taking a step towards Kenton.

“Jesus, what the fuck?!” Kenton shouts, making me jump back.

“Why’s my phone disconnected along with my e-mail and Facebook?” I ask, directing my haughtiness at Kenton this time. He looks at me for a long moment before his head drops forward, his hand going to the back of his neck.

“We need to talk,” he says, lifting his head, looking me over. Then his eyes go to Justin.

“Thanks for helpin’ out,” he says begrudgingly.

“No prob, boss,” Justin says and starts to gather all of his stuff up, shoving it all back into the same bag he showed up here with. When he’s finished packing everything, Kenton walks him to the door, where they have a quiet conversation before Kenton pats him on the back and opens the door.

“See ya around, Copper,” Justin says over his shoulder. I give him a wave, and he smiles before heading out of the house, the front door closing behind him.

As soon as Kenton faces me again, his eyes turn dark and his jaw starts to tick.

“Come here.”

“Wh-what?” I stutter, looking at his clenched fists and the pulse of his neck, which is beating rapidly.

“Come here,” he repeats, the tone of his voice making me freeze in place.

“Why?” I ask softly.

“First, I haven’t seen or touched you in days and need to reassure myself that you’re good. Second, I need your help getting the image of what I just saw out of my head.”

His words have my feet moving before my brain even has a chance to catch up. I do a face-plant into his chest, wrapping my arms around his waist and breathing him in. Every breath I take eases some of the anxiety I didn’t even know I was feeling.

“What’s going on?” I whisper into his chest. His muscles tense and I’m not sure I want to know anymore.

“Let’s sit down.” He takes my hand in his and leads me to the couch, where he tugs me down into his lap. “Your place in Vegas was broken into.”

“Shit,” I whisper. “What was taken?”

I don’t really have anything of value, so I’m not too worried, but it still doesn’t feel good knowing that someone broke in.

“Nothin’,” he says, surprising me.

“What do you mean?” I ask, searching his face.

“Found out that Mick was the inside source at the club the night of the shooting.” He runs a hand down my back. “He told them who you are, and we’re guessing it was them who broke into your place.”

I don't want to believe that Mick was involved in what happened, especially because he and Tessa were sleeping together, but I'm not really surprised. Mick is a self-centered asshole who doesn't care about anyone but himself.

"Okay, so what do we do now?" I wonder out loud. I can't think of anything I left behind that would lead anyone here, but I can't be sure.

His eyebrows come together in confusion and his hand travels to the back of my neck then up into my hair, fisting it.

"You're not gonna cry?"

"No," I reply, feeling my own eyebrows pull together, wondering why I should cry.

"Warrior," he says quietly, his eyes going soft, making my heart pound a little harder. "I have a guy who's connected to the organization that planned the hit. I sent him a message and am just waiting for him to get back to me."

"What do you think they're going to do?"

"Not sure, but I doubt they want the kind of publicity they'll create if they try to send their guy after you."

"What do they care about publicity if they are who you say they are?"

"They're in control of half of Vegas. They may be Mob, but even they have an image to uphold," he explains.

"They killed innocent people," I remind him on a whisper. The thought of people like that caring what others think about them is laughable.

"They planned the hit, but their hands are clean." He shrugs.

I look into his eyes and see an understanding that confuses me, and I wonder if he's ever used that excuse. I lift my hand and run it along the roughness of his jaw.

"Are you okay?" I ask him, seeing the weariness around his eyes.

"Yeah, but I'll be even better when this shit's over."

I hear the tiredness in his voice and wonder how much sleep he's gotten since he left. I push my fingers through his hair and his eyes start to close at the contact.

"You should take a nap," I tell him softly. "We can figure out everything else later."

"You gonna take one with me?" he asks.

Without thinking, I nod and he maneuvers me so that I'm straddling him. My breath leaves on a whoosh, my hands go to his shoulders, and his go to my ass. Our mouths are so close that I feel each of his breaths against my lips. I expect him to kiss me, but instead, he stands up off the couch. My legs wrap around his waist and I bite my lip when I feel the hard length of his arousal against my core through the thin material of my shorts.

When we reach my room, he pushes open the door and gently lays me on the bed before stepping back and taking off his boots and shirt. I watch, mesmerized, as his arm and abs flex when his fingers go to the button of his jeans and he pulls them down. I can see his hard-on outlined through his boxers, and my eyes travel up his body to his eyes, which look sleepy. I scoot back in the bed as he shuts off the light, and I feel the bed compress and his weight hit my side.

I try to ignore the ache between my legs as I lie on my back with his arm around my waist, his breath hitting my neck and his thigh over my legs. I try to calm down, but his hand lifts my shirt and my muscles clench. I expect him to grab my breast or touch me sexually, but he surprises me yet again when his hand just lies against my skin. All of my nerve endings are tingling in anticipation, and then I hear his light snore. My body relaxes and I take a deep breath, letting it out slowly before drifting off to sleep.

"Wake up, baby."

I feel a featherlight touch travel down the side of my face. My eyes flutter open and connect with Kenton's.

"Hi," I say, blinking against the light coming in from the now open blinds in the room.

His fingers run down the underside of my jaw then up along my ear.

“You sleep okay when I was gone?” he asks, his eyes focused on his fingers traveling over my skin.

I think about lying and telling him that I slept great and didn't miss him at all, but something about the moment has me blurting out the truth.

“I missed sleeping with you.”

“Yeah?” His eyes search my face as I nod and close my eyes, feeling too exposed. “I slept like shit.”

His words make my eyes open and search his face.

“Hated that I couldn't be here to look out for you and Justin was doing my job. I didn't like that another man was in the house with you.”

“I wouldn't—” I start to tell him that I would never even think about Justin like that, but his finger covers my lips and his head lowers towards mine.

“I know you wouldn't. I still didn't like it.” He takes away his finger and lowers his face towards mine.

The first touch of his lips is soft, and my eyes flutter closed as his hand runs along my jaw to the back of my neck. I whimper when his tongue runs along my bottom lip before nipping it with his teeth. My hands find their way into his hair so I can hold him to me. His hips shift and his hand at my hair travels down along my side then up and under the shirt I'm wearing, settling just below my breast.

As his mouth devours mine, I pull my mouth from his, pressing my head back into the pillow, lifting my chest, trying to get his hand to move. His thumb sweeps over my nipple; the slight contact has me moaning loudly.

“I need to see you,” he rumbles, pulling away. His hands go to the hem of the shirt, pulling it off over my head and tossing it to the floor behind him.

I start to cover myself, but his hands capture mine and tug them above my head. His eyes travel down my body, and

when they come back to mine, the dark hunger I see makes me hold my breath. His mouth lowers towards mine again, his tongue plunging between my lips, not giving me a choice but to kiss him back. When his mouth leaves mine, traveling down my neck, he sucks my collarbone, causing my hips to lift and my chest to rise higher. His mouth starts a slow trek around my breast before I feel warm, wet heat cover my nipple. My body arches off the bed, and one of his hands leaves mine above my head and travels down to cup my other breast, his fingers rolling over my nipple, causing a moan to climb up my throat.

My hand goes to his shoulder, holding on as his hand navigates down over my stomach, causing my muscles to contract and wetness to gather between my thighs. The first feeling of his fingers along my pubic bone has me panicking, but want quickly takes over as one slides under the edge of my shorts and panties and then down to roll over my clit.

“Soaked,” he growls, his head lifting and his eyes locking on mine.

His finger lowers, entering me slowly as his eyes watch me closely. I don’t know whether to pull away or to lift my hips for more. When his hand leaves me, I cry out, only to be startled when I feel my panties and shorts being tugged off. Before I have a chance to think, his fingers are back and he adds his thumb, rolling it over the bundle of nerves that has me clawing at his shoulders.

“I really want to fucking taste you, but no way can I do that yet.” His jaw locks and a look of desperation fills his eyes. “My control is slipping, so I need you to come for me.”

I don’t understand what’s wrong, but as if he spoke directly to my body, I come on a cry, my head falling back and my eyes closing. The pull from below my belly button expands and explodes through my body. When the feeling subsides, I lift my head, still trying to catch my breath.

“Fucking exquisite,” he whispers, his eyes meeting mine, his fingers still lazily stroking between my legs.

I bite my lip, wondering what to do. I have never experienced anything like that before, and it's been years since I've had sex. I feel completely out of my league and overwhelmed.

"Don't," he states firmly, making my eyes travel back to him. "Do not leave me here. Not right now."

His hands leave me as he crawls up my body, cocooning around me.

I clear my throat and shake my head.

"I wasn't. I mean...I just don't know what I'm doing, so I feel—"

"Overwhelmed," he states, running his nose along mine.

"That's why I didn't do all the things I really want to do to you. I could see it in your eyes that you were unsure." He kisses my forehead and rolls to his side, pulling me with him.

"How long has it been?" he asks softly, gliding his fingers down my spine then back up again.

"A little over ten years." I close my eyes in embarrassment and only open them when I realize that not only is his body tense, but he doesn't seem to be breathing.

"Are you okay?" I get up on my elbow so I can look at his face.

"Fuck," he mutters as his eyes open. "How the hell have you kept yourself away from men for the last ten years?"

"It's not hard when you're not interested," I answer truthfully, looking away from him.

"Until me."

I hear the smugness in his voice and my eyes go back to him, narrowing when I see the smirk on his face.

"My tastes could always change."

"They won't," he says confidently.

"They might," I huff, and his smirk turns into a full smile as he rolls on top of me.

“They won’t,” he repeats, this time kissing me silent.

“We’re not going out,” Kenton says as soon as I walk around the corner into the kitchen.

He’s wearing a dark burgundy button-down shirt that looks like it’s custom made for him. With the top button released, the shirt is tucked into a pair of black slacks that hug his thighs and show off his lean waist. I don’t know how it’s possible for him to look just as hot dressed up as he does in jeans. Seeing him like this has me craving to see him in a suit.

His eyes do a head-to-toe sweep, and I stumble slightly when our eyes lock. The look in his eyes is so dark and hungry that I can’t even take a breath. After he kissed me quiet earlier, he got out of bed and got dressed, telling me that he had some stuff to do, but we had a date and to make sure I was ready. I nodded, unable to talk, and watched as he left the room.

I got up, made some coffee, and ate a piece of toast before heading back upstairs to get ready for my first date. I took an extra-long shower, making sure I shaved everything from the neck down and scrubbed every inch of my body. I chose a dark-blue wrap dress that hugs my curves and shows some cleavage without being slutty. The shoes are what completes the outfit—gold stilettos with a strap across the tops of my toes and a thick band around my ankle. I did my makeup the same way I’d done the night I went to the club—simple with dark-red lipstick.

“You’re really testing my self-control.” Kenton’s rough voice brings me back to the present—along with his hands, which have found their way to my waist.

“But then, if I don’t take you out, I can’t show you off.” One hand slowly slides up my waist to the bow that is holding my dress together.

“You’re like a dessert I get to unwrap and eat at the end of the night.” His fingers wrap around the loose length of the ribbon, giving it a gentle tug. “Let’s go before I say fuck it and unwrap you here in the kitchen and take you on the counter.”

I'm not opposed to skipping dinner and being dessert now. After what happened earlier, I know I won't put off being with him. He smiles like he read my mind and shakes his head.

"Dinner, then dessert." My pussy contracts and I bite my lip to stop from moaning. He leans forward, his finger going to my chin, pulling my lip out from between my teeth, kissing me softly.

"I wouldn't mind skipping dinner," I tell him when his mouth leaves mine.

He laughs, shaking his head and taking my hand.

"We're both gonna need our strength." He walks us out to his car, opening the passenger's side door for me before shutting it and jogging around the car to slide behind the wheel. As soon as we make it down the driveway, his hand interlocks with mine on my lap.

"So, where are we going?" I ask once I find my voice again.

"An Italian place a couple of towns over. They have the best eggplant parmesan I've ever eaten in my life."

"I love Italian," I tell him.

"I know." He smiles, squeezing my fingers.

"How do you know?"

"All those frozen dinners you bought are Italian." He laughs, making me smile and my cheeks heat up in embarrassment.

"I'm not good at cooking." I shake my head and look out the window.

"I can teach you how to cook," he says softly, squeezing my hand.

"I would like that." I've always wanted to learn how to cook, but every time I've tried, it's been a disaster, so I've given up.

We talk the rest of the way to the restaurant about his favorite things to cook and how he learned. I knew that his

aunt Viv and uncle own the diner I had gone to the first time I met Viv, but I didn't know that he used to work there during the summers when he was younger.

When we arrive at the restaurant, he finds parking along the busy street and leads me inside. The interior is dim, with mood lighting that makes the space feel much more intimate. The tables are covered in white linen cloths with a single tea light candle in the center of each. The host leads us to a small table in the back of the restaurant, but when he begins to pull out my chair, Kenton stops him, taking the chair and holding it for me until I take a seat. He then takes his own seat across from me.

"Would you like to see the wine list?" the waitress asks when she arrives at our table.

I look up at her and see that her eyes are glued to Kenton. I know that, if we're going to try and build something lasting between us, I need to get a hold on the jealousy I feel when other women admire him, but that doesn't mean I have to like it.

"Would you like a glass of wine, baby?"

My eyes travel from the waitress to Kenton, and I shake my head. I don't want anything tainting tonight.

His eyes darken with approval and never leave mine as he answers the waitress.

"Just water for now."

She nods and leaves us to look over the menus.

"Do you know what you're going to have?" he asks after a few minutes.

"I don't know. Everything looks so good," I tell him, my mouth watering in anticipation.

"Everything here is delicious. My parents used to bring me and Toni here when we were growing up."

My throat clogs at the happy memory of him and his family. A wave of sadness hits me over the fact that I have none to share with him.

“Stay with me, baby. We’re here together.” He takes my hand in his, some of his strength seeping into me through our connection.

I look into his eyes and nod as he brings my fingers to his mouth, pressing a kiss to them.

“I’m okay,” I say after a few seconds.

He nods but doesn’t release my hand. Even when the waitress comes back to the table to take our order, he still holds on to me but changes the subject. We talk about my job and the request I put in to change shifts; we also talk about Justin and how he started working for him.

He keeps the conversation away from family and anything else he thinks might have me retreating. I know what he’s doing, and I appreciate it more than he knows. During dinner, I realize that he has a way of reading me that no one else ever had. That in itself tells me everything I need to know about being with him.

“Are you ready for dessert?” the waitress asks when she arrives back at our table after clearing our empty dishes.

I squirm, remembering what he said to me in the kitchen about being dessert when we got home. His eyes flare and his tongue comes out, running along his bottom lip.

“Yes,” Kenton replies, his eyes on mine. “You ready for dessert, baby?”

I know his question isn’t about food, and I squeeze my legs together and nod.

“We’ll take a piece of tiramisu to go, please.” He pulls out his wallet, handing her his card.

After he gets his card back along with a dessert box, we get back into his car, and the lust is so thick that I swear I can taste it as he pulls out into traffic. His hand goes to my knee then travels up my thigh and under the hem of my dress. When I feel his finger slide over my core, I gasp.

“Fuck, you sat across from me the whole time like that?” he growls, his finger running down my bare center again.

“Kenton,” I cry when his finger circles my clit.

“Jesus, baby.” His fingers circle my entrance then travel up to run around my clit, keeping me on the edge of the orgasm I feel building, torturing me. I grab his wrist, trying to pull it away. His arm flexes and his hand cups me over my pussy. “This is mine. I get to play with it any time I want, any way I want to.”

His words have me panting. I turn my head to look at his profile and his eyes come to me. The want and determination I see has me removing my hands from his wrist, sitting back, and spreading my legs slightly.

“Good girl.” He keeps up the same pace and movements, and this time when I feel the orgasm building again, I expect him to pull away like he’s been doing. Instead, two fingers swiftly enter me and I lift my hips higher, meeting his hand. His fingers curve and I come; my head rolls against the headrest and my legs squeeze his hand, which is lodged between my legs.

I wonder how he’s able to drive while controlling my body. I look back over at him once I come back down from the high of my orgasm. I have no idea what happened to my inhibitions, but he makes me want to give myself to him, makes me want to please him. I watch as his fingers leave me and he slowly puts them in his mouth. His eyes close like I’m the best thing he’s ever tasted before coming to me for a second then going back to the road again.

“Yes. That pussy is mine.”

I press my legs together and pray that we make it to the house without me climbing into his lap and causing an accident. When we pull onto the dirt road that leads to the house, I sigh in relief and hear him hiss out a breath when I lean over and wrap my hand around his cock, feeling it throb against my palm.

“So is this mine then?” I ask teasingly.

The car comes to a stop, and he looks at me.

“I’m yours. All of me is yours.”

His words hit my chest and the look in his eyes makes the last of the barricades around my heart crumble into dust. I swallow and lick my bottom lip, never breaking eye contact.

“And I’m yours,” I tell him. His eyes close and his forehead touches mine.

“That makes me a very happy man.” His hand moves to the underside of my jaw, tilting my head to the side, and his mouth slants over mine, taking it in a deep kiss before tearing away. “Inside. Now.”

His door opens and I fumble with my seatbelt, getting it unhooked right as my door is opened. I’m out of the car in a heartbeat, and we rush up the stairs. My mouth goes to his neck as he fumbles with the keys, trying to get the door open. Once inside, he shoves me against the wall, his hands going to the tie on my dress. I expect him to rip it apart. Instead, he drops to his knees, his eyes locking on mine as he slowly pulls the ribbon, causing the dress to fall open, exposing one side of my body.

His fingers move to the small button on the inside of the dress, un- doing it quickly, making the dress open completely. He looks me over then pulls the dress off my arms, letting it drop to the floor, leaving me in nothing but my sheer bra and heels.

“Best gift I’ve ever unwrapped,” he mumbles, running his hands along my sides then to my ass, pulling my hips forward to kiss me above my pubic bone.

I start to pant as I watch his tongue come out and lick up my center. My head falls back as his hand lifts my leg over his shoulder. My hands go to his head for leverage as he shoves his face between my legs, his mouth sucking my clit before releasing and licking it in fast strokes.

“Oh God,” I breathe as two fingers enter me and my body starts to shake. My one heel on solid ground makes me teeter.

“Wait,” I cry, feeling myself start to fall.

His mouth never leaves me as he quickly maneuvers my other thigh onto his other shoulder, my back and him the only

things keeping me from hitting the floor. His mouth takes me hard, sucking and licking until I explode. My hands fist into his hair, holding on for dear life as I fly into the abyss of a mind-shattering orgasm.

When I come to, we're heading up the stairs. My head is on his shoulder and his hands are under my ass, holding me to him. He opens the door to my room and lays me on the bed. I quickly take off my shoes before lying back on the bed so, just like earlier today, I can watch him undress. The only difference is that, this time when he gets to his pants and unbuttons them, he pulls them and his boxers down at the same time. I hold my breath when I see his size. He's long and wide, and there's no way it's going to fit inside me.

"It'll be tight, but we'll make it work." The familiar words and the smile on his face cause me to smile and my body to relax.

My eyes roam from his eyes down his body, watching as he strokes himself. He walks slowly to me, his muscles flexing with each step. I scoot back up the bed as he crawls to me, his legs spreading my hips wide.

"You're so gorgeous, baby."

His body covers mine, his hands going behind my back, where I feel him unhook my bra then drag it down my shoulders. Once my breasts are free, he lowers his head and pulls first one nipple into his mouth and then the other. I writhe under him, running my hands down his back to his ass, trying to pull him closer. I can feel more wetness surge between my legs as he torments my breasts. I grab his hair in my hands and pull his mouth away.

"I need you," I breathe.

His eyes grow even darker and his fingers slip between my legs again. His hand leaves me, but then I feel the head of him at my entrance as he slowly starts to enter me. Then he stops, his body suddenly going still.

"What's wrong?" I gasp, adjusting to his width.

“Condom... We need a condom.” His words sound pained, and I search his face before deciding what to say.

“I’m on the pill. I’ve been on the pill since I was seventeen.”

“Fuck,” he clips, making me jump and wonder if I said something wrong.

“I’m clean, baby, but I want to make sure you’re really okay with this.” Both of his hands go to my hair, pushing it away from my face, his eyes looking me over.

“I want this.”

“Jesus,” he groans.

One of his hands goes to the underside of my thigh, lifting it up higher around his waist while slowly sinking into me. I breathe out against the slight pain, trying instead to concentrate on how good it feels. He starts to move in slow, steady strokes, his lips never leaving mine. I lift my hips higher, wrapping myself completely around him, needing to be as close as possible.

“So perfect. Your pussy is so fucking perfect,” he says as he slides out only to slide back in, making me moan. Our skin starts to slicken with sweat, causing his body to slide smoothly against mine.

“I’m not gonna be able to hold off,” he says, pulling his mouth from mine and pressing his forehead into my collarbone.

I feel right on the edge as his fingers roll over my clit. I want to come, but I’m so consumed by every other emotion I’m feeling that I can’t let go. Instead, I concentrate on the way my body’s feeling. I hold him closer, just enjoying the closeness of the moment and how connected I feel to him. His hips jerk, and I feel him grow even bigger before he groans, his mouth latching on to my neck.

“You didn’t come,” he breathes against my skin after a few moments.

“It’s okay,” I say softly, running a hand down his back. “It was great.”

“‘Great’?” He chuckles, pulling his face out of my neck. When he looks down at me, he shakes his head. “That’s not gonna work for me.”

I don’t even get a chance to ask him what he’s talking about before he picks me up out of bed and walks us to his room, straight into his bathroom, where he starts up the shower, pushing me inside before following me in. He pulls me under the water, tilting my face back. His fingers work through my hair. When his hands leave me, I open my eyes, watching as he grabs a large sponge off the shelf. Then he pours some body wash onto it, lathering it up, causing the room to smell like him.

He gently washes me, paying close attention between my legs, where I can still feel him. When he’s done, he washes himself before tossing the sponge to the shower floor. I think he’s going to get out, but instead, he moves us under the rain coming from the showerhead on the ceiling so that hot, steamy water falls down on us. Then he pulls me to him, my back to his front.

His hands start at my shoulders, rubbing in slow circles, then travel down my arms to my hands, where he pulls them up and behind his head. His fingers run down the inside of my arms, over the tips of my breasts, down my stomach, and over my hips. One hand moves to my center, rolling over my clit, and the other slides back up to my breasts, alternately toying with my nipples. My whole body relaxes into him, just enjoying his touch.

“I love touching you,” he whispers.

The word ‘love’ makes my stomach flutter. I know I’m on the edge of love with him, and it won’t take much to push me over.

“Feel what you do to me?” He licks my neck, his hips shift, and his cock slides between my legs from behind.

I lower my hand to where his is playing with me, and I feel the head of his cock near my clit. He pulls his hips back and forth again, and I feel him in my hand every time he moves forward.

“I need to be inside you, baby.” His words sound pained as his hand moves mine out of the way, and on the next thrust forward, he enters me.

“Yes,” I breathe.

“This time, you’re gonna come with me inside you.” He runs his chin up my neck, the scruff on his jaw causing goose bumps to break out on my skin.

One hand cups my breast, first softly. Then it pinches and pulls my nipple as his other hand slowly moves between my legs. My pussy tightens when his fingers tug my nipple hard.

“Fuck. You like that?” He does it again, getting the same reaction. It doesn’t take long to feel the knot in my lower stomach start to unravel. I lean forward, putting my hands on the tile wall in front of me. One of his hands slides around my waist, hitting my clit, and the other goes to my nipple, pinching it. My orgasm is sudden and all consuming. His name leaves my mouth on a cry, and in the distance, I hear mine roared as I float away into euphoria. When I come back to myself, I’m sitting in his lap in the middle of the shower, my face in the crook of his neck.

I lift my head and look up into his eyes, giving him a tired smile.

“That was amazing.” I run my fingers along his jaw then up and around his lips.

“That’s what I like to hear.” His tone is soft, along with his eyes, and I shake my head at his smugness.

“I’m in like with you,” I tell him, getting lost in his eyes.

“Yeah?” His eyebrow rises and he kisses my forehead.

“I’m in a whole lotta like with you too, baby,” he says softly, pulling my head back down to his chest.

We sit there for a few more minutes before he stands us up, quickly rinses us off before turning off the shower, and then pulls a large towel out of the cabinet to wrap around me, getting one for himself off the hook on the back of the door. I watch as he dries his body, my mouth going dry as a tingle begins stirring in my core again.

“Stop looking at me like that.”

I jump and quickly look away at his words, feeling my cheeks pinken as I start to dry myself off. Hearing him laugh, I turn my head, looking over my shoulder.

His eyes drop to my ass and he shakes his head.

“It’s gonna be a long night,” he mumbles.

I look down at his hard-on before lifting my eyes to his again. He wasn’t wrong; it was a very long night.

IT'S NOT PAST TENSE

I WAKE UP when I feel lips touch my shoulder, a hand slide around my waist, and warmth hit my back. I smile into my pillow then roll over to face Kenton.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.” He pulls me up his body so I’m lying on his chest.

“Yes, you did.” I laugh, cuddling into him while breathing in his scent. It’s been three weeks of us being an ‘us.’ At first, it was difficult living together plus being in a new relationship, but things have seem to have fallen into place. He’s still an ass every now and then, but he’s *my* ass.

The day after our first date, Kenton woke me up early, dragging me out of the bed and into the shower, where he proceeded to make love to me before telling me to get dressed because we had to go shopping. I got dressed in a pair of shorts and a light T-shirt before meeting him downstairs. I was exhausted, a little sore from being kept up the night before, and in no mood to go shopping, but he seemed so excited about it that I couldn’t exactly tell him that I hated shopping and to go alone.

When we got in his car, we headed to Nashville. I’d expected him to take us to the mall, but instead, he took us to a large furniture store.

“Why are we here?” I asked, looking at the store in front of us then over at him.

“I need a new bed,” he said, hopping out of the car.

My heart fell into my stomach. We had just had sex for the first time yesterday, and he was buying a new bed to leave mine already? I waited until he opened the door for me to get out. I wanted to claw his eyes out of his head for being such an ass, but instead, I swallowed down the hurt I was feeling, determined to find some other way to get back at him.

He took my hand in his, leading me inside the furniture store. A man in his mid-thirties with a bad comb-over and an even worse suit greeted us as soon as we entered the store. I looked around, trying to clear my head as Kenton and the guy spoke quietly.

When Kenton grabbed my hand, twining his fingers with mine, I was admiring a king-size bed with a canopy top. The set also came with beautiful side tables that were round in the middle with thin legs that curved out and a dresser and armoire that were similar. All the wood was dark with notches in it, making it look like it had just been chopped down in the forest. I could imagine a princess sleeping in that bed amongst the furniture.

“Do you like this one?” he asked.

I looked over at him then back at the bed. I could see him in it as well. The ruggedness of the wood was manly enough that the whimsical element to the design was toned down.

“It’s really nice,” I said softly, not knowing how I felt about picking out a bed that would basically guarantee that he wouldn’t be sleeping with me anymore.

“Is it something you would buy for your own room?”

“Yes,” I told him truthfully.

“Ralph, we’ll take this one.” Ralph nodded and we followed him to the register, where he rang up the order. The whole set was over six thousand dollars, and Kenton pulled out his wallet, pulling out a shiny black card and handing it over to Ralph without even an ounce of regret on his face. When we were done, Ralph told us that he would have it delivered this afternoon.

When we left the furniture store, I thought for sure we would head home, but he drove us to a bedding and home goods store, leading me inside and right to the bedding department, telling me to pick something.

“What do you mean ‘pick something’? It’s your bed. You pick something,” I told him, crossing my arms over my chest in order to not punch him in the gut. My feelings were hurt. All I wanted to do was go home. I knew it was dumb, but that didn’t mean that I didn’t feel like crying about it.

“I need help,” he said, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

I bit my lip, looked around at every bedding set, and one caught my eye. It was white with a large design of a tree on it, and it had a green border that was made out of silk ribbon. I knew it would look amazing with his new bedroom furniture, but I also thought it was too feminine for a guy’s room. I walked over to the wall of blankets, grabbed a Bed in a Bag set that was mostly browns and blacks, and handed it to him. His eyes went from the bag to my face and then narrowed.

“What?” I asked, wondering what was wrong with the set I’d picked. I’d done what he’d asked me to, so what was his problem?

“You would have this in your room?”

“No, but this isn’t for my room,” I said, pointing at myself.

“This is for your room.” I shrugged and started to walk away, but I was grabbed by the back of my jeans, and his hands slid along my stomach.

“Who do you think will be sleeping in my bed with me?” he asked against the shell of my ear. He’d found out the night before that that was a very weak spot for me.

“I don’t know,” I said, feeling stupid tears sting my nose. I didn’t want to think about anyone in his bed.

He turned me in his arms and I ducked my head, not wanting him to see the emotions I was sure were written all over my face.

“What’s going on?” His concerned voice caused my eyes to lift. I shook my head and started to look away, but his hand cupped my cheek, forcing me to look at him.

“You’re the most difficult woman I have ever met.” He shook his head and started to laugh. My eyes narrowed, and he looked over my face before laughing harder.

“What the hell is funny?” I hissed. He stopped laughing and his voice became serious.

“You’re in my bed. I want that to be the place you sleep from now on. I also want it to be somewhere you’re comfortable. That’s why I wanted you with me today.”

“Oh,” I mumbled, my belly fluttering.

“Now, what are we getting?” I bit my lip and walked over to the set that had caught my eye. I picked it up then put it down when I saw the price.

“Maybe you should just get that other one,” I told him, seeing the much cheaper price boldly displayed across the front of the picture on the bag in his hand.

“Jesus.” He shook his head then walked over and picked up the one I really liked. “I hate shopping, so this will go a lot faster if you just pick the shit you like so we can get the fuck out of here.”

“Don’t be an ass,” I growled, making him smile.

“Do we need sheets?”

“Yes,” I hissed then stomped over to the sheets, picking up two sets—a black one that would match the tree printed on the comforter and one green set the same color as the ribbon on the border. The whole time I stomped around, I listened to Kenton laughing. I rolled my eyes but couldn’t help the smile that formed on my lips when his arm swung over my shoulders and his lips touched my temple.

The feeling of him taking a deep breath brings me back to the present, and I tilt my head back slightly to look at him.

“Is everything okay?” I ask sleepily.

“All’s good. Justin just left. He said you went to bed late ’cause you were up eating junk food while watching him play Call of Duty all night.”

“He’s such a tattletale.” I shake my head.

Justin has become like a brother to me. We bicker and argue constantly, but he also makes me laugh so hard that I can’t breathe. I adore him for the way he looks out for Kenton and love that he is such a great friend. He stays with me every time Kenton is out of town. Between him and the rest of Kenton’s men, there isn’t a time when my whereabouts are unknown or I’m not supervised. I hate having people constantly in my space, but I know that, in order for me to be safe right now, I need them.

“I missed you,” I say softly, pressing my nose into his chest.

“Missed you too, babe.” His hand travels down my back, over my ass, and between my legs. One finger dips inside my pussy before rolling over my clit.

“Kenton,” I moan as he takes my mouth in a deep kiss, rolling me to my back and entering me.

By the time we both come, we’re exhausted and fall back asleep.

I snuggle into Kenton and wrap my arms around his waist when I hear the doorbell ring in the distance.

“They’ll go away,” I tell him, not ready to get up. I feel like I just fell asleep.

“I gotta get it. It could be Mom.”

Crap, he’s right. It could be his mom, because while he’s out of town, she or Viv stop by for coffee most mornings.

“Did you tell her you are home?” I ask, knowing that, if she knows he’s home, she would normally give him at least until the afternoon before calling or showing up.

“Nah, so she’s probably here to see you.”

“I’m up. You should sleep.” I throw my legs over the side of the bed then find the T-shirt he had on yesterday. I pull it on over my head before bending and grabbing my sweats off the floor.

The loud slap on my ass has me jumping in place and glaring at Kenton, who is now up and wearing a pair of jeans with the top button undone.

“What was that for?”

“You stick it in my face, babe, and I’m going to slap it,” he says with a smirk, opening the bedroom door.

I jump on his back, wrapping my legs around his hips and my arms around his neck while biting his ear and neck, making him laugh as he tries his best to tickle me off him, making me giggle while heading down the stairs.

“What the fuck?” I hear whispered.

I lift my head at the familiar voice, shocked to see Sid standing on the front porch. My arms and legs start to loosen from around Kenton’s waist and neck, and I drop to the floor.

“Sid?” I ask, concerned, taking in his disheveled appearance.

“I knew she was with you.” His eyes narrow on Kenton. “I fucking knew after your last visit, but this sealed the deal.”

“You were in Vegas?” I ask Kenton and glare.

He crosses his arms over his chest, looking down at me for a second before his eyes go back to Sid.

“Why are you here? More importantly, how the fuck did you find me?” Kenton asks him.

“It wasn’t that hard,” Sid says, glaring.

I look between the two of them then settle my eyes on Kenton. A million questions fly through my head, but the biggest one is why the hell he was in Vegas and didn’t say anything to me.

“Why were you in Vegas?” I try, hoping to get an answer.

“He had a meeting at my club yesterday,” Sid says, and my head swings in his direction.

“Meeting?” I mumble, looking between the two of them

“Motherfucker,” Kenton growls, taking a step towards him.

“She should know what’s going on,” I hear Sid say, and I look back up at Kenton.

“What happened?” I ask. The last time he went to Vegas, my place had been broken into. I have no idea who he would be meeting with besides Link, but I don’t think that’s what this is about.

“We’ll talk soon,” Kenton says, the vein in his neck ticking.

“Why don’t you tell her now?” Sid looks from Kenton to me, his eyes going soft. He starts to take a step towards me, but Kenton blocks his way, putting his hand on the door.

“She’s my friend,” Sid complains.

“She’s my woman.”

“Okay, please put your giant penis away for a minute,” I tell Kenton, elbowing him in the side before looking over at Sid.

“Why are you here?” I ask him softly, wondering if he’s in trouble or something.

“AFTER YOUR LAST e-mail, I wrote you back. When I didn’t hear from you, I wrote you again, only for it to come back to me saying you’d deleted your account.” He runs a hand over his head, and this time, his eyes go to Kenton. “I knew you were with him after yesterday, so I got his address and came to talk to you.”

“Why?”

“You know I’ve always been in love with you, Autumn. Don’t be stupid.”

“Don’t be stupid?” I whisper.

“So, all the women you paraded around in front of me?” I ask.

“Meant nothing.” He shrugs. “I just wanted you to realize you wanted me. I wanted you to fight for me.”

“Wow,” I say softly, shaking my head. “You’re telling me you were in love with me and brought women around so I would be jealous and fight for you...instead of telling me how you felt and *you* fighting for *me*?”

“You’re so closed off. You were always in your head. I was trying to break through to you.”

I look at Sid then Kenton.

“Don’t look at me, babe. I don’t know what the fuck to say about this shit.”

“Sid, you’re a great guy, but you don’t love me.”

The differences between Kenton and Sid are striking, the biggest being that Kenton has fought for me since the beginning. He’s never let me get too far when I’ve tried running away. He’s also never brought women around to try to get me to accept my feelings for him.

“Like I said in my last e-mail, I care about you, but not like that. I hope you can understand,” I tell him softly, hoping that he gets that there is nothing—nor will there ever be anything—between us.

“You’re serious?” he asks.

I bite my lip and nod. I watch regret pass through his eyes before he shakes his head then turns to look off into the distance.

“I guess this is goodbye then?”

“Yeah,” I reply, not understanding the feelings I have inside, why this is so hard. Deep down, I wonder what would have happened if he would’ve actually tried to get to know me. I step up to him and wrap my hands around his waist, giving him a hug.

“Thank you for everything,” I whisper. “One day, you’re going to find someone worth fighting for.”

His arms squeeze me a little tighter, his chest expanding on a breath.

“Have you?”

I know exactly what he’s asking, and tears sting my nose. I nod into his chest and step back into Kenton’s embrace.

“You hurt her and I’ll kill you,” Sid says before turning and heading down the steps.

Once he’s in his car and pulling away from the house, I turn to look at Kenton.

“So what happened in Vegas?” I cross my arms over my chest.

His eyes drop then meet mine again.

“Let’s go sit down.”

I follow him into the living room, sitting on the opposite side of the couch from him. That way, he can’t distract me with his touch.

“I met up with the boss of Lacamo. They agreed you’re off-limits,” he says softly, and my whole body stills at the news I have been waiting to hear.

“So it’s over?” I ask on a whisper. I can’t believe that, after all this time, all it took was one meeting for this whole thing to be resolved.

“It is,” he says, looking at me from across the couch.

I can’t understand why he looks so worried when I know that this news will make things easier for him as well. He has been running himself ragged working his normal cases while trying to keep me safe. Then, my head starts to fill with thoughts about my life, why I’m really here, and what this news means for my future.

“So, I can go home then?” I ask, looking down at my hands.

“No.” The word is rough and causes me to lift my head.

“What do you mean ‘no’?” I search his face, wondering what he’s not telling me. If I’m no longer in danger, I can return to Vegas, even if the thought alone makes me feel sick.

“Exactly what it sounds like—no, you can’t go back to Vegas.” His hands ball into fist on his thighs. “This is your home.”

“This is *your* home,” I murmur and swallow, feeling my heart pound against the inside of my ribs. “Since you’ve been here, this has become my home, but before you, it was a place I slept at night. You have given me a reason to come home.”

“You want me to move in with you?” I whisper, hope blooming in my chest.

“Yes, I want you to move in with me.”

“You’re serious?”

“Yes, baby.” He laughs, shaking his head.

“What about my place in Vegas?”

“Sell it...keep it... I don’t give a fuck what you do with it.”

I stand up, glance around the room, and then look back over at Kenton, who looks worried. My heart does a flip from knowing that he really wants this; he really wants me.

“Are you sure about this?”

“Without a doubt. One hundred percent sure.”

“What will your family say?”

“When are you getting married?” he replies. I feel my eyes get big and my mouth fill with saliva.

“One thing at a time,” he says gently, and I nod.

I’m not sure if he’s in love with me, but I think this feeling I have for him is love—or some form of it. Never really having been loved before, I don’t know what it really feels like. I know that what I feel for him makes what I felt for my son’s father pale in comparison. I know that I want to spend all

my time with him, and he's always my first thought when I wake and my last thought when I go to bed at night.

"Okay."

"Okay?" he asks, searching my face.

"Yes, okay. I'll move in with you," I tell him, a smile creeping onto my face.

"Yeah?" His lips twitch, and I nod before running at him and climbing onto his lap. His arms wrap around me as I press my mouth against his.

"Shit," he groans, pulling his mouth from mine.

"Why are you stopping?" I try to pull his mouth back to mine when I hear someone knocking on the door. "Oh."

I smile as he sets me aside and adjusts himself in his jeans before standing. I sit there for a second and then get up to follow him to the door. After he looks outside, his eyes come to me before pulling the door open.

"You're home?" Nancy says, smiling. "If I would have known that, I wouldn't have come so early."

"It's fine. We were up." He kisses her cheek, letting her into the house.

"Why were you up?" She looks between the two of us, her eyes twinkling, and I know she's going to say something that will have me turning red. "You know, I want my grandchildren to have our family name. I think it's about time you two stop playing house and just get married."

All the air leaves my lungs at the word 'children.' I grab the table closest to me for balance. When a wave of dizziness hits me hard, I'm surprised that I don't hit the ground.

"Jesus, Mom! Autumn just agreed to move in, and now you're trying to scare her off." He shakes his head then looks at me.

"One thing at a time," he says gently, reading my face.

I nod and swallow against the lump in my throat. I could see myself having his child. I can picture a little girl with his

dark hair and golden eyes. She'd be a daddy's girl and he would adore her. Her life would be so different than mine was when I grew up up.

"You okay, baby?"

I feel a hand on my cheek, and I shake the thoughts out of my head. I look into his concerned eyes and take a breath before nodding.

"You're moving in?" Nancy asks. The surprise in her voice has me getting up on my tiptoes to look over Kenton's shoulder. I smile when I see the look of approval and the wide smile on her face as she looks between us.

"So I'm guessing everything has been sorted out?" She looks at Kenton, who nods. "I knew my boy would fix it."

She shakes her head then ducks by Kenton and grabs my hand, pulling me with her to the kitchen.

"What are you doing, Mom?"

"Well, now that it's official, we need to talk about redecorating. This place was okay when it was just you, but now that Autumn's going to be living here for good, we need to make some changes."

"We don't need to talk about that, Mom. Autumn can make any changes she wants to, but we don't need to have a sit-down about it."

"Honey, until you give me a wedding to plan and grandbabies to play with, you're going to have to give me something."

"Jesus. I'm going to the office." He looks at me then his mom and shakes his head. "You gonna be okay here with her?"

"Of course she will be okay with me," Nancy scoffs. "I'm going to get coffee started and call Susan to see if her boys have anything on their schedule." She looks at me then my clothes. "You should get dressed so we can go downtown and head to some stores. I need to get an idea of what you like. I hope we can do the kitchen right away."

“Mom, seriously, slow down,” Kenton warns.

“Do you know how long I’ve waited for you to find a decent woman...someone I could stand being around, someone I would be proud to call my daughter?” She puts her hands on her hips and narrows her eyes. “I want the wedding and the grandkids, but I can’t have that right now. So instead, we’re going to be redecorating this house so that, when the time comes, you’re ready.”

“You know that, when me and Autumn get married, it will be up to her to plan the kind of wedding she wants, right?”

“Of course it will be her planning it.” His mom shakes her head and starts down the hall.

I stand there in shock, my body coiled tightly. He said *when*, not *if*, we get married, like he knows for sure that it’s going to happen.

“Breathe, baby,” I hear on a laugh. I look up and my eyes automatically narrow when I see that he’s chuckling. “Told you she would be planning a wedding when she found out you were moving in.”

“You said *when*.” I shake my head.

“What?” His eyebrows come together in confusion and his hand goes to my waist, dragging me to him.

“Nothing.”

“When what?”

“Nothing?” I say, and it comes out sounding more like a question.

“Autumn.” His tone has my head coming up and my heart beating double-time.

“You said *when* we get married, not *if* we get married,” I repeat. The words are circling inside my head.

“Yeah?” His eyes narrow further, making me squirm.

“When, Kenton...you said *when* we get married, not *if*,” I say again, trying to drive home what I’m getting at.

“Of course we’re getting married,” he says in a tone that makes me squirm. “What?”

“Babe, what the fuck do you think is going on between the two of us?” He shakes his head, putting his fingers under my chin, titling my head farther back. His mouth touches mine, his teeth tugging on my bottom lip.

“You make me crazy.” He kisses me. Then his eyes search my face. “We’ll talk tonight.”

“We don’t need to talk,” I say immediately.

“You don’t need to talk. You just need to listen.”

“Joy.” I sigh, trying to think of a way to get out of this.

“When I get home, we’ll talk.”

“I can’t wait,” I say sarcastically and yell, “Ow!” when he smacks my ass hard.

“Your mom’s here,” I remind him when he gets the look in his eyes that tells me I’m about to get bent over.

“Keep up the smart mouth and I’ll fill it with something that will keep you quiet,” he whispers in my ear, causing goose bumps to break out over my skin.

“I thought you needed to go into the office,” I breathe, closing my eyes. The image of me on my knees in front of him flashes behind my closed lids. Every time I have tried to take him in my mouth, he’s stopped me, saying that he needed to be inside me badly.

My hands slide around his waist and my head goes to his chest, where I listen to the rhythm of his heart.

“I’ll see you when you get home.” I squeeze his waist and feel his lips at the top of my head.

“See you when I get home,” he says quietly.

“Okay,” I reply, and he kisses me once more before jogging up the stairs.

“You got it bad,” Nancy says, making me jump.

I turn around and look at her. Standing in the doorway, she looks me over before looking up the stairs at where Kenton just disappeared.

“I would send you up to get dressed, but he’s up there now, and if you go up there with him, I have a feeling neither of you will be back down for a while.”

I feel my face heat up and I look at the ground.

“Come have some coffee.” She laughs, turning and heading back into the kitchen.

I follow behind, wondering if she gets off on making me squirm.

Once we’ve had coffee and Kenton comes back downstairs to kiss me goodbye, he tells me that I can message him any time and he’ll send someone to rescue me. I would normally laugh about that, but I have a feeling that he’s being completely serious.

The minute the door closes behind him, Nancy pushes me up the stairs to get dressed. She lets me know what we’re going to be doing, not that she gives me a choice in any of it. I have a feeling that the only way I could disagree is if I pop out a kid or start planning a wedding, and neither of those things is going to happen for a while, so I’m stuck picking out appliances—or at least agreeing with what she picks out.

I SIGH AS I sit down in the booth across from Nancy. I think we’ve gone to every home improvement store in the state. If I never look at another oven or fridge again, it will be too soon. I feel my phone vibrate in my bag, so I pull it out and slide my finger across the screen when I see that Kenton is calling.

“Hey,” I answer.

“Hey, babe. I just wanted to call you really quick and let you know I’m gonna be late.”

I feel a frown touch my lips at his words and the anxiety in his voice.

“Is everything okay?” I ask softly.

“Sophie’s place was broken into when she was home. I’m with Nico and the cops now.”

“Oh my God, is she okay?”

“She’s fine. A little shook up, but she’s all right.”

“Who broke in?” I ask in shock. Nancy grabs my free hand, giving it a squeeze.

“We’re not sure, baby. As soon as Nico gets Sophie home, I should be on my way.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to you then.”

“Later, baby.”

“Later,” I say softly. My mind goes to Sophie and Nico. I haven’t met Sophie yet, but I have met Nico. He looks scary but is very sweet. The two times we’ve talked, he told me all about Sophie, and I can tell just by the tone of his voice when he speaks about her that he is in love. I can only imagine how worried he is right now.

“Kenton said Sophie’s was broken into,” I tell Nancy, setting the phone down on the table.

“Oh my,” she mumbles. “I’m going to call Susan.” She picks up her phone.

I watch as she makes the call, and I know that, by the time the phone is hung up, the Maysons will be on a mission. I’m just not sure if it’s going to be what Nico wants. He doesn’t seem like the kind of guy who’d want everyone over after something like that.

“Susan’s going to call Nico’s dad and tell him what’s going on. He’s a cop and may be able to get some stuff sorted before my son or nephew end up in jail.”

I feel my eyes get big. “Why would he go to jail?”

“Honey, Kenton works with cops but isn’t a cop.” She shakes her head, grabbing my hand again. “He can still be arrested if he does something the police find to be criminal.”

“Holy shit.” I stand, grabbing my bag, ready to go save Kenton before he gets into trouble.

“Where do you think you’re going?” She grabs my hand and tugs me back down into the booth next to her. “Let me tell you something. Kenton will always do whatever he wants. There is nothing his father or I—or now you—can say to change his mind.”

“I don’t want him to get into trouble,” I breathe in distress.

“I don’t really believe he will get into trouble, but a mom’s job is never done. I will always protect my family.”

Her words bring tears to my eyes. She’s a great mom who loves her kids. Even with as old as Kenton and Toni are, they are still able to lean on her when they need something.

“You’re family now too, honey,” she says quietly, “and I will protect you as I would protect my own children. That includes looking out for my son so he can continue to look out for you.”

I feel a tear falls down my cheek.

Her hand comes up, holding my face, her thumb wiping the tear away. “Now, what do you say we have some cake?”

“Sure.” I nod, swallowing against the lump in my throat.

We sit there in silence while we each eat a large piece of chocolate cake that is so dense that it’s more like fudge. I have a large glass of milk with mine, and Nancy has a glass of wine. When we’re done, we pay the tab before climbing into Nancy’s Jeep.

I don’t know why she doesn’t say anything, but I know why I can’t. My emotions are too exposed; too much has happened today and I need some time to regroup. It isn’t until Kenton sends a text telling me that he’s on his way home that I feel some of the tension in my belly dissipate. Right then, I

know that I'm no longer in like with him; I'm head-over-heels in love with him.

I WAKE UP on a scream when I feel myself being shaken. My throat feels like it's on fire and my skin feels damp with sweat. I look around in the darkness, holding my chest, trying to remember where I am, when the light is switched on and I see that Kenton is looking at me worriedly. I lower my head, covering my face with my hands, taking a few deep breaths as I try to get my heart rate back to normal.

"You were screaming like someone was killing you," he whispers, sliding in behind me.

I feel my stomach drop and my insides twist with anxiety. I haven't had a nightmare in years. When I first left home, I would get them often, but somehow, they stopped. I forgot what it feels like to wake up scared, so scared that I want to turn on every light then hide under the covers.

"Sorry I woke you," I whisper, trying to pull away from his touch, humiliated that I woke him, that he witnessed that.

"Jesus, don't do that. Do not fucking pull away. Not right now. Not when whatever it was you were dreaming about is still clinging to your skin and has seeped into mine."

The bed moves behind me again and my hands are taken from my face. He pulls me down so I'm on my side, facing him, our faces so close that I can feel each of his breaths.

His arms wrap around me and his thigh slides over my legs so I'm surrounded by him.

"Talk to me."

I try to sort out what to say to him in my head. How can I possibly explain what just happened when I don't understand it myself?

"I don't know if it's a dream or a memory," I say softly after a few minutes. I press my face into his neck and press my body closer to his.

"What happens?"

I take another shuddering breath and shake my head.

“I’m in water. It’s not very deep ’cause I’m sitting in it and it only comes up to my waist. I have this doll in my hand that has blond hair, and I’m dunking her underwater, singing a song to her.” I swallow again, and this time, I feel bile at the back of my throat. “I don’t know what happens, but I feel hands on my head pushing me down. I can’t breathe and I try to scream but end up sucking in lungfuls of water.”

I take a breath just to remind myself that I can. My mom was never a good mom; she was abusive but never left a mark. She always made sure there was never any evidence pointing to her being less than perfect. To everyone who knew us, we lived the perfect life. We had the perfect home, the perfect yard, and she was the perfect mother, who had perfect hair, clothes, and makeup. Everything about her was perfect, and she made sure I was perfect—at least what everyone saw of me.

“Do you think that really happened? That she tried to drown me?” I wonder out loud, feeling his body wrap tighter around mine and his muscles tense. We’ve talked some about how it was for me growing up. I try to avoid talking about it as much as possible, even though he asks often. I just don’t like the look that comes across his face when we do discuss it.

“Do you?” he asks gently.

I take another deep breath, tucking my face into his neck, letting his warmth and smell take away the last of the nightmare.

“Yes.” I nod, feeling his arms go tighter before he lets me go and gets out of bed, muttering a quiet, “Fuck,” under his breath.

“Oh God,” I whimper, feeling sick. I sit up, holding the sheet to my bare chest, looking around for quick escape. Tears start to sting my nose and I fight them back, knowing that there is no way in hell I will cry in front of him. Not now.

“Fuck!” is roared, and I turn my head just in time to see one of the new bedside lamps fly across the room, hitting the

sliding glass door. The lamp bursts into thousands of pieces while the door somehow doesn't shatter.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he chants, pacing back and forth, running a hand through his hair as I try to think of something to do or say to calm him down.

"I'll leave," I tell him quietly, fear settling in my gut.

His pacing doesn't change, and his fists clenching and unclenching tell me everything I need to know about his state of mind. I start to wonder if I do this to people, if I make them want to hurt me.

"I'm so sorry," I whimper.

His head swings my way, and his eyes look me over, going from hard to soft.

"Jesus, baby." He comes towards me and I hold up my hand, trying to ward him off. His eyes drop to my hand then move back up to my face. "I would never hurt you."

I know this; I know deep down that he wouldn't, but I just watched him freak out, and that has put some fear in me.

"Never," he repeats, and that's when I notice that my body is shaking so hard that the bed is vibrating. "It was either the lamp or track down your mom and put a bullet in her."

I feel my eyes widen as he shakes his head.

"I would kill her, baby. Without a second thought, I would end her. I know you don't understand, but this is me. I protect the people I love. I hate feeling helpless when I know I can fix this. Knowing that someone who has harmed you is out in the world, walking around, does not sit well with me. It goes against everything I am to let her get away with what she did to you."

"You love me?" I ask, ignoring everything else he just said, my mind zeroing in on that one fact.

His eyebrows rise and he shakes his head. "What do you think we're doing here?"

I swallow and shrug my shoulders at his familiar words. “Baby, you need to start looking at what’s going on around you.”

“You never told me.”

“I show you every day,” he says, looking dumbfounded.

“You should have told me you loved me.” I resort to getting angry. Why the hell are guys so damn stupid?

“Love.”

“What?”

“I *love* you. It’s not past tense. I love you now and will love you until my heart stops beating.”

My belly flips and I shake my head. “I’m in a whole lot of love with you too.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asks, his eyes narrowing.

“I didn’t know until today.” I shrug, pulling the sheet up higher on my chest.

“What?”

“I didn’t know.”

“I know you love me,” he says, and I’m sure he did know, because he knows what love feels like.

“I have loved—*really* loved—only one person, and that was my son.” I look around, trying to think of a way to explain it to him. “My love for him was different. It was one-sided and pure of any other emotions. Then, today, you sent me a text message, and when I read that you would meet me at home, something in me clicked into place. I have never had that—a home or someone to go home to. That’s when I understood what I’m feeling. You’re my home. You’re the person I belong to.”

“Stop,” he growls, and I know that he understands now.

“You’re the glue that holds all of my broken pieces together,” I say quietly.

“Autumn—”

“You love me for me,” I whisper, and I know he’s done when he plows into me, his body knocking mine backwards onto the bed, caging me in.

“I said shut it.” His mouth comes down on mine, his tongue seeking entrance.

I open my mouth under his. My hands go to his back, feeling his warm, smooth skin under my fingers. His fingers go to my center, where he pulls my panties to the side. Then his fingers run down my slit, causing my hips to jerk at the contact.

“Lift your hips.”

I do what he says, raising my hips off the bed. His hands pull my panties down my thighs, his weight leaving me only to drag them off me. As soon as they’re gone, his fingers go right back to where they were, making my hips shift and jerk once again.

“I think it’s time I get your mouth. What do you think?” My pussy convulses, sucking his fingers deeper.

“My girl likes that idea,” he says, licking up my neck before rolling to his back. I watch as his hips lift and he pulls his boxers down, kicking them off the bed. His hand wraps around his cock, stroking twice and causing a bead of pre-cum to seep out of the tip. My mouth waters and I lick my lips. His groan has my eyes going to his as I bend forward on my knees to lick the tip. His taste bursts on my tongue, and I want more, so I wrap my hand over his and close my lips over the tip, swirling my tongue around it.

His fingers run over my cheek, around my ear, and down my neck, shoulder, back, and ass before hitting me just right. I moan, taking more of him into my mouth.

“Com’ere,” he groans, shifting my hips over his head. The second his tongue touches me, I cry out, forgetting what I’m supposed to be doing.

“You stop, I stop,” he growls, slapping my ass. I moan, taking him as deep as I can, causing him to hit the back of my throat, which makes me gag.

I can feel his fingers holding me open while he licks and sucks, not missing any part. I feel my orgasm approaching and know that it's going to be huge. My hips start bucking against his face, my hand working fast with my mouth. Do I know what I'm doing? No, but I know him, and I know the noises he makes when something feels good. I know we're both close, but then he lifts me off his face with an order of, "Ride me."

I start to turn to face him, but his hands hold my hips in place. "Reverse, baby."

"I fucking love those."

I can feel more wetness build between my thighs. One of his hands holds his cock upright, the other wrapping around my hip. I position myself over him and sink down hard. My head flies back and a loud moan leaves my mouth. *I just found my new favorite position.*

The head of his cock hits my G-spot on each downward thrust. His hands slide around my waist, one going up to cup my breast, the other down to roll over my clit.

"Shit. I need a mirror."

I look over my shoulder and down at him. His eyes are at half-mast and his cheeks have a slight pinkness, and I know I did that to him. I made his hot even hotter just by fucking him.

His hand wraps around my hair, pulling my head back, and I hold the position for a minute before leaning forward. My hands go to his shins as I start to ride him hard and fast. I can feel myself getting closer the harder I ride. When his hips start lifting to meet mine, I cry out my orgasm as he grunts his.

"Wow," I breathe into the crook of my arm, where my face had ended up.

"Fuck yeah. Perfection in everything you do, baby."

I smile into my arm before lifting myself off him and turning around to lie against his chest with my chin on my hands. "I love you," I tell him, looking into his eyes, my finger tracing first one eyebrow, then the other, and then around his lips, which I love so much.

“Love you, baby.” He leans up, kissing my mouth. “I gotta clean up. You wanna come, or do you want me to bring you something?”

“I wanna come,” I smile.

“Smartass.” He smiles back, smacking my ass lightly and shaking his head.

I follow him into the bathroom, where he cleans me up before smacking me on the ass as I walk back into the bedroom. I don’t even bother saying anything when he does it; I know it’s pointless to tell him to stop. Instead, I pick my panties up off the floor, toss them towards the closet, and grab a new pair from the drawer before stepping into them.

I look down at my underwear and feel my eyebrows draw together.

“When the fuck did cotton panties with flowers become sexier than lace shit? Do not fucking ask me, but those are hot, and you in nothing but them is even hotter.”

I roll my eyes and pull them up my legs before climbing into bed. “You’re such a guy.”

“But you love me,” he says, and I smile.

“I do. I don’t know what that says about me, but I do love you.”

“It says you’re smart.” He turns off the light and pulls me to him so my head is on his chest and his hand can wrap around my hair like it always does when we sleep. “You gonna be able to sleep?”

Hearing the concern in his voice has me pressing closer to him.

“I’ll be okay. I haven’t had one in a long time,” I tell him quietly, tracing random patterns on his chest.

“I wonder what triggered it.”

“I think talking to your mom last night,” I say softly.

“What did she say?” he growls.

“She told me about your work.”

“You already knew about my work,” he says, confused. I press closer.

“I know, but I guess I never thought you could get into trouble.”

“Baby, if we were having this conversation a few years ago, I wouldn’t be able to tell you that you have nothing to worry about, but I’m no longer reckless. I take risks, but they are all calculated, and the worst case scenario is thought of and worked around before every situation.” His hand moves to my cheek. “I don’t want you to worry about any of that. Things can always go wrong, and if they do, we figure it out when it happens. Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I nod against his chest. “Night, baby.”

“Night,” I whisper, listening to his heartbeat, letting it lull me to sleep.

SHIT HITS THE FAN

“S HHHHH,” I WHISPER to the little ball of fur I just set down on the floor of my old room. He whines at me, and I can’t help but pick him up again to give him a cuddle.

“Sorry, baby, but you need to be in here until I can figure out how to tell Kenton about you,” I tell my new puppy before setting him down on the ground. I was at the mall when I walked past a pet store. I looked into the window of the shop and a little white fur ball caught my eye. He was tugging a large, red chew toy around the pen that was full of wood chips while all the other puppies fought amongst each other. I went into the store to have a closer look at him, and the minute I stood next to the pen, his head came up, his eyes met mine, and I fell in love. He ran to me, his little puppy body so round that he had a hard time running straight. I picked him up and started laughing. He was so wiggly and loveable, and I knew right then that I was taking him home with me.

I look around the bedroom, making sure there’s nothing for him to get into while I’m downstairs trying to think of a way to tell Kenton that we got a dog. The last few months have flown by. Not long after I agreed to move in, Kenton and I took a trip out to Vegas, packed up my condo, and put it on the market. When we got home from our trip, Nancy got her nephews to come over to gut the kitchen. It took about a month for them to completely renovate it.

The counters are now dark granite, the appliances are stainless steel, the cupboards are dark wood, and the floors are

slate. Nancy wanted to redo the dining room, but after the kitchen ordeal, I was over renovating for a while. We did get a new set for the deck—a large, metal table and six chairs—and we also got a large, round outdoor bed that has a top that flips over to block out the sun. It's the perfect place to read a book or make love under the setting sun, which has happened more than once when Kenton's caught me out there reading.

I come out of my thoughts when I hear a quiet snore. I look down and see that Tubs is sleeping. I shake my head, laying him on his bed before closing the door carefully behind me, hoping that he doesn't wake up until I can tell Kenton about him.

I hear the alarm system sound, letting me know that the front door is open, and I run down the stairs. My feet hit the bottom landing with a loud thud when I jump off the last step.

"You're home," I say breathlessly as soon as his head turns my way.

"I am," he says suspiciously. I feel myself start to squirm under his gaze, and I dig my nails into my palms to keep from blurting out about Tubs. I need to figure out how to tell him, and I'm thinking a blowjob may ease the blow. A smile twitches my lips at that thought and his eyes start to narrow.

"What's going on?" This time, the words are impatient.

"Nothing," I reply immediately, and his eyes narrow further.

"Then why are you over there and not here?" He points to the floor in front of him. I go to him like I normally would, lift up on my tiptoes, and tilt my head back, waiting for him to bend to kiss me. "Okay, what the fuck is goin' on?"

"Um...I... Well, we...um," I start, trying to tell him about Tubs, when all of a sudden, there's a loud bang upstairs and both of our heads tilt towards the ceiling for a second before he looks back down at me. When our eyes meet again, I see hurt hit his eyes. Then rage.

"Stay here," he growls, setting me away from him before I can explain what's going on.

“Wait!” I yell when I see him pull his gun out from behind his back. I run after him up the stairs and yell, “No!” as he pushes open my old bedroom door when he sees all the others are open.

“What the fuck?” he asks, stopping dead, causing me to run into his back.

I slide around him into the room, seeing that Tubs has pulled the lamp off the bedside table and onto the ground. Luckily, it didn’t break. I pick him up and pull him into my chest.

“Bad puppy,” I mutter, kissing his furry little head.

“What is that?” Kenton asks. My eyes go to him and I smile.

“This is Tubs.” I hold him out to Kenton and he wiggles in my hands, his tongue coming out, trying to reach Kenton’s face. I look from Tubs to my confused man, who is looking at the dog like he’s some kind of alien.

“How did it get here?”

“He got here in my car,” I say, bringing him back to my chest, petting him behind his ears when he whines.

“Put him back in your car and take him back to where he came from.”

I lift my eyes and narrow them. “I’m keeping him.”

“Baby, do you know how much work a puppy is?” No, I don’t know, but I talked to a very sweet girl at the pet store and she made sure I had everything we needed—from food to a rhinestone-studded collar.

“It’s a lot of work,” he says, watching me.

“But I love him,” I pout, tucking his tiny head back under my chin.

His eyes drop to my mouth then to Tubs.

“Fuck.” He shakes his head then reaches out his hand, petting the top of Tubs’s head. “What kind of dog is he?”

“American Eskimo,” I whisper as he takes Tubs from my hands and pulls him to his chest. My heart melts at the sight of him cuddling the puppy.

“Okay, baby.”

“What?” I ask, thinking, *This is way too easy.*

“We can keep him.”

“Really?” My eyes go wide.

“I’ll probably regret this after the first time he pisses in the house, but yeah, we can keep him,” he says, bending towards me, kissing the smile off my face.

“None of that,” he tells Tubs when he tries to get in on our kiss.

I laugh and wrap my arms around his waist, looking up into his eyes.

“Thank you, honey.” I give him a squeeze.

“You owe me.”

“Anything you want.” I smile and his eyes heat.

“Remember you said that,” he says with a wicked grin, but then I remember the look on his face before he ran up the stairs.

“Did you think I had someone here?” I ask him, my eyebrows coming together, thinking the look of hurt I caught.

“No, but you were acting strange, and then the crash happened, so I didn’t know what to think.”

“I wouldn’t do that to you,” I tell him softly. The thought alone feels like a lead weight in my gut.

“I know that”—his hand comes up, cupping my jaw—“but sometimes when you have something that seems too good to be true, you start waiting for it to crumble to pieces around you.” My breath catches in my throat and tears fill my eyes. “You, Autumn Freeman, are the most important thing in my life.”

“Stop,” I choke out.

“I love you, baby.”

“Love you too,” I sob, burying my face in his chest, and Tubs takes the opportunity to start licking me, making my sobs turn into laughter. Kenton tilts my head back again, kissing me.

“Where’s his kennel?” he asks when his mouth leaves mine.

“Kennel?” I ask dizzily.

“Where he sleeps,” he prompts.

“Oh, I got him a bed.” I point to the large, fluffy dog bed that is now in the middle of the floor, where I’m sure Tubs dragged it.

Kenton looks at me then the bed and shakes his head. “Get his leash and collar.”

“Why?” I ask, going over to the bags I put on the bed with all his stuff in them. I dig through until I find his baby-blue collar with rhinestone studs and his leash that matches. I turn around, my head bent as I take the tags off both items.

“Hell no!”

I jump at his voice and lift my head.

“What?” I ask, looking down at my hands, where his eyes are pointed.

“He’s a boy.”

“I know,” I say, feeling my eyebrows draw together. “That’s why I bought blue.” I hold up the collar and leash so he can see them better.

“It has sparkly shit on it.”

“The girl at the pet store told me they’re the ‘in’ thing. I even got him a couple of shirts that are blue,” I tell him.

“Scratch that. We have two stops to make—one to Petco and the next to wherever the hell it is you bought all that crap so we can return it.”

“We don’t need to return his stuff.”

“It was one hundred degrees outside today with eighty percent humidity. He’s covered in fur. When the hell would he wear a shirt?”

That’s a good point, but I don’t want to give in; the things I bought are cute.

“He can wear them around the house.” I shrug, walking towards him with the collar undone so I can put it around Tubs’s neck.

“He’s not wearing shirts around the house.” He shakes his head, pulling the stuff out of my hand and giving me Tubs.

I turn and watch him go back over to the bags of stuff I bought, look through it, and mutter the whole time. By the time he’s done, all he keeps out is the dog food.

“Let’s go.” He puts his hand on the small of my back, leading me out of the room then down the stairs to his car.

When we get home that night, Tubs has a new kennel, a few toys, and a plain, black leash and collar, but I did make it out of the store with a new harness that has blue hearts on it, much to Kenton’s disapproval.

“STOP HIM!” I shout, running after Tubs, who is racing away from me with one of my bras hanging from his mouth.

Kenton blocks his path and bends down, picking up the fur ball, who is still gnawing on my bra, and when Kenton tries to take it from him, he starts acting like it’s a game of tug-of-war.

“Bad puppy,” I tell him, unlocking his jaw with my fingers and grabbing my bra, which is now covered with dog slobber.

“It’s not funny,” I snap at Kenton when his laughter follows me as I go back into the bathroom, tossing my bra into the hamper before going to get a new one out of my underwear drawer.

“I told you having a puppy is a lot of work,” he says, walking into the bathroom behind me.

“I know, but he’s so cute,” I say, putting my bra straps over my shoulders and hooking the clasp behind my back.

He starts to laugh again, but this time, the vibration of his laughter is against me as he slides his hands around my waist.

“You sure you gotta go to work?” he asks, kissing the skin of my neck.

“I wish I didn’t.” I move my head to the side so my neck is more exposed to his mouth.

“Stay home with me.”

I hear the plea in his voice and turn in his arms, looking up at his face. I know that, after what happened with Sophie and Nico a few weeks ago, he has been on edge and hasn’t wanted me too far away from him, and it’s not surprising. Having someone you know and care about kidnapped and then having to help rescue them would do that to anyone.

I’ve tried to reassure him that nothing like that will happen to me the only way I know how. The cops are still looking for the hit man, but the men who hired him gave their word that I’m not on his list, and as stupid as it may be, I believe them. After all, they are the ones who paid him. Kenton and I talked though, and he knows that, if they catch the guy, I will testify against him for what he did. I never made any deals, and there’s no way I could refuse to be the only person to help the families of the five people I watched get murdered in cold blood get justice.

“I love you,” I say, coming out of my thoughts. I wrap my hands around the back of his neck and press my mouth to his before he has a chance to reply. If I only knew what was going to happen in a few hours, I would have kissed him a little bit harder and held him a little bit tighter, but that’s the thing about life—you never know what’s going to happen, so every moment you have, you need to act like it’s your last.

“WHY ARE YOU here?” I stop outside the emergency room doors as soon as I see Sid standing there. My heart starts beating wildly as I scan the parking lot, trying to see if there is anyone else around.

“I want to apologize.”

“That’s not necessary.” I shake my head, pulling out my keys as I make my way to my car. I have never been afraid of Sid, but something is off. My insides are twisted into knots. I ended up having to work a double tonight, so the darkness isn’t helping with the fear turning in my gut.

“I would never hurt you.” the pain in his voice is evident, and I slow down, turning to face him.

As soon as my eyes meet his, a car squeals around the corner of the building, coming to a halt behind Sid, who looks stunned for a second before his eyes get big as he watches a man jump out of the driver’s side door and pull a gun from behind his back. I’m frozen in place as I watch the scene unfold in front of me.

“Run!” Sid roars, causing me to come out of my freeze.

I look around, gauging if I should try and make it into my car. I realize I won’t be able to get there in time and start to take off on foot towards the emergency room entrance. I hear one shot then a grunt, and I know it was Sid getting shot. I don’t even pause. I keep running, but I don’t get far before I’m grabbed around my waist. I start kicking my legs and clawing at the arm wrapped around me, but due to the fabric covering his skin, I can’t do any damage.

“No!” I yell as my face is shoved into the hard ground. I feel a gun shoved into my cheek so hard that I know I will bruise. I’ve heard stories about people coming back from flatlining, but I’ve never experienced it myself, so I don’t know what it feels like, but I swear I die in this moment. I feel two shots as pain explodes in my body, but after that, all I feel is myself floating away.

Kenton

“MAN, KENTON. FUCK.” Justin’s distressed voice sounds over the line as soon as I put my phone to my ear.

“What?” I ask. I’ve been on edge all day; something has felt off since I woke up.

It took everything in me to let Autumn go to work. I knew that, if I tried to stop her, she would’ve flipped the fuck out, but something isn’t right. I’ve been in contact with her all day. She even joked during the last call that I must really miss her, ’cause I wouldn’t stop phoning.

“I need you to get to Vanderbilt,” Justin says with forced calmness.

My gut tightens, and I know before he even says it that it’s Autumn.

“Tell me she’s okay.”

“I don’t know, man. I’m gonna meet you there,” Justin tells me, and I can feel the pain in his voice as the words leave his mouth.

“I’m on my way,” I clip, hanging up, and I race out of the office, jump in my car, and head downtown.

When I pull into the parking lot of the hospital, I see that the news cameras and police cars have settled around the entrance of the emergency room. I spot Finn near the front doors in the crowd. I pull my car into the ambulance parking lot and get out, ignoring the yells from everyone around me. I toss Finn my keys before running into the building.

The minute I make it around the corner, the nurse’s station comes into view, and unlike most of the times I’ve been here, it’s completely empty. I run down the hall to where they took Finn the night he had been shot and stop dead when I reach the door. My eyes lock on Autumn through the small, glass window.

Her shirt is off. Her skin is covered in blood. Doctors and nurses are surrounding her. My legs start to get weak and my stomach starts to turn. I swear I feel my life ending as I watch

them work on her. I hear, “Code red,” from the other side of the door as someone pulls a set of paddles off the wall.

“You can’t be here,” someone says as I feel a hand on my shoulder and turn my head. “This is a personnel-only area.”

“That’s his girlfriend.”

I look over the nurse’s shoulder and see Justin coming down the hall towards us. *Girlfriend?* Yes, she’s my girlfriend, but she’s also my future...and she is lying on the other side of that door, covered in blood, and they are calling a code red. *FUCK!*

“He’s still not allowed back here. You need to wait in the waiting area.”

I try to look back in the room, but this time, the nurse blocks the door. “I need to be with her.” My voice is gruff to my own ears. As a man who hasn’t cried since he was young, I’m shocked to feel wetness on my cheeks.

“I’m sorry, hun, but you still can’t be here,” she repeats compassionately this time. “Come with me and I’ll show you where to wait, and as soon as we know anything, a doctor will be out to speak with you and her family.”

Family? I’m her family. She’s my family.

I’m her goddamn family!

I look at the ground, shaking my head, my hand going to the back of my neck. I can still hear loud voices from the other side of the door, but I can’t make out what they are saying.

“I need to be with her,” I repeat, but this time, I don’t know if I’m saying it for me or for the nurse.

“Those doctors in there will do everything within their power to help her, honey. Right now, you just need to be strong for her.”

I don’t know if I will ever be strong again if she doesn’t make it. I shake my head at my own thoughts. If she doesn’t make it, I’m not sure what I’ll do. My whole life with her flashes before my eyes—the way she smiles, the look she gets when she looks at me, her kindness and generosity to everyone

she meets. All the things we would miss out on, like her wearing my ring, our wedding, her having my child, and the little moments you take for granted every fucking day because you always think there will be a tomorrow.

I knew my own piece of heaven was too much to ask for. I fucking knew it was too good to be true.

“Come with me, hun.”

I don't even know that I'm following her until I hear Justin tell her that Autumn's his sister when she asks if there's anyone she should contact. He tells her that he'll call everyone. I don't even know if I'm breathing when my parents show up. It isn't until my mom wraps her arms around me that I feel something.

“She's strong, baby,” Mom whispers to me.

“I won't make it without her.”

“You won't have to,” she replies softly, and I feel her tears seeping into my skin. I pull away and put my head between my legs, praying for the first time in years. I pray to every god out there or anyone who will listen.

“Are you all the family of Autumn Freeman?” I stand up immediately, taking in the room for the first time since I got here. My family, some of Autumn's friends, and my men are all sprawled throughout the room.

“I'm her fiancé,” I tell the doctor, walking towards him.

His eyes take me in, and then Justin is at my side. “I'm her brother.”

“Do you want to talk in private, or can I speak openly in front of everyone present?” I looked around again at all the people in the room.

“We can talk here,” I tell him. “Let me start out by saying she is stable but still in critical condition.” I feel my legs get weak and I let out a long breath. “She suffered two gunshot wounds: one to the shoulder that hit a major artery and one to the face. The one to the shoulder caused her to lose massive amounts of blood, and the one to the face went in her cheek

through her lower jaw, shattering it.” He takes a breath. “She’s a very lucky woman. Though the injuries are significant, we do expect her to make a full recovery.”

I lean my head back, saying a silent thank you to whoever answered my prayers before looking at the doctor again.

“When can I see her?”

“Right now, she’s being moved to the ICU. After we get her settled into her room, we will let you know when you can see her.”

“Thank you,” I mumble.

“She will only be allowed visitors for fifteen minutes at a time, and no more than two people in the room with her.” I nod and he keeps going. “Her recovery is going to be a long one. The amount of damage to her jaw alone will take months to heal. I have to tell you...if it weren’t for the man who attacked her assailant, this conversation would probably be a lot different.”

“What?” I ask, wondering what the fuck I missed over the last few hours while I sat here feeling like my world was ending.

“A man named Sidney Sharp was there when the attack occurred. He was shot in the chest but was able to make it to your fiancée and somehow stop her assault.”

What the fuck was Sid doing here?

“The gunman?” I ask aloud.

“He got away. The police are looking for him.”

I take a breath, letting it out slowly. I need to keep it together long enough to see that Autumn gets better, but then I’m going to track down the stupid fuck and kill him.

“Did Sid make it?” I ask.

“He’s in the ICU now but is expected to recover as well.”

“Thanks, Doc.” I shake his hand then go back to my seat. I lean my head back and close my eyes. Whoever did this is

going to fucking die, and I don't give a fuck who or how many people I have to kill to make that happen.

THE SLAUGHTERHOUSE

KENTON

“**T**HEY AGREED SHE was off-limits,” I remind Justin, sitting back in my chair.

We were going over what happened at the hospital after watching the tapes from the night of the shooting. I hated seeing the video of Autumn getting shot, but it was the only way to know exactly what happened. The video footage was grainy and the images distorted, but I could still make out what happened. Autumn is adamant that the shooter from the club is the guy who shot her, and I will always trust her over anyone else.

It’s been two weeks since everything went down. I’ve been working leads as they come in, but most of my time has been spent with her since she woke up from the medically induced coma they’d been keeping her in. She can’t talk because they have her jaw wired closed, but she does recognize everyone and has been able to write things down, and that’s the most important thing in all of this.

The first time I saw her after I was let into the ICU, it took every- thing in me to stay upright. Her head was wrapped in gauze, only her lips and eyes visible. She looked like a science experiment gone wrong. There were tubes and wires attached all over her body, leading to the machines that were surrounding her bed.

I used every muscle in my body to get my legs to move me to her. When I reached the bed, I fell to my knees at her side and dropped my forehead to the top of her hand. I stayed like

that for a long time, just thankful to feel the warmth in her hand and hear the sound of her breath.

When I lifted my head and my eyes looked down at her empty finger, I knew I would put my ring where it belonged, where I should've put it months ago, but I had been concerned that I was moving too fast for her. Now, I don't care. I know she loves me, and I know that the love I have for her is something I've never felt for another person and what that meant for us.

So that night, I talked to my mom and she gave me my grandmas' ring, the same one that's been in our family for generations'. The oval-cut sapphire ring has diamonds around the center stone and down the band. It's the ring I knew would sit on the finger of the woman I love since I was old enough to understand its meaning.

I went to the hospital the next day, and like it was meant to be, I slid the ring on her and it fit perfectly. I knew that, when she woke up, she would have a long road to recovery, but I also knew that we were going to go on with our lives together and there would be no more putting stuff off until tomorrow.

"Man, he's the only person I can think of who would have the balls to hurt her," Justin says, bringing me out of my head.

"Get Kai on the phone." I run a hand through my hair, frustrated that this shit is happening. I feel torn between needing to be with Autumn and needing this finished so we can move on with our lives knowing that there is no longer a threat once she's out of the hospital.

"On it." He stands up and leaves the office. I turn my head and look at Finn.

"Where do you want me?" he asks.

"Go to the hospital, talk to Sid, and see if he told anyone about his visit here."

"Done." He stands but stops at the door. "How's Autumn?"

"She's doing better than they thought she would be at this point."

“What did she think of the ring?” he smirks. I smile for the first time in hours and shake my head.

“She hasn’t taken it off and thrown it at me, so I’m taking that as a good thing.”

“She loves you, man. You’re both real fuckin’ lucky.” He shakes his head and I see something flash in his eyes before he leaves the office. I don’t know what that was about and don’t have time to find out right now, but it looks like, when the water calms, I need to have a sit-down with my boy. I run a hand over my head before picking up the phone when I see that Justin is calling.

“Yeah?”

“Kai will be calling any minute.”

“Thanks.”

“You heading to the hospital soon?” he asks. I look at the clock and check the time.

“Yeah. They should be moving her out of the ICU today and I want to be there.”

“I’ll see you there at some point,” he mumbles. Justin has been at the hospital as much as I have. I can tell that the thought of losing Autumn from his life has affected him as much as it has me. He isn’t in love with her, but he loves her like a sister and is one more family member she didn’t have before but has now.

“See you.” I hang up. A few minutes later, I answer the phone, looking at the clock again. “Yeah?”

“I was told you need to speak with me,” Kai says, and I lean forward and feel my muscles tense.

“I need you to set up another meeting.”

“I’m sorry about your situation, but—”

“Do not fucking tell me you can’t get me a meeting,” I cut him off, feeling the phone cracking in my hand. “This is my woman. I need this shit done so when she comes home, she knows she’s safe. Get me the meeting.”

“You’re putting me in a very bad position.”

“What would you do if this shit happened to your woman?” I growl.

“Kill every single motherfucker who even thought about hurting her,” he replies back, his tone dark.

“Give me what I want.”

“I’ll make the call, but you owe me,” he replies.

Kai isn’t the kind of guy I like owing favors to, but at this point, I would make a deal with the devil to get what I need.

“Thanks, man.”

“I’m very sorry about what happened.”

I hear the sincerity in his voice, but that does nothing to ease the fury that’s been pumping through my veins since this shit went down.

“Me too. Call me when it’s set up.” I hang up and shove my phone in my pocket before heading to the hospital.

“YOU TOLD ME she was off-limits,” I tell the two men sitting across from me. “You said you were putting a leash on your fucking dog.”

I got into Vegas two hours ago on Sven’s private plane after I learned that Paulie Amidio had agreed to have a sit-down with me.

“Do you know who you’re talking to?” Paulie Amidio Jr. asks, sitting forward.

His father, Paulie Sr., puts his hand on his shoulder, pulling him back. Anyone can tell they are family. They are both dressed identically in black suits, both have dark hair slicked back from their faces, and both have dark skin and crystal-blue eyes.

“We were under the impression that it was over. Unfortunately for all parties involved, Vincent didn’t feel the same.” Paulie Sr. starts rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“Where is he now?” I ask. I don’t care what the fuck is going on in their organization; the only thing I care about is getting this shit settled.

“My men are looking for him now,” he says, and his son nods.

“I need a list of the people he associates with.” I will find him myself if I have to.

“Do you think this is Match.com?” Paulie Jr. asks, and it takes everything in me not to shoot him in the fucking head. This little fuck is greedy for power. I saw it during our first meeting, and I see it now.

“Son,” his dad says in a harsh tone.

“Fuck that, Pop. This is bullshit,” Junior says, starting to stand.

His dad wraps his hand around his arm and pulls him back down into his chair.

“This is my fucking family. You do what I say when I fucking say it,” Senior tells him, slamming his fist onto the table in front of him. When the younger man’s eyes come to me, I see embarrassment and anger, but he covers it quickly, ducking his head.

“I’ll get you the information you asked for, but if you find him, you bring him to me,” Paulie Sr. compromises.

“What are you going to do with him?” I ask, because in my mind, death is the only option at this point.

“That’s family business,” he says vaguely.

“That’s not going to work for me. He put two bullets in my woman. I want him six feet under,” I state, trying to keep my cool.

“He won’t be a threat to you after I get him.” His tone is cold, and I immediately nod.

“I’ll be waiting for your call,” I tell him, standing and leaving the room.

Kai doesn’t follow me out into the parking lot right away, so I take the time to call my mom and check in. She gives me an update about Autumn and Tubs, telling me that both are okay and Autumn seems to be doing a lot better today; she got out of bed and took a shower. That’s all great news, but it would be better if I were there to see it for myself. Autumn was upset that I was leaving, and I could see it in her eyes that she was afraid, but I needed to see to this situation myself. I’m not leaving anything to chance.

“TELL ME WHERE the fuck Vincent is,” I growl, digging my thumb into the open wound on Alfeo’s thigh. I have been at this for over two hours and still have nothing.

I picked up Alfeo outside his place of business in Vegas at a house known for selling pussy. Normally, I would turn my eyes at this, but Justin got back to me with information, and this house has been on the cop’s radar for the last year. They’ve been trying to build a case against Alfeo. Seems he has a preference, and that preference is for young girls who are mostly runaways and high school dropouts with nowhere and no one to turn to. He gets them addicted to blow and then puts them to work.

“I’m not telling you shit,” Alfeo says as spit and blood fly out of his mouth.

“That’s not the right answer.” I pull the knife I shoved into his left thigh out and slam it into his right one.

His scream fills the small space, and I shake my head. For a man who acts so fucking hard, he sure as fuck screams like a chick.

“I’m getting really fucking sick of this game. Tell me what I want to know or I’ll put a bullet in your fucking head.”

“Fuck you.” He tries to sit forward, but the ropes around his arms and legs hold him in place.

I pull out one of the guns Sven gave me from behind my back and hold it to the side of his head.

“Last chance.”

“Like I said before...fuck you,” he spits.

I pull the trigger, letting one off into his shoulder. I don't want to give him another chance, but he's been one of Vincent's sidekicks since they were young. I only have three men who've been in contact with Vincent over the last three years, so I don't have a lot of options.

“You shot me!” I make out through his screams of agony.

“And I'll do it again if you don't tell me what the fuck I need to know.” I put the gun back to his head.

“I don't have anything for you, you piece of shit!” His eyes go wide with panic.

“Well then, Alfeo, our time here's up.” I pull the trigger.

This time, the bullet goes through his temple and his brain splatters all over the wall. *I will never get used to the stench that comes along with killing someone*, I think as I go to the sink, wash off my arms and hands, and then begin thinking about my next move.

“What's next?” Kai asks.

I look at him then Sven over my shoulder. Both of them have been at my side since I left the meeting. They helped me get Alfeo to the basement I brought him to but have stayed back and let me handle this my way. I'd expected Kai to go back to Hawaii, but he came out of the club when I was hanging up with my mom, his face contorted with rage. I didn't ask him what it was about, but I had a feeling the small woman I'd gotten a glimpse of him kissing a couple of minutes before his men had taken her away as we'd gone inside had something to do with that look. Sven, I knew, would have my back. The minute I called him from Tennessee

telling him that I needed his plane, he was on it, coming to pick me up.

“We’re going to find Carlo to see if he has anything to say,” I tell them.

“You gonna kill him too?” Kai asks.

“Yep.” I look Kai dead in the eyes without saying anything else. These men are all fucking scum and do not deserve to breathe.

“Just making sure,” he says, and I see his lips twitch.

I shake my head and listen as he makes a call to have someone come clean up my mess.

“DO YOU FEEL like we’ve been here before?” Sven asks Kai from behind me.

I ignore them and pull the blade out of Carlo’s leg. I tilt my head back and forth, working out the kinks in my neck.

“I told you I don’t know where he is!” he shouts and then starts to cry.

“When the hell did men start all this crying bullshit?” Kai asks, stepping forward.

“Your man has no loyalty to you. Tell us where he is and this will be over,” he says, getting down to Carlo’s level.

“So you can kill me? Fuck you!”

“You’re going to die one way or another, but think of it this way: you do the right thing and, when you get to the other side, God may have mercy on you,” Kai says, but I disagree with him. This guy here is as bad as his friends. He has a history of beating women that goes back ages. His last girlfriend was in the hospital for a month after what he had done to her.

“I haven’t spoken to him,” he swears.

“Bullshit.” I lift the blade I pulled from his thigh and slam it through his chest. He gasps for air, and I can almost visualize his lungs filling up with blood.

“Tell me!” I roar, losing patience.

He starts coughing and his body begins to convulse out of control in the chair.

“Now you killed him and he didn’t even tell us anything,” I hear Sven say, but my eyes are locked on Carlo’s mouth as I lip-read the word ‘slaughterhouse.’

“Where’s the slaughterhouse?” I ask Sven.

His eyebrows come together and his hand goes to his suit’s pants pocket. He pulls out his phone and types something in it before looking at me again.

“There’s a club named The Slaughterhouse downtown.”

I pull the blade from Carlo’s chest and watch as his body fights for air, hearing Sven ask, “You gonna end him?”

“He’ll die.” I wrap my knife up in a thick piece of cloth and tuck it into my bag.

“Remind me not to piss you off, Mayson,” Kai mutters as Sven laughs.

“WHAT KIND OF fucked-up place is this?” I shout over the music as we walk into the club.

The room is dark, with an eerie, red glow. Hanging from the rafters, acrobats of both sexes are naked and dripping blood onto the crowd below them. Around the room, there are spotlights that shine down on different BDSM scenes being played out.

“Well, we now know where they got the name from,” Kai says as we make our way through the groupings of people in various states of undress.

After the cleanup crew came and got rid of Carlo's lifeless body, I sent Justin a message and had him look into The Slaughterhouse. His search turned up the name of a woman named Abigail Soscia. She's a twenty-six-year-old woman who has a police record as a prostitute but has been clean for the last ten years. How she got the money to open this place is the information I'm interested in.

We make our way to the bar and Sven leans across, talking to the bartender. Then his eyes come to me and he lifts his chin towards the door at the side of the room. As soon as we make it through the door and head down the hall leading to the bottom of a set of stairs, a guy who I'm assuming is a bouncer comes down the stairs and blocks my path, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Move," I tell him, not in the mood for bullshit. I need to get home to my woman, and the only way I can do that is to get this shit handled.

"No one goes upstairs." He glares. "Go back to where you came from. This part of the building is off-limits."

"Look, I know you got a job to do, but you do not want to piss me off right now."

He raises an eyebrow, obviously finding me lacking.

"A word of advice—move," Sven says, and the bouncer's eyes go to Sven and then Kai before coming back to me.

"Fuck this," Kai says, and his arm swings around my head and cold-cocks the guy right in the jaw. I watch in slow motion as his eyes roll back in his head and his body folds to the floor.

"That's one way to do it," Sven mumbles.

I step over the guy. When we reach the top of the stairs, we see that there are three doors, one on each side of the hall, and a set of blood-red double doors at the end face us. I head straight for them while Sven and Kai stay behind, blocking the first two doors.

I knock once, putting my hand on the gun in the waist of my pants, and I hear something mumbled from the other side, footsteps, and then a lock being turned. The door swings open

and a tall woman with dark- red hair, which I can tell is natural 'cause it looks almost identical to Autumn's, wearing a pair of jeans and a black, skintight T-shirt looks at me with wide eyes.

"This area is off-limits," she says.

I scan the room behind her and see that it's an office with a desk, a chair and a couch. I can't see any doors, so I know she's alone.

"We need to talk." I start herding her into the room.

"No, we don't. *Justice!*" she yells, backing up. I'm sure Justice is her bodyguard who is currently taking a Kai-induced nap.

"Do you know a guy named Vincent?" Her eyes flash with understanding and she shakes her head, looking around the room.

"Where is he?" I ask as she goes behind her desk, trying to put space between us.

"I don't know," she whispers.

"*Where is he?*" I roar, my hand going to the top of her desk, sweeping everything off. Her chest is moving rapidly as her eyes go from me to the floor. I look to where her eyes are pointed and they land on a photo that is now on the floor lying face-up. The painted, black, wooden frame shows off the photo of a little boy, a man who I know to be Vincent and Abigail. They look like an everyday American family, all of them wearing the same dark jeans and white button-down shirts. They are sitting out in an open field of grass, and Abigail is looking down at her son with a smile on her face that says he is the love of her life. Vincent has a smile on his face as well, but his seems forced, and even through a picture, I can see the kind of man he is, almost like he has no soul.

"How long have you been together?" I nod towards the picture. Her eyes come to me and tears begin to fill them.

"He shot my fiancée at close range two times, once in the face and once in the shoulder," I tell her, reminding myself why I'm here.

“I won’t stop until I get him. I’m sure you know I’m not the only person looking for him. I’m sure members of Lacamo have been here looking for him. I would hate for something to happen to you or your boy ’cause you’re protecting him.”

Her face softens and her hands wring together.

“I found out he was having another affair two weeks ago and kicked him out. Last I heard, he was staying with his latest piece in the penthouse at The Guardian.”

I pull my phone out and send a text to Justin. It takes two minutes to get a message back letting me know that the penthouse has been rented out for a little over a week to a woman named Layla Harden. I look up from my phone after reading the message. I have a feeling that anyone who has any kind of relationship with Vincent at this time is in danger. He has screwed over the wrong people, and those people’s moral compasses are fucked up.

“You need to get your boy and get out of town for a little while.”

“I have a business to take care of.” She shakes her head.

“Find someone you—” I’m cut off mid-sentence when there is a loud bang in the hall followed by a lot of grunts. We both turn towards the door when it’s thrown open. I pull my gun as the bodyguard from downstairs crashes into the room with both Sven and Kai trying to hold him back. If this situation weren’t so serious, I would laugh.

“Justice, stop! I’m okay!” Abigail shouts, covering her mouth as she watches Kai and Sven attempt to take this guy down.

His eyes go to her, and I can see worry etched in his face.

“Get the fuck off me!” he barks, batting Sven and Kai off him. He storms over to her, holding her face and looking her over. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she answers as tears slide down her cheeks. “I have to get out of town.”

I watch understanding light across his face, and he nods, looks over at me, and says, “You’re lucky I didn’t have my gun on me or you would have a bullet in your head.”

“Justice.” She slaps his arm, bringing his attention back to her.

“Babe,” he replies softly, and her eyes lower from his as a light blush creeps across her cheeks. “I know a place we can go. Dex will love it.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” She looks away.

“No more bullshit, Abi.”

“I told you I can’t see you like that,” she tells him.

“And I told you I don’t give a fuck what you say anymore. I know you feel the same way I do.”

“But Dex...” she whispers, closing her eyes.

“I love that kid. I’ve been a part of his life since he was born. Do not use him as an excuse,” Justice growls.

“As sweet as this moment is, we’ve got shit to do,” Sven says, breaking in. I look at him and nod.

“I’m sorry about your fiancée,” Abigail says sincerely. “I know it doesn’t make it any better, but I’m sorry, and the Vincent I fell in love with years ago would have been sorry too.”

I doubt that, but love is blind.

I turn to look at Justice and pull my card out of my pocket.

“If you find you can’t keep her and her boy safe, you call me.”

His eyes narrow, but he takes the card with a nod of his head.

“Are you going to kill him?” Abigail asks, looking at me.

“No,” I say, telling her the truth.

“Amidio is looking for him, and I doubt he wants to have afternoon tea. If I were you, I would find a way to prepare your boy for what’s to come,” Kai tells her.

She nods and understanding flits across her face before she grabs Justice's hand.

"Let's roll," I tell Kai and Sven.

I WATCH FROM down the hall as the small housekeeper I just paid a thousand bucks walks up to the large double doors at the end of the hall and knocks.

"Housekeeping!" she shouts through the door.

When I see the door open and a woman wearing nothing answer, I make my move, pulling my gun and heading down the hall. The housekeeper runs away and the woman, who I'm assuming is Layla, screams at the top of her lungs when I shove her inside. Vincent comes around the corner with a towel around his waist and a gun in his hand.

"Drop it," I grumble.

"Fuck you." He raises the gun towards me and an almost silent shot goes off from behind my back. He falls to the ground, clutching the hand he was holding the gun with to his side.

I turn my head, expecting to see Sven or Kai, but it's one of Amidio's men who has his gun raised. Kai and Sven are both behind the other three members of Lacamo, looking ready to kill.

"You following me?" I ask.

He shrugs, and I walk over to Vincent, putting my boot to his hand, which is trying to pick up the gun, and I crush a few bones. He grunts pulling his hand to his chest.

"We'll take it from here," one of Amidio's other men says, bringing Vincent to his feet.

His face is now pale from the amount of blood he's lost; I'm sure an artery was hit. One of the men brings over a towel, wrapping it around Vincent's wrist while the others start to clean up the mess.

“We had a deal,” I remind them.

“Deal still stands. Right now, boss has some questions for him. We’ll be in touch,” he says as he and another man drag Vincent from the room while another man talks to Layla, who is crying hysterically.

“Now what?” Sven says, looking between Kai and me.

“Now, we wait.” It isn’t until two in the morning that Kai gets a message to head downtown. When we arrive at the location, I’m surprised by the amount of cars gathered outside.

“What the fuck is going on?” Kai asks, looking over at his man, Frank, in the driver’s seat. How the hell he got the name Frank when he’s Hawaiian and looks like he could be a sumo wrestler is anyone’s guess.

“Don’t know. You want me to come in with you?”

“Nah.” Kai shakes his head, looking around at all the cars. “These men know not to fuck with me.” He gets out of the SUV and bends over, pulling something out from under the seat and putting it in the waist of his pants. “Keep it running and use your gun if you have to. If something seems off, leave, get Myla, and head to my parents’.”

“You just said they know not to fuck with you,” Frank tells him, pulling his gun from his inside coat pocket.

“Doesn’t mean they aren’t stupid, brother,” Kai mutters, slamming the door.

“Myla won’t be happy,” I hear Frank say as I slam my door.

When we get to the building’s entrance, one of the guys from the hotel earlier meets us out front and escorts us inside and down a hall.

“What the fuck is going on?” I ask when we’re taken into a large room.

It is full of men of all different ages yelling at the top of their lungs as a man in the center of the room pulls a pair of metal cutters from his pocket and walks to Vincent, who is strapped to a chair. He picks up Vincent’s hand and touches

each of his fingers with the tip of the clippers before settling on one.

Vincent doesn't even flinch when his finger is clipped off and it rolls across the floor. His body is now black and blue, and he's bleeding from his nose, mouth, and other wounds. I can tell just by looking at him that he's in shock. The good in me fights to the surface, not wanting any human being to suffer like he is, but then I remind myself of the shit he's done and how much pain he's caused and the urge to end his pain is beat back as anger is put in its place.

"You're up next," Paulie Jr. says, walking up to me and handing me a knife.

"What's going on?"

"Payback. He betrayed a lot of people, and all those people get their pound of flesh before he's ended," he explains.

"Take this back." I hand him back the knife and pull my gun.

"You can't kill him, and you only get one hit," Junior tells me.

"I won't." I walk past him to the center of the room. Vincent raises his eyes, but at this point, with the kind of damage that's been done to his body already, I would be surprised if he even understands what's going on. When I reach his side, I put the gun to his shoulder at the same place he shot Autumn. Then I think about her face, the damage that's been done, and how, regardless of how much she heals, every time she looks in the mirror, she will be reminded of what happened. I pull the gun away from his shoulder and walk around to the front of him. My hand moves to his jaw and I pull it open.

"I told you, you can't kill him."

I ignore him, put the gun in Vincent's mouth, and lean it to the side so the muzzle is sitting against the inside of his cheek. I feel a gun come to rest at the side of my head, and I start to say something when Kai comes over and whispers inaudibly to Paulie Jr., making him back up.

“You shot my girl,” I say quietly, tilting his head back and forcing his eyes to mine.

“You know I could kill your son and wife and you can’t do shit about it,” I taunt only loud enough for him to hear.

His eyes widen and I know he understands. Before he can respond, I pull the trigger, and blood and flesh spray out across the room and onto some of the people who are standing too close.

A loud cheer goes up as I make my way back to Sven and Kai. When I reach them, I notice a man talking to Kai. He’s young—I would guess mid-twenties. He’s wearing a suit and his blond hair is pulled back into a ponytail. His posture is casual, but the expression on his face is anything but.

“We good?” I ask, stepping into the mix when the man presses his chest into Kai’s.

His eyes come to me and he looks me up and down before looking back at Kai.

“Tell Myla I send my love,” the guy says, starting to walk off.

I put a hand to Kai’s chest when I see a look I’ve become familiar with over the last few weeks come across his face.

“You don’t even get to say my wife’s name!” Kai growls, grabbing the guy around the throat.

Wife? I look at Kai’s hand and notice for the first time that a very thick band is wrapped around his left ring finger.

“What’s going on here?” Paulie Sr. asks, walking up and putting a hand on Kai’s shoulder.

“Just making a few things clear,” Kai says, shoving the guy away from him. The guy looks like he wants to say something before thinking better of it and walking away.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” Kai says, shrugging off Senior’s hand.

I look at the older man and give him a chin lift before leaving the warehouse.

“You okay, man?” Sven asks Kai, and he nods, but I notice that his body is still tight and his fingers have started rolling his wedding band around his knuckle. I don’t say anything, but I do watch closely as he and Frank have some kind of silent conversation. Sven looks at me and shakes his head, saying, “I’m gonna call and have the plane ready.”

“Thanks, man,” I tell him, sitting back. I pull out my phone, sending a message to Autumn, telling her that I love her and I will be home soon. It didn’t take long for her reply to come through. The simple “*I miss you*” message has me smiling to myself. A few more hours and I would be home with my woman, leaving all this shit behind us.

FUTURE, MEET PAST

AUTUMN

I LOOK IN the mirror and turn my head to the side, taking in my face. My jaw is still slightly swollen, but for the most part, I have healed completely. I know I'm the one who said that I hated being beautiful, but when I was able to see myself in the mirror at the hospital for the first time, all I could think about was how disgusting I looked. My face was swollen and deformed, my lips cracked from being so dry. It wasn't so much that I cared what I looked like, but I was worried Kenton would see me and the look of love I was so used to receiving from him would turn into something else. I didn't want that.

I should have known better though. The first time he saw me without the bandages covering my face, his hand gently cupped my cheek while his eyes told me everything I needed to know. I knew he loved me before everything happened, but now, I will never doubt it again.

I look down at my hand and remember when I saw my engagement ring for the first time. I was sitting up in bed, my head swimming due to the pain medication I was on, but Kenton was there to see me and I never wanted to go without spending a single second with him. We were talking. Well, he was talking; I was writing everything down on a white board they had given me. My face was bent towards my hand when my eyes caught on something on my finger. At first, I thought it was a bug, but then my eyes focused on the sapphire and diamonds and my breath caught in my throat, making me feel like I was going to pass out from lack of oxygen.

“Breathe, baby,” I heard him urge, and I gulped down a lungful of oxygen as my eyes filled with tears.

“Will you marry me?” His hand covers mine on the whiteboard before I could write *YES*.

“I already told everyone you’re my fiancée, so you have to say yes. Maybe I should take your pen from you so you don’t have a say,” he mumbled, and I growled. “So what will it be? You gonna make an honest man out of me?”

His hand left mine and I wrote

MAYBE

in large, bold letters on the board.

“You must feel better if you’re fucking with me.” He smiled and my heart contracted. “Now, will you please just fucking say yes?”

If I could have smiled, I would have. My head bent and I wiped the board off before writing

YES

across the whole surface. The smile that lit up his face was one I would never forget until the day I die. His fingers went to the ring, rolling it back and forth on my finger.

“We’re getting married,” he whispered. I nodded, feeling tears fill my eyes. “Thank you.” His forehead touched mine. I lifted my hand and held it against his cheek.

I shake my head out of my thoughts when I hear something coming from down the hall. I peek my head around the corner just in time to see Tubs running with a pair of Kenton’s boxers, taking them with him down the stairs. I shake my head and go back to getting ready, figuring that Kenton can deal with him. I hear Tubs bark and Kenton growl, and I start to laugh.

When my eyes go back to the mirror, I see the dimple in my cheek I didn't have before the shooting. My hand lifts and my finger runs over the mark. It's funny how something that seems so innocent can come out of something so painful.

I clear my head and finish getting ready. Tonight is the night I marry Kenton. Well, kind of. When I got out of the hospital, Kenton wanted to go right to the courthouse and get married, but I wanted to at least have his family there to witness us starting our lives together.

He didn't agree with me. He didn't want to put it off another day, so we compromised. We got married two days after I was released, and he promised me that, when I was completely healed, he would throw me a huge reception, where I could wear a dress and he would wear a suit, and that way, I could have the wedding pictures I really wanted.

I finish my hair and makeup, and when I hear someone coming up the stairs, I smile as Tara calls out my name.

"In the bathroom!" I yell, touching up my lipstick.

"Your dog molested me when I walked into the house. I think it's time you got him fixed."

"We can't. Not yet anyways. Only one of his balls has dropped," I tell her, walking into our bedroom.

"Seriously?" she asks, and I can't help the laugh that escapes me.

"Seriously, but don't bring it up in front of Kenton. It's a sore subject."

"What's a sore subject?" Kenton asks, walking into the room, wearing his usual jeans and T-shirt. I cannot wait until later—when I get to see him in his tux.

"Your dog having one ball," Tara teases him. His eyes narrow and I shake my head.

"What time are you heading to your mom's?" I ask in a rush, knowing what's coming if I don't change the subject.

"I'm leaving now. I just came up to kiss you," he says sweetly. I smile as he walks towards me. His eyes move from

my mouth to my cheek and then to my eyes. I see pain cross his features, but he quickly covers it. He told me the other day that he loves my dimple, just hates what it reminds him of. I can't imagine being in his position, thinking he was going to die. He hasn't talked much about what happened while I was in the hospital, but before he left, I could sense that he was ready to snap at any moment.

Since he got back from Vegas, he's seemed much more at ease. He hasn't told me what exactly went down when he was away, just that I was safe now. I asked about the police and what they were doing, but all he told me was that sometimes justice isn't provided by law enforcement. What that means is anyone's guess. His mouth touches mine in a soft kiss, bringing me back to the moment. When my eyes meet his, I take a deep breath, willing myself not to cry.

"I guess I'll see you at the altar." I smile, and he shakes his head, kissing me again.

"You're already my wife," he says against my mouth.

"I know," I whisper then start to giggle when I hear Tara making gagging noises. I look around Kenton at her.

"You know I have seen you with Finn, right?" I ask her, watching a blush creep across her cheeks.

She and Finn got together while I was in the hospital. She had been in the ER while I was being worked on and was a wreck when they took me to the ICU. Finn found her sitting in the hospital chapel and didn't leave her side. Since then, they have been inseparable. It's funny to watch him with her. He never lets her leave his side when they are in the same room. Life is crazy sometimes. The guy who seemed to take life as a joke has done a complete turnaround.

"Oh, shut it," she growls, picking up a pillow from the bed and tossing it at me.

I laugh and Kenton kisses the smile off my face. This time when he pulls away, it takes a few minutes to pull myself together enough to finish getting ready.

“YOU KNOW YOU don’t have to do this, right? We can run away and live on a beach somewhere, drinking from coconuts and using banana leaves as clothes,” Justin says.

I look at him and raise an eyebrow.

“First of all, that’s sick. I don’t want to even see you without a shirt, much less wearing nothing but a banana leaf. Second, you’re like a brother to me, so that’s just weird. And third, I’m already married to Kenton, so it really doesn’t matter if I walk down the aisle or not at this point.”

I watch his eyes go soft and he puts his arm around my shoulders, pulling me into his side before kissing my hair.

“I love you too, sis, and I’m honored to walk you down the aisle.”

“If you mess up my makeup by making me cry, I’m going to kick your ass,” I tell him, putting my arms around his waist and laying my head against his chest.

When I was little, I used to wonder who my dad was. My mom never talked about him, and if I did bring him up, she would get pissed, so I learned quickly not to ask questions. Kenton asked me if I wanted him to look for him, but I don’t know if I want to do that. When Nancy and I talked about the wedding—or renewal of vows—she asked who I wanted to walk me down the aisle. At first, I said no one, but then I thought about all the people I have gained as family here. Then I thought about Link and wished he would be here to do it, but he was taking care of the club for Sid. Then I thought about Justin, how much he means to me, and how important he is in my life, and I knew it had to be him. We may not be blood, but I know deep down we are family—maybe not in the traditional sense, but in every way that counts.

“All right. Let’s go before you get my suit all wet,” Justin says as we hear the music begin.

I look at myself in the mirror that’s propped up against the side of the door one last time, making sure my dress is still in place. The white lace dress with cap sleeves that drapes under my shoulders hugs my body, showing off every curve until it

reaches mid-thigh and bellows out similar to a mermaid's tail. I fell in love with this dress immediately when I tried it on at the bridal shop.

I pull the veil over my face and down around my shoulders, taking a deep breath. Tara looks at me and smiles, and I smile back as she opens the door. I take in the backyard of Kenton's parents' house. There are chairs on the grass, where all of our family and friends are seated so they can watch us say our vows. At the end of the aisle, Kenton is standing under a large arch that's been covered in tulle, lace, and flowers. My breath catches in my throat when I look at him in his tux. He is always gorgeous, but right now, as his eyes take me in, I have to do the same. His broad shoulders are covered in black material that shows off the expanse of his chest and the strength in his arms. His hair looks like he has been putting his hand through it all day, and the dark hue around his jaw that is always visible only adds to his hotness.

He asked me if he should shave, and I told him that, if he did, he wouldn't be getting lucky until his scruff grew back. He laughed and smiled, picked me up, put me on the bathroom counter, and ran his jaw along my inner thigh before looking up and whispering, "Told you you would love it." Then he proceeded to shove his face between my legs, making me scream out his name. He was not wrong; I loved the way I could grab fistfuls of his hair to hold him in place and the way the roughness of his facial hair felt between my legs.

I come out of the memory as I make it to the end of the aisle, and Kenton takes my hand from Justin. When I look into his eyes, his travel down my body and he mouths the words, "Holy shit." I smile bigger and look into his eyes.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness the union of Kenton and Autumn," the pastor says, and my eyes go to him. "Is there any—"

"We're already married, so you can skip the part about anyone not wanting us joined together," Kenton says, cutting the pastor off, and I feel my cheeks get pink as everyone in the crowd starts to laugh.

“Okay, we’ll skip that part,” the pastor says, looking at Kenton and laughing. He continues the ceremony, and when he asks Kenton if he will have me as his wife, Kenton’s eyes come to me and I see the same look in his eyes that I saw the first time he said, “I do.” Every ounce of love he has for me is there right on the surface for me to see.

I don’t even remember saying, “I do,” when my veil is lifted and Kenton takes my mouth in a kiss that is way too hot for all of the people who are there to witness it. His tongue delves into my mouth, his body pressing against the length of mine. One hand is on my ass, his other hand on the back of my head, forcing it to the side so he can get deeper. I moan into his mouth as I feel his erection press into my belly.

The moment is broken when the catcalling and clapping starts.

He rips his mouth from mine and his lips go to my ear. “You’re so fucking lucky my whole family’s here.”

I close my eyes tighter and press my legs together the best I can to temper down the throb that’s started in my core. When I open my eyes, I’m almost bent backwards and Kenton still hasn’t stood up.

“What are you doing?” I whisper, looking at everyone watching us.

He presses his hips into my waist, letting me know why we’re stuck. After a second, he stands us up and wraps his arms around me.

“How long until you can walk without me guarding you?” I ask him while trying not to laugh out loud.

“Glad you think this is funny, babe, but I have no idea how I’m going to make it through the rest of this party. You in that dress is a recipe for blue balls,” he mumbles, giving me a squeeze. “If the cameraman wasn’t at the end of the aisle waiting to capture this moment, I would say fuck it, but I don’t think I want our kids looking at our wedding album one day and asking what’s wrong with my pants.”

I start to laugh and bury my face in his chest. It takes a minute or two for me to get my laughter under control, and by the time I've calmed down, his hard-on is no longer pressing into me. I tilt my head back and he leans down, kissing me one more time. This time when his mouth leaves mine, his hand goes behind my back and his other under my legs. I squeal as he lifts me into the air, shouting, "My wife!" More applause breaks out and I shake my head, looking out over the crowd at everyone I have come to know and love.

I LOOK AROUND the backyard and smile. It's now dark, and there are twinkling white lights running overhead across the entire area. The center of the yard has been turned into a dance floor with tables set up along the edge, each with a large centerpiece in the middle made out of large glass bowls with candles floating in them and stones at the bottom that match the forget-me-nots and white roses I carried in my bouquet. The whole backyard looks like something out of a romance novel.

"I'm so happy for you and Kenton," November says, bouncing April, one of her little girls, on her thigh while another runs around us. Her and Asher's other kids are off running around with the rest of the kids at the party. Kenton told me that the Maysons are trying to take over the world with their offspring, but I didn't believe him until there were kids running around the backyard.

"Thank you," I tell her, smiling at the little girl on her lap. She holds her hands out for me to take her, and I look at November, who nods.

"Hi." I smile, looking into her cute little face.

She pats my cheek with her hand then pulls herself closer to me, laying her head against my chest. I feel tears start to sting my nose then look around when I feel someone watching me. My eyes meet Kenton's and his go from mine to the little girl, who is now fighting to keep her eyes open as she plays with the stones of the necklace I'm wearing.

“Looks like you’re going to be joining the club soon,” November says.

“Oh, no, I don’t think so,” I murmur before looking down at the sleeping baby girl in my arms then over at Kenton, who hasn’t taken his eyes off me. The look in his eyes makes my belly flutter, and the word, “Maybe,” comes out of my mouth before I can think better of it.

November starts to laugh, and I look at her and smile.

“Autumn, you’re needed out on the dance floor,” I hear through the speakers set up around the backyard.

My eyes go to the dance floor, and Kenton is standing there in the center with his hand reaching out to me. I get up from my chair, handing a sleeping April to her mom. I walk to the dance floor, my stomach in knots. When my fingers touch Kenton’s, his hand wraps around mine and he pulls me into him just as *All of Me* by John Legend starts to play. Tears fill my eyes as I listen to the lyrics of the song. When Kenton’s lips whisper words of how he loves all my curves, edges, and imperfections, my face goes into his chest and the lyrics of the song sing to my soul like they were written just for us.

When the song ends, Kenton looks over my shoulder and nods, and I turn my head to see who he’s looking at. Sid is standing off to the side, his hands in his suit pockets. I put out my hand to him and he shakes his head, walking towards me. He saved my life the night I was shot. If he hadn’t been there, I have no doubt I would have been shot again. I put my hand in Sid’s as I feel Kenton kiss my hair. He still doesn’t like Sid, but he now tolerates him.

I finish my dance with Sid and go right to Kenton. His arms wrap around me and I look up into his eyes, saying a silent, “Thank you.”

The rest of the night is a complete blur. I don’t know if I will ever be able to get my shoes off; they feel like they are imbedded into my feet. I have laughed and danced more tonight than I ever thought possible. When all the men went to the dance floor, I almost fell out of my seat laughing, watching

them dance to *Larger Than Life* by the Backstreet Boys. I couldn't imagine a more perfect night.

"You're not going to fall asleep on me, are you?" Kenton asks as he kisses the top of my hair.

"No way. I want to see where we're going for our honeymoon," I tell him, leaning my head back to see his face.

"You won't know until we land."

"What do you mean?" I know they tell you where you're going when you check in at the airport.

"Sven's letting us borrow his plane as a wedding present."

"Wait. So you're telling me we're going on a private plane?" I ask, my mouth hanging open.

"What can I say? I've always been curious about the mile high club," he says with a shrug. A smile forms on my lips and his eyes drop to my mouth. "You like that idea?"

"I kinda can't wait to show you your surprise," I reply.

"If it has anything to do with you naked, then I can't wait either." He bends down, pressing his mouth to mine.

"You'll just have to wait and see," I say breathlessly when his mouth leaves mine.

By the time we get into Kenton's car and head to the airport for our honeymoon, my eyes are so heavy that I'm not sure how I will keep them open. I make it onto the plane and find a seat as Kenton talks to the stewardess and pilot. I can't imagine living the life Sven does, but he always seems so down to earth. I adjust my wedding dress and lean my head back, just wanting to close my eyes for a few minutes before I go take the dress off.

I wake up, feeling a kiss to my lips then forehead. My eyes slowly open and Kenton's face is the first thing I see before I look around, seeing the sun streaming through a set of open doors. Bits and pieces of last night come back to me, but most of it is hazy.

"I missed all the good stuff, didn't I?" I ask.

“You slept like the dead, babe.” He chuckles, kissing my nose.

“I even slept through you taking off my dress.” I close my eyes in disappointment. I had on a beautiful, strapless, lace bra and panties that matched it. I know he says that he loves my plain undergarments, but even I thought I looked hot in what I had on under my dress.

“I loved the lace, but I prefer you as you are now,” he says softly, his hand moving under the sheet along my belly then up, cupping one breast before traveling down to run along the top of my pubic bone. His tongue runs over my nipple and he pulls away, blowing on it and watching as it puckers. “Yes, I love you like this.”

He smiles, pulling my nipple into his mouth. This time, the heat has me arching back and grabbing a handful of his hair. His mouth travels from my breast, up my neck, and to my mouth, where he kisses me deeply as his tongue delves into my mouth. His long, thick fingers slide between my folds and down over my clit before entering me, curling up, and then hitting that spot that makes my toes start to curl.

“Yesssss,” I hiss.

“Already so hot and wet for me.” He bites my earlobe before licking and sucking down my neck. He moves so that his body is over mine and his thighs are pushing mine apart. His hands hold each of mine, pulling them up near my head. I lift up, biting into his chin. His mouth takes mine, and I moan when I feel the head of his cock touch my clit before it lowers, bumping against my entrance. Then the tip slips inside before pulling out, going too far. My mouth pulls from his and I try to lift my hands, wanting to grab his ass to pull him into me.

“Please,” I beg.

“So sweet,” he whispers, bending his head, biting and sucking one nipple before moving to the other one and torturing it the same way.

My hands are fighting to get free, wanting so badly to grab him. His hands shift to hold on to my wrist, forcing my hands

flat down on the bed. His hips shift forward and he enters me again, this time thrusting fast and hard. My hips rise up to meet his, my legs wrapping around his waist.

I start to feel that deep tingle in my core, but just when I know I'm going to come, he pulls out, his hands release mine, and his body shifts. Then his hands push my thighs farther apart and his mouth lands on my center, pulling my clit between his lips. I come on a scream, my hands holding on to his hair as I ride out my orgasm.

His mouth lifts, and before I even come down from my high, he flips me to my elbows and knees and his hand slides up my spine to the back of my neck, pressing my head deeper into the mattress. Then his hands go to my hips and lift them higher, and he surges deep inside on a swift thrust.

“God, yes,” I moan and start to get up on my hands when they are grabbed from the mattress, pulled behind my back, and used to pull me back into him so hard that the slapping of his skin against mine causes a slight sting against my ass.

“Give it to me, baby. Give me what I want.” He thrusts harder, and this time when I start to feel the pull to come, he releases my hands and pulls me up against his chest. His mouth moves to my ear. His hands separate, one zeroing in on my clit, the other pulling one nipple. I come hard and fast, bucking against him.

“Fuck, yes,” he mumbles in my ear, his thrusts slowing until he plants himself deep inside me, where I can feel him pulsing.

His hand releases my breast, traveling up my neck and turning my face towards his before he takes my mouth in a deep kiss. He pulls out of me, making me whimper, then flops down on the bed, pulling me down on top of him. I lie there in silence for a few minutes, listening to the sound of water while feeling the slight breeze coming from outside glide across my damp skin.

“Where are we anyways?” I ask, getting up on an elbow so I can look down at him.

“Go look out the door.” He smiles, and I debate on whether or not I want to get up before pulling myself away from him.

I find his shirt at the end of the bed and quickly slip it on over my head before walking to the doors. The closer I get to the doors, the brighter it gets outside. My breath catches as I take in the view before me. There is a pink beach that leads to water so blue that it looks like a painting.

“Oh my God,” I whisper and feel hands slide around my waist. My hands slide over Kenton’s and I tilt my head back so I can look into his eyes. “Where are we?”

“The Bahamas.” He smiles, bending down to kiss my mouth.

“Is the beach pink or are my eyes playing tricks on me?”

“It’s pink.”

“Wow.” Who would have thought there was a place in the world with pink-sand beaches?

“What do you say you put on that bikini I saw in your bag and we go snorkeling?” he asks. I smile and nod before completely turning around in his arms.

“Thank you for this.” I get up on my tiptoes, press my mouth to his, and then duck under his arm, running back into the room so I can put my suit on. I hear him laugh and the sound only makes me smile bigger.

The rest of our honeymoon is spent either in bed or on the beach. I can’t imagine it being any more perfect.

“BABE, GET THE door!” Kenton yells from his office. I roll my eyes and drop the shirt I was folding to the bed.

“You could say please!” I yell back, bouncing down the stairs with Tubs right behind me. I hear him laugh but don’t hear him say please.

We have definitely fallen into the role of a married couple—except I don't cook or clean. We have a housekeeper who comes once a week, and Kenton cooks dinner most nights, because anytime I get near a stove, it's a recipe for disaster.

I swing the front door open and my world tilts.

“Mom,” I whisper in shock. Before I realize what's happening, her hand is coming across my face in a slap so hard that my head flies to the side.

“How dare you?” she hisses, lifting her hand again. I can hear Tubs going crazy.

“I have never hit a woman in my life, but I will tell you right now. You touch her again and I will put you down,” Kenton growls while stepping between my mom and me.

My hand hasn't moved from my cheek. I can still feel the sting of her slap, and my body heats up. My vision blurs—not with tears, but with rage. I have been through hell and she shows up here not out of concern, but out of self-preservation. I know exactly why she's here.

Kenton found my father not long after we got home from our honeymoon. At first, I wasn't going to contact him, but after a long talk with Kenton and Nancy, I decided I had nothing to lose. If he didn't want to talk to me or have a relationship with me, it wouldn't hurt any more or any less than if I didn't reach out to him. So I called him, and to say he was adamant that I was a scammer is an understatement.

It wasn't until Justin sent him a copy of my medical records that he called me back. He told me that my mom told him that I'd died when I was three and that I had been cremated. He said that he still had the urn that he believed my ashes were held in. He explained that my mom moved out of the area they lived in a few days after she dropped off what was supposed to be my remains to him, and he never heard from her again.

“Do not come between me and my child,” my mom hisses, trying to get around Kenton.

I don't even know what comes over me, but the rage I have felt since I was young gives me the strength to get around Kenton's body, which I swear is expanding before my eyes.

"How dare I? *How dare I?*" I shriek at the top of my lungs. "I'm sure you're here because my father contacted you. How dare you keep him from me?! How dare you tell him I was dead and let him believe his only child was killed?"

"Do not talk to me like that. I did what was best for you. He was nothing."

"Why? Because he didn't fit into your perfect little world?"

"He was a garbageman," she says snottily.

"And you slept with him for over two years!" I yell, my hand balling into a fist at my side. I feel heat from Kenton at my back, his presence offering me strength. I know that, with him, I will be able to face any demons I have.

"He wasn't good enough for me or you."

"He loved me!" I scream, and without thinking, I smack her. My hand stings from the impact, but seeing the red tinge to her cheek somehow makes me feel better.

Her hand goes to her face and her eyes get big. "You little bitch."

"I'm not that scared little girl anymore, Mom," I tell her when I see her hand start to rise again. "You hit me and I *will* hit you back."

Her hand reluctantly drops to her side and her eyes start to narrow. "He's suing me. After all these years, he showed back up in my life and threatened me. My fiancé left me and it's all your fault."

"I hope he wins, and your ex is obviously a smart man," I hiss, and then I take a step back and slam the door in her face. My heart is beating out of control and I can feel the adrenaline pumping through my system, begging me to open the door and kick her ass.

She starts to yell, and Kenton picks me up, growling, “Stay,” before setting me away from the door and opening it. “You’re trespassing. I have a gun and will shoot your sorry ass if you don’t get the fuck off my property, and don’t even think about coming back. There will be a restraining order in place before the night’s up.” He slams the door closed then puts both his hands to the frame, his head lowering between his open arms.

I can tell by his breathing alone that he’s trying to control the urge to go back out there and make good on his threat, whether she’s leaving or not.

“I want to kill her,” he whispers.

I duck under his arm, put my face near his, and wrap my arms around his waist.

“I know,” I whisper back. I can feel the anger rolling off him in waves so strongly that it’s almost hard to stand.

“Do you think she’ll come back?” I ask.

“She will never get near you again.” He stands, his hands come up to hold my face, and his thumb moves over my cheek, which still feels hot from the slap. “I may not be able to kill her, but I swear she will not have the life she has now by the time I’m done with her.”

I can tell that there’s nothing I can do or say that will change his mind. I don’t even want to try to get him to let it go and let her move on with her life like nothing happened. She knowingly ruined my life— and my father’s—and it’s going to take a long time to build a relationship with him.

“I need to call Justin. Are you gonna be okay?” he asks after a few minutes.

“I’ll be fine,” I tell him softly.

He bends down, pressing his lips to mine in a quick kiss. I watch him walk away before heading upstairs to finish what I was doing. I somehow feel like a weight has been lifted and I was given my power back after what happened with my mom.

“It’s done,” Kenton tells me, coming into the kitchen, where I’m making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

I look at the clock, seeing that he has been in his office for about five hours now. When my eyes go to him, I can tell that the stress and anger that were on his face before are now gone. I know that, with him as my man, I never have to worry about anything. He will always work to make the world a safe place for me.

“I love you,” I tell him, watching his face go soft.

“I know, babe.” I smile bigger and go to him, wrapping my arms around his waist.

“Now what do we do?”

“What do you mean?”

“There are no bad guys after me, and I’m sure you got rid of my mom for good, so now what do we do for entertainment?” I ask, and he starts walking me backwards until my back hits the counter.

“Now, we see how long it takes for me to plant my kid in you.”

“Really?” I whisper.

“Hell yeah,” he growls back, his mouth crashing down onto mine. I have to say that I like the way he looks at keeping us entertained.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR, THREE MONTHS, SIX
DAYS, TWELVE HOURS, FIFTEEN
MINUTES, AND THIRTY-SIX
SECONDS LATER.
APPROXIMATELY.

I LOOK IN the mirror, my hands going to my waist, where my stomach has started to expand. I love this. I love knowing that our baby is growing inside me. We were worried for a while after we started trying to have a baby because I didn't get pregnant right away, but the doctors all assured me that sometimes it just takes time. It was worth the wait. When I took that pregnancy test and saw the positive sign for the first time, I thought I was going to pass out from excitement. Kenton just looked stunned, like he couldn't believe it had finally happened.

"Baby, seriously, we're going to be late if you don't move your ass,"

Kenton says, walking into the bathroom. Our eyes meet in the mirror and mine narrow.

"I would be ready if I didn't puke every ten minutes and pee every five from your child. So if you want to blame anyone for my lateness, you need to look in the mirror."

"Babe, I got you up four hours ago knowin' you get sick in the mornings and you need time to wake up and use the bathroom a million times before we can leave the house."

I feel my eyes narrow further and my fists start to clench at my sides.

"I wanna meet my kid, baby," he says gently, a small smile forming on his lips as his hands come around my waist, his thumbs moving over my bump. All the annoyance I was feeling seconds ago leaves, and then tears start to fill my eyes.

“What am I gonna do with you?” he asks, taking in the tears filling my eyes.

“Love me,” I say as he pulls me into his chest. These pregnancy hormones are killers. One minute, I feel like I’m on top of the world; the next, I want to kill someone. Luckily, Kenton loves me all the time.

“So today’s the big day, huh?” the nurse says, handing me a dressing gown. I look at her and smile, nodding my head.

“Well, I’ll just let you get changed, and the doctor should be in in a few minutes.” She closes the door behind her, and I start to get undressed.

“Are you nervous?” Kenton asks.

I turn to look at him, my eyebrows coming together. “Why would I be nervous?”

“You know, what if it’s a girl?” He shrugs.

I smile and start to laugh. All of his cousins have girls; it seems their firsts are always girls. I don’t know what’s bringing this on now, but we’ve talked about the sex of the baby before and he’s always said that he would be happy with whatever we have as long as he or she is healthy.

“What’s bringing this on?” I ask him as I finish getting undressed and putting the gown on before hopping up on the table.

“I talked to Nico last night. He was telling me how different it feels having girls than boys and how, with the girls, he’s worried non-stop, but with his boy, his emotions have seemed to even out some.”

Nico and Sophie had a little boy a few weeks ago. I’m sure it is different having boys, but I can’t imagine it being that different.

“So now you’re worried?” I guess.

“I think about you non-stop all day long,” he says softly, causing my breath to pause. “I just worry that I won’t have enough of me left over.”

I let out a breath, and my heart lightens.

“You have the biggest heart of anyone I know.” I hop off the table and go to him, pushing my fingers through his hair. “No matter if we have a boy or girl, I know you will find room for all of us.”

His head tilts back and his eyes meet mine. “Love you, babe.”

“Love you too.” I bend my head down and kiss him just as the door opens and the doctor walks in.

“How are you guys today?” Denise, our doctor, asks. Kenton stands to greet her with a hug, and Denise smiles and hugs him back with a pat to his cheek. Denise is about seventy years old and should probably retire, but she told me the first time I met her that she will probably be working until the day she dies. She’s the same doctor who delivered Kenton and would be delivering our baby if everything goes as planned.

I go back to the table and hop on top, lying back before answering, “We’re really good.” I smile at her, running my hand over my stomach.

“Well, you look really good, and all the work-ups we did look perfect. I just need to check you over to make sure everything looks okay, and then we can see what you’re having.”

“Sounds good,” I say.

She smiles at me and then Kenton before proceeding with the inter- nal exam. Then she lets me put my pants back on before having me lie back on the bed again. She tucks a paper towel under the edges of my leggings and lifts my shirt farther up, exposing the rest of my stomach before squirting lubricant there.

Kenton comes to stand next to me, wrapping his hand around mine. The loud sound of a heartbeat pulses through the room, and I watch the dark screen next to my head, trying to make out our baby. When I see the figure emerge through the black, tears start to fill my eyes as they always do when I see our child.

“Look at how big he is already,” Denise says, and my eyes go to her before my head tilts back so I can see Kenton’s face.

“We’re having a boy?” I ask when I don’t see Kenton react at all. I wonder if he even caught on to what she just said.

“You are.” I hear the smile in her voice as Kenton’s head tilts down and he looks at me.

“Well, Daddy, what do you have to say about that?” I ask him.

“Thank you.” He bends, kissing my mouth. Before he pulls his lips away, he whispers, “I want a girl too. You’re right. I have enough room for a lot more.”

I nod and lift my head slightly, pressing a kiss to his lips as I feel tears slide down my cheeks. I’m looking forward to sharing that with him.

Three years, one month, six days, twenty-two hours, six minutes, and two seconds later.

“HONEY, YOU NEED to put her down,” I tell Kenton as I walk into the living room.

He’s sitting on the couch, wearing a pair of sweats and nothing else. The football game’s on the TV, the sound low in the background as our sleeping daughter lies in his arms and our son sits at his side, his head laying against his chest with his eyes closed. Half the time, I wonder if he pretends to be asleep just so he can spy on us. He knows far too much for a three-year-old.

“She just knocked out,” he says softly, looking down at her before looking at me again.

I roll my eyes and shake my head, knowing that he’s lying. If he’s home, the kids are on him. I love seeing him with them, but when he’s not home and I have our kids, when I’m alone and they both want to be held all the time, it makes it hard to get stuff done around the house.

“Your mom’s on her way over with Viv. They want to look at the backyard and measure to see if they can fit a play set back there.”

“She doesn’t give up, does she?” he gripes, looking down at Anna-belle again.

I know exactly what he’s thinking. The minute his mom walks in the door, the kids are no longer ours. They are all Grandma’s, and he hates it.

“You have something in common.” I smirk.

“Well, seems like she will be useful while she’s here after all,” he mumbles.

“What does that mean?” I ask, my eyes narrowing as I watch a smirk form on his lips.

“You’re gonna find something to do with that smart mouth of yours while Mom takes care of the kids for us for a little while.”

I feel a tingle begin and am all of a sudden very anxious for Nancy to show up.

“Strip. Then get on your knees, babe,” Kenton grunts, backing me into our bathroom. As soon as Nancy walked into the house, Kenton handed the kids off to her. I could tell by the twinkle in her eyes that she knew exactly what was going on. Thank God Maz was awake so she couldn’t say anything that would have me turning red.

I quickly strip and drop to my knees, watching as Kenton locks the door to the bathroom behind him.

“Finally, she listens,” he mumbles.

I ignore that comment and just enjoy watching him walk towards me. His hands go to his sweats, one pushing them down until his cock springs free, the other hand wrapping around himself, stroking as he walks to me.

“Open.” His eyes lock on my mouth as I open for him. The second the head of his cock touches my tongue, I moan. “I think you love sucking me off more than I like it, and I like it a whole hell of a lot.”

His hand runs down my cheek, his thumb going to my chin. He pulls down on my jaw, making me open more as he slides deeper into my mouth, hitting the back of my throat. His hand lowers, running down my neck then over each nipple, giving them a tug. I moan around him and use one hand to cup his balls before wrapping around the base of his cock, twisting on each thrust, while my other hand goes between my legs.

“Show me how wet you are for me,” he demands, and I pull my slick fingers out from between my legs. His hand wraps around my wrist, pulling my fingers to his mouth.

The heat and feel of his tongue on my fingers has me releasing him from my mouth and leaning my head back. Before I can even ask him to fuck me, I’m up and bent over the vanity, his foot kicks my legs farther apart, and I feel the head of his cock touch my entrance. I expect him to enter me slowly, but he surprises me by covering my mouth with his hand as he slams deep in one fast thrust. I scream out, my teeth biting into his palm. His hand pulls my face to the side so he can take my mouth in a deep kiss while he moves rapidly behind me.

“Tilt your ass higher,” he says, and I rise up on my tiptoes and put my palms flat down on the vanity, getting more leverage. “Look at us.”

My eyes go to his in the mirror and I take us in. His suntanned skin makes mine look creamy white in comparison. His large size behind me makes me look more feminine somehow. My red hair is down, cascading over my shoulders in a wavy mess. We look like we belong on the cover of an old romance novel. His hands move over me before one wraps under my neck, the other holding my breast; the visual alone has my orgasm approaching quickly.

“Come for me. I want to feel it.” His words, cock, and hands send me over as I turn my head, pressing my forehead into his neck. I hear and feel him growl his release as his thrusts slow and his hips jerk.

“Love you,” I tell him, turning towards the mirror so I can look into his eyes.

“You too, baby,” he says, pulling me a little closer to him as I feel his thumb run over the scar on my shoulder.

“Autumn, Anna’s diaper needs changing!” we hear Nancy yell, breaking the moment.

I look at Kenton and roll my eyes. Unless the kids are at her house, she doesn’t do diapers. She says that she changed enough of them to last a lifetime.

“I’ll take care of our girl while you get dressed.” He smiles.

“Thanks,” I moan as he pulls out. He turns me in his arms, kissing me deeply before releasing me, grabbing a washcloth, and cleaning us up. After washing his hands, he leaves the bathroom. I stand there for a few minutes looking at myself in the mirror. When I look into my eyes, I see a woman who knows what love is, and that feeling alone has me hurrying to get dressed so I can go be with my family.

“ARE YOU SURE that’s him?” I ask, leaning across Kenton, who is sitting in the driver’s seat of our truck so I can get a better view out his window.

“I’m sure, baby,” he says gently, running a hand down my back.

I look from the young man I’m supposed to be meeting in a few minutes to my husband.

“What if he hates me?” I ask. It’s the same question I’ve asked every time we have spoken about this moment.

“No one could ever hate you, and if he does, I’ll kick his ass.”

“You better be nice,” I say firmly. I know him, and he will do just as he says.

“You know I will be. Now, are you ready to go over there?”

“No,” I whisper, shaking my head and looking back out the window at the young man.

He’s handsome, with dark hair, golden skin, and a long, lean frame that makes me think of his dad. I watch him as he takes a drink of coffee before setting it on the table, lifting his wrist to look at his watch.

“He’s waiting for you, baby.”

“I’m so scared,” I say quietly, sitting back in my seat. My stomach in knots from the anxiety.

“My warrior is never afraid of anything, and if she is, she knows I will be there to fight along with her.”

I look into his golden eyes, the same eyes I fell in love with all those years ago, and smile, feeling tears fill my eyes. I have no idea how I got so lucky. I lean forward, this time putting my hand behind his neck and pulling his face forward so I can reach his mouth.

“Thank you,” I whisper against his lips.

“Anything for you.” I smile and open the door to the truck, hopping out before he can make it around to my side.

“What did I tell you about waiting for me?” he grumbles, grabbing my hand. I shake my head but don’t reply; we would be arguing for the next hour if I did.

We walk across the street, and the second we hit the sidewalk, Dane’s head lifts, his eyes lock on mine, and I see for the first time that his eyes are blue.

“Autumn.” He says my name, and tears pool in my eyes. I nod and squeeze Kenton’s hand so hard that I’m surprised it doesn’t break.

“Kenton.” Dane’s says, sticks out his hand, and gives it a shake before pulling back.

“Can I get a hug?” he asks me, and I feel my body shake but nod anyways.

His arms come around me and I realize how big he is. I would guess his height to be around six two; it’s hard to think

that he was once growing inside me. Our kids now are still so small being just ten and seven. I start to cry harder and feel myself being transferred from him to Kenton, and as soon as I smell my husband's familiar scent, my anxiety starts to ease and the tears start to lessen. I pull my face out of Kenton's chest and wipe my eyes with the back of my hand.

"Sorry," I whisper, shaking my head.

"It's okay." He smiles, rubbing my shoulder. Tears sting my nose again as I wonder what his parents must be like to have raised such an amazing man.

"Let's sit down." Kenton says and I feel his hand on my lower back as he leads me to a chair.

"Tell me about you," I say as soon as we're seated.

"Well, I'm in law school and work part-time at a firm. I play soccer and run track. Really, I'm kind of boring." He shrugs.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" I ask. He laughs, running his hand along his jaw. I can't imagine girls his age not falling at his feet.

"What?" I ask when he doesn't reply.

Kenton says, "Babe."

"You sound like my mom," he tells me. Then he looks like he thinks he shouldn't have said that.

"Tell me about your parents," I say softly. I hate that I couldn't raise him, but I hope that the people who adopted him really wanted a child and loved him fiercely.

"Mom's a schoolteacher and Dad's a fireman. They met when my mom's house caught fire and my dad rescued her. They were married not long after they met and started trying to have kids soon after, but it never happened for them, so they gave up and decided to adopt." He shrugs, looking slightly uncomfortable.

"Funny thing is, about a week after they brought me home, they found out my mom was pregnant, so I have a younger

sister.” He smiles, and I can see how much he loves his family. “They’re really great parents.”

I nod and feel Kenton’s hand give my thigh a squeeze. “I’m so happy you had a good childhood.”

“Kenton told me a little bit about what happened and why you gave me up for adoption. I want you to know there are no hard feelings or anything.” His hand moves to his hair, running through it. “I’ve had a really great life.”

“I’m glad. I just never wanted you to hate me,” I tell him quietly.

“I didn’t, and I don’t. My parents have been upfront with me since I was little, explaining that I was adopted. I was always curious about you, but I have never been upset when I’ve thought about you.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, all the fears I’ve held inside since the day he was taken from me releasing with the words he spoke. I was so worried that he hated me, and I never wanted that.

“Kenton told me you have two kids, a boy and a girl?”

“We do.” I smile at him then over at Kenton, who leans in, kissing the side of my head.

“I would love to meet them. And maybe bring my sister with me, if you don’t mind.”

“I would love that.”

“We’ll set it up for a weekend when I have time to hang out for a while.”

“Okay,” I agree with a smile.

He stands and so do I. Then he pulls me in for a hug. I hug him back, memorizing the feeling. He steps back and gives Kenton’s hand a shake.

“I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Talk to you soon,” I say as I watch him walk away before facing Kenton.

“Cool tattoo!” I hear yelled from behind me.

I turn around, seeing Dane standing on the other side of the street with his hands in his pockets. I put my finger to the skin behind my ear and bring it to my mouth, kissing it before waving goodbye to him.

We get into Kenton’s truck and I lay my head back against the seat before rolling my face in his direction. “Thank you for that.”

“Anything for you, babe,” he says, and I nod and look out the win- dow as I listen to the truck start up.

I sit forward and put my hand over his on the gearshift. “Anything for you too. You know that, right?”

“You’ve already given me everything,”

I press my mouth to his and kiss him with every ounce of love I have for him. Then I pull back and get back in my seat. “Let’s go home.”

“*Home,*” he mumbles, squeezing my leg.

I wrap my hand over his and lean my head back, giving a silent thank-you to whoever makes unknown dreams come true.

The End

OBLIGATION

THE UNDERGROUND KINGS
SERIES: KAI

ABOUT OBLIGATION

[ob-li-gey-shuh n]: An obligation is a course of action that someone is required to take, whether legal or moral.

At six years old, Myla was sent to a family her father and mother had chosen for her when they knew their time on earth was almost up. What they were unaware of was what they thought would be her safe haven would become her living hell.

Kai has been watching Myla from afar since he took over the family business from his father and inherited the responsibility of keeping her safe. When word gets back to Kai that Myla is not only in danger, but that his assets are being compromised, he immediately jumps into action and does the only thing that can be done at the time by marrying her.

Neither Myla nor Kai would have thought that something that started off as a farce would become the most important thing either of them could've ever done.

To every single woman who has the courage to fight her demons. Your strength is astounding even when you fight in silence.

FIRST MOMENTS

“EVERYONE IS LOOKING for you.” I turn my head, pulling my hair out of my face as I watch a boy I’ve never seen before climb up the stairs and into my tree house. “

Who are you?” I ask him as he sits across from me.

“Kai,” he smiles, looking around. He looks a lot different than the other kids I know. His hair is long, and his skin is a lot darker than mine. “Why are you hiding?”

I shrug and look away from him. Daddy was yelling earlier; he was so mad that he was turning red. Then Mommy started crying, and Daddy started yelling louder. I heard Mommy telling Daddy that he had to send me away. I don’t want to go away. I try to be good, but sometimes, I forget to listen.

“Why are you crying?”

I look up at him and wipe my face.

“I’m scared,” I whisper, wiping my nose.

“Come on. I’ll protect you,” he says, holding his hand out to me.

Then my mommy calls my name again. I look at his hand, move Mr. Bear under my arm, and put my hand in his.

“Myla!” Mommy yells, running towards me. I can tell she has been crying again.

“Where did you go?” Her hands grab my shoulders and she shakes me hard.

“It’s my fault. I asked her to show me the tree house,” Kai tells her.

She stops shaking me then looks at him.

“You shouldn’t have done that. You knew we were looking for her,” she says angrily her head.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking,” Kai says softly, putting his hands in his pockets and looking at the ground.

I look back at Mommy, and she shakes her head before grabbing my hand and pulling me with her. When I look over my shoulder at Kai, he smiles, making me smile back.

PROLOGUE

“**T**IME FOR BED, *zvyozdochka*,” Papa says as he walks into my room. I run to my bed and jump in, making all of my stuffed animals fly out of the bed before standing up, jumping once, and falling to my back, which makes him laugh. “Your mama has told you about jumping on the bed, Svezda.”

I know that Mama doesn’t like it when I jump on the bed, but it always makes Papa laugh.

“Will you sing me my song?” I ask him as he move towards the bed.

“Have you brushed your teeth?”

“*Da*,” I answer affirmatively in Russian, making him smile.

“Did you wash your face?”

“*Da*,” I repeat, giggling.

“Did you wash your smelly feet?” he asks while bringing my feet towards his face.

“*Nyet*.” I giggle harder, wiggling my toes.

“Ah, *zvyozdochka*, what should I do with you?” he asks, calling me his “little star” while tickling me. I roll around on the bed, trying to get away from him as I cry out in laughter. When he stops tickling me and I stop laughing, he picks me up and pulls my covers back before laying me back down.

“Now will you sing me my song?” I ask him again, tucking Mr. Bear under my chin, feeling my eyes start to close.

“*Da.*” He kisses my forehead before sitting down on the side of the bed. His fingers run over my eyelids, causing them to close completely before he starts to sing quietly. “*Zvyozdochka, zvyozdochka, you outshine the sun. Zvyozdochka, zvyozdochka, nothing compares to you.*”

“*Zvyozdochka, zvyozdochka, the holder of my treasure. Zvyozdochka, zvyozdochka, I will always love you dearly, for you are my star who guides me from far and will always lead me home.*”

Then I fall asleep.

“YOU KNOW WHERE to take her,” Papa tells Philip as he carries me outside. I cling tighter to Papa. Mama ran out of Papa’s office soon after she woke me up, telling me to get dressed, and then took me to him.

“I don’t want to go!” I cry, kicking my legs and wrapping my arms tighter around Papa’s neck as he tries to hand me to Philip. I don’t want to go away. I want to stay with him and Mama.

“*Zvyozdochka, you must be a big girl and go with Philip.*”

“I won’t be bad anymore!” I sob, screaming out as he pulls my hands from around his neck.

Philip’s hands wrap around my waist, pulling me from my papa.

“You’re our greatest treasure, Svezda. We love you,” my papa says as he opens the door for Philip, who sits down in the back of the limo, holding me in his lap.

“I love you, Papa!” I cry and see that my Papa is crying too before he turns his back on me.

“*Pah idiom!*” Philip says, and the limo begins to move.

I turn in Philip’s arms and look out the back window, watching as Papa pushes the front door of the house open.

Then I see Mama on the floor. Papa picks her up, and I hear her scream my name as the door closes.

MY HUSBAND

I FEEL THE sun on my closed eyelids and something sharp poking me in the face. Moving my hand, trying to get away from the pain, and whimper when it scrapes against my cheek. I lift my head and run my fingers along the side of my face, feeling wetness. Opening my eyes to see a light smear of blood on my fingers. I flip my hand over, and then I see the gaudy ring that is now taking up residence on my ring finger.

“Great,” I whisper, closing my eyes and laying my head down again.

I prayed earlier, before I went to sleep, that when I woke up, the ring I’m wearing now and the man who put it there would be nothing but a bad dream. No such luck. I roll over and take a shaky breath, wanting to close my eyes for a few more seconds, wishing I could just sleep until everything was back to normal.

“Time to get up.”

I turn my head and meet my new husband’s eyes as he looks at me through the open bedroom doorway. He looks like an ancient Hawaiian warrior. His long, wavy hair is tied into a ponytail at the back of his neck with a piece of leather cord. His wide nose and square jaw make his full lips and long eyelashes somehow appear masculine. At five eight, I have never felt short, but next to him, I feel minuscule. He must be at least six seven. His shoulders are so broad that I wouldn’t be

surprised if he had to turn slightly to fit through most doorways.

“If we didn’t have to meet with my lawyer, I would let you sleep,” he says, bringing me out of my perusal.

One thing I have to be grateful for is that, ever since the moment he saved me, he has been kind and surprisingly soft with me.

“I’m getting up,” I tell him quietly and start to sit up, but pain slices through my side, causing me to inhale sharply.

“I thought you said you weren’t hurt?” he growls.

I’m gently lifted to a sitting position on the side of the bed. I’m so focused on trying to breathe that I don’t even notice his proximity until I feel his hand on the bare skin of my shoulder.

“I’m fine,” I mumble, trying to breathe through the pain and the feelings that are swimming around in my stomach.

“You’re going to the doctor.”

“I’m not,” I say, lifting my head and meeting his eyes.

“Myla.” His eyes go soft as my name leaves his mouth, and his hand comes up, causing me to flinch and his jaw to go hard.

“Sorry,” I whisper while standing.

“We need to talk about what happened,” he commands as his hand drops to his lap.

“How long do I have to get ready?” I ask, walking towards the bathroom.

“Thirty minutes,” he replies as I turn to face him. When our eyes connect again, his flash with annoyance as he stands.

“We will talk,” he declares, walking out of the room, shutting the door behind him without saying another word. I stare at the door for a moment before turning around and walking into the bathroom, where I turn the faucet on, place my hands on the counter, and look at myself in the mirror, watching as tears begin to fill my eyes.

“You’re strong, Myla. You can do this,” I whisper to myself, taking a deep, shaky breath and then letting it out as I splash cold water on my face.

When I look at myself again, the tears have been washed away with the water, no trace left behind. I grab a towel out of a built-in shelf and bury my face in it, muffling the sound of the sob that climbs up my throat.

My soul feels like it has been blackened by not only what I witnessed, but what I did. I have no idea how I’m supposed to get over seeing people die right in front of me or knowing I’m the reason they are dead.

I wipe my face on the towel and go to the glass shower door, sliding it open before turning the water on. Once I feel that the water is warm enough, I carefully remove my clothes and step into the shower, letting the water from the showerhead pour over me. I really want to sit on the shower floor and cry, but right now, that is not an option.

I wet my hair then look around the shower stall, finding a shelf full of bottles of different body washes. I quickly sort through them, find one for women, and then pour a big glob onto my hand and lather up. I don’t know for sure if this is Kai’s bathroom, but if by chance it is, I don’t want to use something of his and smell like him for the rest of the day. As it is, it’s difficult to be around him.

I rinse off and get out of the shower before drying off and picking my clothes up off the floor. When I step back into the room, I take it in for the first time since arriving here last night. The room is huge, with large, glass doors that look out over the ocean. I walk toward the doors and look out at the water.

In Seattle, I live in a beautiful two bedroom condo. I chose my condo because of the ocean view I have, but the view I have back home is nothing like this. Other bodies of land block my view, and the water is so dark that it’s almost black. Here, the water is a blue I have never seen before. So blue that it almost looks like the sky on a crystal clear day.

My eyes travel from the view outside to the giant bed that is covered with a set of pure white sheets. It's even bigger than the California king a friend of mine has, and it would be a perfect fit for a man Kai's size. On each side of the bed, there's a table with a lamp that looks like a piece of driftwood on it. The lamps match the dresser in the room, which is long with a few odds and ends on it. There's another tall one, but it's completely clean.

The room has no paintings or anything else to give it life or say whose room it is. I shake my head at my own thought and look at the clothes I had on earlier, scrunching up my nose. Even though I was exhausted enough to fall asleep in them last night, I do not feel like having them on again today. I walk to the long dresser, pull the top drawer open, and find men's boxers. I pull a pair out and slip them on under my towel. When I open the next drawer, I find socks and slip them on as well before searching through the rest of the dresser and finally finding a shirt, being careful of the bruises on my side.

Once I'm dressed, I take towel into the bathroom and hang them up. I find some toothpaste and use my finger to brush my teeth before taking a breath, preparing myself to face Kai and his lawyer. Yesterday, when we got married, I didn't sign a pre-nup even though the men with Kai had insisted. I really didn't understand why they were so adamant until after we were married and at the airport.

I'd expected us to just get on a flight. I was shocked when we were escorted to a private plane. I was more surprised when the name on the plane happened to be my new husband's. I had somewhat gotten myself under control by the time we arrived in Hawaii, but I was shocked again when a Bentley picked us up at the airport and took us to a mansion. I have been around people who have money, but I have never been around anyone with the kind of money Kai obviously has.

I go to the door and run my fingers through my wet hair before turning the knob and opening it an inch to peek out. It takes a second for my eyes to adjust to the darkness of the hall,

but when they do, they connect with a set of hazel eyes surrounded by dark lashes.

“Myla,” the man says.

I double-blink and take in his features. His hair is dark brown, his nose is wide, and his skin color is similar to Kai’s. My eyes drop to his mouth, and he smiles, making my eyes narrow before they lift to meet his again.

“Who are you?” I ask, opening the door the rest of the way and crossing my arms over my chest.

His eyes move to my arms and then back up, and his smile gets wider, “Aye.”

“What?” I frown when he chuckles.

“Name’s Aye.”

“Like when a pirate says yes?” I inquire. Then I growl, “What’s so funny?” when he bends over, holding his stomach and laughing. It takes a moment, but eventually, he pulls himself together and stands back up to his full height.

“My name’s Aye, but my friends call me Daddy. How about you just stick with that?” he asks, sticking out his hand.

“I’m not calling you Daddy,” I frown, watching his lips twitch.

“You don’t have to call me Daddy.” He smiles, reminding me of a little boy. “You can call me Aye.”

My frown grows deeper.

“Do people really call you Daddy?” I narrow my eyes, daring him to lie.

“Sure do,” he smirks, wrapping the hand he had out for me to shake around my upper arm. Then he moves me from the door and closes it before putting his arm around my shoulders and leading me down the hall.

“What are you doing?” I step out of his hold.

His eyebrows pull together and he looks down the hall to where we are heading.

“Kai didn’t tell you I’ll be your security?” he questions, and I shake my head. “Well, me and Pika will be, but he is not here right now, so it’s just me until he gets back.”

“I thought I was safe now?” I murmur, wrapping my arms around myself.

“You are safe,” he says, concerned, looking me over. “No one will get to you.”

“Can you just take me to Kai?” I ask softly, feeling anxious. Even though I don’t really know Kai, he is the one person I trust right now.

“Of course,” he says quietly, taking my hand and leading me down the hall.

When the hall opens up, we are on the third floor. A glass banister that gives a clear view of a large, wooden staircase is in front of us. The stairs lead down to a level with wooden floors. Then another set leads to the beach below. I have never seen something so amazing. The ocean is just yards away, but the beach is literally inside.

“It must be expensive to keep this place clean,” I mutter to myself, looking out at the ocean and the sand that is spread across the bottom level of the house.

I hear Aye chuckle again before he tugs on my hand and begins leading me over a bridge, down another hall, and into a large dining room, where Kai and another man are sitting with papers spread out in front of them. As soon as we enter the room, both of their heads turn towards us. Kai’s eyes travel from my still wet hair to my sock-covered feet before he holds a hand out in my direction, nodding his chin ever so slightly. I don’t want to go to him, but something in the look he’s giving me tells me to do it. I walk to him and take his hand, not even flinching when he pulls me down onto his lap.

“*Makamae*,” he whispers against the shell of my ear, placing a kiss there.

My stomach knots and I dig my nails into the palm of my hand as I turn my head to look at him. When our eyes connect, I try to silently understand what he’s doing.

“You found some clothes,” he says quietly as his fingers play along the edge of my shorts.

“I hope you don’t mind,” I murmur, grabbing his hand and stilling his movements.

“I would never deny my wife,” he mutters, holding my eyes. I fight to not look away, to not cower. The moment I met him, I knew he was not someone I would ever want to cross, but he was my savior. Even knowing he promised not to hurt me, I still feel the urge to pull away from him and the energy that is wrapping around me.

“Are you feeling better, now that you have showered?” He searches my face as his fingers come up to run along the underside of my jaw.

“Yes,” I mutter as that knot in my stomach loosens and another feeling begins to take root.

“Good,” he murmurs, leaning forward and brushing his lips lightly over mine.

My hand goes to his chest, feeling the warmth of his skin and the beat of his heart through the material of his shirt. When he leans back, his eyes search mine for a moment before looking away. The moment the connection is broken, I pull in a breath and turn on his lap to face the man across the table.

“Myla, I would like you to meet detective, Nero Wolfe. Nero, this is my wife, Myla Kauwe.” He squeezes my thigh when my nails dig into his.

“Nice to meet you, Myla.” He smiles, showing off a dimple in his left cheek, which is highlighted by his tan skin. His dark-brown eyes look between Kai and me as he shakes his head, causing his shaggy, dirty-blond hair to slide against the collar of his dress shirt. If he weren’t wearing a suit, I would’ve guessed he’s a surfer, not a detective.

“Nice to meet you,” I murmur, shifting slightly under his gaze. I knew we would eventually need to talk to the police about what happened, but I was hoping I would have a few days for myself to accept everything.

“Kai has filled me in on most of what occurred, but I do have a few questions for you. If that’s okay?” he asks softly.

I war with myself on turning to look at Kai for permission. I was not prepared for this, and I feel like I have been put on the spot.

“Of course.” I nod and pull away from Kai, moving to my own seat.

I need to remember that this is all a lie; we may be married, but it’s not out of choice—it’s out of necessity. I can’t let my personal vulnerabilities affect this situation. And as much as I hate to admit it, Kai has an enormous effect on me.

“Well, let’s get started, then,” Nero says, rearranging some papers on top of the table. “I know you and Kai were married yesterday in Vegas, but can you tell me what happened the day before?”

I wrap my arms around myself and look over my shoulder towards the door, where I want to escape, but my eyes land on Aye, who nods and gives me a small smile. Then I feel a squeeze on my thigh and the roughness of Kai’s palm as it moves along my skin.

I turn my head back towards Nero without acknowledging Kai.

“What would you like to know?”

“Start from the beginning.” He gives a slight smile, picking up a pen.

I nod again and pull my feet up under me on the chair, trying to get my thoughts in order before I begin.

“I own a bakery in downtown Seattle called Raining Sprinkles.” I swallow, remembering that my bakery is nothing but ash and rubble now.

“Take your time,” Nero says comfortingly.

“Like I said, I own a bakery, and on Sundays, I open the bakery alone and give my girls the day off because it’s normally pretty slow in the shop. Really, the day started out like any other day. I got there around five, made a pot of

coffee, and took care of some stuff in the office until around six. At six, I went to the kitchen and threw together a few batches of muffins, put them in the oven, and then went out to start stocking the display cases. At eight, I flipped the sign from closed to open, and not long after that, my first customer came in.”

I pause, taking a breath while wrapping my arms a little tighter around myself.

“The rest of the day was uneventful. There was nothing out of the ordinary. I was busy because I was on my own, but I expected that. At around two thirty, I went to the back and pushed a load of dishes through the dishwasher, and when I got back out front, I realized the man from that morning was still sitting at the same table he had been when I first opened.”

I close my eyes and open them slowly.

“I went and made sure he was okay and that he didn’t want anything. Then I told him I closed at three. When three o’clock came around, he was gone. I took care of a couple of customers who had been waiting for me to box up their items and walked them to the door to leave. As soon as they were gone, I shut the door, and I was flipping the sign over when the man from earlier came running up to the door, telling me through the glass he thought he left his phone in the bathroom.” I bite my lip and, without thinking, look at Kai and then back at Nero before speaking again.

“I got a weird feeling, so I stood by the door while he looked around for his phone. I was watching him when the door was shoved open and I stumbled back. I thought it was a customer, but that’s when I looked up and saw my brother, Thad.” I shudder as bile crawls up my throat and nausea rolls in my stomach.

“Are you okay?” Nero asks as I pull in a deep breath.

“Fine,” I whisper, putting my feet on the floor while sliding away from Kai’s touch. “I was taken aback when I realized who it was. I had not seen him since I was eighteen and moved away from home. He pushed his way past me and then let in a few other men,” I say, and I feel Kai’s hand on my

lower back as he lifts my shirt slightly. Then his fingers begin to move over my skin. I wonder if he is trying to remind me of the things I'm not supposed to talk about.

"Then what happened?" Nero questions softly, and I lean back slightly into Kai's hand, who pauses his movement before resuming.

"He forced me into the back room. My brother said he owed some men money and that I needed to give it to him. I don't know if he was on drugs or what, but he seemed really afraid. I told him I didn't have the kind of money he was asking for, and he proceeded to tie me to a chair."

"Then what?"

"I don't know," I say faintly. "I was hit over the head, and when I woke up, Kai was pulling me out of the burning building," I look over at Kai, and even if I never tell anyone every detail of what really occurred, I do know that that part is not a lie, and I will forever be indebted to him.

"Then you went to Vegas and got married?"

I pull my eyes from Kai to look at Nero.

"Yes. Well...we had been planning on getting married," I lie.

Kai's hand pauses on my back. We never discussed what exactly happened to me or what we would say if someone asked me about this, so I was trying to think on my toes.

"After what occurred, I realized how short life is, and I told Kai I didn't want to live another day without him and that I was tired of putting off our relationship. So we stopped in Vegas on the way here and got married," I tell him.

Nero searches my face. Then his eyes drop to the pad in front of him, where he begins to write again.

I bite my lip, feeling like I have done something wrong. I have no idea what I should have said. I don't think, "*I met him for the first time yesterday, and I married him because he told me that was the only way he could keep me safe at this time,*" would have gone over so well.

“And you don’t remember anything else?” he asks, lifting his head to look at me.

I shake my head and pull my feet back up under me. “Nothing,” I mutter, pressing my lips together.

“Can you tell me a little about your brother?”

My body stills and I feel all the blood drain out of my face.

“There is nothing to tell,” I whisper, hating myself a little bit for being so weak when it comes to him.

“Are you okay?” Nero asks, reading my face.

“Fine. Just tired.” I sit up, putting my elbows on the table, holding my hair back from my face as images from my past flash through my head.

Being taken from my parents when I was little and told that they were dead.

Moving in with Modesto and Ida Akskvo and their two sons, Thad and Royce.

Being told that, if I ever spoke of where I really came from, I would die. Having happy memories of my life with my new family. Working in my dad Modesto’s bakery. Shopping with my mom Ida. Hanging out with my brother Royce.

But then everything changed when I turned sixteen and Thad started sneaking into my room at night, showing me that Hell can exist on Earth. The memories alone of the things he did to me, the things he took from me, cause me to gag. I stand from the chair and run out of the dining room. I have no idea where I’m going and begin opening and closing doors along the way until I finally find one that leads to a bathroom. I slam the door behind me, fumble with the lock on the door until I hear it click, and then feel along the wall, finding the switch and turning it on.

The moment my eyes adjust to the light, I see my reflection looking back at me. My face is pale, my dirty blond hair looks stringy, and my lips are a darker pink than normal. Another wave of nausea hits me, and I lunge for the toilet. It takes a few minutes to get myself under control, and when I do, I

realize someone is pounding on the door so hard that the painting on the wall is shaking.

“I’m kicking it in!” Kai yells from the other side.

I’m about to tell him that I’m opening it when the door crashes in, banging against the wall, and wood flies everywhere. Kai appears in the bathroom doorway. Our gazes lock, and I see something flash within his eyes as he storms towards me.

“I’M GOING TO carry you so you don’t get anything stuck in your feet,” he says softly, picking me up.

“Aye, tell Detective Nero we’re going to have to reschedule. My wife isn’t feeling well,” Kai mutters, carrying me into the room I was in this morning and shutting the door with his foot before carrying me to the bed, where he gently lays me down.

“Let me get a washcloth for you,” he says, walking into the bathroom.

I hear the water turn on, and a moment later, he comes back carrying a rag.

“You need to tell me what happened at the bakery before I showed up.”

He sits on the side of the bed and holds the wet cloth out for me. I take it from his hand, trying to control how badly I’m shaking. What happened begins to play in my head like an old movie.

“Myla, I’ve missed you,” Thad said, wrapping an arm around my waist, walking me backwards into the shop.

His body bent, his face went to my neck, and I felt his tongue touch my skin. My body froze and I instantly hated myself for not screaming, for not fighting, but like all those years ago, my body had stiffened in fear.

“What are you doing here?” I whispered as two more men walked in. My stomach dropped as I watched one of the men close the door and turn the lock.

“It’s your birthday,” he said as he began to pull me with him towards the back of the shop.

I cried out and tried to pull away, and he smiled evilly and started to laugh. His fingers dug into my skin so hard that I knew I would be bruised.

“Please let me go.” I tried to pull away again, but his grip tightened, and he dragged me to the back room, shoving me into a chair.

“Shut up,” he ordered with a finger in my face. Then he looked over at one of the men who had just walked in.

“Go to her place and get all of her shit. Then meet us here,” he said, tossing my purse at the guy.

“Got it,” he said, digging my keys out of my bag and leaving the room.

“What’s going on? Why are you here?” I whispered. Thad turned towards me. His hand went to my jaw, his thumb and middle finger on either side, where he squeezed hard.

“I’m taking you home and you’re getting married. Mom is going to be so happy,” he smiled. I felt bile fill my throat, making it hard to breathe.

“What are you talking about?” I finally got out through my fear.

“Oh, princess, there is so much you don’t know.” His hands went to each arm of the chair and his body caged mine in. “Don’t worry though. We’ll have plenty of time to talk about it.” He licked my neck, making my stomach roll.

When he pulled away, my eyes locked on the man’s across the room, the man who had been in my shop all day. Something flashed in his eyes, but he turned his face away from me before I could catch it.

“We have a busy day ahead of us,” Thad said. I looked around, trying to plan my escape.

“Myla? Myla.”

I realize I'm being shaken. My eyes focus in on Kai's face above me, and I quickly scoot back in the bed, hitting my head on the headboard in the process.

"Careful," he complains as I rub the top of my head.

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize." He looks away from me to the view outside. "Do you want to talk about what happened?"

I shake my head and then realize he's still looking out the window.

"No." I lean my head back and close my eyes. "I'm sorry about telling the detective we were dating. He caught me off guard and I was already flustered, and honestly, I had no idea what to say. We probably should have talked about that. I mean, I don't even know if you have a girlfriend." My eyes fly open and connect with his, and I can see laugh lines around his eyes and a smile on his lips.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" I hiss, watching as his smile gets bigger.

"You talk a lot," he chuckles, shaking his head.

"Well, do you?" I growl. I never even thought about that for one moment, and something about the thought of him having a girlfriend makes me feel a different kind of nausea.

"No."

"Good." I nod, and his smile gets bigger. "I just mean good because I would feel horrible if you were dating someone and then got married to someone else."

"Myla, I know." He rubs my knee, and a tingling sensation begins to fill my lower belly.

"How badly did I mess up with Nero?" I question, sitting up farther and moving away from his touch.

"You did fine. We spoke before you came in, so he understands you're still trying to deal with what happened."

I bite my lip while wrapping my arms around myself. Then I look out the window. "So, now what?"

“Now what?” he repeats, and my eyes travel back to him.

“Yeah. Now what do we do? You said we needed to talk to your lawyer.”

“You do nothing. I canceled the meeting with my lawyer when Nero showed up, and now, I have business to take care of. If the gods are working in my favor, we can get everything resolved and things can get back to normal,” he says softly.

I dip my head slightly in agreement, even if my normal was lost a long time ago.

I KNOW YOU

I LOOK OVER my shoulder at the house behind me when I hear Kai yelling. I push my sunglasses up to the top of my head and put my Kindle down on the table next to my lounge.

“Stay here,” Aye says, taking off towards the house.

When the voices begin to get louder, I get up and head inside. I walk softly down the hall and peek around the corner, seeing the guy who let Thad into the bakery. He’s standing in the kitchen alone, his body pressed close to the wall, his head tilted back like he’s waiting for the moment to strike.

My gut twists with anxiety, but I battle it back, head down the hall, and open the bathroom door, looking for anything to use as a weapon. It’s a half-bath with a pedestal sink and a mirror; there are no drawers or cabinets. I’m about to give up and go search out somewhere else when the plunger catches my eye. I pick it up and test the weight in my hand. It’s a heavy, wooden one with a large, black, rubber end. I take it with me down the hall and wait just outside the kitchen.

The guy is no longer there, but Aye is standing next to the counter. I start to walk towards him, but the guy begins to sneak up on Aye. Without thinking, I charge at him with the plunger over my head and bring it down hard on his head. The rubber end flies off and bounces across the kitchen floor as the guy crumples to the ground.

“Wh—” Aye looks down at the guy, who is now knocked out, then looks back at me with wide eyes. “Why did you do

that?” He takes the plunger stick from my hand and looks at it then back down at the guy.

“He was sneaking up on you,” I tell him, turning the guy onto his stomach then pulling his hands behind his back, using the skills I learned in a self-defense class I took, to make sure he is immobilized.

“Do you have cuffs or something?” I ask, looking up at Aye from my bent position.

“We’re not cuffing Pika,” he mutters, shaking his head while looking at me like he has no idea who I am.

“This is one of the guys from the bakery,” I tell him.

His eyes flash with understanding, and Pika starts to moan, so I grab the stick from Aye’s hand and start to hit the guy again, but then it’s snatched away from me.

“Myla?”

I turn my head towards the kitchen opening when Kai says my name. His eyes travel down my body, over the bikini I’m wearing, making goosebumps break out along my skin. When his eyes reach my toes, they widen at the sight of the guy lying at my feet.

“What’s going on?” He steps into the kitchen and over to my side.

My belly dips as his smell surrounds me. He smells like spice, coconut, and the hot sun. Every time he’s near, I have to stop myself from leaning closer.

“This is the guy who let Thad into my bakery. The one who said he left his phone,” I tell him.

His eyes go soft, and he unbuttons his shirt so he’s wearing nothing but a pair of black dress pants and his shoes. I watch as his abs flex. Then he opens the shirt and slips it around my shoulders. I pull away slightly and push my arms through the holes, holding my breath for a moment, keeping his scent in my lungs as long as I can.

“This is one of my guys,” he tells me, crouching down and rolling the guy over.

“He was at my bakery. He...he is the reason Thad got inside,” I repeat in a stammer, watching as the guy’s eyes open and then focus on me.

“He was my inside source for the men Thad was working for,” Kai says, helping Pika sit up.

“What do you mean he was working for you?” I look at the injured man then at Kai.

“Why don’t you come with me?” Aye suggests softly, grabbing my hand.

“No.” I shake his touch off and cross my arms over my chest.

“Why didn’t you tell me that before?” I glare at Kai.

“There was no reason to,” he says, looking at me like I’m crazy for even asking.

“No reason?” I shake my head in disbelief. His audacity is absolutely ridiculous.

“He was doing a job,” Aye chimes in.

My head swings his way and his hands go up in front of him to warn me off.

“I’m sorry,” Pika says as Kai helps him to stand.

“You’re sorry? You’re sorry you allowed men to follow you into my shop, or are you sorry you watched as Thad kicked me in the ribs while I was curled up in a ball and begging him to stop? Or are you sorry that you set my bakery on fire? Please clarify which part you’re sorry about!” I yell, and my chest heaves as I attempt to take a full breath.

“All of it,” he whispers, unsure, looking at me then Kai.

“Thanks. I feel so much better now that I know you’re sorry,” I say, shoving through the three of them and walking down the hall towards the living room.

I need to go clear my head. I can’t say that I have gotten over what happened, but since being here, I’ve found it easy to pretend like I’m safe. Now, seeing him makes me realize how

much I have let my guard down, and that is something I never want to risk happening again.

I rush out of the house and walk out to the water's edge until the waves rush over my feet.

"If he could have helped you, he would have."

I look over my shoulder, toward the sound of Kai's voice, and watch him walk up to me wearing another shirt.

"He would have, but he knew he couldn't risk them finding out he worked for me."

I feel my throat clog, turn my head away, and look back out over the ocean, not wanting to acknowledge his words.

"He watched." I take a deep breath, letting the smell of the salt water clear my head.

"He watched and did nothing," I murmur, wrapping my arms around myself as my words get lost in the sound of the waves crashing against the shore.

"I've known him since I was seventeen," Kai says closer to me than I expected, surprising me by wrapping an arm around my shoulders. "If he could have stopped it, he would have."

I stiffen slightly before forcing my body to relax and lean into his embrace. Deep in my soul, I know he's right, but I'm still angry. I'm angry that Pika saw me in a moment of weakness, angry I couldn't do anything even when I had done everything to make myself stronger. Angry that I never took into consideration the amount of fear I would feel when I came face-to-face with a part of my past that had terrified me for so many years.

"I forgot," I whisper, shaking my head, watching as the sun turns the sky orange and red.

"Forgot what?" he asks softly, his fingers sending tingles down my arm through the fabric of his shirt.

"That I'm in danger. That I need to watch my back," I say, and his arm tightens around me.

"You're safe here."

I tilt my head back and look up at him as he towers over me. His chin dips, and our eyes connect.

“I promised you I would protect you. Trust me to do that,” he says softly as his eyes search my face.

My eyes focus on his, and I notice for the first time that he has a dark ring of brown around the outside and an almost copper color that shoots out from around the center.

“Trust me to do that,” he repeats. I feel his warm breath against my skin. And I wish in that moment that I were someone worthy enough of someone like him.

“I’m trying.” My eyes close. I pull away from him and then step farther out into the water.

“I need to go meet someone,” he says regretfully after a moment.

“Sure,” I murmur without taking my eyes off the sea.

“I’d like it if you’d go with me.” I turn my head to look at him. His hands are in his pockets and his shoulders are slumped forward. The vulnerability I see on his face makes me nod in agreement immediately. The only time we have spent together is when we have met for meals or when he has needed me to talk to someone with him. I only recently found out that the room I have been staying in is his. He claimed that the bed is much better than the others in the house and refused to take the room back even after I insisted. And something about sleeping in his bed has made me feel closer to him—and safer in a strange way.

“Where are we going?” I ask after a moment.

“You’ll see. Dress casual.” He smiles, and a piece of hair blows onto his lip.

I fight the urge to close the space between us and remove it with my finger, using that as an excuse to see if his lips are as soft as they look.

“Did you hear me?” he asks.

My eyes focus on his. I feel my cheeks get pink when I notice the small smile on his handsome face.

“Sorry. No,” I admit.

“I asked if you could be ready in the next hour.”

“Oh, yeah... Sure,” I say, hoping I don’t sound as anxious as I feel. He watches me for a moment before nodding once, turning away, and walking back towards the house. I watch him go, wondering what exactly I’m feeling. Since the moment I met Kai, I have felt some kind of strange pull towards him. But as much as he entices me, he scares me.

The only men I have been with have been lanky and soft-spoken, men I knew I could get away from if I needed to. I hate to say it, but I was very promiscuous for a while. It was like something in me had flipped and I realized the power I had. I realized I had the ability to say yes or no when it came to sex, and I wanted to prove to myself I could be intimate with someone—and maybe not completely enjoy the act— but it would be my choice.

I’m not proud of the way I acted or the way I used men. But like most things in life, it’s something I learned from, and it helped me grow and become a better person.

Kai is like none of the men I’ve been with. He’s large and intimidating. Though he is soft with me, I have seen him speak to some of the people who work for him, so I know that his gentleness is not always his way. I also cannot imagine him letting me be in charge the way I’m used to.

I haven’t been intimate with a man since my last relationship, and that was a few years ago. After Fredrick broke up with me, I was left confused. He was the person I’d planned to spend the rest of my life with. We’d met when I bought my bakery, and he’d helped me get my loan.

He was so funny; he had the ability to make me laugh at nothing. He was not much taller than I am and cute in that nerdy guy kind of way. He was soft-spoken and gentle, and he said all the right things. After six months of dating, he asked me to marry him. I, of course, said yes. Our wedding was set for the fall, and we were planning on having a baby right away, hopefully with conception occurring during the honeymoon. Everything was perfect. I was getting the one

thing I had craved since moving away from home: a family of my own, people who loved me, and somewhere I belonged.

Then, like everything in my life, it came crashing down around me.

Fredrick had been away for a week at a conference, and when he arrived back in Seattle, he asked me to meet him for dinner. I got dressed up, packed an overnight bag, and met him at one of my favorite seafood restaurants.

The moment I saw him, I knew something was off. He didn't greet me with his normal hug and kiss. He took my hand and helped me sit down across from him. Without a word from him, I knew we were over. I remember sitting there, looking at him sitting across from me, wondering, *Why?* That's when he told me that he believed our lives were going in two different directions and he wasn't ready to settle down.

I told him that I would wait for him, that we didn't need to get married, that we could put off the wedding until he was ready, and that was when it seemed like I was begging to be with him. That was the moment I realized he didn't love me the way I loved him, so I lifted my chin, scooted the chair away from the table, and walked out of the restaurant, never looking back.

I loved him, but there was no way I would ever feel like I was begging someone to be with me again. I wouldn't ever let someone have that much power over me.

I come out of my thoughts when the sound of seagulls fills my ears. I lift my face towards the sun, letting the rays warm my skin for a moment before turning and heading to the house to get ready.

"LET'S GO." I look at Kai, who is leaning against the side of a black convertible, dressed more casually than I have ever seen him.

Even when he comes to breakfast in the morning, he is normally wearing a suit, so seeing him in a pair of khaki shorts and a white, linen shirt with the top two buttons undone and

the sleeves rolled up— showing off a tattoo I never noticed before that wraps around his forearm—has stunned me.

I start down the steps, my eyes meeting his, and my step falters slightly when his eyes sweep me from top to toe before locking on mine.

“You look nice,” I say, immediately feeling like a fool when he gives me a slight smile and opens the door to the car without telling me something relatively the same.

I know this isn't a date, but I took extra care in getting ready. I have no idea where we are going, but I wanted to make sure I looked nice. I chose a dress I had gotten from one of the few shops in town. The strapless, cotton dress covered in bright, tropical flowers looks nice against the creamy color of my skin, and the sandals I chose are black and wrapped around my big toes then up and around my ankles. I thought I looked attractive, but as Kai gets behind the driver's seat, I'm beginning to have doubts about my choice.

“It's about an hour drive,” he mutters as the car roars to life.

I nod then realize he can't see me, so I clear my throat and murmur a quiet, “Okay,” as we pull away from the house.

“Is Pika okay?” I ask, wanting to fill the silence. I turn my head to look at Kai.

His eyes come to me for a moment before he focuses on the road again.

“He's fine. He has a bump, but he's had worse.”

“Oh,” I mutter as my eyes drop to my lap, and I begin to turn my ring around on my finger, watching as the light bounces off the diamonds.

“Why did you have him working with Thad?” I ask when he doesn't say anything else.

“Your father was a very good friend to my dad.” He lets out a breath, and his hand wrings the steering wheel. “Before your father passed away, he told mine his plan for keeping you safe.” He pulls his sunglasses over his eyes, turns his head,

and looks at me before turning towards the road. “Your father asked mine to help keep an eye on you. He knew that, even with everyone believing you had also been killed, there would still be some who would be looking for you.”

“What do you mean they believed I was killed?” I whisper.

“Your parents’ remains and the remains of a child were found after they put out a fire in your parents’ home,” he says, and I turn my head to look out the window as a lone tear slides down my cheek.

I have small memories of my real parents. Every time I pull a batch of snickerdoodles out of the oven and the smell of vanilla, cinnamon, and sugar hits my nose, I think of my mom. I can remember her baking them often when I was little and the way she would yell at my dad when he came into the kitchen to steal them off the counter when they were fresh out of the oven. I can remember laughing when he would quiet my mom with soft words and a few kisses before leaving and going back to his office. I remember the way my dad was so large and everyone seemed so afraid of him, but to me, he was so gentle. He always smelled like mint, and if I were around, he would pull me up against his chest and kiss my hair no matter what he was doing.

I know that my mom and I were his whole world. Even if I can’t remember much from my childhood, the memories of my parents always bring me comfort. So even though I have known for years that they are gone, hearing that their bodies were found has the already-shattered pieces of my heart crumbling a little bit more.

“Who was the child?” I wonder out loud as I watch a group of sea- gulls fly off in the distance.

“I would guess they got a body from a morgue,” he says easily, and my stomach turns as I wonder what kind of people would do something like that.

“My dad was a bad guy, right?” I ask as some puzzle pieces begin to fit together.

The car slows down suddenly and veers off to the side of the road. My head turns and I look over at Kai, who now has his sunglasses up on top of his head and his eyes on me.

“Your father was a good man. He was a man of honor and a man who loved his only child enough to make sure she’d have a future. He may not have been a man who lived on the right side of the law, but he was not a bad man,” he says firmly, making me feel instantly relieved.

“Why is this happening now, then?” I don’t realize I ask that question aloud until Kai’s eyes soften, his hand comes up to my face, and his thumb runs over my cheek, sliding away another tear.

“There is so much you don’t know, Myla.”

“Like what?” I whisper.

“When the time is right, I will tell you.” A part of me wants to demand him to tell me what he knows, but there is another part of me that wants to ignore everything happening around me and leave all of this behind.

“How difficult is it to get a new identity?” I mutter, surprised when I hear a chuckle come from Kai.

“I’m serious,” I complain, turning my head to catch a smile that makes my heart constrict from how beautiful it is on Kai’s face. I swallow hard and look back out the window, trying to ignore the feeling I have from knowing I made him smile.

After a moment, the car fills with music, and my body relaxes into my seat as The Fugees’ “Killing Me Softly” fills the air. When I peek at Kai out of the corner of my eye, I wonder if he’s hearing the song like I am in that moment and if he knows that the lyrics of this song say so much more than I ever could.

LOOKING IN A MIRROR

“MYLA.” My shoulder is nudged. I lift my head just in time to see a group of laughing kids run in front of the car.

“Where are we?”

“A luau.” I turn and look at Kai, who is watching out the front window of the car. When his head turns and his eyes meet mine, he smiles, and then his hand lifts and his finger runs down my cheek.

“You need to learn not to sleep on your hand. Every time you wake up, your ring is imprinted in your cheek,” he mutters.

My hand goes to my face, my fingers running over the skin. I swear I can still feel the tingle from his touch.

“It’s a big ring,” I point out and glimpse at him when he doesn’t say anything. His eyes are on the ring on my hand, and regret is bright as day in his eyes.

I pull my eyes from him, tug the visor down, and look at myself in the mirror, wanting to ignore the feelings seeing that look on his face caused. I thought at first that the ring was just something he had picked up in Vegas, but then I noticed an inscription on the inside of the band that reads, *In this lifetime and the next*, with the initials *B* and *N*.

After I saw the engraving, I knew that the ring that now sits on my finger had once meant a lot to someone, and even if I had hated it at first, there was something beautiful about it

now. I also understood why Kai hates that I have the ring. Before me, the ring was a representation of love, and now, it's the symbol of a lie.

“Are you ready?”

Without looking at him, I nod and unbuckle my seat belt, and once I'm out of the car, I look around. Kids are playing in the sand, building sand castles, or chasing each other near the water's edge. There are teenagers in small groups scattered along the sand, some sunbathing, others talking in groups, while the adults stand around chatting and laughing. I run my hands down my dress, feeling a little overdressed since a lot of the women are only in their swimsuits while the men are dressed similar to Kai.

“Ready?” Kai asks again when he reaches my side.

“Yep,” I tell him with more certainty in my voice than I actually feel, shocked when he takes my hand.

“What are you doing?” I ask, trying to pull my hand free from his grasp.

“Holding your hand,” he replies, entwining our fingers.

“We're in public,” I hiss. His head dips, his sunglasses-covered eyes meet mine, and his energy changes, beginning to beat against me.

What does that have to do with anything?”

I look at him like he's crazy and then around at the people on the beach.

“All of these people can see us.”

His frown grows deeper. Then he drops my hand, lifts his sunglasses to the top of his head once more, and turns his body so he's standing right in front of me.

“You're my wife.”

“Pretend wife,” I remind him quietly. His eyes flash with something I haven't seen before and his jaw goes hard, making my breath catch.

His face dips and he whispers against my ear, “None of these people know that it’s pretend.”

It wouldn’t be so bad if the effect he has on me was also pretend, but when he’s touching me in any way, it’s difficult to keep things separate. I let out the breath I was holding and pull back so I can look into his eyes.

“You’re right,” I acknowledge, hoping he will let me go.

He searches my face, and without another word or giving me any other option but to walk with him, he takes my hand, intertwines our fingers, and leads me towards a giant fire that is set up in the middle of the beach. As we approach the bonfire, I notice the men lifting their chins to Kai. He does the same in return. I also notice that the women we pass all devour him with their eyes before shooting daggers at me.

I’m so caught up in watching the people we pass that I don’t notice that Kai has stopped until my hand is tugged. I turn my head to see what’s holding him up.

“Kai!” a beautiful woman wearing a gold bikini yells, running up to us, looking like she just stepped out of an episode of Baywatch. Her hair is dark brown and down around her shoulders. Her body looks like she spends her days counting calories and working out. Even from just looking at her, I feel insecure.

As she nears us, a smile lights Kai’s face up, and he drops my hand just in time to catch her as she throws herself into his arms. Jealously like I have never felt before ignites in my stomach as I watch them embrace. She is the first to release him, but even then, his arm stays around her. I have never been one for violence, but the urge to rip his arm off and beat him with it causes me to fist my hands at my sides.

“Myla.” Kai says my name and the woman’s face lights up again.

She catches me off guard when she steps away from Kai and throws her arms around me. My hands go out to my sides, and I stand there awkwardly, not knowing what I should do.

“I’m so happy to finally meet you,” the woman tells me as she releases me and steps back to stand near Kai.

“I—” I look at Kai when I have no idea what I should say or who this woman is.

“Meka,” Kai says warningly, grabbing my hand again and pulling me closer to his side.

The woman looks up at him, and I realize she is not quite as old as I first thought she was. And she has the same lips and eyes as Kai.

“Myla, this runt here is my sister, Meka. Meka, my wife, Myla,” Kai says, making me feel instantly nauseated. I didn’t realize I would be meeting his family, let alone meeting them as his wife. I can’t imagine that this will be easy to explain or easy to undo when the time comes, and having other people involved will only make it that much more difficult.

“It’s nice to meet you, Meka,” I finally get out.

Another smile lights Meka’s pretty face up as she looks at her brother then back at me and shakes her head.

“You said she was pretty, but you didn’t tell me *how* pretty,” Meka says, making butterflies erupt in my stomach as Kai’s fingers flex around my hand. She takes a step back then holds up her hands in front of her, forming a box with her fingers before squinting and closing one eye.

“You guys look perfect together—her with all that blond hair and you with that long, womanly, dark hair.” She giggles, and I cover my mouth when an unexpected laugh explodes from it.

“Don’t encourage her,” Kai grumbles from my side, but I can see the side of his mouth tip up slightly in a smile.

“Seriously, you guys look good together,” she says as she looks at her brother, her eyes going soft.

“All right, kid, If you’re done annoying me, tell me where Kale is.”

“You’re never any fun.” She pouts, putting her hands on her hips.

“And you’re always a brat,” he tells her, but his tone is loving. I have seen Kai be soft before, but I have never seen him the way he is with her.

“He was near the barbeque pit the last time I saw him.” She shrugs then waves off in the distance when someone calls her name.

“Thanks, runt.”

“Anything you want to know, Myla, you call me. I know all of his dirty secrets,” Meka says, making me smile before she walks off towards the water.

“I might do that,” I say under my breath as Kai begins walking again.

“I didn’t know I was going to meet your family,” I tell Kai as my feet move double time to keep up with him through the thick sand.

“It’s not a big deal.” He shrugs.

I can feel myself frown at his words. I have no idea how he can say that it’s not a big deal when, to me, it’s huge.

“They know we’re married. We’re not staying married, so I think it *is* a big deal,” I say, tugging his hand and forcing him to stop.

“Myla, I’ve told you from the beginning that I wouldn’t let anything happen to you. I know what I’m doing.”

“This isn’t about you keeping me safe, Kai. This is about you lying to your family.”

“My family knows me. They trust me to always make the right decisions. So, no, it won’t be easy, but in the end, everyone will know I did what I had to do,” he says adamantly.

“Why don’t you just tell them the truth now? Be honest about it. That way, they’re not surprised.”

“I can’t. If that information falls into the wrong hands, then this whole thing was for nothing. Our marriage needs to

seem as real as possible. Only my closest men know the truth,” he informs me.

“But it’s your family. Don’t you trust them?” I ask, feeling my eye- brows pull together in confusion.

“I do, but I also know they are not my employees. I can’t kill them if they disobey me.”

I feel my eyes widen and my mouth drop open with shock at his words.

“I’m kidding, Myla.” He shakes his head.

I search his face, but he doesn’t appear to be joking, and all of a sudden, I feel like Alice when she fell down the rabbit hole.

“All you need to know is you’re safe. Trust me to keep you that way.”

“Alrighty,” I mutter, rolling my eyes.

“Are we done?” he asks impatiently, but I can tell that, if I wanted to talk, more he would put off whatever he needs to do and take some time to talk to me. I would be lying if I didn’t admit that that makes my heart lighten towards him.

“Well, it’s your soul, so sure.” I shrug.

His lips twitch, and I notice a small scar that slices through the middle of his full bottom lip. I also notice how his lips look so smooth. I have never been one who really enjoyed kissing, but I could imagine myself really enjoying kissing him.

“Myla?” he rumbles.

My eyes lift to his, seeing that they have darkened. I swallow and take a step back, needing to put some space between us. He clears his throat and lifts his hand to the top of his head, pulling his sunglasses down over his eyes, and I immediately feel like I have been blocked out.

Without another word, he takes my hand again and begins to lead me across the beach. This time, his pace is slower, like he’s more aware of me. As soon as we reach the bonfire, he

pauses and begins to look around. I don't know who he's looking for, but my body is wound tight and the butterflies that erupted in my stomach earlier have not lessened. Plus, it's not helping that his thumb is continuously moving in circles over my skin, causing my awareness of him to never calm.

"Kale!" Kai shouts, and I follow the direction of his gaze.

My eyes land on a man with short hair who is almost as handsome as Kai. He's wearing a pair of swim trunks printed with large Hawaiian flowers on them. He starts towards us, his eyes locking on our entwined hands, and I can see trepidation in his gaze as he comes to stand in front of us.

"Mom and Dad are here," the guy named Kale says.

I feel my body freeze, and I begin to look around, trying to pick people who also could be related to Kai out of the crowd.

"I thought they weren't going to be home for another week," Kai mumbles, holding my hand a little tighter.

"Did you really believe you could call Mom with news that you got married and she wouldn't rush home to meet her new daughter?" The guy scoffs like Kai's an idiot, and I'm beginning to believe that that might be the case.

"They were in Australia," Kai says.

I twist my hand slightly to pinch his skin between my fingers as hard as I can, needing to get some of my frustration out. If I could knee him in the nuts without causing a scene, I would do it without a second thought.

"You got married," Kale repeats.

I stop pinching and begin digging my nails into Kai's palm. I'm so angry that I could spit fire. I can't believe he brought me here knowing his family would be here, and I really can't believe he at least didn't tell me that he'd told his family we got married.

"Where are they now?" Kai asks, forcing me to move in front of him, wrapping his arms around me, and causing me to become immobile.

I try to wiggle away, but Kale looks between us, frowning, so I instantly wrap my arms around Kai, making it look like we're embracing.

"I'm not sure," he mutters, looking around, and I do the same even though I have no idea what his mom and dad look like.

"Well, before they get here, let me introduce you to my wife," Kai says as I return my gaze to Kale.

"Nice to meet you," I tell him softly.

"You too," he grunts then glances behind us, a smirk appearing on his face.

"Good luck. You're going to need it," he says, looking at Kai before disappearing.

I'm just about to open my mouth and yell at Kai about how giant of an idiot he is when I hear someone take a sharp inhale. I turn my head to look over my shoulder and see an older woman who's wearing a swimsuit with a sarong tied around her waist and a handsome older man wearing a linen shirt and shorts.

"Fuck," Kai groans under his breath while turning me in his arms and wrapping his hands around my waist.

"Svezda," the woman whispers, looking at me. Then confusion fills her eyes as she looks at Kai.

"Mom, I would like you to meet Myla. Myla, my mother and father, Leia and Bane Jr."

Kai's mother's eyes travel from Kai to me then back again, and I can see hurt in her eyes, which I don't understand.

"Nice to meet you," I tell her, putting my hand out in front of me.

Her eyes drop to my hand then lift to meet mine again.

"Bane?" she gasps quietly, looking from my hand to her husband. I take my eyes off her and look at him just as he's pulling his eyes off me, but I still catch the look of sadness in his gaze.

“Kai?” I ask as his father tucks his wife into his chest when she begins to sob.

“My mom and yours were very good friends,” he tells me softly in my ear, “and you look a lot like her, so I think it’s just a shock for her to see you here.”

“My mom?” I whisper back.

I don’t have any pictures of my family. I remember my mom having long, blond hair, but that’s all I can recall about her appearance. So thinking about the fact that I might have been seeing my mother every day when I looked in the mirror is shocking.

It takes a moment for Kai’s mom to pull herself together, but when she does, her head turns towards me, and she takes a deep breath before stepping away from her husband and coming to stand in front of me. Her hand lifts and she cups my cheek as tears fill her eyes.

“I didn’t know.” She inhales and closes her eyes when her gaze meets mine again.

I’m confused by the look on her face until she speaks.

“Your mother would have been thrilled. We would joke often when you were young that you and Kai would get married. At the time, it was just wishful thinking, but seeing that her wish has come true, I know she is still watching over you.” She whispers the last part, and I hate myself a little more.

I swallow over the sudden lump in my throat and notice that Kai’s hands have tightened around me so much that I can feel every one of his muscles against my back. I try to speak, but there are no words to describe the emotions I’m feeling right now. I can’t believe that his mother and mine were friends, and I can’t believe he knew the kind of effect this situation would have on everyone yet still followed through with it. He never even gave me a choice in the matter, and I feel worse now than I ever did.

“You knew my parents?” is the first thing that comes out of my mouth, and then I feel horrible when silent tears begin

to fall from her eyes.

“I did. *We* did. I thought...” She pauses and looks over her shoulder at her husband then brings her gaze back to me. “I believed you were dead. If I had known, I would ha—”

“Leia,” Kai’s father says, cutting her off, and comes to stand next to her. “Maxim didn’t want that.”

“But—” she tries to argue.

“No, love. It wouldn’t have been safe,” Bane says firmly, and Leia dips her chin then looks up at Kai through her long lashes.

“How did you know?” she asks him quietly.

I tilt my head back to look at Kai. His sunglasses are now sitting on top of his head again, his eyes focused on his mother.

“We always knew,” Kai tells her.

I instantly wonder what else he could be keeping from me. I first believed he was doing this to help me, but a nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach is leading me to believe that this has more to do with him than me. I just can’t figure out why.

“I know you have a lot of questions, but let’s put them off for another time. Myla hasn’t eaten.”

“I’m fine,” I tell him, hoping he will relent. I have a lot of questions of my own, and maybe his mom will be able to answer them for me.

“You need to eat,” he tells me on a squeeze.

“He’s right, honey. And we’ll have plenty of time to talk when we’re planning your real wedding.”

At her words, the nausea I was feeling earlier comes back in full force, making it hard to breathe.

“That’s not necessary,” I wheeze out. “Of course it is. I don’t understand kids these days, all of you in such a hurry to get things done that you forget you need to remember the little moments. Don’t get me wrong. I’m happy you have fallen in

love with my son, but as a friend of your mother's, I know she would have wanted a big wedding, with you in a dress. I want to make that happen for her."

I nod because I can't say anything.

"We should find your sister. I know she will be excited to meet Myla," Kai's mom mutters, looking around.

"She met her earlier," Kai states, wrapping an arm around my shoulders.

Her eyes come back to us and go soft when she sees Kai press a kiss to the side of my head, which I stupidly feel all the way down to my toes.

"We're both glad you're here, Myla," Bane says, looking between Kai and me. "I'm sure we will be seeing a lot of each other."

"We will," I agree, and he puts his arm around his wife.

"I'm glad you're here, Myla. I will come over soon and visit with you," Leia promises.

"I would enjoy that very much," I tell her, feeling my face brighten.

Without thinking, I take a step towards her and give her a hug. When her arms close around me, I feel like she is somehow a link to my parents, and I will be able to find out whatever it is I need to know. That feeling alone is worth whatever messed-up crap is going to happen.

"Do you have any photos of my mom?" I quietly ask her when I pull away.

Her face goes soft again, and she gently slides her finger across my forehead, moving a piece of my hair.

"I do. I'll bring them when I come visit you." She smiles slightly then looks at Kai. "Take care of her."

"You know I will," he tells her, and I can hear the sincerity in his tone. "Are you guys going to stick around for a while?"

"Yes. Your uncle Frank is here," his mom says. Kai mutters, "great," under his breath.

“I heard that,” she scolds then looks at me. “You’ll like Frank.” She smiles. “Your mom loved him. He’s funny.”

“No one thinks Frank is as funny as Frank thinks he is,” Kai’s dad says, shaking his head.

“He’s funny,” his mom tells me with a wink. “We will see you guys before we head home.”

“Sure,” I concur, watching them walk away. Once they are out of earshot, I turn in Kai’s arms, get up on my tiptoes, and pull his head down so I can whisper in his ear, “You have a lot of explaining to do.”

He leans his head back and looks down at me. His arms wrap around my waist, and he hauls me flush against him, making me inhale sharply at the feeling he ignites between my legs.

“You told me you would trust me.”

“You keep making that task very difficult,” I tell him honestly.

“Sometimes, the things that seem the most difficult end up being the most extraordinary,” he tells me quietly, dipping his face and running his nose across mine.

My breath pauses as his lips barely skim mine.

“Please stop,” I murmur, dropping my forehead to his chest.

He is making it so difficult to separate real from fake, and I cannot let myself be pulled down any further than I already have been. Regardless of how much I want to get lost in this thing with him, I know I can’t.

“Mela?”

“No, Kai, please. This is already hard enough.”

“All right, *makamae*,” he says gently, letting me go, but not before I can feel his arousal against my belly, which makes my stomach dip.

“What does *makamae* mean?” I question as he takes my hand again, making a tingling sensation shoot up my arm.

“One day, I’ll tell you,” he says, leading me through the sand back towards the fire pit.

“Why not now?”

“Now, you need to eat,” he says, giving my hand a tug when my feet stop moving, because in front of me, on a table, is a pig that looks like it has been cooked whole. The outside is golden and glossy, and in its mouth is a bright red apple.

“I’m not hungry,” I tell him immediately.

I love meat; hell, I love bacon as much as the next person. But seeing a pig whole like the one sitting in front of me makes my stomach turn over.

“You need to try it.”

“I can’t,” I whimper.

“I know you eat meat. I’ve *seen* you eat meat, including bacon.”

“I know,” I swallow as saliva fills my mouth.

“I’m going to make a plate for myself and one for you without the *kalua*, and if you feel like it, you can have some of mine,” he tells me, which makes my body relax. I don’t want anyone to think I’m being disrespectful of their culture, but I cannot imagine myself eating that.

After making our plates, he leads me a little ways down the beach, away from most of the crowd. He takes a seat in the sand, and I follow his lead, slipping my sandals off before sitting down next to him. Once I’m situated, he hands me my plate and I begin to eat, enjoying everything he chose for me.

“It’s really beautiful,” I say, looking out at the ocean.

“It is,” he agrees. I turn my head and see that he’s not looking at the water, but at me, and there is a dark look in his eyes that makes my pulse speed up. “Would you try something with me?”

“Like what?” I ask, turning slightly towards him.

“I want you to close your eyes and I’m going to feed you.”

“Kai.” I shake my head but then realize this might be the perfect opportunity for me to get some answers.

“If I do this, then you have to do something for me,” I tell him.

“Like?”

“Answer a question for me.” His expression closes off, and I can tell he is going to say no.

“One question, Kai,” I plead, sitting up a little taller.

His eyes search my face, and then he nods, making me feel like I just accomplished a huge feat.

“Turn towards me and close your eyes,” he orders, taking my plate.

I shift slightly and sit cross-legged in front of him. His eyes drop to my chest and then my legs, and I pull my dress down slightly so it lays over my thighs.

“Close your eyes.”

The rough, deep tone of his voice makes the butterflies erupt once more, and my pulse pick up. I bite my lip and close my eyes, feeling the intimacy of the moment wrapping around me.

When I hear a low growl from him, my eyes fly open and I see that his are locked on my mouth.

“Close your eyes.”

I do and inhale sharply when I feel the touch from one of his fingers on my bottom lip.

“Open,” he says, pulling down slightly on my chin.

My lips part, there is a cold, sweet taste on my tongue, and the flavor of ripe pineapple fills my mouth.

“Do you like it?” he asks, and I nod.

I have always enjoyed pineapple, but since coming to Hawaii, I have found out that it’s nothing like what I used to buy at the store back home. Here, it’s sweeter, and there are times when I swear I can taste the sun when I take a bite of it.

“Open again,” he tells me as soon as I swallow.

I do, and this time, the taste of ginger and chicken hits my taste buds. I chew slowly, enjoying the texture.

“Do you like that?” he asks.

“Yes,” I whisper as soon as I swallow.

“Again,” he instructs, pulling down on my bottom lip. My lips part, and the taste of smoked meat fills my mouth. I block out what I saw and just enjoy the flavor.

“That is the taste of years of tradition. Men are taught at a young age how to properly prepare and cook the *Kalua* pig.” I feel his finger on my bottom lip again, and my eyes open. I look at him and suck in a breath. His face is inches from mine and his dark eyes are on my mouth.

“I’m going to kiss you.”

I can’t say anything. I can’t even breathe. His lips brush lightly over mine at first. I turn my head slightly, not wanting it to be over, and he groans as his hand tangles into the hair at the side of my head, making me gasp. Then I feel his tongue on my bottom lip, and I open my mouth, losing myself in his taste and smell. He pushes me back into the sand, his body lying half on me. His hand not in my hair holds on to my waist, his thumb close to the edge of my breast.

“Kai,” I moan into his mouth as my hands find the hard, smooth skin of his back under his shirt. My nails dig in and my hips lift as he slides one of his large thighs between my legs.

“*TU Kai*,” he groans when he pulls his mouth from mine and presses his forehead against my shoulder, ending what was one of the hottest make out sessions of my life.

“Ask your question,” he says as his chest moves rapidly against mine.

My mind is in such a haze that it takes a moment to decipher what he said. My brain goes over all the questions I have to ask, trying to pinpoint one that will help me the most.

“Why are you doing this?” I whisper, not realizing I spoke out loud until his body stiffens and his face rises above mine.

“When you were little, I found you crying in your tree house. I wasn’t very old then, but the moment I saw you with tears in your big, blue eyes, I knew you were something that needed to be protected.” He looks above me and out into the water before bringing his gaze back to mine, pulling his hand out of my hair, and running it down my hairline.

“I have always needed to protect you,” he says softly.

I feel my world tilt once again. Without thinking, I lift my head and press my mouth to his. He groans, and his hand slides behind my back, pulling me deeper into his embrace. The sound of the ocean off in the distance and the feel of the warm sun on my exposed skin makes the moment feel even more surreal.

He slowly pulls away, placing one last kiss on my lips before lifting his head and looking down at me. There is something in his eyes now that I didn’t notice earlier, but before I can read it, he looks away and sits up, pulling me along with him.

“I don’t think we can eat that,” I say, laughing when I see that our plates have been sprinkled with sand.

“I think we should head home,” he says, ignoring my comment.

As I watch him stand, I suddenly feel awkward when he doesn’t look at me. I get up, dust myself off, and then pick up my sandals and my plate, heading towards a trash can. I have no idea how he can create such a tornado of feelings inside me.

I don’t like that he has the ability to make me melt with a kiss or become so mad that I swear I could spit fire. With him, I feel like he causes me to become two different people. And I don’t even know if I like one of those people.

“Are you ready?” he asks when his hand takes mine as soon as I have dumped my plate into the garbage.

I look around and notice once again that people are watching us, so my stomach drops when I realize that, to him, this is probably all just a show.

“Sure.” I shake my head and wish I had a pair of sunglasses so I could block him out. I know that, if he were to look into my eyes, he would see much more than I want him to.

POPCORN

“**H**OW LONG ARE you going to pout for?” Aye asks. I look over at him and glare. It’s been a week since I went with Kai to the beach and met his family. One would think that things would have been different after our awkward moment, but they haven’t.

The man confuses the hell out of me. One moment, he is kissing me senseless, and the next, he is standoffish and making me feel like I had made a giant mistake. But then he’s back to being his regular charming self while acting like he didn’t rock my world.

“I’m not pouting,” I sigh.

“Your bottom lip tells a different story. Now be a big girl and tell Daddy what’s wrong,” he says, taking a seat next to me on one of the oversized loungers as I fight back the smile threatening to take over my face.

“Please stop referring to yourself as Daddy,” I say, but I end up laughing at the end, which makes him smile.

“Please stop telling my wife to call you Daddy,” Kai growls, walking up behind us, which makes me jump.

“Yes, sir,” Aye says, standing quickly as I tilt my head back and put my hand above my eyes to block the sun so I can look at Kai.

“Are you still upset?” he asks then looks at Aye and flicks his head in a sign for him to leave us.

“No,” I tell him, watching Aye go, even though I still feel a small amount of anger over the news he gave me this morning.

“It’s for the best,” Kai assures me.

“Is it?” I ask, tilting my head when he comes over to sit down at my side.

“Yes. Your mother and father have been worried, Myla.”

“So *you*”—I press my finger into his chest—“took it upon yourself to tell them that I ran off and got married, and then you paid for their plane tickets to come visit. So now, not only am I forced to lie to *your* family, but I have to lie to the people who raised me since I can remember. Not to mention, their son is Thad, so you have just told him where I am,” I say, trying to keep the fear over the last part out of my voice.

“Thad won’t get near you,” he growls, grabbing my thigh.

“Okay, Kai. You know everything.” I shake my head and look out at the ocean, trying to ignore the feelings his hand on my skin is giving me.

“It’s a few days, Myla,” he says gently.

“It’s a few days of lying to their faces,” I clarify.

“How are we going to explain sleeping in separate rooms?” I question, raising a brow at him.

“We’ll be sleeping in the same room while they’re here.” He shrugs like it’s no big deal.

“What?” I whisper, feeling the color drain out of my face. It’s difficult enough seeing him every day. I have no idea how I will deal with him sleeping in the same room as me, let alone the same bed.

“It will be fine. You’ll see.”

“You’re delusional,” I breathe.

“Pardon?” he asks, taking on the same tone I hear from him when he’s speaking to his men. I gather some much needed courage and look him dead in the eyes before repeating myself more slowly.

“I said you’re delusional. You actually believe this is going to turn out okay, when I know that it won’t. Haven’t you ever watched a movie before? There is always some huge lie that is being kept hidden, and in the end, the truth comes out.” I suck in a breath. “I don’t want to be there when this hole caves in.”

“The difference is this isn’t a movie, Myla, and I know what I’m doing.”

“If you say so.” I shake my head again and pull my eyes from him. When we were just lying to ourselves, I was able to handle all of this, but now that we have gotten people we both care about involved, I know that this is going to be something I end up regretting. I just hope I don’t regret it for the rest of my life or that my choice doesn’t have a negative effect on the people who are innocent in this whole thing.

“Your mom misses you,” Kai says, breaking into my thoughts.

“I know, and I miss her too, Kai, but this isn’t the time or place for a family reunion.”

“You need to learn to trust me.”

“And you need to learn to talk to me before taking it upon yourself to just do stuff you have no right to do,” I argue.

“You’re right,” he says, and I’m completely taken aback by his words and the fact he just agreed with me. “You’re right, but I’m also right.”

I let out a defeated breath, realizing once again that he just doesn’t get it.

“So much for that,” I think and don’t realize I’ve said it out loud until I see his lip twitch.

“It will all work out.”

“You keep saying that, Kai, but you and I both know that your mother has built it up in her head that my mother’s wish has come true. She is so happy that she has this relationship to reconnect her with her friend who is long gone that she is not going to be very understanding about the fact we have lied to her and everyone else.”

His eyes search my face, and for the first time, I get the feeling that he finally understands what I have been saying all along.

“So we try to make this into a real relationship.”

My lungs freeze and my mouth goes dry as I sit there in stunned silence, looking at him and trying to think of a way to come back from that.

After a moment, I sit up in the lounge.

“Are you insane?” I screech.

“You’re attracted to me,” he states.

“I...I’m attra—attracted to you?” I stutter out.

“And I’m attracted to you,” he says as his eyes travel over my body, and I feel my nipples pucker against the thin material of my bikini.

“Be serious.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“I’m being very serious.”

“It won’t work,” I argue.

“Why won’t it? Every relationship starts with attraction. You’re attracted to me, and I’m attracted to you.”

“Stop telling me that I’m attracted to you,” I growl, trying to stand up, but before I can, I’m down in the lounge and Kai is leaning over me with his face inches from mine.

“Why not try, Myla?”

“Because it’s a very, very dumb idea, Kai.” I roll my eyes.

“We don’t even have to have sex until you’re ready,” he says, ignoring what I just said and moving his face closer to mine. “Let’s try it while your family is in town. After they leave, we will reevaluate everything and then decide if we want to keep moving forward in our relationship.”

“I can’t believe I’m even considering this,” I say.

A small smile appears on his face right before he lowers his head and takes my mouth in a kiss so hot that I feel it all the way to my toes. When he pulls his mouth from mine, his

lips go to my forehead, my nose, then my chin. I'm surprised by the sudden feeling that ignites in my chest from his soft show of affection.

"We need to have a first date," he tells me, and I don't even try to fight back my smile this time.

"What?" he questions as his eyebrows pull together.

"I get to pick our first date," I tell him and then bite my lip when his eyes narrow.

"All right, Myla. You get to pick the first date," he agrees.

I can tell he is trying to figure out what I'm up to, and it takes everything in me not to smile or tell him that he's in for it.

"In the meantime, would you like to watch a movie?" he asks, catching me off guard.

"I..." I pause and search his face before lowering my voice and asking, "A movie?"

Aye, Pika, and I watch movies often, but Kai has never even *asked* to watch one with us. And he honestly seems annoyed when he finds us all lazing on the couch together.

"It's Saturday. There isn't much going on, and I don't need to work, so uh—"

"Okay," I agree, cutting him off, seeing how uncomfortable he is with asking me, "but I get to pick."

"No!" He shakes his head. "I'm not watching a chick flick."

"I never said anything about watching a chick flick. I said I get to choose the movie."

"Nope. I'm picking," he says firmly.

I roll my eyes and hop off the lounge before he can stop me again. I look over my shoulder when I notice he's not following me.

"Are you coming?"

“Yep,” he mutters with his eyes glued to the waist of my bikini.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, looking down to where his eyes are locked.

“Your color is changing,” he says, his eyes traveling up my body, making me feel like I’m not wearing anything.

“I’ve been using sunscreen,” I tell him when the look in his eyes doesn’t change.

“I can see that,” he says so quietly that I almost don’t hear him. I’m just about to ask him what his problem is, but then his hand goes to my waist and he pulls the side of my bikini down.

“What are you doing?” I ask, stepping away from his touch.

“Your tan lines...” He shakes his head like he’s coming out of some kind of trance.

“What?” I ask confused.

“Nothing. Are you ready?”

“Sure.” I bite my lip and walk into the house in front of him. The whole way, I swear I can feel his eyes roaming over my exposed skin.

“I’ll be right back,” I mumble, running up the stairs and into my room, where I quickly grab an oversized shirt and slip it on before I run back down to the movie lounge.

“What did you pick?” I ask, plopping myself down onto one of the overstuffed sofas.

“You’ll see.” He smiles at me over his shoulder, and that image alone is enough to make me want to go to him and kiss the smile off his face.

For a man who doesn’t smile often, when he does, it’s always stunning. It astounds me that someone who gives off the energy of a person you wouldn’t want to cross is the same man you would pray to spend a moment with just to see if you could get him to smile at you.

“Myla?”

“Hmm?” I ask.

“I asked if you would like something to drink?” I feel my face heat up, realizing I was staring at him, and know that I need a moment to gather my wits before sitting alone with him in a quiet room.

“Oh, I can get it.” I hop up off the couch and make it to the edge of the movie room before turning around and asking, “Would you like something?”

“A beer.” He smiles and I feel my already-hot skin become even hotter.

“Got it. Beer,” I say under my breath, quickly going to the kitchen. By the time I make it back to the movie room, it has been a good fifteen minutes. I got drinks, made some popcorn, and dug around in the cupboards until I found some gummies and chocolate. I was killing time, but I knew that, if I was going to be around him, I would need to have provisions that would keep my mouth and my hands full while I was in such close proximity to Kai.

“So, what did you pick?” I ask him again before grabbing a handful of popcorn and shoving it into my mouth.

“You’ll see,” he says once more, coming to sit down right next to me.

I try not to look at him, but I can’t help it. I swear my eyes have a mind of their own. When I turn my head, he has what looks like an iPad in his hands and is pressing the screen.

I study him for a moment when I know he is completely caught up in what he’s doing. His hair is tied back like it usually is, and his jaw is locked in concentration. The slight bump in the center of his nose is more pronounced with the downward tilt of his chin. My eyes lock on his lips, and even from his profile, they look full and completely kissable.

“You’re staring at me.”

“Am not,” I tell him, putting popcorn into my mouth while turning my face towards the TV.

“I told you you’re attracted to me,” he mutters.

“Whatever.” I smile then look over at him when I feel his eyes on me. “What?”

“Nothing.” He grins, making my belly dip.

“So, what are you torturing me with?” I ask. His eyes heat at my words, which makes me squirm in my seat.

Without answering, he presses another button. Then the TV lights up and Die Hard begins to play.

“Oh my God! I love this movie,” I beam at him, and his hand comes up, his finger running over my lips before he drops his hand and turns to face the television again.

I inhale a deep breath, letting it out slowly before turning back to face the screen. We spend the rest of the day watching movies and relaxing, and by the time we’re both ready for bed, I have found something out about Kai that I never expected: he is definitely someone I can see myself falling head-over-heels in love with.

I also realized that, with him, it would never be as easy as just love. Love seems too simple of an emotion to describe what I’d feel for him if I allowed myself to go there.

SWIMMING WITH THE SHARKS

“ARE YOU SURE about this?” No, I’m not sure now that we’re out in the middle of the ocean, but there’s no way I’m backing out. When I woke up this morning, I was surprised to find Kai sitting on the side of the bed, watching me. I was even more surprised when he told me that we were going to have to have our date today because my parents would be here in two days and he wouldn’t have much time to get away during the week.

Although I’m excited to see my parents, I still have a fair amount of anxiety about their visit. Even if Kai and I are going to be seeing where this thing goes, I have no idea how it will play out with two people who know me having a front-row seat at the start of our relationship.

I look from the ocean, where a cage has just been placed into the water, to Kai and give him a shaky nod. When I was around ten, I watched *Jaws* for the first time and instantly became obsessed with the ocean and all the creatures that live in it. One of the things I loved the most about the ocean was sharks, and I promised myself that, if I ever got the chance, I would go swimming with them.

This plan always seemed like a good idea. That was before I was sitting on a large boat, wearing a diving suit, getting ready to be lowered into the ocean in a cage, where fish blood and body parts will be tossed into the water with me, at which time I’ll come face-to-face with one of the world’s greatest predators.

“I promise you will love it,” he tells me, grabbing my hand, running his fingers over my skin.

“I want to do it.” I swallow thickly.

When I told Kai what my plan for our first date was, his face lit up and he looked like I had given him some kind of gift. He told me that shark diving is one of his favorite things to do, next to surfing. He said that he doesn't get to go often but his friend would be willing to take us out on his boat. I can't believe how fast everything happened. It felt like all I had done was snapped my fingers, and then I was on a boat, wearing a wetsuit.

“Do you remember what to do once we're in the cage?” he asks.

I nod again, my voice seeming to be lost. Luckily for me, I took diving lessons a couple of years ago, and when Kai and his friend went over everything with me and asked me questions, I still knew all the right answers and what to do in case of an emergency.

“All right. Let's get the rest of your gear on, *makamae*.”

He takes my hand and leads me to the ledge, where I don the breathing mask and the rest of my gear. After Kai gets me ready and has checked me over at least three times, he quickly puts on his own, gives a thumbs up, and then signals me to place the breathing apparatus in my mouth. I do and immediately feel the flow of air that will allow me to breathe underwater.

As soon as I'm set, Kai pulls me over to the side of the boat, where a set of stairs leads into the water and down into the cage. He goes ahead of me and waits at the bottom of the steps for me to follow him down. When I reach the step that has half my body in the water, I become fully aware he is there, his body caging me in. His hand gives my waist a squeeze of reassurance before he submerges himself fully into the water.

I follow him under and am instantly stunned by the serenity. The ocean is so blue from above, and the water is so

clear from below that I swear I can see for miles. The silence is like nothing I have ever known. The only sound I can hear is the noise coming from my own concentrated breathing.

I spin around slowly and come face to-face with Kai, who points to his eyes then up to the top of the water. Suddenly, the water turns red and there are specks of white, which I know are fish particles filling the area surrounding us. Even though I know what's coming, I'm still in awe when small fish swim near the cage and begin to eat up the smaller pieces of chum.

As I watch them, I realize they are almost moving in slow motion up until the moment their mouths open, and then they move suddenly, snatching up the food they were after. I don't know how long it takes— it could have been minutes or maybe even hours—but Kai taps me on my shoulder. When I look over at him, he's pointing to the far end of the cage, where there is a large, black mass heading towards us. I grab Kai's hand and try to keep my breathing even as the fuzzy image clears up and the black mass becomes a large shark. I know right away that it's a tiger shark, one of the deadliest animals on Earth.

I grab Kai's hand tighter as the shark swims around the cage a couple of times. The moment seems almost suspended in time, but before I have even really had a second to appreciate the beauty of the magnificent creature in front of me, he's gone. We float around the cage for a few more minutes, but when Kai taps his wrist, I know that it's time to head up.

Once we reach the surface, Kai's friend helps me onto the boat and begins getting my gear off me. When my mask is off, I take a deep breath of the salty ocean air and look around for Kai. When our gazes connect, I try to convey with my eyes how much this moment means to me. It's not every day you get to live out one of your childhood dreams, and I couldn't be more thankful that he is the one who gave this to me.

I finish getting everything off and put away while trying to understand the feeling I have in my chest. It's not until Kai comes over and drags me from where I was sitting to a large

couch at the back of the boat when I realize what it is: *Happiness*.

I have always considered myself a happy person, but I didn't know that, deep down, I really wasn't, and since the moment I arrived in Hawaii, I have been truly happy. I miss my shop and my girls, but to me, I was just getting by before. And now that my life has evolved, I've been forced to do something I never would have done before, and I've left what I'd thought of as the security of my home, I'm finally, really, and truly happy. With that thought, I curl into Kai's side, lay my head on his chest, and drift off to sleep with the smell of the ocean and the rocking of the boat lulling me into dreamland.

I WAKE UP and attempt to roll over, only to find myself tethered to the bed by an arm over my waist and muscular, hairy legs tangled with mine. And then I remember that my parents are in Hawaii, sleeping a few doors down from our room.

“Go back to sleep,” Kai rumbles against my neck, causing goosebumps to break out all over my body.

“I thought you were going to stay on your side of the bed?” I whisper, rubbing my legs together, which have suddenly become restless.

“It got cold. I needed your body heat to stay warm.”

I smile at his reply and turn in his arms to face him, noticing that it is much colder in the room than it normally is. As soon as I'm facing him, he wraps an arm back around my waist, places his hip over mine, and begins to play with my hair. It has gotten easier over the last couple days to be this close to him, and if I'm honest with myself, I have come to crave his touch and presence. He's like a drug I know is bad for me but can't help wanting more of.

After a moment of enjoying the ease of the moment, I tilt my head back and ask, “Do you think it will be weird today, having my mom and dad and your parents here?”

His gaze travels from the piece of hair he's playing with to mine, and then he looks over my head before replying, "No. My mom and I talked. She won't even be bringing up the fact she knew your mother." He tucks my face under his chin, forcing me to inhale a lungful of his scent.

"I still think it's going to be awkward."

"I'll be with you for most of the day. I have to leave for a couple of hours around noon, but after that, I'm all yours," he tells me, and I ignore the feeling I get from him telling me that he's mine and pull my face out of his chest so I can look up at him.

"You know, if your mom brings up planning a wedding while my mom is here, we're completely screwed," I sigh.

"If that happens, we will deal with it when the time comes."

"You act like it's not a big deal, Kai. It was bad enough that I got married once and it wasn't real. I don't want to do it again, only this time wearing a white dress and doing it in front of my parents."

"Don't worry about that right now. Just enjoy the time you have with your parents while they are here," he encourages.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from saying more. It seems like, no matter what I say, he's not understanding that *that*, for me, is way more than I can handle right now. I have never been a good liar, and it's not something I want to become good at.

"We should probably get up." I pull away, take the blanket off, and shiver when the cold air hits my skin. "Did you turn on an air conditioner?"

I look over my shoulder, and though his back is to me, I hear him mutter, "No," under his breath as he stands. I try to pull my eyes away from him, but seeing the muscles of his back flex when he raises his arms above his head keeps my eyes in place.

"Do you need to shower?" he asks, smiling when he catches me staring at him.

“I do.” *A cold one*, I think but don’t add as I stand and go to the bathroom.

I shut the door, go to the sink, get my toothbrush, and see that Kai’s toothbrush is next to mine in the holder. I ignore the feeling that gives me, squeeze some toothpaste onto the toothbrush, and brush my teeth before going over to the shower.

“What are you doing?” I ask him as he walks into the bathroom just as I’m turning the water for the shower on.

He ignores my question, walks over to the sink, and begins to load his toothbrush up with toothpaste.

“I’m going to shower,” I say, looking at him through the mirror and frowning when he begins to brush his teeth. “Do you need to do that right this moment?”

Our eyes connect and he pulls the toothbrush from his mouth.

“Feel free to get in,” he tells me, and I can hear the challenge in his voice.

Something in me snaps, and I pull off the pair of panties I have on then rip my nightshirt over my head and get into the shower, keeping my back to him.

The glass doors are mostly fogged, but I know he can still see me. I honestly can’t believe I did something so ballsy, but I feel like he is constantly pushing me, maybe even testing me. I peek over my shoulder and find his gaze locked on me through the mirror.

My nipples harden and I feel my pussy contract from the look in his eyes. I start to think I’m an idiot when all he does is stare, but when his body turns to face me, he starts to take a step in my direction. Instead, he stops and shakes his head, adjusting the bulge in his pants and then leaving the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. I let out the breath that was locked in my chest and turn the water temperature to cold for a moment, needing to cool down before switching it back to warm, quickly washing up, and getting out.

By the time I make it into the bedroom, Kai is gone, but the scent of his cologne is still lingering in the air. I put on a pair of navy blue shorts that fold at the hem and a white, linen button-down shirt over my navy blue bikini before toeing on a pair of white flip-flops that have rhinestone studs across the straps and putting my hair into a quick braid. Then I leave the room.

“Hey, Pika,” I say when I open the door to our room and find him leaning against the wall across the hall.

“Kai asked me to take you to the dining room.”

I nod and begin to follow him down the hall. Things have gotten a little easier between Pika and me, but I still hate the look of pity I sometimes see on his face when he’s looking at me. I guess it helps that he doesn’t talk much, and honestly, half the time, I forget he is even around.

“Did you have a good night off?” I ask, trying to fill the silence between us.

His eyes come to me over his shoulder, and he shrugs.

“Didn’t do much,” he grumbles then turns around and continues walking.

“Sounds like fun,” I mutter then bite the inside of my cheek, wondering why the hell I said that.

Normally, Aye is with us, so it’s easier to deal with Pika and his cold demeanor. He seems like an all right guy—if you like the silent, broody type who would be more inclined to watch paint dry than to talk to you.

We walk the rest of the way in silence, and as soon as we make it just to the entrance of the dining room, I hear my mom ask if I’m coming and Kai tell her that I was getting out of the shower when he left the room. I duck my head and fight back a blush that is getting ready to take over my face, remembering what I did.

When we enter the dining room, I take in my mom, who is sitting next to the large open doors that lead out to a balcony. If you didn’t know any better, you would think I’m her

biological child. We have the same blond hair and blue eyes, and she is also tall and lean.

My dad is sitting at the table with a newspaper open in front of him. He shaved his hair off when I was fifteen and hasn't grown it back since. He is also tall, but his body is larger, and where he used to be fit, his body has started to go soft with age. His dark-brown eyes meet mine and he smiles, pushing back from the table and coming towards me.

"There's our girl," he says quietly, wrapping me up in a hug.

"Hey, Dad," I reply just as softly, wrapping my arms around his back while soaking in one of his wonderful hugs—one of my favorite things in the world.

"You doin' okay this morning?"

"I am." I lean back and smile up at him. His face goes soft, and he leans in and kisses my forehead.

"I can't get over how beautiful you have become," my mom whispers. I turn towards her just as she engulfs me in a hug. Even though she said the same thing yesterday when we picked them up from the airport, my head soars from hearing her words. I hadn't realized just how much I missed them. They are the only parents I have ever known, and there was never a moment growing up that they didn't make me feel welcome and loved.

"I'm happy you're here," I whisper back honestly.

"You know, wherever you are in the world, if you needed me, honey, I would go through hell to make it to you."

A sob climbs up my throat. I know she is telling the truth, and that is why I have always tried to protect both my parents. The thought of something happening to them because of what their son has done has always made me fearful.

"Don't cry. We're here now." She holds me tighter then whispers in my ear, "Your husband looks like he's going to murder someone. I don't think he likes it when you cry."

I pull my face away from her chest, and my gaze collides with Kai's.

"I'm okay." I wipe my face with a tissue my dad hands me.

Kai comes over to me and wraps an arm around my waist before kissing the side of my head.

"I was telling your mom about our shark diving trip." He looks down at me and smiles.

"I told him about when you were little and you were fascinated with the ocean but how the closest you ever got to sea life was at the aquarium," Dad says.

"Dad used to tease me about him having to work more hours just to afford my obsession with the aquarium." I smile at the memory.

"I loved having that time with you," my dad says then looks at Kai. "My sons were always doing one sport or another, and life was always hectic. It was nice to spend a quiet afternoon once a month with a little girl who wanted nothing more than to sit in the observatory of the aquarium, watching the fish swim around."

"I loved that time with you too—just as much as I liked helping you in the bakery on Saturdays when I got older," I tell him.

"You were always a good kid." He looks at me with eyes full of sadness then takes my mom's hand. "I don't know what we did, but whatever it is, we're sorry. We tried to be good parents."

"Oh God," I choke out. "You didn't do anything," I get out around the lump in my throat.

"You were amazing parents—the best. I just... I just..." I pause, not knowing what to say. There is no way to explain to them why I left home and never looked back without calling out their son, and I'm not willing to risk telling them what he did to me.

"I know there is much to talk about, but if we could put all of that off until another time, I would be grateful. Myla has

been very stressed since we got married, and I really don't want my wife to spend the first few weeks of our marriage depressed," Kai says.

My face goes soft, and I lean deeper into his side.

"This should be a happy time for us, *makamae*," he adds, tilting his head down towards me. I look up at him in wonder and know that this is one more reason why I could fall in love with him so easily. He has a way of reading me that no one has ever had before.

"I agree," my mom says quietly, and my eyes go to her. She is looking up at Kai with her eyes shining. "We have plenty of time to talk about everything. Let's just have a good time while we're here."

"Thanks, Mom," I whisper.

She smiles at me and reaches out to gently hold my cheek before dropping her hand to her side.

"I, for one, am starving," my dad chimes in, and the energy in the room becomes lighter.

Kai presses another kiss to the side of my head then leads me over to the table and pulls out a chair for me before taking a seat at my side.

"Thank you," I whisper, looking at him when the servers come in to take the breakfast orders.

"Anytime." He leans in and I tilt my head back without thinking, accepting his kiss. When our lips part, his eyes stay locked on mine and the look I have been trying to decipher appears on his face again before he turns away, not giving me a chance to figure it out.

"I'M GLAD YOU found a good man." My dad smiles at me as we walk down the beach.

After breakfast, we decided to take a walk while my mom went to lie out in the sun.

“You have always put everyone before you. I’m glad you found a man who makes sure you’re taken care of.”

“He’s good to me,” I say while taking in a lungful of ocean air. “You can see it when he looks at you that he adores you.”

“Really?” I question, then wonder if I should have said something different.

“When you picked us up at the airport yesterday, your mother and I paused the moment we saw you at the baggage claim. We were, quite frankly, in awe. Kai is...well, kind of intimidating.”

“No, he’s not.” I shake my head. Kai is beautiful to me.

“He is, but he was looking at you with a softness in his eyes that I have only ever seen once before, and that was from your father when he looked at you or your mother,” my dad whispers.

My head swings his way. I’m in shock because we have never, not even once, spoken about my father before.

“You were his star.” He shakes his head before he looks out at the water and then back at me with a deep sadness in his eyes. “When he asked me to take you in, I knew how hard it was for him to do. Your mother and he loved you. You were the reason they were put on this Earth.”

“I hate that I don’t remember them,” I say through tears.

“You do...” He pauses, takes my hand, and then places it over my heart. “In there, you remember them. They have always been with you, will always be with you.”

“I know they loved me,” I tell him after a moment, when I finally find my voice again.

“I know they did too,” he says as his face softens. “No, I know, because they gave you and Mom to me.”

“Oh, Myla.” He shakes his head and tugs me into a hug. “We miss our girl.” I can hear tears in his voice, and it kills me that I have done this to him.

“I miss you guys too,” I sob, wrapping my arms tighter around him.

“Let’s make this the last time we wait so long between visits.”

“Okay,” I agree, holding on to him tighter. We stay like this for a long moment. I have missed both of my parents, but my dad and I have always been close, so not having him in my life over the last few years has really hurt.

“Love you, Dad.”

“Love you too.” He pulls away then looks at my tear-stained face. “You need to stop crying before we get back to the house and your husband sees you.”

“I’m done,” I smile at him through watery eyes.

He wraps his arm around my shoulders, and we walk the rest of the way back to the house in silence. I feel like, over the last few weeks, I have been bombarded with things from my past—some good, and some bad. But I’m also grateful for the closure I’m getting from it.

TETHERED TO HIM

“I TOLD YOU the moment we got them together it was going to be bad,” I growl at Kai, who has the nerve to smile at me.

After my dad and I got back from our walk on the beach, Kai’s mom showed up and instantly began talking to my mom about weddings and how she believes we should have another ceremony where everyone can come to witness us exchange vows. Then my mother started telling her that they would only be able to stay until the weekend but she would love to have some kind of celebration before she went home. So now, my mother and Kai’s have just told us what is going on and how we will be having a party with over one hundred and fifty people.

He shrugs. “It’s just a party.”

“Did you hear them?” I practically shout. “They said a hundred and fifty people. A hundred and fifty people is more than a party. That’s like...a concert or something.”

His eyebrow rises, and he shakes his head. “What kind of concerts have you gone to?”

“That doesn’t matter.” I roll my eyes, completely exasperated.

“I know you don’t want to do this, but look at how happy our mothers are right now. And it will be good for everyone to meet my wife. I should have done something as soon as we got home, but with everything that happened, I didn’t want to put too much pressure on you.”

“I don’t need to meet everyone, Kai,” I tell him, feeling nervous from even thinking about it. “We don’t even know what we’re doing. Things between us are still up in the air.”

“Stop,” he growls, turning to face me. “Every time you talk about us, you make it seem like we have an expiration date. We agreed to try to make this work, but in order for that to happen, both of us have to be involved. You can’t have one foot out the door already, Myla.”

I swallow, close my eyes, and drop my forehead to his chest, realizing that he’s right. I agreed to see where things go with him, while at the same time, I have been counting on us coming to an end.

“You’re right.” I open my eyes and look up at him. “I’m sorry. You’re right.”

His hands come up, and he gently holds my face between his palms.

“Let’s worry about one thing at a time.” He kisses me softly then leans back just enough so he can look me in the eye. “Let’s give our mothers this party. I know it will mean a lot to both of them.”

I nod and lean into his touch.

“I’ll be with you all night.” He kisses me again, but this time, before he can pull away, I nip his bottom lip.

He growls deep in his throat and his hand tangles in my hair, forcing my head to the side. My mouth opens under his, and the moment his tongue touches mine, I whimper. I have never been with someone like him, and as much as it scares me, I still want him more than I have wanted anything in a very long time. He slows the kiss and pulls away, resting his forehead against mine.

“You’re right.”

“I’m right?” he asks, surprised.

“Well, it would mean a lot to my mom to be involved, even if it is just a party.”

“And us?” he questions. I debate for a moment how to answer him before pressing my chest against his.

“I know you don’t think I’m giving us a chance, but I am. I have never been with someone like you before. You scare me.”

“My—”

“Oh, honey, I’m so excited!” my mom says, interrupting Kai. “Do you think we should have a photographer?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” I mumble, gaining a squeeze to my waist from Kai.

“I’m sure your brothers would love to see some pictures of you.”

My body freezes and I feel the blood drain out of my face as Kai’s arms band around me.

“You don’t look so well. Are you okay, honey?” my mom asks. I nod, not able to speak.

“She’s had a long day. I’m going to get her to bed. Tomorrow is going to be another busy day,” Kai says.

“Of course,” Mom mutters, looking me over. I give her a shaky smile and a quick hug before Kai leads me back towards our room. Once we’re inside and I hear the door close behind us, I walk to the bed, sit down, and then kick my shoes off before pulling my feet up onto the bed and tucking myself into a ball.

“Do you know that Rory was once my best friend?” I ask Kai as I watch him slip his shirt off over his head then pull his pants off, leaving him only in his boxers, which shows off the tattoo on his right hip that disappears into his underwear, the bottom of the ink ending just above his knee. I wish I could see the full extent of the artwork and get up close to the very detailed work.

“That’s brother?” he questions, pulling me out of my thoughts as he walks towards me, holding a shirt in his hand.

I nod as I watch the muscles in his stomach flex.

“Do you still keep in touch with him?” he asks. I shake my head.

“No. When I moved away from Nevada, I just left everything behind,” I say, sitting up on the side of the bed. When he mutters a quiet, “Up,” his hands go to my stomach. Then he pulls my shirt off over my head and then quickly tugs the new one down. I reach behind my back and unhook my bra, pulling it off then out one of the sleeves of the shirt.

“Why did you run after graduation?” he questions. I look up at him, and he searches my face. Part of me wonders how he could know about that, but I’m starting to understand that Kai knows a lot more than I could even begin to realize. And I wonder if his question now is more of a test than him just asking out of curiosity.

“I got accepted into culinary school,” I say softly, watching disappointment flash in his eyes.

I quickly slip my shorts off, watching as he walks around the bed and gets in behind me. I don’t know why, but I expect him to ignore me, to just turn his back to me and go to sleep, but instead, he comes to me, pulling me down with my back to his front. Then he slides one arm under my neck and wraps the other around my stomach.

“So, you guys were friends?” he asks softly after a moment.

I feel his breath on my neck, so I close my eyes for a moment, memorizing the feeling.

“We had all the same friends, and when we were home, it was like living with my best friend. I think it was harder leaving him behind more than anything else.”

“Huh,” he grunts, and a small thrill fills me that perhaps he’s jealous, but I squash it immediately, knowing he would never be jealous.

“I got an engagement announcement from him about a year ago, and I sent a congratulations card back in return, but I just couldn’t find it in myself to even pick up the phone to call him.”

“Something must have happened to make you cut off all ties with the people you considered family.”

“I think I was just trying to find my own way in the world,” I lie, gaining a squeeze from him.

“I wish you would talk to me,” he says quietly.

I turn to face him and bury my face in his chest, wishing I had the courage to share what happened to me with him.

“I’m so tired,” I tell him instead, breathing him in.

“Sleep, *makamae*,” he says, wrapping his arms tighter around me. Even though I try to talk myself out of it, and even though I know it’s a huge mistake, I fall asleep feeling safe and wanted.

Kai’s face is between my legs, his large arms holding me in place, his hands holding mine against my thighs, making it impossible to touch him. I cry out in frustration as I feel my clit pulse in his mouth.

I wake up breathing heavily, and I remember the dream I was having. I was begging him to make love to me, but he just kept me on the edge. I go to get up and realize Kai’s hand his cupping me over my panties, and I can feel the hard length of him against my back.

“Oh, God,” I moan quietly, squeezing my eyes closed. I know that all I need is the smallest brush against my clit and I will explode. I go to move again and his fingers press in.

“Kai,” I whisper, unintentionally rolling my hips forward into his hand.

“*TU Kai*,” he rumbles, pressing into my back.

My hand goes to his thigh and my nails dig into his skin as his fingers slide my panties to the side and his middle finger circles my clit.

“Drenched,” he growls against my neck as his finger does another circle.

My hand on his thigh goes behind my back and down into his boxers, my fingers attempting to circle his width without

coming close. From the feel of him in my hand, I can imagine how large and beautiful he is. I slide down then up, and he growls, his teeth nipping my neck.

He feels like steel covered in smooth silk. My thumb runs over the tip, catching the bead of pre-cum before doing another downward stroke.

“*Makamae,*” he says, and without warning, two fingers swiftly enter me.

“Kai!” I cry out and turn my head over my shoulder in time for his mouth to capture mine in a kiss that takes my breath away.

His fingers move in sync with the hand I’m pumping him with. I pull my mouth from his and cry out again as his thumb rolls over my clit, causing the orgasm that had been building since I woke up to explode through my body.

I squeeze my eyes closed as my pussy convulses around his fingers, and his teeth take hold of the skin of my neck as my hand fills with cum from his release. After a moment, I begin to come back to myself, and I can feel my face turn red from embarrassment. I never expected that to happen. It normally takes a while for me to feel okay with any kind of intimacy, but as with everything about Kai, he brings it out of me so easily.

“I could go again,” he says.

I feel that his cock is still semi-hard. I let him go when I realize he is still in my palm. He flips me over to my back, and his fingers sink deeper inside me, causing me to moan loudly as aftershocks from my orgasm fill my lower belly.

“You’re my wife, Myla.”

“I know.” I squeeze my eyes closed.

“This is natural.”

“I’m not ready for this,” I say then feel the bed begin to shake.

“Are you laughing?” I ask in disbelief, popping one eye open.

“You might not think you’re ready, but you were begging me for it...even in your sleep.”

“No,” I whisper, feeling my eyes get big and my face turn even redder.

“I haven’t come from a hand job since I was thirteen. I’m just as surprised by what happened as you are. But I don’t regret it. I don’t regret anything that has happened between us.”

I feel my face go soft, and I lean up, pressing a kiss to his mouth. Then I moan down his throat as his fingers begin to slide in and out of me again. He pulls his mouth from mine then looks down into my eyes.

“This time, I want to see you when you come. I’ve imagined it a hundred times, but now, I will have the memory of the way you look, the way you smell, and the way you taste,” he says, lowering his face to my stomach, and then his teeth pull my shirt up, exposing my breasts.

“I think I’m obsessed with your tan lines,” he says, licking my breast and making me whimper. “One day, I’m going to strip you down and trace every inch of them with my tongue and teeth.”

His mouth moves to my other breast, and I feel him lick it as well, his mouth avoiding my nipple with each stroke of his tongue.

“Kai!” I cry, my fingers threading through his hair when his lips lock on to my nipple. His tongue flicks over the tip as his fingers stroke into me harder and faster, his thumb zeroing in on my clit. My head digs back into the pillow. My eyes squeeze closed, but then they fly open when he demands, “Open your eyes.”

When our gazes lock, I fall apart in his hands, my insides becoming liquid as another orgasm explodes through my body. My eyes stay locked on his as I float off before slowly coming back to myself.

“I now understand what beauty really looks like,” he says, pulling his hand out of my panties and curling himself around

me.

“Thank you,” I whisper, and he pulls away so he can look at me.

“I will do that for you any time you ask.” I feel my lips twitch, and I’m just about to say something when there is a loud bang on the bedroom door.

“Kai!” a woman yells. “Let Myla up! I have strict orders to take her from you, even by force. I need to get her ready for the party tonight.”

“You’re going to have to come back,” Kai grunts, rolling us over so that I’m sprawled out on top of him.

“I’m telling Mom!” she yells dramatically. I begin to laugh then quickly gasp when one of his hands slides up under my shirt then down into my panties before it cups one cheek of my ass.

“I should get up,” I say quietly, looking down at him.

His hand goes to the side of my face then slides around as his fingers circle the back of my neck. He tugs gently, forcing my mouth down to his. His teeth nip at my bottom lip. Then he soothes it with a swipe of his tongue.

“You should spend the day in bed with me,” he says, causing a tingle to shoot right to my core.

“Myla, if you can hear me, I really need you to come out here,” Meka yells, and I begin to laugh against Kai’s mouth.

“I’ll see you later,” I tell him. His hand gives my ass a squeeze as his hips lift. I feel the hard length of him against my belly before I’m rolled again and he’s over me, his hair like a curtain, making the moment seem even more intimate. His face lowers and he takes my mouth in a deep kiss then quickly pulls away. Then he hops off the bed. His eyes look me over before he walks over to the dresser, grabs a pair of sweats, pulls them on, and then opens the door to the bedroom, where Meka comes flying in.

“Oh, thank God. I thought I was interrupting,” she says, and I bite the inside of my cheek, because she is obviously

oblivious.

“You did interrupt us,” Kai growls then looks at me on the bed again, and I can see the silent promise in his eyes.

“Are you leaving?” she questions, ignoring his last comment, coming to the bed, and flopping down next to me.

Kai grunts at her then looks at me, and his eyes change, appearing softer.

“I’ll see you at the party.”

“See you at the party,” I reply softly.

His eyes stay locked on mine for a moment then travel to his sister.

“Take care of my wife.”

“Will do,” she tells him on a whisper.

I watch him leave and don’t pull my eyes from the door until Meka pats my leg.

“It’s going to take some time to get used to him being in love,” she says.

My gaze goes to her. “Pardon?”

“I have never seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you.” I stare at her, unsure of what to say and not wanting to get my hopes up. But the feeling I have had in my gut since the moment I met Kai is causing a warm feeling to spread throughout my body.

“Anyways, you already know he’s in love with you.” She smiles then jumps off the bed. “Okay, go shower, We have a lot to do.”

I get off the bed, stumble to the bathroom, and shower quickly. When I come out, the room has not only Meka waiting, but also my mom, Kai’s mother, and a large woman wearing a very bright floral dress that accentuates her dark skin and fuller figure.

“You’re here! Let’s get started.”

I begin to take a step back from the woman when she starts towards me holding a bag in her hands.

“Come on, child. We don’t have all day.” She rolls her eyes. I look at Kai’s mom, but she just smiles.

“Marcy is going to get you dressed and make sure your dress fits you. She can size it while we go out and get your hair and makeup done.”

“Um...I thought we were just doing a small get-together.”

“We are, but there will be a photographer and I would like to have some pictures of you and Kai,” my mom says, making me feel guilty.

I swallow down my own personal feelings and walk towards the woman.

“Where would you like me?”

“Here is just fine.” She stops in front of me, sizes me up, and then opens the garment bag, pulling out a white dress.

“You’re much smaller than he normally likes,” she mutters to herself.

I shake off the feeling I get from her words and look at my mom.

“You’re going to look beautiful.” My mom smiles then begins talking to Kai’s mom and sister.

Even though I’m in a room full of people, I feel alone. I close my eyes and wish that I were back in bed with Kai again.

“MAKAMAE.”

I lift my head and my eyes crash with Kai’s. His eyes run over my hair and body then land on my feet before meeting my gaze again. When I looked in the mirror after his sister and Marcy finished with me, I was shocked. I looked like a model—nothing like myself at all.

My long, blond hair had been highlighted, with caramel lowlights added in too, and blown out completely straight so that it hangs down to the middle of my back. My skin, which has gotten darker from the Hawaiian sun, now glows from the lotion they used.

The dress I have on shows off my figure and does this crazy lift to my breasts that makes them look like they are fake, and the heels I have on make my legs look a mile long. His eyes look me over again, and when they meet mine again, I can feel the heat in his eyes.

I inhale a deep breath and take him in for the first time. His hair is back and his jaw is shadowed, making him look even more warrior-like than he normally does. His hands flex at his sides, and I notice he's not wearing his typical suit, but a pair of light dress pants and a white button-down shirt with the top two buttons undone. His eyebrows pull together, and he walks towards me when he realizes I'm not coming to him.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, stepping up to me.

“I... Well...” I pause and look behind him at the closed door. When I decided to do this earlier, it seemed like an okay idea, but now that I’m in the moment, I’m not so sure.

“If you don’t want to go, we can get undressed, put in a movie, lock the door, and put Aye and Pika on guard,” he says, looking concerned.

I feel that feeling in my gut expanding further, making me warm all over.

“You would do that, wouldn’t you?” I lean into him, place my hands on his chest, and look into his eyes.

“Of course.”

I swallow and let the feeling coursing through me settle in before I start to lean back.

“Where are you going?” he questions, snaking one arm around me while his other hand cups my cheek and his thumb runs over my bottom lip.

“You’ll mess up my lip gloss,” I complain.

He smirks then lowers his mouth, kissing me wet and deep before pulling back slowly, leaving me panting.

“Now, what were you going to say?” He leans back, and my fingers go to his mouth, where I wipe my lip gloss off his lips.

“I...” I clear my throat, feeling nervous all of a sudden.

“I have something for you,” I say, taking a step back, needing to have a little space between us. “I just want you to know you can always say no or that it’s stupid—”

“Myla,” he cuts me off, pulling me closer.

“What is it?” I bite my lip and step away from him again. This time, I go over to the dresser and open the top drawer, pulling out the small, black box I placed there earlier.

I realized this morning that the ring Kai had given me tethered me to him. I had a constant reminder of him with me, and the more I thought about it, the more I wanted him to be tied to me in a way that could be seen by anyone who happened to be in his presence. I could lie and say that I wouldn’t be disappointed if he told me he wouldn’t wear the ring I was about to give to him, but I knew deep down that this was going to be one of the moments that defined us and where we were going.

I turn towards him, and his eyes drop to the box in my hand. When his gaze comes back to mine, his eyes are filled with confusion. When I’m finally standing in front of him, I hand the box to him and he opens the lid.

“It’s okay if you don’t wear it,” I whisper, unsure of what to say because I can’t read his face as he removes the ring from the confines of the box.

“Put it on me,” he says, lifting his eyes to meet mine.

I take a deep breath then take the ring from him, feeling the ridges from the design and the weight of the heavy metal between my fingers as I take his hand and slide the ring onto his finger.

When the idea about getting Kai a ring came to me, I wasn't sure what I was going to do. I went to the jewelry store and was escorted to the gold wedding bands most men wear, but none of them seemed like Kai. I gave up and was leaving the store when I noticed a ring in one of the display cases that held some pieces of traditional Hawaiian jewelry. The large, silver band with a black design engraved into the metal looked like the tattoo on his arm, and I knew it was something I could see on him.

I'm so caught up in my own head that I don't realize I'm moving until the backs of my knees hit the bed and I'm lying down with Kai covering me.

"You bought me a ring," he growls. I can't read the look on his face, so I just nod.

"Thank you," he whispers, kissing me on my lips then down my neck to the tops of my breasts.

"Kai," I whimper.

"Yes, *makamae*?" He licks back up to my mouth, kissing me again.

"The party," I whisper as I feel myself falling deeper into the moment.

"I'm going to make love to my wife," he grunts, causing moisture to flood my center.

"Okay," I whisper then hear him chuckle as his hands go to the back of my dress.

"Come out here *right now!*" is yelled as someone bangs on the bedroom door.

"Fuck!" he roars. I hear giggling outside, and then Kai's soft eyes look down at me.

"After this, you're mine," he says quietly, placing a soft kiss on my jaw.

"Yes," I agree immediately. He smiles, gently kisses me, gets off the bed, and then pulls me up with him.

“So, is the ring okay?” I ask him, looking at the ground, feeling unsure. His fingers go to my chin and he lifts my face towards his.

“It’s perfect.” He kisses me again then searches my face. “You’re perfect.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to avoid saying something stupid or pushing him back over to the bed.

“I just need to fix my lip gloss,” I tell him, and a smile appears on his face. “It won’t last long.”

He kisses me again, making me laugh.

“Good thing I have a whole tube of it,” I say, stepping away from him and into the bathroom.

I hear the door to our room open and his sister come in, and I smile and look at myself in the mirror, seeing a look of almost blinding happiness in my eyes.

“Ready?” Kai asks, walking into the bathroom after a moment.

“Yep.” I smile as he takes my hand and leads me out of the room. When we make it down to the party, I’m astounded by the number of people who have shown up. One hundred and fifty people sounds like a lot, but seeing that many people is overwhelming.

“We were wondering if you guys were going to show up,” my dad says, walking up to us, carrying a glass of wine in one hand and a beer in the other.

“I don’t think Mom would let me skip this even if I wanted to.” I smile, taking the glass of wine he holds out to me. Then I give him a hug.

“You look beautiful, honey.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I whisper and then lean against Kai when he pulls me back into his side.

“Kai.” My dad smiles, shakes Kai’s hand, and then hands him the beer.

“You’re going to need that,” my dad tells him.

Kai's lips tilt up as he mutters, "Thanks."

"I'm going to go find your mom. I'll see you soon," Dad says and walks off into the crowd.

I take a sip of wine and look around then up at Kai.

"It's going to be a long night."

"Tell me about it," he mumbles as his eyes drop to my breasts.

I can't help the laugh that escapes, and I lean up to kiss his cheek. It doesn't take long after that for everyone to notice that we have arrived, and they begin to come up and offer congratulations to us. It feels like we stand in the same spot forever, only having a moment's break when my mom brings the photographer over to snap a few pictures of us. When I notice a lull in the crowd and see that Kai is caught up talking with a group of people I don't know, I tell that I'll be back and make a quick escape to the bathroom. Inside the house, there are people everywhere, and there are long lines at both the bathrooms, so I make my way to our bedroom and quickly use the restroom there then head back outside.

"Would you like a glass of wine?" one of the servers asks, stepping in front of me.

I debate for a moment then decide yes and take the glass from his tray, giving him a quiet thank-you before I take a sip. I start back towards Kai then detour when I spot his mom, waiting until she is done talking to the person in front of her before telling her quietly, "Thank you for doing this for us."

She turns to face me and her eyes go soft as she runs her hand down my cheek.

"I should be thanking you. As a mom, you always want what's best for your kids, and I've been worried for a few years that Kai was not going to find someone worthy of him. I'm glad he found you," she whispers, and I feel tears begin to fill my eyes.

"No crying," she chides, leaning forward and giving me a hug while accidentally knocking the drink out of my hand.

“It’s fine.” I smile as she apologizes.

“Thank God I didn’t spill that on your dress.” she mumbles, picking up the plastic glass and handing it to a passing waiter. “You go find your husband while I go and get you another glass of wine.”

“Maybe that was a sign that I shouldn’t have any more wine,” I laugh, and her face goes soft again.

“You remind me so much of her,” she says faintly then looks around.

I know this is making her uncomfortable, but I still have a lot of questions to ask her about my parents. Just...now isn’t the time or the place.

“I’m going to go find Kai, but I would like for us to have lunch when my mom leaves. If that’s okay?” I question, placing a hand on my stomach when it begins to turn.

“I would enjoy that. We’ll work out the details later. Just go enjoy your night.”

“Thank you.”

She smiles then walks off as a wave of dizziness hits me. I brush it off and take a deep breath then head towards Kai. When I reach his side, his eyes come to me and a small smile lights his face before he leans down and presses a kiss to my lips.

“Missed you,” he mutters against my mouth. As I start to reply, I feel like I might faint. “What’s wrong?”

I look up into his blurry face and everything tilts as I fall against his chest.

“What the fuck?” he growls, and I feel myself being lifted then carried. I hear commotion going on around me, and I want to ask what happened, but everything goes black.

THE SOUND OF beeping off in the distance begins to grate on my nerves. When I finally get one eye open, I can tell I’m in Kai’s and my room.

“Turn off the alarm,” I croak, and my hand goes to my throat when I feel it burn. I try to sit up, and suddenly, strong arms are stopping me.

“Easy,” Kai’s rough voice commands.

I look at him, and there are dark circles under his eyes and he looks like he hasn’t slept in days. My mind reels as I try to remember anything at all.

“What happened?” I ask as he helps me sit back against the headboard before reaching across me and grabbing a glass of water from the bedside table. When I lift my hands to take the glass from him, I notice an IV.

I look at Kai and try to understand what’s going on, and he just shakes his head and lifts the cup closer to my mouth. I feel tears sting my nose as I take the glass from him and hold it between my shaky hands. I slowly take a sip of water and look around the room. Everything looks the same, except there is now an IV stand and a large machine next to the bed, which I instantly recognize as where the beeping is coming from.

“I’m sorry,” Kai says, and my gaze goes back to him.

“What happened?” I repeat through the pain in my throat. “You were poisoned.” He rubs the back of his neck. “It was a small amount, but still enough to make you very sick.”

“Oh, God,” I breathe.

“They pumped your stomach. That’s why your throat is so sore. The doctor assured me it would get better after a few days.”

“How?” I whisper, still in shock.

“Mom said you had a glass of wine at the party, and it wasn’t one that anyone recalls giving you.” He rubs the bridge of his nose. “She said she accidentally knocked it out of your hand when it was still full.”

“I had a sip.”

“That’s what we figured. Do you remember anything about the waiter who gave it to you?”

“No.” I shake my head, not recalling anything about him.
“There were so many people there.”

“I know.” He sounds angry as he shakes his head.

“Are you okay?” I whisper when he doesn’t look at me.

“Fine. Just glad you’re awake.” He leans in and places a kiss on my cheek. “Why don’t you lie back down and I’ll get your parents.”

“My parents?” I ask.

“They’ve been worried they wouldn’t get to see you awake before they left, and I wanted to be able to talk to you, tell you what was going on before you had visitors,” he mutters, and I can tell from his demeanor and tone that he is exhausted.

“You should lie down here with me. You look tired. They can wait a little longer,” I tell him, not liking the feeling in the pit of my stomach.

He shakes his head and takes the water from my hand, setting it on the table next to me before helping me lie back down.

“Kai,” I whisper, noticing he’s avoiding looking at me. His eyes come to mine and I see pain flash through them before it disappears, when his face lowers and he mutters, “I’m sorry,” against my mouth. He rests his forehead against mine for a moment. Then he gets up and leaves the room without looking back.

I watch him go, and tears fill my eyes because I know that was the end of us.

“Oh, honey, don’t cry,” my mom says when she finds me curled into a ball on my side, tears dripping onto the pillow, a few minutes later. She pushes my hair away from my face then hands me a tissue. “We’re so relieved you’re okay.”

“Just a bad case of food poisoning.” I spit out yet another lie, knowing there is no way I can possibly tell my parents that someone tried to kill me.

“Good thing your husband thinks fast on his toes,” Dad says. I tilt my head back to meet his eyes then nod in

agreement.

“Do you feel okay?” Mom questions, looking at the machine next to the bed.

“Tired but fine,” I assure her.

“We’re glad you woke up before we left.”

“You’re leaving?”

“We wish we could stay, but the bakery’s been busy and we don’t have a lot of help right now,” my dad mutters, looking guilty.

“Of course,” I whisper, taking his hand. “I’ll come see you guys soon,” I promise him and actually mean it.

“Maybe we will be back before that. Perhaps for a baby shower.” My mom smiles, and new tears begin to sting my nose, but I fight them back. “We love you, honey.”

“Love you too, Mom,” I whisper as a lump of emotion clogs my throat.

She moves out of the way, and my dad takes her place, leaning down and kissing my forehead.

“Remember you always have a safe place to fall,” he tells me before kissing my forehead again and standing to his full height.

“We’ll call as soon as we land in Nevada. Just make sure you rest and that your husband does as well.”

“I will, Mom,” I reply and then kiss her cheek when she leans down to give me another hug.

“Bye, honey,” my dad says as he takes my mom’s hand, and they leave the room. I stare at the closed door for a moment before turning onto my side and carefully pulling the covers up over my shoulder.

I WAKE UP and the room is dark, but I feel the weight of Kai's arm around me and his warmth at my back, so I push myself deeper into him. He tightens his hold on me as he whispers something I can't understand. I try to pull myself out of my sleep-ridden state enough to ask what it means, but exhaustion takes me away before I ever get the chance.

I WAKE UP with the sun shining on me and the bed behind me completely cold. I lift my hand, and the IV that was there is gone, along with the machines. I roll over and look at the clock—it's after two in the afternoon. I almost think that yesterday was a bad dream, but then my eyes land on a folded piece of paper on the pillow next to me. I scoot up in bed, and with shaky hands, I unfold the note.

I was wrong. I couldn't keep you safe. My lawyer will be in touch with the divorce papers, and my men will take care of you until I know you're safe to go home.

XX Kai

My lungs compress and I fight to take a breath, as it feels like my heart is being ripped from my chest. Even though I knew it was coming, it still kills me. I carefully sit on the side of the bed, and the door opens.

I turn my head and my eyes collide with Pika's.

"Do you need help?" he asks softly. I want to scream at him to go away, but instead, I shake my head and stand slowly.

"Let me help you," he says, ignoring me and walking into the room. Tears begin to fall again and I swipe them away with the back of my hand.

“It will be okay,” he consoles quietly. The pity I hear in his tone causes a ball of anger to build in my stomach. He wraps his arm around my shoulders, and I push him away, stumbling slightly.

“Careful,” he growls, sounding just like Kai, making fury explode through me.

“Go away!” I scream, pushing him away again. “Get out of my room!”

His arms come around me, and I pound against his chest with the back of my fist as tears stream down my cheeks.

“Shhhhh,” he hushes me, forcing me closer to his body, where my fists wrap into his shirt and I bury my face in his chest to cry harder.

“It will be okay.” He rubs my back as my legs give out under me. He catches me before I fall to the floor, picks me up, and carries me to bed, laying me back down.

“Do you want me to stay with you?” he asks, pulling the covers back over my shoulder.

“No. I just want to be alone,” I breathe through my tears and attempt to pull myself together.

“I don’t mind,” he whispers. I look at him and shake my head. He nods, looking around and then back down at me. I can tell he wants to say something else, but instead, he kisses my forehead and stands. I hear the door close, but my eyes stay locked on the sky I can see out the window.

Myla, this is stupid. You weren’t even in love with him. Stop acting like a lovesick fool, I lie to myself then bury my face in my pillow and cry harder.

LIMBO

“NOW WHAT ARE you baking?” I look at the open kitchen doorway and narrow my eyes at Aye.

“Nothing for you, and don’t even think about coming in here.” I wave the spoon at him, trying to sound firm. It never fails that he shows up when I’m in the middle of baking.

“You’re really going to do that to Daddy?” he asks, and I can’t help but smile at him.

“Fine. You can have one, but first, you have to promise you will take me somewhere.”

“I’ll take you,” Pika says, joining us.

“You don’t have to do that,” I reply softly, watching as he comes over, dips his finger into the bowl of cookie dough, and swipes some off the edge before licking it off his finger.

“You know I don’t mind.” His eyes go soft, making me shift uncomfortably.

Since Kai left, Pika and Aye have constantly been at my side. I would honestly be lost without either of them, but over the last week, I have started seeing a change in the way Pika looks at me.

“I’ll take her,” Aye says, saving me.

“Thanks,” I tell him, going back to placing some more dough in balls on the cookie sheet while ignoring the heat I feel coming off Pika, who is standing too close to me.

“Where are you guys going?” he asks after a moment.

I look over my shoulder at him and debate how to answer.

“I have yet to receive divorce papers from Kai’s lawyer, and you guys won’t tell me anything, so I’m going to talk to a lawyer.”

“Myla,” Aye says. I quickly swing my head towards him.

“No.” I shake my head. “I know you’re his friend, and I totally get that this puts you guys in an awkward situation, but I have to do this. I will not be in limbo.”

“I’ll take you if Aye refuses,” Pika says. I look at him again then jerk my head up and down once.

“Pika.” Aye throws his arms up in the air.

“I’m taking her,” Pika replies evenly.

“Fuck this!” Aye shouts and leaves the kitchen.

“Come find me when you’re ready,” Pika rumbles. I nod and let out a long breath as I listen to Pika and Aye fight somewhere in the house. I hate that I’m causing a rift between them, but I can’t do this anymore. I moved out of Kai’s room the day he left and haven’t been back in there since then. I couldn’t wake up in his bed again, with his smell surrounding me.

I hate that, every time I think about Kai, I still feel the pain in my chest that I felt when I read his note the first time. I hate that he did what he did, yet I can’t bring myself to hate *him*. I didn’t realize until it was too late that Kai had gotten under my skin. He came into my life, made me believe I was going to be given something beautiful, and then took it away from me without any warning.

I look down at the bowl of cookie dough and my eyes catch on the ring I haven’t had the courage to take off. I let out a ragged breath and know exactly what I need to do. I just need to be strong enough to do it.

Kai

I LOOK OUT over the water for a moment and then turn my head back to face my computer. My eyes land on the picture that is now the screensaver on my personal laptop.

It's one of the photos taken the night of the party my mother threw for us. Myla was at my side, the front of her body plastered against me. My hand was on the top of her ass, her head was tilted back, and she was smiling up at me, with my face tilted down looking at her. You can't see it in the picture because of how the photo was taken, but I remember looking into her eyes, not understanding the look of wonder I saw there.

Myla has to be the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life. I now regret never telling her how beautiful she is every chance I got, but when I first met her, I assumed that, like with most women who look like she does, she knew it and knew how to get men to grovel at her feet.

I came to realize that she didn't understand the power she held over men with her looks alone. She didn't know that one smile from her could put a man on his ass. I look down at my hand and pull the ring off my finger, putting it back into my pocket. I only wear it when I know I'm going to be alone for a length of time.

I need everyone to believe Myla and I are done, even if I know within myself that it's not the case. When I left Myla behind, I knew it was going to be difficult, but I also knew that, if I stayed with her in Hawaii, I was putting her at risk of being harmed again.

I found out after she was poisoned that the culprit was an enemy of mine, and rumors were being spread that I now had a weakness. Before Myla, I had never been vulnerable. I never worried about my siblings because I knew they were under the radar and always protected. And I knew the same thing went for my parents. I didn't take into account that Myla would be seen as a way to push me off my throne until I was holding her in my arms as she fought to breathe.

In that moment, I knew I couldn't put her at risk. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if something happened to

her, and although I had married her for my own selfish reasons, those reasons no longer applied, and the only thing that matters to me now is her safety and well being. I also know that my leaving her is not enough to stop the threats against her, and in order to make sure she stays safe, I need to make an example out of the men who threatened her. As long as I am alive and breathing, no one will ever have the ability to harm her in any way.

I lift my head and look at the door when there is a knock on my office entrance.

“Come in,” I call while rolling my chair back. My brother informed me moments ago that Snider was on his way up with only one of his men. This pissed me off; he is basically saying that he doesn’t believe I am a threat.

Since taking over for my father, I have lain low, staying out of all of the back-and-forth between families, and just concentrated on turning the family business into something my children could inherit. Because of this, my guess is some of the people I have done business with have begun to believe I’m weak. They seem to have forgotten that my family holds a power that goes back generations. In the past, there were not many people stupid enough to mess with us. The day Myla was poisoned, that all changed.

As soon as the door opens, Snider walks in with his bodyguard at his side. I stand and take him in, wondering how the fuck *he* has the ability to cause fear in people. Over the years, he has let himself go. No longer concerned about his appearance or health, he now carries around at least fifty extra pounds on his gut. He is balding on top, with long wisps that lie over his bald spot, a sad attempt at giving himself the appearance of hair. The navy-blue, velour tracksuit, gold jewelry, and sneakers make him look like he’s watched too many episodes of *The Sopranos*.

“Nice digs,” he says, taking a seat in front of my desk. “To what do I owe the pleasure of this meeting?” He sits back and laces his hands in front of him, looking like he doesn’t have a care in the world.

I take a seat and slide the gun from its holder under my desk, flipping the safety off.

“My wife was poisoned a month ago. I got word that you were the one to instigate that hit.”

“Ex-wife, you mean?” he inquires, and the guy next to him laughs. “She went and spoke with a divorce attorney today.” He smiles. “Oh, you didn’t know that, did you? I knew you would think we are all idiots when you left her, but I had a feeling you were full of shit when you said you were done with her.”

He looks from me to the man next to him and begins speaking in Russian. *“A piece like her you could fuck for the rest of your life and still find new ways to fill her with your come.”*

“I would tire of her quickly when she got fat from having my children,” his man replies in Russian.

I see red, lift my gun, put a bullet through his head, and then turn the gun on Snider as his bodyguard’s body crumples to the floor.

“Who do you have on her?” I growl, ready to put a bullet through his skull as well.

“You can’t kill me, Kai, and you know it,” he says, taking a Kleenex out of his pocket and wiping the blood splatter off his face.

“You must have forgotten who I am, who my family is.” I shake my head in disgust.

“I’ve forgotten nothing. Just because you inherited the seat from your father doesn’t make you as powerful as he was.”

I smile and pull the trigger, putting a bullet through his shoulder.

“You forget that, for years, I was my father’s watcher.”

His eyes get big and he cries out as he looks at his shoulder then back at me again.

“You can’t do this!” he groans.

“You think I fear you or them?” I shake my head and stand up. “I fear no one but the gods, and when my time comes, they are who I will answer to. Now, tell me. Who do you have watching my wife?”

“You kill me and you’re as good as dead,” he says pathetically, ignoring my question.

“Ah.” I shake my head, stand, and walk around to sit on the front of my desk. “You’re stupid, Snider. You have always been rash, and this situation is no different. You didn’t think before you did what you did.”

“If you kill me, there will be war.”

“The moment you put Myla on radar, you started a war with me!” I roar, and fire a bullet through his other shoulder.

His body slumps lower in his chair, and he fights to lift his head to look at me.

“I will make sure pieces of you are divided evenly amongst your friends.”

“Everyone knows who she is. Paulie Jr. wants her for himself,” he wheezes out.

Ice-cold fear floods my veins, but I push that feeling aside and growl, “He’s going to have to get through me.” I pull the trigger and the bullet hits him between the eyes. A moment later, the door to my office opens and my brother walks in.

“Did Myla go and file for divorce today?” I ask him. He looks at the guys on the ground then at me.

“She did. Aye told Pika not to take her, but he wouldn’t listen. He thinks Pika has feelings for her,” he replies.

“She’s my wife!” I roar and push everything off my desk with a sweep of my hand.

“Not for long,” he says calmly, shaking his head.

When I left Hawaii, I left all of my men with Myla and brought my brother with me. I also told him what had happened with Myla and that, although things between us had begun on a lie, that was no longer the case now.

“What attorney did she go to?”

When he looks at me, I can tell he doesn't want to answer, and I know exactly why.

“Fuck,” I growl.

There are only two divorce attorneys I know who would be around this time of year, and one of them would be more than willing to help Myla divorce my ass. The lawyer would also do it quickly and enjoy every moment of it.

“Are we going home?” he asks, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

“Yes, and call the cleaners,” I tell him while pulling Snider's phone out his jacket pocket and looking through his call log until I find the number I'm looking for. I press send on Paulie Jr.'s number and then hold the phone to my ear.

“What?” Paulie answers after a moment.

“I hear you're interested in my wife.”

“Fuck,” he breathes, and I can hear shuffling coming down the line.

“Let me give you the message Snider will unfortunately be unable to deliver. You so much as even think about my wife and I'm coming for you.”

“Kai,” he says, and I can hear fear in his voice.

I have known Paulie Jr. since we were both ten and our fathers began molding us to take over the family businesses. It was during our first meeting that I learned the difference in ways our fathers were raising each of us. Where my father had raised me with a firm hand and a large amount of respect, Paulie Sr. had been raising his son to fear him, and over the years, that fear has slowly caused his son to resent him and crave the power he held over his head. But just because he wanted to dethrone his father doesn't mean he wants his father to know he is after his seat. If his dad ever caught wind of what his son was up to, Paulie Sr. would take his own son out without a second thought.

“Be smart. Forget you know anything about my wife.” I hang up then look at my brother, who is just getting off the phone as well.

“Sweepers are on the way, and the plane is ready when we are.”

“Thanks,” I mutter, walking over to my laptop, shutting it down, and watching the picture of Myla and me disappear. Even with the war that is brewing, I know the most important fight I will ever be in is waiting for me at home.

HONEY I'M HOME

MYLA

I WALK THROUGH the house looking for Pika and Aye. Since I woke up this morning, they have been incognito.

Yesterday, Pika took me to begin the process of filing for divorce. When we arrived at the lawyer's office, I was a nervous wreck. The old brick building looked like all the others in the area, but there was something about it that put fear in me.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Pika asked.

I looked over at him and then back to the building.

"I'm sure." I opened the car door and climbed out. "I'll be back."

"I'll be here."

"Thanks," I murmured before slamming the door closed and heading for the building.

When I was halfway there, I stopped myself from turning around, heading back to the car, and telling Pika to take me home. I knew I couldn't do that. I knew I couldn't let Kai be the decider of my future, and waiting for him to get me the divorce papers was doing exactly that.

As soon as I opened the door to the building, the bell over the door rang and a beautiful woman wearing a business suit walked out of the back office and greeted me in the lobby.

"Myla?" she questioned, giving me a small smile and sticking out her hand.

“Hi,” I replied, placing my hand in hers, surprised by the firmness of her shake.

“I’m Tammy. My receptionist took the afternoon off, so I hope you don’t mind if we just get down to business?” she asked.

“No, that’s fine.”

“Would you like a bottle of water or a soda?” she asked. I shook my head and wrung my hands together. “It will be okay.” She smiled again. “Just follow me and we can get started.”

“Sure,” I agreed and followed her into a large office, where she nodded at me to sit down in a chair in front of her desk. “When we spoke yesterday, you said that you were wanting to file for divorce. Is that right?”

“Yes,” I whispered, and then I looked at the door, wanting to make a run for it.

“Can I ask you why?” she probed. I looked at her then back at the door.

“I think I made a mistake,” I whispered.

“I think a lot of women feel like that,” she muttered. I started to laugh hysterically until tears were falling down my cheeks. It took a minute to get myself under control, but when I did, I looked at her and found a smile on her face.

“I needed that,” I told her, wiping under my eyes and relaxing into my seat. After that, the rest of the meeting went by quickly, and when I left, I felt like I had not only made the right decision by filing, but that I had done the right thing as far as stopping all the lies.

Tammy had told me that she would get the papers prepared and have Kai served. She’d also explained that, if Kai didn’t agree to sign them, we could proceed without him because I wasn’t requesting any of his assets that had rightfully become half mine when we’d married without a pre-nup.

I come out of my thoughts when I hear voices coming from Kai’s office. Since he’s been gone, no one has been in

this part of the house, so I'm surprised to hear the hushed tones of men speaking behind the closed door. I tiptoe across the hall, careful not to make any noise. I slowly put my ear to the door and my hands around my ear so that I can zero in on the sound. Weight and warmth press me harder into the door.

"What are we listening for?" is whispered in my ear. I scream as strong arms wrap around me.

"Easy," says an all-too-familiar voice, causing my body to instantly react and pain to compress my chest.

"No," I whisper as Kai's office door is opened and Pika's and Aye's eyes land on me. I tilt my head back, praying I'm wrong—that Kai isn't home—but my eyes collide with his.

"Let me go," I whisper, bucking against his hold.

His eyes go soft as he whispers, "*Makamae*," tightening his arms around me almost as if he doesn't want to release me.

"Let me go," I repeat a little louder this time.

"We must talk," he says calmly.

"Ha!" I lean my head back and scream at the top of my lungs. "Well, then, if you say we must talk, Kai, by all means, let's talk."

"I know you're upset."

"No, Kai, I'm not upset." I frantically shake my head back and forth, knowing I probably look insane.

"If you'll just listen for a moment, I can explain everything." My body stills and I force myself to relax as his hold on me tightens almost painfully.

"Okay," I breathe, wanting to hear what he's going to say. I so badly want him to make this right, to make me understand so the pain in my chest will go away.

"I needed the people who were trying to harm you to believe we were no longer together."

My gut twists, and I know that, even if that were the case, even if he was doing it as a way to protect me, no one would have known he'd left me a note. No one would have known he

told me that his lawyer would be in touch. No one would have known I cried for hours, alone, in our bed, surrounded by his smell. He could have spoken to me, could have told me what he wanted to do, but he didn't even give me a choice in the matter. He left me without so much as a "fuck you."

"You did a good job," I say snidely.

"You have to understand," he says quietly, giving my waist a squeeze. I jerk away and turn to face him.

"I understand I told you before that I needed you to be upfront with me about *everything*." I accentuate the last word. "I understand that you could have talked to me, but you chose not to. And I also understand that what we had was never real, so the fact that it ended shouldn't really hurt." I shove past him and head towards the kitchen.

"Myla, I'm not going anywhere!" he shouts down the hall.

I turn to look at him. Words get stuck in my throat, so without another word, I turn away and head towards the kitchen. There, I grab a glass of water before making my way down to the beach, where I sit staring off into the ocean until a chill fills the air and I'm forced to go inside.

I GET OUT of bed, pulling on a pair of shorts and a hoodie before heading to the kitchen, finally giving up on getting any sleep. I have tossed and turned for the last hour, unable to turn my brain off. I finally decided I would just get up and bake something.

Since I was young, baking has been an escape for me, and I know it's the one thing I can do right now that will help me clear my head. I make it to the kitchen and turn on the light. Then I pull out all the ingredients I need to make pineapple cupcakes with rum cream frosting. Just as I begin to crack eggs into the bowl, I see movement out of the corner of my eye. My belly does a flip, expecting to see Kai, but instead, my eyes connect with Pika's.

“I see you,” I tell him, going back to putting the ingredients into the bowl.

“How are you feeling?” he asks, coming to sit on the counter next to me.

I think about his question for a moment then think about the way my stomach felt every time I thought about Kai, and I honestly didn’t know how to answer.

“I don’t know.” I shrug, pull out a baking pan, and fill the holes with cupcake liners.

“I have known Kai for a long time.” I swallow but don’t look at him. “I know you don’t want to hear this right now, but he was right in his actions.”

My head lifts and my eyes meet his. “You don’t think he should have told me something? Anything? At least given me some kind of clue he was coming home and we were *not* over?” I feel the pain in my chest expand. “I’m sorry, but I cannot imagine being with someone, caring about them, and then leaving them without a backward glance...without even a proper goodbye.”

“Myla, think about where he’s coming from. You meet this girl, and out of nowhere, your life changes and she becomes someone worth fighting for, worth protecting. Think about the kind of guy you know him to be, and *then* tell me he wasn’t doing the right thing.”

“He didn’t do that, Pika. He didn’t fight. Not for me,” I whisper and then look down at the bowl in my hands. “So if you’re going to stay in here and try to convince me that what he did was okay, you might as well just go.”

“I’m here for you as your friend,” he says then tugs on my arm until I go to him.

My waist goes between his legs, my head leans on his chest, my arms wrap around him, and I feel his lips on the top of my head.

“One day, Myla, you will see he was right.”

I LOOK OUT the window, down at the rain falling into the ocean, which makes it look as turbulent as my emotions. Kai came to my room an hour ago and knocked on the door, yelling through that his mom would be here at noon. I ignored him and the feeling I got when he didn't say anything else or try to and kick down the door to get to me.

I hate that I am feeling so confused. I can't figure out what I want him to do. Do I want him to fight for me, or do I want him to just leave me alone?

I shake my head at my own stupid thoughts and turn towards the mirror to look at myself. I want to look decent for Kai's mom. I don't think she would understand my showing up in a pair of sweats with dark bags under my eyes from not being able to sleep properly over the last month. Actually, I know that, if I showed up like that, she would have a million questions I'm just not ready to answer.

So, instead of sweats, I pull out my favorite jeans. They have seen better days, and those days were about ten years ago. They are a pair of medium-washed jeans with holes along the front. I bought them that way, but over the years, those holes have gotten bigger and bigger— some from normal wear and tear, and others from me and my constant picking at the material when I have them on.

I put on a plain, white tank top, and since it is raining, I put on my favorite orange sweater that has bell sleeves and little white polka dots on it. Then I put my hair in a bun on top of my head and dab on some concealer, a little blush, and some mascara. I sigh, slip on my flip-flops, and head for the door.

If you would have asked me a month ago to sit down with my real mom's best friend and talk to her about the kind of person she was when she was alive, I would have jumped at the chance, but today, I don't feel like doing that. I don't want to talk about my past. I don't want to talk about anything. I want to lie in bed and feel sorry for myself. Or maybe lie in

bed, turn the air conditioner on high, bury myself under a million blankets, watch movies, and eat ice cream.

I open the door, and my eyebrows pull together when I come face-to-face with a man I have never seen before. He is large—at least three hundred pounds and six two. I would guess he's in his early forties. His skin is the same color as Kai's, and his hair is long and slicked back from his face. He is wearing a bright floral shirt with the top two buttons undone, showing off the mass of hair on his chest and a thick, Cuban-link, gold chain. My eyes travel farther down and take in his beige khaki pants and a pair of leather sandals on his feet, which have thick black soles and large straps that wrap across his feet then around his ankles.

“Who are you?” I ask, taking a step back.

“Frank.” He smiles, showing off a set of perfectly straight, white teeth with one of the front two outlined in gold.

“Um...” I look at him, confused, and his smile gets bigger.

“Uncle Frank,” he says like I should know exactly who he is.

“Aww, come on!” He throws his hands up in the air, and I notice that every one of his fingers has a gold ring on it. “That damn boy never gives me any credit.” He shakes his head. “Kai's my nephew. His mom is my sister.”

“Oh,” I mutter, still confused on why he is standing outside my bedroom door.

“He sent me to look after you.”

“What? Where's Aye or Pika?” I question, and his face changes slightly.

“They were needed elsewhere.”

“Where's Kai?”

“Don't know.” He shrugs then smiles again. “You ready to do this thing?”

“What thing would that be?”

“Go down to the library,” he explains like we are going to be doing something much more exciting than just going to the library.

“Sure,” I mumble, still confused. He smiles bigger then pulls a gun out from behind his back. When I see it in his hand, I scream then back up into the room and quickly shut the door. My heart is pounding hard as I get down on the ground and crawl over to the window, not wanting to be shot if he decides to shoot through the door.

“Aw, geez. I’m not going to shoot you, girl! I’m here to protect you!” he yells through the closed door.

“Go away! I have a gun and I’m not afraid to use it!” I yell back, knowing damn well I don’t have a gun. I don’t even know how to shoot a gun, and God forbid I ever be given a gun. I would likely shoot myself by accident.

“Fucking great,” he mumbles, and then he lightly knocks on the door. “Please come out. I put the gun away.”

“Go away!” I yell then open the window and look down to the ground below, realizing I’m stuck. If I jump out the window, I would likely fall to my death, but if I go to the door, I might be shot by a crazy man.

“I’m going to get my sister,” he says, knocking on the door again.

“Could you please not tell her or Kai about the whole gun thing?” he asks, and I begin to wonder if he is fricking crazy. “I’m going to take that as a yes,” he says, and then there is silence.

I look around the room. It’s huge, with a king-size bed, two nightstands, two dressers, a large closet, and its own bath. But what it doesn’t have is someplace to hide. I look at the door again and know that “Frank” could be trying to trick me and still be standing outside the door, waiting for me to be like all the dumb chicks in every scary movie ever made and walk out into the hall, right into his grasp.

“Myla,” the familiar voice of Kai’s mom, Leia, calls though the door, and my stomach pitches, because now, she’s

in danger.

“Myla, honey, please open the door. My brother is an idiot. He didn’t mean to scare you,” she says, and I swear I can hear the smile in her voice.

“I told you, girl. I’m here to protect you,” Frank says, and I hear a loud *thwack!*

“Can you please stop until I get her to come out here?”

“I just want her to know that I’m her bodyguard,” he whines.

“You already said that, Frank, and you obviously scared the poor girl to death. So why don’t you let me take it from here?”

“Fine, fine.”

“Myla, honey, please come out.” I look around the room for some kind of weapon, and the only thing I can find is one of the lamps from the bedside table. I pick it up, take off the shade, unplug it, and carry it to the door. If I needed to, I can try to at least save Kai’s mom. I slowly open the door, and my eyes lock on Leia’s.

“Ah, thank fuck,” Frank mutters, throwing his hands in the air and looking up at the ceiling.

“You will have to forgive my brother. He can be a little”—she pauses, searching for the right word—“excitable.”

I look at her then Frank and shake my head, thinking “a little excitable” is a giant understatement.

“Sorry, girl,” Frank says then smiles, throwing his arm around his sister’s shoulders. “She’s cute,” he tells her, and then his face goes serious. “Don’t tell Kai about this.”

“Ugh...sure.” I bite my lip to keep from laughing at the look on Leia’s face. I can’t believe that someone as elegant as she is is related to this guy.

“You’ll learn to love him,” she mutters, taking the lamp out of my hand and setting it inside the room. Then she takes my hand and leads me down the hall.

“Hold up,” Frank says, and we stop in our tracks.

He gets in front of us and begins walking down the hall, looking right and left like he is making sure the coast is clear. Kai’s mom wraps her arm around mine and leans into my side, and I feel her silent laughter as we watch her brother the whole way to the library.

I LOOK AT the picture that was just handed to me, and I can’t believe how absolutely stunning my mom was. She looked like she could have graced the cover of *Vogue*. Her hourglass figure, beautiful, porcelain skin, and long, thick, blond hair were all perfect in a way that people today pay loads of money for.

“You look just like her.”

I look up from the picture and into the smiling face of Kai’s mom and shake my head.

“You do. You have your dad’s nose, but everything else is all your mom.”

I look down at the picture again and notice that my lips are the same as hers, the bottom one full and the top one slightly thinner. Her cheekbones were pronounced, just like mine, and her eyes were almond-shaped, also like mine.

“See? Your nose is all your father’s.” She smiles, handing me another picture, this one of a handsome man wearing a suit that fit him well, showing off his toned physique.

I can tell, even through the photo, that he took care of himself. His hair was dark brown and styled in a way that said that he took his time to tame it, and his skin was naturally tan. I look at his face, my eyes zeroing in on his nose, and I can see we do have the same one.

“How old were they in these pictures?” I ask, still staring at the photos.

“This was right after they were married, so I would guess early twenties. Your mom was about a month pregnant with you when this picture was taken. She had griped that she

looked terrible because she had been having horrible morning sickness. I told her she was crazy. I had never once seen your mother look anything but perfect,” she says with a giggle.

“She was really beautiful,” I whisper, taking another picture when it’s handed to me, this one of my mom and dad together, my mom with a large, round belly that looks like a perfectly shaped basketball under her form-fitting dress.

“She *was* beautiful.”

I look up from my position on the floor and see a sadness in her eyes that makes my heart hurt. “We don’t have to do this,” I whisper, not wanting to cause her any more pain.

“Oh, honey.” She shakes her head, her hand coming down, running over my hair. “Even though this hurts, it feels good. Your mom was my best friend. She was someone who could walk into a room and everyone would stop to take notice that she was there. It wasn’t her beauty that did that, either. Her spirit called to you, made you want to be around her. I’m sad that you will never know what it was like to be in her presence, to have her shine her light on you. So if this is the only part of her you will be able to experience, then I’m so happy to be the one to share it with you.”

Wow, I think, loving Leia just a little more than I already did.

“Thank you.” I clear my throat as tears begin to clog it. She smiles then hands me another picture, this one of my mom sitting on a bed with my dad next to her, one arm holding her close, the other wrapped around a tiny baby.

“You see what I mean? Your mom had just given birth, yet she looked absolutely perfect,” she says, and she is not wrong.

My mom’s hair was on top of her head in a tight bun, and her makeup was still perfectly in place. She looked like she had just gotten through with a day at the spa, not just given birth.

“They look like the perfect couple,” I say wistfully.

She laughs and her face lights up.

“They were crazy about each other. Your mom told me she was going to marry him the first night they met.”

“Really?” I ask, looking at the picture again.

“Oh, yeah. We were both in our freshmen year of college and had just passed our first semester exams, so we decided to go out to dinner to celebrate. The moment we walked into the restaurant, your mom stopped dead in her tracks, causing me to plow into her. I looked around to see why she was stopping, but then I noticed a tableful of men. All of them were handsome. I told her she was staring, and she whispered that she couldn’t help it—her future was sitting right in front of her. At this point, I swore she was crazy. Honestly, who sees a man and says something like that? But then your dad’s head turned our way and his eyes locked on your mom, and without another word to the men at the table, he came over to us, stopped in front of your mom, took her hand, and led her to the bar.”

“No way.” I smile. My dad had balls.

She laughs hard and her eyes go soft. “Yes way. I stood there for a few minutes, wondering if I was seeing things, but I wasn’t. A few minutes later, your dad brought your mother back to me, introduced himself, and then went back to his table.”

“What happened next?”

“It’s like you say—the rest is history. Your dad made plans with your mom for the next night, and from that moment on, they were inseparable.”

“That quickly?” I ask, running my finger over another picture of my parents, this one of them laughing while looking at each other.

“That quickly. Sometimes, you just know, and your mom and dad both knew. It was almost as if, the moment they saw each other, their souls had recognized the other as their perfect match.”

“That really sounds crazy,” I murmur, but an image of Kai flashes through my head and how something deep in me

knows him and went to him without a fight the moment I saw him. I think about how, every time I have been with him, it has been easy, about how he makes me feel. I shake off that thought, not wanting to feel the pain I feel every time I think about him now. Not right now, when I have the opportunity to learn about my parents.

“Sometimes, you just know,” she repeats. She smiles then pulls out another stack of pictures.

For the rest of the day, I sit on the floor while she sits on the couch, and she shares pictures and stories of my parents with me. By the time she leaves, I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. She unconsciously helped mend some of the pieces of my heart back together again.

ONE DAY AT A TIME

“**W**HERE’S PIKA?” I ask Aye. He looks at me, presses his lips tighter together, and then looks back to the TV.

“What does that mean?” I question, confused by that response.

“He’s not here.”

“I obviously know that. He hasn’t been here in two days, but I’m asking you where he is.”

“You’re going to have to speak with Kai about that,” he mutters, not taking his eyes off the TV, knowing damn well there is no way in hell I will be speaking to Kai about anything, let alone where Pika is. I haven’t talked to Kai since the day he arrived home, and at this point, I’m not sure who has been avoiding whom.

“Guess you don’t want to know that badly,” he mumbles.

I feel my pulse start to pick up when I remember how I met Pika for the first time.

“Is he okay?” I whisper. Pika has become a friend, and the idea of him being hurt doesn’t sit well with me at all.

“He’s fine,” I hear growled, making me jump, turn my head, and look over the back of the couch at Kai.

I feel my stomach drop. I’ve seen Kai angry before, but I have never had that anger directed at me. I shrink down into the couch but can’t break eye contact.

“Aye, go. Myla will be with me for the rest of the day. I’ll call you if you’re needed,” he says, and his eyes never leave mine as his energy pulses against my skin.

“Sure,” Aye says.

I want to tell him not to leave me, but I can’t do anything but stare into the cold eyes that are boring into mine.

As soon as Aye’s gone, Kai runs his hand over his hair then looks at me and shakes his head. Then he looks at me again and growls deep in his throat, “We’re going out.”

“Um...” I mutter under my breath as I watch his chest expand with a deep inhale.

“Be ready in ten minutes.”

“I...” I shake my head. There is no way I will be able to get ready in ten minutes. I’m still wearing my pajamas. It takes me longer than that just to shower.

“Ten minutes,” he repeats then turns around and leaves the room.

I look at the doorway, shake my head, get off the couch, and head to my room. I doubt I can get ready so quickly, but I sure as hell am going to try. Kai has never scared me before, not even a little bit. Even when I’d watched him kill someone, he had never appeared as angry as he did a few moments ago.

Kai

I LEAVE THE living room and prowl straight to my office, slamming the door behind me. I try to breathe, but it doesn’t cut through the madness that has been building and expanding since our fight, and then seeing her in the kitchen in the middle of the night, with her arms wrapped around another man while he kissed her, even if it was not an intimate kiss, was too much for me to handle.

Every day has been an internal battle of self-control, and the constant weight in my gut and fucking irritant under my

skin has not been helping. When I married Myla, I had no idea this was going to happen to me. I didn't understand what I was feeling when I looked into her eyes when we said our vows to one another. I might not have expected these feelings when I married her, but I have them now, so there is no fucking way I'm going to sit on the sidelines and let someone—who I have known since I was a kid—come in and steal away the woman who belongs to me, a woman I know, if I admitted it to myself, I am falling in love with.

A woman who I know was feeling the same thing I am right now before I left.

I take another breath, and then another. Pika is lucky he is still alive. After what I had seen, I wanted to fucking slaughter him, but I knew that, if I walked into the kitchen and did that, it would only make her believe she was right about me.

It wasn't like me to sit and wait, but I had to do it. But that didn't mean I had to let Pika stick around. I sent him away two days ago. He was back on the mainland, helping my other men keep track of Thad and Paulie Jr. When I confronted him about his relationship with Myla, he told me that he had feelings for her. I decked him and he didn't back down. He even told me that I was a moron for having left her without telling her anything. Then he told me that it didn't matter how he was feeling about her because she couldn't see past me, and he didn't suspect she ever would.

His words gave me a margin of hope of winning Myla back, but I'm not a stupid man. I know that it is going to take work. I know I'm going to have to take it slow. But slow with her feels impossible.

Fuck. The moment I brought her into my home, I had her in my bed, even if I wasn't sleeping in there with her. I just knew that I wanted her in my space, wanted to know she was in a bed I would share with her eventually. Sleeping with her those few nights her parents were in town also changed things. I have slept with my share of women, but I never felt a connection to any of them. Even just holding Myla eased some-thing within me, brought peace I thought was long gone to my soul.

She was my peace in a world I knew was fucked up beyond most people's understanding.

I look at the door and let out one last breath. I probably just scared the shit out of her. She is probably running for the hills, but Pika's name leaving her mouth, the soft tone in her voice from worry over him, had set me off. Even if I know she doesn't see him as anything more than a friend, I know he doesn't feel the same. I also know that Pika is a player. He has a girl in every town he visits, and often two if he is in the mood for that kind of play. Women throw themselves at him, and having Myla around him right now is not a risk I am willing to take.

I move to the door, opening it then moving down the hall to the room Myla has been staying in before knocking once.

"Yes?" her quiet voice asks through the door.

"Can I come in?" She doesn't reply for a moment, but when she does, it's soft and unsure. I push the door open and see that she's sitting on the side of the bed with a pair of sandals in her hand.

"I'm just about ready," she mutters, ducking her head to look at her feet as she slips the sandals on one at a time.

"I wanted to tell you that you can have more time if you need it."

"I'm ready now. I hurried," she whispers, and my gut clenches when I hear the fear in her voice.

I live off power. I have my whole life. In my business, fear is power. You can control most people by using fear. With Myla, I do not want that. I do not want to think she is with me out of fear of repercussion.

"Take your time," I tell her. Her head lifts, her gaze meets mine, and she looks confused.

"I thought you said we were going somewhere."

"We are, but it can wait. Take your time."

"I'm ready now." She stands. My eyes travel over her the plain, black dress, which is loose with thin straps that show off

the fact that she isn't wearing a bra. Then it billows out down to her feet.

"I didn't know what I should wear," she mumbles, looking uncomfortable.

I shake my head then tell her what I should have told her a million times before.

"You look beautiful."

Her head lifts and her gaze meets mine.

"I..." She pauses, and her eyebrows pull together.

"What?" she questions, looking completely confused and cute as fuck.

"You look beautiful."

"Okay." She looks at me again then straightens her shoulders almost like she's preparing for war.

"Are we going?" She tosses a hand out towards the door.

"We are." I smile, take her hand, and hold it tighter when she tries to pull away.

I lead her out of the house to my Jeep, helping her in before jogging around and getting in behind the wheel. I have absolutely no plans set for today, so I'm going to have to make some shit up.

Myla

I LOOK AT Kai out of the corner of my eye and feel my eyebrows pull tighter together in confusion. I have no idea what he's up to, but I know it's something.

"Where are we going?" I ask after a few minutes of silence.

"Dinner." His hands tighten on the steering wheel, and I wonder if this is some kind of business dinner.

Then, butterflies erupt in my stomach once again. Chances are, if we are having dinner, I will have to play the role of his

wife, and as much as it pisses me off, I'm secretly excited about it.

We only drive for about ten minutes, and when we reach our destination, I'm even more confused. I look out the front window and double blink. It's not a restaurant he would usually have a dinner meeting at. It's not even really a restaurant. It's a small trailer with a few tables set up outside of it. The sign out front says *Tides* in large lettering, the small sign under it claims that restaurant has the best fish tacos in Hawaii.

"I thought we were having dinner."

"We are." He shuts the Jeep off, opens his door, and hops out, and I watch him jog around to my side. When he opens my door, I turn to get out, but he mumbles a quiet, "Just a moment." He slips his jacket off and then his tie and cuff links before unbuttoning the top two buttons of his shirt and rolling up his sleeves. Once his appearance is more casual, he takes ahold of my waist and helps me out of the Jeep. Then he turns with me in his arms and shuts the door before taking my hand again and leading me towards the trailer.

"Aloha, brother."

"Aloha, friend," Kai returns to the large guy whose head is sticking out of the small window.

"Who do we have here?" he asks, looking me over.

"My wife, Myla. Myla, this guy here is Derek. He and his wife are the owners of Tides."

"Wife?" the guy says, seeming shocked.

"Nice to meet you." I smile through the anxiety I'm feeling.

"I didn't know you got married. Babe, did you know Kai got married?" he shouts, and a petite woman comes to the window and smiles at Kai and me.

"I had no idea. It's about time." She smiles bigger while wrapping her small hand around her husband's large bicep.

“Got that right. Been waiting years for you to settle down,” Derek says.

His wife comes to stand in front of him.

“Do you want the usual?” she asks, leaning slightly out the window, looking down at us.

“Do you like fish?” Kai asks softly.

I look up at him and feel the weight of Derek and his wife watching us.

“I do,” I reply just as softly.

“Make the order double, Derek, and do you have any fresh pineapple juice? Myla loves it,” Kai adds, wrapping his arm around my shoulders.

I unconsciously lean against his side and then try to lean away when I realize what I’m doing, but his hold tightens, preventing me from moving.

“That I do. Take a seat, and we’ll bring you your order when it’s up.” He waves us off.

Kai turns us around, leading me over to one of the picnic tables that are set up. I sit and look around, avoiding looking at Kai. Once again, my emotions are in turmoil, and it is all his fault—or at least I’m going to blame him for it.

“What are you thinking, *makamae*?” His hand takes mine.

Part of me wants to pull away, but the other part of me, the part that is tethered to him, wants to grab him and never let go.

“I’m so confused.” I shake my head then turn to look at him. “I really hate that you make me feel like I’m two completely different people.”

“What do you mean?”

I let out an irritated huff before answering him.

“There is this side of me that really dislikes you and the things you do. Then there’s this other side of me that doesn’t care about the part that dislikes you. She just likes you, all of

you.” I let out a breath then glare when I see his smile. “You should know I think the part of me that likes you is an idiot.”

He presses his lips together then lets his head fall back, and roaring laughter comes out of his mouth. I have seen him laugh before, and like all of those times, my stomach flutters.

“It’s not funny.” I roll my eyes.

“Yes, it’s funny.” He continues laughing. A smile forms on my lips from watching him. His eyes drop to my mouth and his expression goes soft.

“All the parts of me like you, *makamae*,” he tells me with such sincerity that the warm feeling begins to seep back into my belly.

“What does *makamae* mean?”

His hand comes up and he cups my cheek, his thumb running over my bottom lip. I don’t expect him to answer me, but unlike all the other times, his face comes closer to mine so close that I can feel his lips brush mine as he whispers, “Precious.”

Holy shit! I jerk my head back in shock and search his face.

“Grub’s up!” is yelled, breaking the moment, and I face forward just as Derek sets a plate in front of me and another in front of Kai.

“Thanks,” I tell Derek while my insides churn.

Kai calls me precious? I look over at him, and his gaze is still on me.

“Let us know if you need anything else,” Derek mutters, and I’m sure he can feel the strange energy that is floating around between Kai and me.

“Will do,” Kai assures him, his stare never leaving mine.

As soon as Derek is out of earshot, Kai speaks again. This time, his voice is soft in a way that wraps around and inside me.

“I know this is difficult for you, Myla. I know I’ve done wrong, but I want you to understand something. I’m a man who was raised to do what needs to be done, never taking into consideration anyone else. I know the results of that have hurt you, but as I’ve told you from the beginning, I will tell you again. I will do *whatever* I have to in order to protect you. So, at the end of the day, even if you’re pissed at me, that works, ‘cause that means you’re still breathing.”

He looks over my shoulder then back at me again, letting out a long breath before continuing, “I will not give up on there being an us because I know we are worth fighting for. So you can be pissed and hold your ground, but I’m going to do the same, and while I’m doing it, I hope you will give us another chance.”

“You’re really good at this apology stuff...when you’re not being a jerk,” I mutter.

He smiles then takes my hand, placing a kiss over the ring I still haven’t taken off. It’s almost like he’s telling me that he sees it and knows that, as upset as I am, I still haven’t given up on us either. I look at his hand and notice that the ring I gave him is still sitting on his finger.

“One day at a time, Kai. That’s all I can offer you,” I whisper.

“I’ll take it, *makamae*.” He places another kiss on my hand then nods down at my plate.

“Eat. They really are the best fish tacos in Hawaii,” he divulges to me.

He isn’t wrong—though I’m not sure if it is the tacos or the feeling of warmth I have back that makes them taste so good.

I WATCH THE sunrise and take in the beauty of the moment. From the sound of the ocean to the smell that’s surrounding us, I can’t quite figure out what it is, but I know that it’s perfect. I

lean back against Kai, and his arms wrap tighter around me, his thighs tightening against my sides. Since our dinner of delicious fish tacos two weeks ago, we have been working on us, and this *us* is way better than the previous one. I have let down my guard slightly, and I'm just enjoying the day-by-day time we spend together.

It isn't so much that I have forgiven him for leaving me the way he did, but I'm trying to be understanding of the man he is, and like he told me, he is a man who is not used to answering to anyone. He is a man used to doing what needs to be done—damn the consequences. I can't say I completely agree with this way of thinking, but I've been trying, and I can tell he is also trying to care when it comes to me and what I need from him.

"This is my favorite time of day," he whispers, placing a gentle kiss on the side of my neck.

I have also learned something else about Kai; he is seriously romantic, even if he isn't trying to be. Just this morning, when he woke me up, he handed me a sweater and led me out to the beach so I could experience my first Hawaiian sunrise. He often does small things that let me know he is thinking of me.

"It's so quiet," I tell him, rolling slightly to my side, letting my face rest on his bare chest while wrapping my arms around him.

"That's why it's my favorite. I have a moment to think. No phone, no one telling me that I'm needed—just me and nature." He kisses the top of my head. "And now, you."

Okay, that was sweet...really sweet. See what I mean when I said he is seriously romantic?

I tilt my head and place a kiss to his skin, wordlessly letting him know how much that means to me. We sit here for a long while, watching as the sun rises into the sky. I'm not sure what he's thinking about, but I know I'm silently hoping that we have hundreds more moments just like this one.

CONSUMMATION

I WALK INTO Kai's office when I hear him calling me. I have no idea what could have set him off now, but judging by the bellowing of my name, I'm assuming it's not a good thing.

"What's going on?" I ask as soon as I walk over the threshold.

"What the fuck is this?" he roars, shoving a stack of papers at me. I take them from him and instantly feel guilty. I haven't had a chance to talk to Tammy about the divorce. I've been so caught up with Kai and us spending time together, getting to know each other, that it didn't cross my mind. *Not even once.*

"Divorce papers," I whisper when I read the first page.

"I see that, Myla. Why the fuck did I just get served with divorce papers?"

Oh, shit.

"I wanted a divorce?" I whisper then look up in time to see him plowing towards me.

I naturally back up until I feel the wall behind me. His face comes within inches from mine, and my pulse picks up.

"I told you I'm not going anywhere," he growls, caging me in.

"I know." I close my eyes and turn my head to the side.

"I told you that we are going to work this out," he snarls, and I feel his hand on my side. "I told you we will *never* be

over.” His hand comes up and he cups my breast through the material of my top as his teeth nip into my earlobe.

“Kai,” I breathe, and then I’m turned around and moving backwards. My ass hits his desk, and he leans over me slightly as he pushes all the papers and items off the top of his desk and onto the floor.

“Kai,” I repeat nervously as his hands go to my shorts.

He quickly unbuttons them, sliding them down over my hips along with my panties. He takes the papers I didn’t realize I was still holding out of my hand, setting them on the desk. Then he lifts me to sit on top of them, spreads my legs wide, lowers his head, and buries his face between my wide open thighs.

“Oh, God,” I moan, holding on to his hair.

“Not God, Myla,” he growls against my pussy, his teeth and tongue bringing me closer to orgasm.

“Kai!” I cry out, squeezing my eyes closed.

“Who’s your husband, Myla?” he growls, burying two fingers inside me.

“Oh, God.”

A loud slap sounds in the room as a sting tingles the skin of my thigh. My eyes fly open and I look down at him.

“Not God. Who’s your husband?”

“You are.”

“What’s my name?” he demands.

“Kai,” I whimper as his fingers move more quickly, curling up to hit my G-spot.

“Oh yeah.” His mouth latches on to my clit, and I feel my body light up as my orgasm rocks through me. My clit pulses in beat with my rapid heart rate. I squeeze my legs together as my thighs begin to shake with the intensity of every feeling coursing through my body. I look down at him as he lifts his mouth away. Then he wipes his chin on the inside of my thigh.

I take a trembling breath, and my body relaxes back onto the desk, unable to hold myself up any longer.

“You okay?” he asks, leaning over me, taking my mouth in a deep kiss before I have a chance to answer.

“Awesome,” I whisper when he pulls away. He helps me sit forward, pulls my shirt off over my head, and then unhooks my bra, tossing them both to the floor. He then chuckles, leaning me back against the desk when he realizes that my body is of no use to me right now. I hear the soft whoosh of material and open my eyes just in time to see his shirt hit the floor. I look back up at him, and his hand lowers to his pants, undoing his belt and button then sliding them down. For the first time, I see how truly beautiful all of him is as his cock springs free then bounces against his lower belly.

He wraps his hand around his girth and pumps up and down, with his eyes locked on me.

“Open up,” he grunts as his hand runs up the back of my calf then up over my knee, pulling my legs apart.

I spread my legs, and he hooks his arms under my knees, pulling my ass to the edge of the desk. My legs wrap around his hips as my thumb runs over my oversensitive clit, making me jump.

“Easy, love,” he whispers as I feel the head of his cock sliding over my clit then down, and I feel the crown press in as his head lifts and his eyes lock on mine. He slowly slides inside me.

“*TU Kai*,” he rumbles, sliding out then back in. My thighs wrap tighter around him, and my hips lift off the desk so I can take him deeper.

“Yes,” I hiss as his hands go under my ass and lift me into each of his thrusts.

I move my hands up over his abs, feeling the strength under my palms then sliding them farther up over his chest and around his neck. His hands wrap around my waist, holding me in place as his thrusts speed up.

“I’m going to come again,” I whimper.

His mouth comes down on mine, his tongue sliding into my mouth. I kiss him back then feel the waves of another orgasm close in, so I turn my head and, without thinking, sink my teeth into his shoulder. He roars as his hips jerk before planting himself deep inside me. I wrap my legs and arms tighter around him, not wanting to lose the connection. *Not yet.*

“Are you okay?” I whisper after a moment. His head comes away from my neck, and his eyes lock on mine.

“I had no idea,” he says after another moment of silence.

“No idea what?”

“No idea that, when I married you, I would end up with this.” He presses deeper into me. “I knew when I told you we should try to make this work that I wanted it to, but I didn’t realize how important it was going to become to me. The idea of being without you is almost unbearable.”

His soft spoken confession causes warmth to spread deeper, but then I realize what set him off.

“I forgot all about you being served. I’ve been so caught up with us that I haven’t even thought about anything,” I confess, watching as understanding fills his eyes.

“They’re ruined now,” he smiles, and I realize that the papers are still under me and covered in us.

“Ewww.” I frown.

“We just consummated our marriage on our divorce papers.”

“That’s very caveman-ish.” I shake my head. His smile softens, and his eyes search mine.

“How are you feeling?”

“Happy.” I run my fingers through his hair, and his eyes turn lazy.

“We need to get just enough clothes on to make it to our bedroom.”

“Why?” I ask, feeling my eyebrows pull together.

“Because we’re going to spend the rest of the day in it making up for lost time.” His head dips and he licks up my neck. “I really need to be better acquainted with my wife’s body.”

“Okay,” I breathe, pressing my thighs tighter around his hips.

“Hold on, love.” He nips my neck and leans back, watching my face as he slides out. The endearment causes those ribbons of warmth to wrap tighter around me.

“Oh *no*.” I close my eyes and cover my face.

“No, no, no...” I shake my head. I can’t believe how stupid we were.

“Myla, what is it?” He pulls my hands away from my face and looks down at me, frowning.

“We didn’t use protection, and my birth control ran out.”

“We did use protection.” He smiles before pulling out completely.

I watch him pull the condom off, tie the end, wrap it in a tissue, and throw it away. I let out a silent, *Thank God*. This situation between us is complicated enough, and I cannot imagine adding kids as a factor.

I let out a breath and sit up, watching as he fixes his pants before coming back to me with his shirt. He opens it up, helping me put it on. He leans in, and his fingers go under my chin, tilting my head back and locking his gaze with mine.

“I would like you to get back on birth control. I almost didn’t remember to use a condom, and I have a feeling it’s going to be difficult to stay prepared.” His hands run up my inner thighs before curling around my waist.

I think about how amazing it felt having him in me and how much better it would be if we didn’t have anything between us, and my legs tighten.

“Oh yeah,” he breathes. “I can imagine it too, sliding into you, feeling your hot, wet heat strangling my cock while your nails dig into my back.”

“Kai,” I whimper at the image then squeak when he lifts me. My arms go around his neck, my legs wrap around his hips, and his hands go to my ass.

“Hold tight.” He opens the door to his office then quickly walks to his room, taking me into the bathroom.

“Let’s get cleaned up, and then I’m going to have a closer look at your tan lines.” He sets me on the vanity.

“You’re obsessed.” I laugh, remembering all the times he has brought them up before and how strange I thought it was at the time.

He walks over to the shower then looks at me over his shoulder.

“For months, I’ve had to look at them from afar, watch your skin darken, knowing that parts of you would forever be creamy white, and those parts are the best ones. So, yes, I’m fucking obsessed with your tan lines because I know that no one else will ever be able to see them but me.”

He starts the shower then comes back to me, his hips going between my legs. My breath is still paused from his words, and I let out a harsh exhale as his hand comes up and his fingers run along the underside of my jaw. Then they move down to trace my collarbone and farther down between my breast before undoing the buttons of his shirt to spread it open.

I look down at myself, seeing what he’s seeing. My breasts are pale, along with my lower stomach and hips. His finger traces the outline where dark meets light before going lower and doing the same along my stomach, making my muscles contract as his fingers run over my skin.

I take my hand and place it over his, admiring the contrast in our colors. He grunts, pulling me from the counter with his hands under my ass, carrying me into the glass-enclosed shower. As soon as we enter, the spray of warm water engulfs us, causing a moan of pleasure to leave my mouth.

“You can’t make those noises right now—not when I don’t have a condom in here and my cock is so close to the heat I can feel coming off your pussy.” He slides me down his body,

his cock hard against my belly as my feet touch the floor.
“Step back.”

I do and tilt my head back under the spray, wetting my hair as his fingers work through it. Then I lean my face forward, my gaze colliding with his as he pulls a bottle of shampoo off the shelf. He runs some through my hair before he tilts my head back again, rinsing the suds clean. When I step forward this time, he smears some conditioner in my hair and starts to lean me back again, but I stop him.

“My turn.” I turn us and step up in front of him, grabbing the bottle of shampoo. I look at him, wondering how I will be able to reach the top of his head.

He smiles then mutters, “Hop up.”

I put my hands on his shoulders and hop, wrapping my legs tight around him, the slickness of our bodies making him hold me tighter to him so I don't slide down. I reach over and grab the bottle I set down moments ago, squirting some in my hand then massaging it through his hair, using my nails to scrape over his scalp.

“Hell,” he mumbles, closing his eyes. I smile and press a quick kiss to his lips, whispering there, “Lean back.”

He does, and I rinse the soap from his hair then grab the conditioner, following the same steps, only this time, his eyes are locked on mine as my fingers move through his hair, making the moment feel even more intimate.

When I'm done with his hair, his hands squeeze my ass once, signaling for me to hop down. When my feet hit the ground, he turns me in his arms and grabs a bar of black soap off the shelf. Holding it in his hand, he starts at my arms and slowly moves to my chest. Then he works it down over my stomach and lower to slide between my legs, where he carefully washes me. When he's done, my body is on fire.

I take the soap from him and lather my hands up before running them up his chest, over his smooth skin, which is warm and hard to the touch. As my hands travel over his abs, I become fascinated as his muscles twitch under my touch. My

eyes travel lower, noticing the bead of pre-cum on the tip of his cock. Without thinking, I lean lower and lick the head, the salty taste of him exploding on the tip of my tongue.

“*TU Kai*,” he groans, taking hold of my chin, forcing my face up to his. “Don’t test my willpower right now, *makamae*. I’m hanging on by a thin thread.”

The thrill of his words causes my eyes to go half-mast. I love that I can do that to him. I swear I feel my body feeding off the power I have over him, knowing he wants me so badly that he might snap. It causes me to sink to my knees, place my lips over the head of his cock, and swirl my tongue around it once. Then I wrap my hand lower, using my fist and mouth at the same time. My head tilts back as his hand tugs on my hair.

“I’m going to punish you for this,” he growls, causing my pussy to convulse and a whimper to climb up my throat.

I take him as deep as I can as he thrusts into my mouth. Without warning, he pulls me up, the sound of me releasing him from my mouth echoing through the glass-enclosed space.

“I—” I start to tell him that I wasn’t done, but his mouth crashes down on mine and he lifts me up, spreading my legs and impaling me on him. I cry out, my hands go to his shoulders, and my nails dig into his skin as he fucks into me hard and fast, my body gliding easily against his with the wet sheen of soapy water that is coating our skin.

“Come!” he roars.

My body takes over, listening to his command, my pussy convulsing as his hips jerk then still.

His forehead lowers to mine.

“Yes, you’re going to be punished. That time, I didn’t use a condom,” he says, but I hear no anger.

My eyes slowly open, my orgasm still floating through my system, making it hard to focus. His hand comes up, running from my temple down along the underside of my jaw. I lean in towards his touch and sigh when he pulls me away from the wall and back under the water.

“I’m clean,” I mumble as the haze clears.

His hold tightens, and my arms slide farther around his shoulders as my ankles lock behind him.

“Not worried about that.”

“We will be more careful.” He shakes his head, pulling out of me and setting me gently on the floor once again. “The first chance I get, I’ll get on birth control.”

“We have a lot to learn about each other.” His hand cups my cheek. Then he lowers his head, placing a kiss on my lips. “And if the gods are in our favor, a lifetime to do it in.”

I like that a lot. I like that he wants this thing between us to work.

“You’re pretty amazing,” I tell him honestly, feeling the warmth that is always in my stomach engulf me.

“It means a lot that you believe that.”

His words catch me off guard, and I search his eyes for understanding. He carries himself with an air of confidence that is almost intimidating. Since I met him, he has seemed so sure of every single thing he has done, even things that have put a strain on our relationship.

“You don’t believe that?” I question as he begins washing me up again. His hands pause, and I can see that he’s really thinking about how to respond.

“Like I have told you before, I have never taken anyone else’s opinion into consideration, good, bad, or indifferent. In my business, it’s about how you respond to each and every situation. There has never been a time that I have considered someone’s opinion of me.”

“What about when you have dated?” I ask even though the thought of him with anyone else makes me feel uncomfortable.

“You’re the first woman whose opinion of me I’ve cared about. I was never concerned with an assessment of the kind of man I am from the women I have been with before you.”

“It seems like you’ve closed yourself off from everyone,” I whisper sadly.

“It comes with the territory. I’m not talking about my family or even some of my men, but with others, you never know who could turn on you. You never know if the man who is laughing, showing you pictures of his children, is poisoning your drink behind your back.”

His words cause a wave of sadness to crash over me. I can’t imagine living my life in a constant state of worry, having to be on guard at all times. Without even thinking, I wrap my arms around him and burrow my face into his chest.

“I’m so sorry,” I tell him, and his arms, which have wrapped around me, tighten.

“It’s not going to be forever, Myla. I have been working to make sure that I will not have *years* of this left. When my kids come into this world, they will be able to live normal lives, never knowing about the life their father led before them. It’s important for me that you understand that as well. This is not going to be forever. There will come a time when the house is just ours and there are not going to be others around on a constant basis. I hated having guards when I was growing up. It wasn’t a good feeling when I went to speak with my father only to have one of his men stop me. I don’t want that for my children, and I don’t want that for you.”

“I never thought about that.”

Since I have been with Kai, there has always been someone around, and I have known since day one what they were here for, but I honestly never really thought about what their roles were in being around, never put much thought into why exactly they were here. And now that he has me thinking of it, I wouldn’t want my kids to grow up with constant guards either.

I kiss his chest then step back. He turns off the water and opens the shower door. Then I follow him out, and he wraps a towel around me. I watch as he dries himself off and turns his head to look at me.

“I normally find it annoying that there are people around all the time. But I think I might find them useful tonight,” he mutters.

“Pardon?”

“I only have a few condoms, and they can run to the pharmacy.”

“You wouldn’t,” I gasp. He kisses the frown off my face then swoops me up into his arms, making me scream out and clutch his shoulders.

“I would.” He smiles, tossing me onto the bed before following me down.

“You won’t,” I tell him as he spreads my towel open.

“I will.” And he does. It’s after midnight, I am starving, we only have one condom left, and I know that, at the rate we were going, we are going to need to stock up. At this point, I am thankful for having people around. That means I get to ride Kai to completion right before Chinese food and condoms are delivered to the door by one of his men.

NEW DREAMS

I WALK OUT to the water and dive under, needing to forget the last two hours. My mind is reeling over the information Kai has just shared with me. I do not want to be angry with him about keeping yet another piece of information from me, but I feel like I'm repeating myself over and over.

"Talk to me."

"Be honest with me."

"Tell me what's going on and don't surprise me with stuff."

Why is that so hard to understand?!

I scream in my head, diving down deeper. Kai and I had the perfect morning. He woke me up with his mouth between my legs. I love waking up with Kai, but I love even more the way he wakes me up most mornings—like I'm his breakfast and he's starving.

I have learned over the last week that Kai likes me on my hands and knees in front of him, and normally, after he has his fill of me, he flips me onto my stomach and pounds into me until his own orgasm takes him over. But this morning, he didn't do that. He took me slowly, his face close to mine while he rocked gently into me. I loved it, every moment of it, and when I was looking into his eyes as the waves of my orgasm hit me, I could have sworn I saw love there as he looked down at me.

When we finally got out of bed and showered, we had a small break-fast out on one of the balconies before heading into his office. I hadn't had a job and had gotten to the point

that I was ready to jump out the window if I didn't find something to do with my days, so Kai had told me that I could help him out and get him organized. His office was a mess. There were papers and folders everywhere, and he didn't even seem to have a system.

So, a few days ago, I started getting things separated and put away into a filing cabinet I found, and then I scanned others things that could go straight into the computer. Today, I found a paper with my name on it. I was confused by the wording and didn't really understand what I was looking at, so I took it over to Kai, who had just gotten off the phone. When he saw the paper in my hand, his face had closed off and my stomach had dropped.

He sat me down on the desk in front of him to explain. My father had left real estate in my name before he passed away, and Kai's father— and now Kai himself—held the deeds to those properties. Not only was the land left to me worth millions of dollars, but the casinos that now sit on the land that was once owned by my father produced extra income.

I swim harder, cutting through the water, and then come up for air, inhaling deeply.

This whole thing wouldn't be so bad if I weren't falling in love with Kai.

He has done everything within his power to make me feel like he needs me as much as I need him, but this has me doubting his real reasons. Millions of dollars are attached to me, giving me the knowledge of why Thad was attempting to kidnap me. Whoever I married would have access to that property and, in turn, have access to all the money that was now mine.

And that is why my heart hurts. I married Kai without really questioning his motives. I didn't question why he would insist that it was the only way for him to keep me safe.

You're an idiot, Myla, and your self-preservation is basically nonexistent,

I reprimand myself, looking at the horizon. It's so beautiful, almost as beautiful as the man I just ran out on. The life he has given me has all the makings of the perfect fairytale—a handsome knight saving the day, living in a beautiful castle, and falling in love.

“Fairytale don't exist,” I whisper into the salty air then turn around and swim back to shore. As I come out of the water, I see Kai sitting on one of the chairs that are closest to the beach. His eyes are covered with his sunglasses, but even through them, I can feel the burn of his gaze on my skin.

“We're not done talking, Myla,” he growls, standing up and walking towards me.

I ignore him and walk into the house, not caring that the clothes I have on are the ones I just dove into the ocean wearing, dripping water everywhere.

“We need to talk.”

I round on him and know that, if he would just give me a little bit of time, I would be better adept at understanding how I'm feeling, but like always, when he wants to talk, we must talk, and now isn't any different. All that does is serve to piss me off further.

“Stop.” I hold up my hand when he starts towards me.

He pulls his sunglasses off and his gaze drops to my hand then lifts to meet my eyes again.

“I never wanted this—any of this.” I wave my hand around. “I didn't want my parents to die, I didn't want my childhood to be blackened by someone I had trusted, and I didn't ask to fall in love with a man I'm not even sure I really know. So if you could just give me five fucking minutes to deal with how I feel, I will get back to you!” I scream and start to storm off again, but this time, I'm stopped when I'm suddenly pinned to the wall by Kai, who is breathing heavily, his face inches from mine.

“What did you just say to me?” he growls. I push against his chest, wanting to get away.

“What did you just say?!” he roars. My body stills, and I lean away from him.

“I said I didn’t want any of this,” I whisper, closing my eyes.

“No, Myla. You said you didn’t ask to fall in love.”

“I never said that.” I open my eyes and then close them when I realize he is right—I did say that.

Shit, that was not good. Not good at all.

“Do you think you’re the only one with shit on the line here? Do you think it’s easy for me to know that the woman I married—the woman I *love*—has a fucking target on her back? One that gets bigger every fucking day I spend with her? I make that shit worse. Knowing I could be the reason she’s hurt—or worse—but not having the fucking balls to stay away from her because I knew she was meant to be mine from the moment I met her when I was ten years old...” He pauses, taking a breath. “This isn’t fucking easy, Myla, but nothing good ever is.”

His hand comes to wrap around the back of my neck, and his face dips closer to mine. “I understand that you need me to be honest with you, but I know—I fucking *know*—there is shit you’re keeping from me as well. Shit that is big. So big that it forced you away from your family.”

I inhale, feeling my pulse spike.

“I have let you have that, been waiting for you to figure out when you would be ready to talk to me about it, not wanting to push you too hard.” He pauses again.

My insides feel like they are going to collapse in on me with the weight of his words.

“I should have told you about the shit your dad left you, but I didn’t really see the point in doing that. You will never touch the money that comes from that land, even if we’re not together. I won’t allow you to touch it because it’s fucking dirty. The men who want it are not good men, and I mean they are *not good men* in a way that they will kill you without even thinking twice about it. That is not what I want for you, and

that sure as fuck is not what I want for any children we bring into this world.”

His hand lets me go and he takes a step back. “So you can be mad that we didn’t talk about it, but you need to get over it and trust me.” His jaw ticks and his hands fist before his voice softens to a tone I have never heard from him before. One that makes my insides feel like they have withered up and died.

“This is what I was raised to do, and no one—not even you—will stop me from doing that.” He snarls the last words then storms off down the hall.

I STAND THERE stunned for a moment as tears fall down my cheeks before walking to our room, where I start the shower, pull my wet clothes off, and get in. Then I slide to the floor, letting all of his words sink in. He loves me. He said that he loves me in a way that I know he really meant it, and I have no doubt that it is true.

I also believe him. He wouldn’t want me to deal with anything that came from the money from the casino, and if I were honest with myself, I wouldn’t want anything to do with that money either. My parents died, and before they did that, they’d sent me away, never wanting what was happening to *them* to touch *me*. I hate that I didn’t have them, but for me, the idea of growing up knowing that the things I had around me had been purchased with dirty money didn’t sit well with me.

I would never want that. And I understand why Kai has been work- ing so hard to get his family out of the business they are in. I wrap my arms around my legs, put my forehead on my arms, and let the tears fall. I don’t know how long I sit on the shower floor, but when I sit up, my body is stiff and the tears have finally started to lessen. I get up and take my time washing myself, not wanting to face the consequences of my actions.

It’s so hard to trust anyone. And even though Kai has never given me a reason to doubt him, I have. I get out of the shower, go to the bedroom, and crawl under the covers without

even drying off. I know I need to go find Kai and apologize for running out on him without giving him a chance to explain, and then I need to apologize for acting like a crazy woman. Then I need to tell him that I love him and hope he forgives me.

More tears begin to fall as I think about the look in his eyes as he spoke his last words to me. I hate that I did that to him. I hate that I'm so screwed up that I didn't even take a moment to think about what I have learned about Kai over the last few months. I just jumped to the conclusion that he was out to hurt me and rode that train all the way to Crazyville. I press my face deeper into the pillow, just wanting to forget everything that has happened.

I WAKE UP and the room is dark except for the moonlight that is glowing through the window. I roll over and realize that the bed is empty, and my pulse skips at the thought that Kai didn't come to bed. Sitting up, I push my hair out of my face. I gather my courage and get out of bed, walking to the dresser and finding a pair of panties and a top to wear before pulling my hoodie on over my head. I don a pair of sweats and head out of the room.

"Do you know where Kai is?" I ask Aye as soon as I open the door and step out into the hall.

"No. He hasn't been this way yet." He moves to my side.

"What's up? You feeling okay?" he asks softly.

I'm sure that I look horrible. I don't even have to look in the mirror to know that my eyes are red and swollen from crying.

"I'm fine. I just need to find Kai," I mumble.

He starts to say something, but I shake my head and begin walking. I go to Kai's office first. The door is wide open, and the dark room is empty.

I continue on my way, and with every empty room, my anxiety begins to grow. Pausing in the main hallway and look

out over the ocean at the moonlight that has cast a glow on the water. Inhale a frustrated breath then see Kai standing on the beach with his hands in his pockets. I swear I can feel his pain even from so far away.

I run down the stairs, out of the house, and onto the beach. I hear Aye yell behind me, but I ignore him and head straight for Kai, whose body has turned to face me. His arms open, and I jump into his embrace, but unlike the movies, where he should have caught me in flight, I knock him down, his body hitting the ground in a *harrumph* as the air is knocked out of his lungs.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him, straddling his waist and kissing his face.

“I’m *so* sorry,” I whisper, looking into his eyes. “I promise, from now on, I will try to give you a chance to explain yourself instead of going off half-cocked. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I would never want to hurt you.”

“I know, love,” he says gruffly, pushing my hair out of my face.

I close my eyes then open them up slowly, looking down at him.

“I love you. I know I haven’t done a good job of showing that, but I do love you.”

His eyes close and he pulls my head down to his chest.

“We both have a lot to learn,” he repeats, something he has said to me a few times in the past.

“If the gods are smiling down on us, we will have a lifetime to do it in, right?” I question quietly.

“The gods have been smiling on me since I was ten years old and found a beautiful little girl crying in her tree house.”

Tears begin to fill my eyes, and I place my chin on his chest so that I can look at him.

“You saved me,” I whisper. “I don’t just mean what happened in Seattle. You saved me from myself. You have shown me that sometimes things that are a little scary and new

can be the best possible things for you. You have shown me that I can trust again, and you have given me my family back. You saved me from me, and I would be lost without you.” I sob, burying my face in his chest.

He holds me tighter to him, my tears continuing to fall. I cry until I can’t cry anymore, until Kai shifts me in his arms and carries me inside. Then he lies with me in bed, holding me close to him, letting his warmth and love seep through the years of heartache.

I ROLL OVER, and Kai tightens his arms around me as I turn to face him. Once I’m comfortable, I study his face as he sleeps. It almost seems like all the power he normally has buzzing around him is shut off. I never would have believed I’d end up falling in love with a man like him. I lift my hand and run my finger along the scruff that has taken up residence on his chin.

“Why are you awake?” his sleepy, rough voice asks as his head tilts down and his eyes meet mine.

“I just couldn’t sleep.” I snuggle closer to him.

“Do you miss Seattle?” He catches me off guard with his question, and I think for a moment about what I left behind. I miss the few friends I have, and I miss my bakery, but I don’t miss Seattle.

“I don’t miss it. I miss my bakery and some of my friends, but that’s it,” I say.

“When things settle, you could open a bakery here,” he says quietly.

“I could call it ‘Sunshine and Sprinkles.’” I smile at the thought. I have been so caught up in everything that has happened that I haven’t really thought about what I want to do when life goes back to normal.

“You could. I want you to make a life here with me. I want you to be happy.”

“I’m happy.” I frown at him.

“You’re happy now, but I’ve seen you bake. You smile when you’re baking.”

“My real mom used to bake. I don’t remember much about it, but I know it was something she loved doing, and when I moved, my adoptive dad taught me how to bake. I used to love that quiet time with him. Then, when I left home, it was something that made me feel connected with a time when I felt loved,” I say, whispering the last part.

“You wanna talk to me yet?” he asks cautiously.

“Not yet,” I reply just as carefully, hoping that, one day, I will have the courage to open up to him. He’s right. It’s not fair for me to expect so much from him when I haven’t fully been honest.

He rolls to his side and places his face near mine. “When you’re ready, love, I’m here.”

“I know.” And I do know that I need to talk to him about it, but I hate myself a little for what was done to me. Even with the counseling I received and knowing that it wasn’t my fault, I still hate that I wasn’t stronger, that I didn’t fight harder.

His arm slides around my waist, and his hand goes under my neck then up to thread through my hair at the back of my head, pulling my face closer to his chest. I wrap an arm around him in return then drift back to sleep.

When I wake a couple of hours later, I hear Kai talking to Aye at the door, and when Pika’s name comes up, my ears perk up.

I have been worried about my friend, and Aye seems to be keeping his lips sealed on where he is, so the only thing I can imagine is that wherever he has gone to is not safe. Kai turns around to face me then says something out the door before walking over to where I’m still lying.

“What’s going on?” I murmur as he comes to sit down on the side of the bed.

“Nothing.” He leans over and kisses me, but I can tell that something’s wrong.

“Please talk to me,” I beg him.

“I have to go away for a few days.”

“Why?” I sit up, pulling the blankets up with me, and scoot back to the headboard. I don’t know what I will do if he tells me that we’re over now.

“There’s some business I need to attend to in Vegas.”

“Okay,” I say slowly, hoping he will continue. But instead, he looks around the room, anywhere but at me. “What is it?”

He stretches out his neck then looks at me again. “Pika’s in jail.”

“He’s in jail?” I feel my eyes get wide. “What did he do?”

“Don’t know. No one knows. The cops aren’t letting him speak to anyone.”

“That’s illegal,” I tell him.

He smiles then frowns. “I really don’t want to leave you.”

“I can come with you if you want,” I suggest.

“You’re not coming with me. You’re safest here.”

He’s right. Here, all the flights and boats that come to the island are monitored, so Kai’s men know if someone shows up. Plus, the house is completely secure. I feel safe here, and I know I wouldn’t be able to say the same thing if I went to Vegas, even with Kai.

“I’m not sure how long I will be gone, but I need to go and make sure he’s okay.”

“I understand. I’ll be fine. Is Aye staying with me?”

“Aye and Frank,” he replies.

“So, basically, Aye is going to have to watch over Frank and me while you’re gone?”

“Basically.” He smiles and I giggle. “It makes my uncle feel useful.”

“I like him a lot, and, your mom’s right. He’s funny, even if he is crazy.”

“He likes you too. All of my family does,” he says in a tone I have come to crave from him. Something about the way his voice goes soft makes that warmth seep into every cell in my body.

“Who are you taking with you?”

“My brother. I have my cousin and some men in Vegas, so I know that, once I get there, we’ll be good.

“I hope Pika’s okay. He didn’t even say goodbye to me before he left,” I whisper.

“He’ll be fine,” he says gruffly, and I nod.

I know Kai will make sure Pika is okay. I just wonder why the police are keeping him quiet.

“When do you need to leave?” I ask.

“After I get ready. The plane is being prepared as we speak.”

“Do you want me to do anything? I can pack you up some clothes while you shower if you want.”

“I have a place in Vegas. I keep clothes there.”

Of course he has a place in Vegas, I think, and then I gasp as his finger runs over my nipple.

“There is *something* you can do though.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“I need you to come shower with me.” A smile forms on my mouth and grows wider as his eyes heat.

“You *want* me to come shower with you?” I scoot to my knees on the bed so I can get closer to him.

“Need,” he rumbles as his hand wraps around the back of my neck, pulling my mouth to his.

His hands go to my waist and travel up my sides, pushing my tank top up and over my head, his mouth only leaving mine for a brief moment. His hands tug at my pants and he quickly pulls them off, placing his hand between my legs, his fingers zeroing in on my clit.

“Oh,” I moan, and he pulls me onto his lap.

My hands go to his shoulders and my head falls back as his mouth leaves mine to trail down my neck. He widens his thighs and opens me up to his touch. His lips lock around my nipple as one finger enters me for a moment before trailing up and over my clit, circling it again. I grab his hair as his mouth trails over to my other nipple and tugs hard.

“Kai,” I whimper as my nails scrape across his scalp and my hips buck against his hand. I trail my hands down over his chest to claw over his abs then run my fingers under the edge of his boxers, over the head of his cock.

“You want it?” he growls. My head comes up and my eyes meet his.

“I want it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.” My head flies back as he enters me with two fingers. His other hand holds on to my ass, helping me to rock against his hand. I come on a moan, my face going to his neck. I come back to myself as his fingers leave me. I pull my face away from his skin and lean back enough to look into his eyes.

“Lift.”

I lift my hips at the same time he works his cock out of his sleep pants. He reaches over to the bedside table and pulls out a condom. Then he uses his teeth to rip open the gold foil packet, making quick work of sliding the condom down his length.

“Com’ere.” His hand wraps around my hip and he pulls me closer while he holds himself in place.

I slowly slide down, feeling every inch of him stretching and filling me. I still my movements when I have taken him in fully. His hands come up to frame my face, and no words need to be said. I can see everything he wants to say right there in his eyes. I hold on to his shoulders, using them as leverage as I lift and roll my hips. Our eyes stay locked on each other, just our hands moving. His cups my breast and rolls my nipples then slides down my waist, his thumb running over my clit.

My hand drops and goes to our connection, feeling his cock entering me.

“You feel that?”

“Yes,” I breathe as his thumb rolls over my clit. “So full.”

“*TU Kai.*” His eyes close, and when they open, he takes his bottom lip between his teeth and starts pulling me up and down on him hard. I whimper when he reaches a place deep inside me that has never been touched before. The pain mixed with pleasure brings me closer to orgasm. I lean forward and bite his chin then pull his lip between my teeth, nipping it before licking his mouth until his tongue tangles with mine and the taste of him I love so much seeps into my pores. His hips begin to buck, and I grind myself down, crying out into his mouth as my orgasm erupts through me, causing a wave of pleasure to roll along every cell in my body. I distantly hear Kai roar my name as I slowly come back to myself. I feel his arms wrap around me and his face bury in my shoulder. Our breathing is labored, and my body feels like it weighs a million pounds as I slump against his chest.

“Are you going to be okay while I’m gone?”

I lazily lift my head and look into his eyes. “If I say no, would you stay with me?”

“Absolutely.”

I blink at the absolution in his tone and swallow back my emotions.

“I’ll be fine.” I don’t want him to worry about me. I know he has his friend to think about. And I hope he can get things sorted out with Pika, so that he can come home quickly, but I really don’t want him to worry about me when he’s away.

“While I’m gone, Mom’s going to come over and go with you to look at some real estate.”

“Real estate?”

“Just a few spots that you could open up a bakery at.”

I take in his words and lean forward, kissing him again.

“I should be receiving the money from the fire in the next few weeks.”

“Then it’s perfect timing.” He smiles and my heart soars.

“Though I will be paying.”

“Paying for what?”

“Your new bakery.”

“No.” I shake my head. “You’ve already done too much for me.”

He studies my face for a moment before looking away, and I have a feeling he just mentally erased everything I just said. “Let’s go shower so I can get to the airport.”

He lifts me off him and sets me to my feet before taking care of the condom, wrapping it in a tissue, and then throwing it in the trash.

I put my hands on my hips. “I’m serious, Kai.”

His eyes take in my posture before he mutters, “We’ll talk about it when I get home.”

I bite my bottom lip to try to keep quiet. I really don’t want to fight with him right before he leaves, but I know we’ll be talking when he gets home. When I first arrived in Hawaii, I tried to give him money for some stuff I needed from the store, but Kai turned me down and absolutely refused to even discuss my giving money for the things I needed. At the time, I was in such a bad place in my head that I didn’t fight him harder on letting me pay my way.

He places his hand on my lower back, leading me to the shower and pushing me inside before following me. After the shower, we both get dressed—Kai in his usual suit and me in a pair of sweats and a tank top.

“I know you want to stop working how you work now, but does that mean you will stop wearing suits?” I question, taking him in. The dark blue suit with the white dress shirt and tie all fit him like a second skin, showing off the taper of his hips and the wide expanse of his chest. I have never put much thought into men’s clothing, but he seriously knows how to dress and

does it well, so the thought of never seeing him dressed like he is now is slightly disappointing.

“Don’t look at me like that when you know I have to leave,” he growls, wrapping an arm around my waist, pulling my body flush with his.

“I was just asking a question,” I mutter against his lips when his mouth connects with mine.

“Be good for me while I’m gone.”

“You be careful,” I whisper gently, trailing my fingers down his neck. His eyes go soft as he shakes his head, kisses me once more, and then pulls me out of the room. I walk hand in hand with him to the front door, where he kisses me one last time before stepping outside and heading to his car, which someone has pulled up in front of the house for him. Once he’s behind the wheel, he gives me a chin lift and I blow kisses at him.

A BULLET AND A BAND-AID

“SO, WHAT DO you want to do?”

I turn, come face-to-face with Frank, and smile. “Go to the beach.”

“Oh,” he says, sounding disappointed.

“What did you have in mind?” I ask him, and his face transforms and he gets a glint in his eyes.

“Have you ever shot a gun?” he asks.

I shake my head before replying, “I took self-defense classes and have done some martial arts training, but I have never shot a gun.”

“Well, there is no better day than today.” His smile widens, and he puts his arm around my shoulders.

“What’s going on?” Aye asks when we walk into the kitchen.

“I’m taking Myla to learn how to shoot,” Frank says.

Aye looks at me then to Frank and frowns. “Myla is not going to be anywhere near a gun. She would end up killing herself...or one of us.”

“Hey!” I pout.

He looks at me and shrugs. “You know it’s true.” He raises a brow. I roll my eyes.

“What if we get in a shootout?” Frank asks. I look at him like he’s crazy.

“It could happen,” Frank adds.

I feel the blood drain out of my face, because I know he’s right. It *could* happen.

“It won’t,” Aye assures me when he takes in my ashen appearance. I swallow and think about what Frank just said. As nervous as it makes me, I know that he’s right. I need to learn how to shoot.

“I want to learn,” I say.

Frank’s, “Really?” and Aye’s, “Not happening,” come at the same moment.

I ignore both and carry on. “I think it would be good to know...just in case.”

“Kai won’t like it, Myla.” Aye argues.

“Kai isn’t home and never has to know,” I assure him. He looks doubtful, but I can also see that he knows I’m right, even if he doesn’t want to admit it.

“Fine, we’ll go to the range, but you have to swear to do everything I tell you to do,” Aye negotiates.

“Swear.” I cross my fingers over my heart. He mutters something under his breath then looks at Frank. “If she gets hurt, I’m blaming you.” He points at Frank’s chest.

“Sure,” Frank says then smiles at me and winks.

“This is going to be bad. I’ll go get the car,” Aye mumbles, leaving the kitchen.

“It will be fine,” Frank states.

I hope so.

“I CAN’T BELIEVE you shot me,” Frank groans, lying back on the stretcher.

“It’s barely a scratch.” Aye rolls his eyes.

I squeeze Frank’s hand, because even if it is just a scratch, he is right. I just shot him.

“A bullet hit me,” Frank growls.

Aye just shakes his head.

“All right. You’re free to go,” the EMT says after placing a Band-Aid over the small wound.

“Are you sure that’s safe? What if I have a concussion?” Frank asks.

The EMT looks at him like he has lost his mind.

“Come on, Frank. Let’s get you home so you can lie down and rest,” I interject.

“That’s probably smart. I’m a little tired,” he tells me, and I fight not to laugh at him. “And you should call me Uncle Frank.” His arm goes around my shoulders and I feel myself stumble slightly from his weight.

“Okay, Uncle Frank.” I tilt my head to look up at him.

He smiles, but then his face goes serious. “Don’t tell Kai about this,” he pleads.

I press my lips together to keep from laughing and nod my head once. Then I help him the rest of the way out to the car. No way would I tell Kai about this. I could only imagine his reaction.

Kai

AS SOON AS I get off the plane in Vegas, I head to the car that is waiting for me. Frank Jr., my uncle’s son, is standing outside with his arms crossed over his chest and a look of displeasure on his face. He looks just like my uncle, but where Frank Sr. is slightly crazy, Junior is serious and has been my right arm since I was just a little kid.

“Brother,” he rumbles, greeting me with a handshake and a half hug.

“How’s it going?”

“Could be better, but then you know that or you wouldn’t be here,” he says.

“Did you get in touch with Rosenblum?” I ask him, opening the back door to the car and tossing my bag inside before heading to the driver’s seat.

“He’s meeting us there,” he mutters once we’re both seated.

I start the car but pull my phone out of my pocket, sending a quick text to Aye to let him know that I’m on the ground and ask him what Myla’s doing.

Aye: Good. She’s in the kitchen baking,

comes in almost immediately. I ease back in my seat, put the car in drive, and head for the police station downtown.

“My dad phoned this afternoon when you were in the air. Said he got shot today,” Junior says nonchalantly.

My eyebrows pull together. If something happened, I would have been notified at the time.

“Did he shoot himself?” I half joke.

“Said your wife shot him.” I slam on the brakes, look over at my cousin, and pull my phone out, dialing my uncle’s number before putting it to my ear.

“You land?” he asks on the first ring, sounding normal.

“About ten minutes ago.”

“Good. Myla’s safe and in my direct line of vision. I will keep you up to date on her whereabouts.”

I grit my teeth and growl, “Heard you got shot today.”

“Dammit, woman. I told you not to tell him you shot me,” he complains.

I hear Myla in the background reply, “I haven’t even talked to him!”

“How the fuck did Myla shoot you, Frank?” I bark.

“She wanted to learn how to shoot a gun,” he says, and I hear Myla ask him what I’m saying.

“Goddammit, Frank! What the fuck were you thinking?” I holler.

“How was I supposed to know she was such a bad shot?” he protests.

“I’m going to kill you, Frank. Swear to Christ, when I get home, I’m going to kill you.”

“Hey, now. I should be the one complaining. After all, I did get shot today.”

“Where’s Aye?” I demand, and the phone goes quiet for a moment.

“You don’t even have to say it,” Aye sighs.

“Apparently, I do. What the fuck were you guys doing?”

“Frank said it would be good for Myla to learn how to shoot, she agreed, and I agreed with them. The plan was good, man. Just the situation got fucked up.”

“Do *not*...under any circumstance...leave Myla in Frank’s care. You got me?”

“You know I wouldn’t,” he assures me.

“Good. Now, how bad was he hurt?”

“Grazed,” he whispers, and I can only imagine my uncle eating that shit up like it was a near fatal wound.

“Put Myla on.”

“Hello,” she says softly.

“No guns, *makamae*,” I tell her firmly and hear her move around for a moment. Then her soft, sweet voice slides down the line, wrapping around me.

“I thought it would be good to know how to use a gun... just in case.”

“If you still feel that way when I get home, I will teach you how to use one safely,” I promise.

“Don’t be mad at Uncle Frank. He was just trying to help.”

“You shot him, which means you could have shot yourself, so he may have been trying to help, but he wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“In all fairness, I didn’t know the gun was going to jump like it did,” she confides.

I do not even want to imagine the kind of gun she was using that would *jump* the way she described.

“No more guns.”

“No more guns,” she repeats.

“Love you,” she whispers after a moment.

I let those two words wash over me before replying just as quietly. “You too, *makamae*. Be good, and I’ll call you when I can.”

“Promise,” she says before I click the phone off.

“I’m going to kill your dad one of these days,” I tell my cousin.

“He tries.” He shakes his head.

“He’s crazy.”

“True,” he mumbles. My uncle is a good man, but fuck if he isn’t constantly causing drama. I stop at a red light and rub my hands over my face, thinking about everything that has happened and the battle I still have on my hands.

“How’s Myla?”

“Good,” I say, telling him the truth. She has put everything in prospective for me, and I know that, one day, when we’re sitting on the beach, watching our babies play in the ocean, I will look back on these times and know that all the bullshit I had to deal with was worth it.

“So, you guys are for real?”

I look over at my cousin, a man I love like my brother, and speak the only truth I know.

“There was never a time when it wasn’t real. Even when I was fighting it, I still knew I would fight *for* it.”

He grunts and shakes his head as the light turns green and I take off again.

Once we arrive at the police station, I see Richard Rosenblum, my attorney, standing near the front doors with his phone to his ear. We park, get out of the car, and head up the stairs.

“Just got off the phone with Judge Connell and explained that they have been keeping a client here without any explanation. He said he would be calling the chief now, so hopefully, by the time we get up there, they will have this shit sorted out.”

“Nice to see you too, Rich,” I mutter, but I feel my lips twitch. Rich, and his father before him, has worked with my family since I can remember.

“Yeah, yeah. We can catch up with a beer after we get your man out.” He smiles as Junior opens the door and we all walk inside. Rich leads us to an elevator, then up another set of stairs, and into a large waiting room.

“Wait here,” he tells us.

I nod and watch him go to the desk and begin talking to the woman sitting there. When she picks up the phone, he shakes his head and says something that has her sitting up a little taller and glaring at him. I watch her mouth move but can't make out any words as she speaks to someone on the line before hanging up and saying something to Rich. He shakes his head and walks back over to us.

“The chief's in a meeting.”

“Seriously?” Junior says, voicing my own question.

“My guess is he's on the phone with the judge. We'll give him a few minutes. After that, I'll make another call.” We sit there for another five minutes, and then one of the doors opens up and Pika comes walking out looking a little worse for wear. His clothes are wrinkled and his hair is in disarray, but he doesn't appear to be hurt in any way. He walks over to us as Rich walks over to the side to question the officer who brought him out.

“Glad to see you, man. A jail cell is not my ideal location to catch up on sleep,” he grumbles, shaking my hand then doing the same to Junior.

“Did they say anything to you?” I ask.

He looks over his shoulder then back at me. I can tell he doesn't want to get into it here.

“We'll talk once we're out of the building.”

I nod as Rich comes over to us.

“Told me they can't talk to me.”

He shakes his head and looks at Pika. “We need to have a word once we're outside.”

Pika nods, and we all leave, heading out to the large SUV we arrived in.

“You wanna tell me what all that was about?” Rich asks.

Pika rolls his head around his shoulders and looks at me. “Appears that someone knew I was keeping an eye on Paulie and Thad.”

“What does that mean?” Rich asks, unaware of the weight of the situation.

Pika looks at Rich then back at me for permission, so I nod for him to continue.

“I was following Thad on his way to Paulie's house when, halfway there, the cops pulled me over. I didn't think much about it until they told me I was under arrest as a suspect in a burglary that happened in the area.” He pauses, shaking his head. “I explained to them that I was nowhere around the area until that moment and they had the wrong guy. They explained that I fit the description of the suspect who was reportedly spotted in the area and I would need to go down to the station.

“Now, I may not be black, but my skin color is on the dark side of the color spectrum, so I did what they asked and went with them. I didn't think anything was strange until they kept me in lockup without even a phone call.”

“This is bullshit,” Rich says.

“This just proves there are a lot of dirty cops in this town, and the few who aren’t dirty are afraid of what will happen if they try to go against the grain,” Pika says.

“You want to fill me in on what’s happening?” Rich asks. I look around then back at him.

“Not here,” I reply.

“Let’s meet at my dad’s office in an hour,” he offers.

“Pika can get a shower and something to eat before we meet you over there,” I agree.

“See you then,” Rich says, walking to his car as we all get in the SUV.

“Thanks for coming and getting me.” I look in the rearview mirror at Pika and shake my head. It’s not his fault he has feelings for Myla; there isn’t any helping it. If you’re in her presence for a mere moment, you feel clean, and for men like us, that does something for your soul.

“We’re family,” I tell him simply. He nods, and I look back at the road. Once we get to my condo, Pika goes upstairs and showers.

When he comes down, I’m on the phone with Kenton Mayson.

“You’re sure Amidio is the one who was sanctioned to do the hit?” I question, ‘cause if so, that is not good at all. A few years ago, I would have said that that didn’t matter, but now, it does. The man has gone crazy. There are whispers that he started using meth and that’s why he’s had a sudden change in personality, but I just thought all of those demons he had been carrying around had begun picking away at his conscience and what was left of his soul.

“That’s the word on the street, so that’s what I’m going to believe. They say there was some big real estate deal about to go down and not all the players thought it was a good idea. When they didn’t back down and set up the meeting anyways, they decided to take out the threat indefinitely,” Kenton explains.

That sounds about right. Real estate is huge, not only for the market value, but also for the street value. If you have a piece of property in a prime location where you could put girls, guns, or drugs, you could take over a city. That is the exact reason why I am never going to let Myla touch the property her parents left to her.

“I’m going to put in a call and see what I can do. For now, just keep your woman close.”

“You know I will,” I reply. He hangs up, and I look at Junior then Pika. “We may have to come back to the mainland for a bit. I’m going to need you guys to get everything set up for Myla here in Vegas. I want to find a house near the city, but far enough out that we have at least fifteen acres. I need you guys to make sure it’s secure. Do whatever updates you need to do to it before I bring her here from Hawaii.”

“What’s going on?” Pika asks.

“I believe the relationship between Paulie and his son is about to change drastically.”

Understanding flashes through Pika’s eyes before he asks, “How long do you think we’ve got?”

“Not sure. I know it will take a couple of months to get stuff set up, and I won’t bring her here until I know the new house is secure. This situation has been in the works for a while, so we have time, but I need to be here when shit goes down.”

“Honestly, I’m surprised he’s waited this long,” Junior mutters and leaves the room with his phone in his hand.

“What do we need to do?” Pika questions.

“We need to figure out who all the players are before we make our move. From what I understand, Thad told Paulie Jr. he knew who Myla’s parents were. Paulie, being who he is, knew that, if he could marry her, he would gain access to all of the land and properties her father had. In turn, he would become more powerful than his father, finally getting what he has wanted since he was sixteen.”

“Why would Thad be involved? What does he have to gain from the situation?”

“That’s what I want to know,” I mutter, running a hand over my jaw.

“She’s afraid of him,” Pika says quietly.

“She is. She hasn’t spoken to me about why she fears him, but I know she does. She moved in with his family when she was young. She wasn’t even really old enough to build real memories of her biological parents at that point, so all I can think is he scared her and she never got over it,” I say, but something in my gut tells me that her fear has a much larger foundation than that.

“I don’t know, man.” Pika shakes his head.

I know he has seen the fear that comes into her eyes even when just her brother’s name is brought up.

My jaw clenches and I growl, “Let me worry about Myla.”

“Done,” he mutters, holding up his hands, hearing the warning in my voice.

“We need to meet Rich,” Junior says, coming back into the room.

“Let’s go,” I say. We go out to the car, and this time, Junior gets behind the wheel and Pika hops in the back seat. When we arrive at the law firm, Rich and his father are both waiting. I let them know as much as I can. Rich’s father has been taking care of my family since before I was born, but I trust *anyone* only so much.

“Are you heading back home?” Rich asks.

I look at him and shake my head. “No, I need to find a house here in Vegas before I leave.”

“You’ve got your condo,” he says, confused.

“I can’t control the building. I need to find something out of town that has a few acres.”

“I know an agent. I’ll get you the info.”

“Thanks,” I mutter, shaking his hand before heading back out to the car.

I now have a few days to get things done before heading back to Hawaii and explaining to Myla why we will be staying in Vegas for a while. I know she feels safe at home, and I hate taking her out of that environment, but I need to be here, and I won't be here without her.

Over the next two days, I look at over two dozen houses, and I am just about to give up and go home to my wife when I finally find a house I know Myla will love. It's a two story adobe-style home on twenty acres. The house is much smaller than our house in Hawaii, but its open floor plan and updates are perfect for what we need, and I know my men can make it secure enough for us to live there comfortably while staying in Vegas.

I WALK INTO the house and go to the kitchen, wanting to grab a bottle of water before heading to find Myla. She doesn't know I'm home yet. We spoke earlier in the afternoon, and I told her I would see her tomorrow, but after signing the contract on the house, I got on the plane to come home. My body felt like I was going through withdrawals from being away from her.

I open the fridge, and I'm grabbing a bottle of water when something catches my attention out of the corner of my eye. I stand to my full height and flip the overhead light on. My eyes take in a cake that looks like it could grace the cover of a cookbook. I walk towards it and take in all the detailing. The white frosting looks smooth yet creamy. Three layers sit tiered one on top of the other, each layer displaying a single flower so perfect that, if you were not looking closely, you would believe they were real.

“You didn't tell me it was your birthday. Uncle Frank mentioned it, and I couldn't believe that I didn't know.”

I look from the cake to my woman, my wife, who is wearing a pair of light sleep pants and a tank top. Her shoulder is resting against the doorjamb, her arms crossed under her breasts, lifting them higher, and the mass of hair she normally keeps tied up is down around her shoulders, framing her face.

“I never celebrate it,” I tell her, and I honestly didn’t even remember it’s my birthday until this moment.

“That’s what they said, but I wanted to make you a cake anyways.” She shrugs. I like that. I could imagine her floating around the kitchen, baking a cake with a smile on her face—the smile I only ever see on her when she’s doing something she loves.

“You gonna feed me a piece?”

Her eyes go half-mast, and that look has my cock jerking in my pants. I step towards her, placing a hand on her hip, then look over her shoulder, seeing my uncle standing in the hall.

“Frank, you’re dismissed.”

He smiles and shakes his head, knowing exactly why I’m being so short with him.

“Thanks, Uncle Frank,” Myla tells him then turns red when he gives her a wink.

Once I know he’s out of earshot, I use my hand on her hip to pull her closer to me.

“Missed you, *makamae*,” I whisper against her mouth before kissing and licking the seam of her lips.

Her mouth opens and her body melts against mine as her taste floods my system. Her nails dig into my skin through the material of my dress shirt. With my mouth still on hers, I lead her backwards to the counter, lifting her up, spreading her thighs, and making room for my hips.

“I missed you too,” she hisses as I nip at the skin on her neck and make my way over the swells of her breasts. She grabs my hair, causing me to growl as she pulls my mouth away from her skin.

“Hold on,” she whimpers.

I lift my head to look into her eyes.

“What?” I question, breathing heavily.

She pushes my chest, and I regretfully help her off the counter and watch her as she goes to the fridge and reaches on top of it. Then she pulls a small box down before she turns the lights off. I wonder what she’s doing, and then I see a flicker of light as a single candle on the top of the cake is lit.

“You have to make your wish,” she tells me shyly.

I look at her beautiful face, which is only lit by the small candle, and wonder, not for the first time, what the fuck I did to please the gods so.

“I already got my wish,” I tell her gruffly.

Her eyes go soft and her hair moves slightly as she shakes her head.

“Do you know the reason you blow out a candle on a cake on your birthday?” she questions, carrying the cake towards me.

I shake my head.

“In ancient Greece, they did it to pay tribute to the goddess Artemis. They made a round cake to represent the shape of the moon and added candles to represent the moonlight. Later, people believed that, when the candle was blown out, your wish would go to the gods to grant. Some people believe the smoke from the candles will chase away evil spirits for another year. There is tradition in everything, every event, every holiday, and this is one tradition I want to share with you and, someday, share with our children.”

Oh yeah, I like this. I don’t know what I did to deserve having this for the rest of my life, but I know I will find a way to be worthy of it. I walk towards her, not even thinking about my wish, knowing what it is before I step in front of her and blow out the candle. I take the cake from her hands and gently set it on the counter before turning back to face her. Then I pull her by the waist, sliding my hands under her tank top, around her back, down over her ass, and inside her pants.

I slowly pull the thin material of her sleep pants over her hips and ass then down her thighs until gravity takes over and they fall to the floor. Then I travel my hand up over the curve of her hips and the dip of her waist until my hands meet the material of her tank top, pushing it up her sides and over her head.

“This is how you should always greet me,” I say, bending and brushing my lips against her ear, feeling her shiver.

“There are too many people around,” she moans as my hand slides around and down her belly.

My fingers slide between her folds then circle her clit. She’s right; there are always too many fucking people around. But I know we are alone right now. I lift her up on the counter and hear her gasp when her skin touches the cool granite.

“What kind of cake did you make me?” I lean back and swipe my finger through the creamy white frosting.

“French vanilla with a mango center.”

I hold my finger out and her tongue comes out. Her eyes lock with mine as she licks the frosting off slowly.

“You don’t want any?” she asks.

I smile and lean back, taking another swipe of icing. This time, I gently smear it on the tips of her breasts before lowering my head and pulling first one then the other nipple into my mouth. Her body arches under me, and her feet dig into my back. I pull my mouth from her breast and kiss down to her belly button.

“It’s good,” I whisper against her lower stomach.

Her stomach quivers, and I nip the skin over her lower belly before locking my gaze with hers.

“But I’ve had better.” I swipe my tongue over her clit before pulling it into my mouth with a gentle tug.

Her body starts shaking, and I pull away, breathing against her perfect core. Her eyes lock with mine and heat. I stand and slowly take my tie and shirt off before dropping them to the floor. The heels of her feet go to the counter, which opens her

up to me. I growl in approval, quickly unhook my belt just enough to release my cock from the confines of my pants, and then slide the head through her wet folds twice before slowly edging inside her.

“Kai,” hisses from her lips. Her back arches and her chest rises, causing my hips to buck and my length to slide in even deeper.

I have dreamt about her since I’ve been gone, and I haven’t even used my hand to relieve the tension that has been building from waking up without her, so I know I will not be able to hold back the release I already feel building.

I roll my hips forward, and her hands come up to my shoulders. Fuck. She looks like some kind of pagan sacrifice spread open before me, her legs wide, her head back, the length of her hair touching the counter, and the moonlight bouncing off her features. I put a hand on her ass to keep her in place while my thumb goes to her clit, circling it. Her head lifts and her eyes meet mine as I begin pounding into her hard, each thrust causing her to tighten around me.

“You need to come.” I slap her thigh, causing her to get wetter as her head falls back and her hands slip off my shoulders.

She lies on the counter, her back arches, and her hands roam up her stomach to hold on to her breasts, her fingers pulling on her nipples. Fucking beautiful. I have never seen anything more erotic than her writhing on the counter, getting off on the way I’m fucking her.

My thrusts speed up, and her hand travels down to where mine is rolling over her clit. Her legs wrap tighter around my hips as her pussy begins to convulse, her orgasm milking mine from me.

I lay my head on her chest, trying to catch my breath as I listen to the sound of her heavy breathing and enjoy the feel of her heart. I feel her shaking, and I wonder if she’s crying. When I look up at her, her head is back and there is a stunning smile on her face, which I can see even in the moonlight.

“I’m going to get offended in a minute,” I tell her.

Her head tilts down and our eyes lock. “Don’t. That was awesome.”

I chuckle and pull my weight off her, helping her to sit up while simultaneously sliding out of her. “Why were you laughing?”

“It’s nothing.” She closes her eyes. I look down, seeing that I have once again fucked up and not worn a condom. I have never had this issue before her, and I don’t understand what it says about her that she has the ability to cause me to be so reckless. Not that I would mind her ending up pregnant, but I know that that’s not something she is comfortable with at this time, and I respect and love her enough to give that to her—at least for the time being.

“Tell me?” I pick my shirt up and help her slip it on.

“Just...at the rate we’re going, I will never be able to start birth control.”

“Pardon?”

She bites her lip then looks around before looking at me.

“The doctor said I couldn’t start until after I have my period.” Her brow furrows and then her eyes get big.

“What?”

“Oh no,” she whispers, covering her mouth.

“Myla, what?”

“I’m late,” she breathes as all the color drains out of her face.

“Late for what?” I question, still confused.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no...” she chants, her eyes still locked with mine.

Then it hits me. *Late. She is late for her period.* I feel my body lighten, but then I take in her ashen expression and instantly become concerned.

“Talk to me,” I tell her gently while tucking myself back into my slacks.

“It’s too soon. We’re not ready.”

“It’s not too soon.” I gently place my hand on her stomach, overwhelmed by the thought that my child could be growing in there right now.

“We need to go to the store,” she says, moving my hand and jumping off the counter.

“I’ll send someone.”

“No,” she pleads, grabbing me with both hands. “If I am, I don’t want anyone to know.”

“We, *makamae*,” I growl.

“What?” She shakes her head, looking around the kitchen.

“That’s *my* son growing inside you. You’re not in this alone, nor will you ever be.”

“Kai.” She shakes her head and tears begin to fill her eyes.

“This is our moment, and we won’t share it with anyone else, but this is about both of us,” I tell her firmly.

“You’re right,” she whispers. “I just... I just never planned for this. For *any* of this.”

I catch a tear as it falls and remind her softly, “I never planned for any of this, either.”

“I know.” She closes her eyes then opens them back up. “I need to know if I am.”

“I’ll take you to the drugstore. We don’t even know if you are, so you may still get your wish.” I hear the deadness in my tone as I lead her back to our room. I grab a clean shirt as she quickly gets dressed.

The trip to and from the store is silent. I’m trying not to be pissed about this situation. I understand there is a lot to take into consideration, but I’m angry that she acts as if it would be the end of the world to have my child.

“Let me do that,” I tell her, noticing that she is shaking. I take the box from her hand and open it up.

“What if it’s negative?” she whispers, looking at the test.

I fight back the words that are on the tip of my tongue, and when she speaks, I’m glad I did.

“On the way to the store, I imagined what it would be like to know that I was pregnant. I was still scared, but there was also excitement mixed in there. Now, if I go and take this test and it’s negative, I think I may be disappointed.”

The anger that was building simmers down. I tilt her chin up so that I can look her in the eyes. “There’s always someday, Myla.”

She nods and walks to the bathroom, pausing to look at me over her shoulder before walking in and closing the door. It feels like forever that she is out of my sight, so when the door opens and she walks out, I pull her into an embrace.

“Do you have a watch?” she asks quietly.

“Yeah.”

“We’re supposed to wait three minutes,” she whispers before burying her face in my chest.

I look at my watch, set the timer, wrap my arms around her, and then wait. When the alarm goes off, I press a kiss to the top of her head before she pulls away. She comes back a second later, holding the test in her hand.

I can’t read the look on her face, so I hold out my hand to take the test from her.

“What does it mean?” I ask, seeing two pink lines.

“I’m pregnant.”

I look from the test to her and smile.

“Yeah?” I question, my smile getting bigger.

Her face softens and she leans forward, taking the test out of my hand and looking at it again.

“You’re happy about this?”

“Yes,” I tell her, not even a single ounce of doubt in my head. I know that this is right.

“I’m pregnant,” she repeats then looks up from the test, her gaze meeting mine. “I feel excited. Is that weird?”

I exhale a breath, the stress I was feeling immediately leaving my chest.

“It’s not weird,” I assure her then smile when she jumps up, wrapping her legs around my waist.

“This is crazy.”

She is right about that, but since the moment I saw her in Seattle, our relationship has been crazy.

“Now let’s go have some cake since you already gave me my wish,” I tell her, and her face goes soft and her hands come up to either side of my face.

“Let’s have cake,” she whispers, pressing a soft kiss to my lips.

OH BABY

MYLA

SINCE FINDING OUT I am pregnant, all the plans for going to Vegas were put on hold. Kai didn't want to risk something happening to the baby or me, and to be honest, it was one less thing for me to worry about. I hated the idea of being in an unfamiliar place, where I didn't have anyone to lean on. Kai's family has become mine during my time since I moved to Hawaii, and his mom is excited to be a grandmother. Even though I am just weeks along, I don't want to take that from her. Especially when we didn't know how long we would be in Vegas.

Now, as I look down at the water and watch Kai come out of the ocean looking like a warrior ready for battle, my insides become liquid. I never in my wildest dreams would have believed that someone like him would be my husband and the father of my child, but things always have a way of working out, just like they are supposed to.

He prowls towards me, the ocean water still running over the contours of his skin, and doesn't stop until he's caging me in, one hand on each side of the lounge I'm lying on.

"You should go inside." He kisses my nose then my lips as his hand at my side moves to lie on my lower stomach.

"I'm comfortable." I smile, stretching up and kissing him.

"Have you been drinking water?" he mutters as his fingers play along the edge of my swim bottoms.

"Yes." I roll my eyes when his eyes stay locked on where his fingers are touching me.

“It’s hot out today.” He finally brings his eyes up to mine and I notice they are darker than normal.

“Honey, we’re in Hawaii. It’s always hot.”

His eyes go soft, and he presses another kiss to my lips. “I’m going to see about getting a chair that has a cover over it.”

“I like the sun,” I complain.

I love that he cares about me, but I swear, since we found out about the baby, he has been high-strung and doing everything within his power to drive me absolutely bonkers.

“It’s not good for you, *makamae*.” “Kai.” I shake my head. He brings his hand up, his fingers tracing the edge of the top of my bikini, pulling it down slightly so the skin that is still untouched by the sun is exposed.

“Let’s go inside.” His finger runs under the material and over my nipple, causing me to gasp.

“I’m hungry.” He licks his lips, and my eyes follow his tongue. That liquid heat in my belly expands and spreads between my legs.

“Myla.” My name comes out like a warning as I lift my hand from my lap, running it over his abs and along the elastic of his shorts.

It’s so difficult to keep my hands off him, and over the last couple of weeks, my need for him has only gotten worse. Luckily for me, Kai never denies me anything.

“I can see that you’re wet,” he whispers near my ear.

I pull away to look into his eyes. His gaze is locked between my legs, and I notice the damp spot on the piece of material.

He pulls his lower lip into his mouth, and his fingers flex into my skin. His face lowers towards my belly and he places a kiss there. Then he sucks, making my belly clench and more wetness spread between my legs.

“I can smell you.” He nips lower on my stomach, right above my mound.

My hand tangles in his hair and I try to pull him away.

“*TU Kai*,” he rumbles, making me squirm.

“Up,” he says.

I don’t even realize he’s lifting me until my ass is off the lounge and my arms are forced to wrap around his neck so that I don’t fall to the ground.

I cling to him as he carries me inside to the bedroom. He kicks the door shut with his foot and carries me to the bed, gently setting me down before stepping back and pulling his shorts off. I lick my lips when his cock bobs against his stomach as he steps in front of me. When he pulls the string on each side of my waist, my bottoms drop to the bed, and then his hands quickly remove my top.

“Um,” I whisper as he gets on the bed and adjusts me so that I’m facing the headboard and my pussy is right over his mouth.

“Feed me, *makamae*.”

I look down at him and my hands press against the wall as I exhale slowly before lowering my hips. His eyes, which are locked on mine, heat, and I pause, leaning back so I can fully see his face and not just his eyes. His hands go around my thighs, and he pulls me down onto his waiting mouth.

At the first touch of his tongue, I watch his eyes close like he just tasted the most amazing thing he has ever eaten. When he licks me again, his tongue swirls around my clit, and his fingers dig into my thighs, pulling me deeper into his mouth.

“Kai,” I whimper.

“Ride my tongue, baby,” he growls, causing my pussy to contract and my hips to rock against his mouth.

My hands go to my breasts and I pull my nipples, which have become extra sensitive. I’m so lost in the way my body is feeling that I’m startled when Kai’s mouth leaves me.

“Turn around.”

It takes a moment to get adjusted, but when I do, my hands go to his stomach and run down his abs. One hand wraps around his cock and the other holds his heavy sac as I lower my face and lick the head of his cock, tasting the salty taste of him on my tongue.

His hips lift, and I suddenly feel powerful. Even with his mouth devouring me, I'm in control of the way he feels. I lower my mouth just enough to swirl my tongue around the head of his shaft, not going any farther down, even when his hips lift like he's begging me to. I remove my mouth and slowly slide my hand up and down, enjoying the feel of him in my hand, the way he feels smooth and hard.

I lick the head again, only this time, I take him to the back of my throat and moan when he rewards me with his fingers entering me. I lift then lower my mouth; each action is rewarded with a pull or a tug from his mouth. I'm getting close and know that, when I finally fall over the edge, I am going to be lost.

When his fingers begin moving faster, I whimper around him and start moving faster. I know that, when he comes, I will come too. I begin using my hand in sync with my mouth then gently cup his balls.

That's when it happens. His mouth latches on to me, quickly flicking my clit. I cry out around his cock, and the taste of him erupts on my tongue. I swallow him down as lights flash behind my closed lids, and my body explodes in the most mindblowing orgasm I have ever had. It is like nothing I have ever felt before.

I lay my head on his thigh, taking large gulps of air while trying to get my body under control. He rolls me to my side then turns around to lie the way I'm facing, wrapping his arms around me, pulling me into his chest, and running his hand up and down my back while our breathing returns to normal.

“That was insane,” I tell him, lifting my head and resting my chin on his chest.

His head tilts down so that his eyes meet mine, and a look I have never seen before fills his eyes.

“You come hard, *Makamae*, every time I eat you, but that time, you soaked my face.”

I lower my face so that he can't see how red I am, but his hand tugs on my hair, lifting my face up until our gaze locks again.

“It's beautiful knowing I have that kind of control over you,” he says softly.

He's right. When we're together, I find it easy to hand everything over to him. *I love knowing he'll take care of me*, I think as I drift off to sleep.

“TAMMY!” I CALL out when I see my lawyer—or, I guess, ex-lawyer—walking across the street.

Her head turns, she looks between Kai and me, and I see something in her eyes, but from the distance between us, I can't make it out.

“Myla.” She smiles, schooling her face and walking towards us.

I look up at Kai to see if he noticed anything strange. His jaw is clenching, and the vein I have occasionally seen pop out of his neck when he's mad is displayed above the collar of his white shirt.

“How are you, Myla?”

I swing my head to Tammy and smile, stepping away from Kai to embrace her.

“Good. How are you?” I question, stepping back.

Her eyes go from me to Kai, and she swallows then smiles.

“Really good. I'm seeing someone,” she says then looks up at Kai before bringing her eyes back to me.

“Sorry for being so rude. This is my husband, Kai. Kai, this is Tammy,” I say.

Tammy smiles, but Kai doesn't say anything.

“So, you're seeing someone? That's nice.” I smile awkwardly and feel Kai move slightly behind me.

“Sorry, *makamae*, but we need to hurry,” Kai says.

I look up at him and nod before looking at Tammy once again.

“Sorry. We have a doctor's appointment today to find out what we're having. He's a little anxious.” I grin, setting a hand on my stomach.

You have to look close to see that I'm pregnant, but there is a roundness that wasn't there before, and today, we just hit our fifteenth week, so we will finally know for sure what we are having. Though Kai swears that it's a boy.

“You're pregnant,” Tammy whispers, looking at Kai, me, and then my belly.

“That's why you didn't follow through with the divorce,” she says, and I feel myself turn red. Her hand covers her mouth. “Sorry. I didn't mean that.”

My gut clenches and my stomach is starting to feel sick.

“We didn't know at that time.” I shake my head, feeling like I need to make it clear that we had agreed to be together before we found out we were having a baby.

“I gotta go,” she says, and I watch her leave in a hurry.

I turn to face Kai and search his face for a moment before letting my eyes drop to the ground.

“That's your ex-girlfriend, isn't it?” I whisper, feeling like a complete idiot. And a bitch—an idiotic bitch.

“She is,” he confirms, making me feel worse.

“I'm sorry,” I whisper, watching as my tears fall to the concrete at my feet.

“You have nothing to be sorry about, Myla.” He tilts my head back to meet his eyes. “We were over long before you came into the picture.”

“She still loves you,” I tell him, but he shakes his head.

“She liked the idea of being with someone more than the actual part about having a relationship.”

“What?” I ask, feeling my brow crease.

“She is one of the only lawyers in town. She has an important job, and that was always more important to her than building a relationship with me. I accepted that, and I also accepted that she wasn’t my future. She’s a sweet, beautiful woman, but she is married to her practice.”

“You loved her.”

“No, *makamae*.” He runs his finger down the bridge of my nose. “I cared for her. She’s a good person, but I never loved her. Love is an obsession that, no matter how hard you try, you can’t fight. I love *you*.”

“I hope that she finds that,” I tell him. His face goes soft and his fingers skim along the underside of my jaw.

“I hope so too.” He takes my hand again and leads me down the street to the doctor’s office. Once inside, we head straight to reception, where we’re given a form to fill out before being taken back to one of the exam rooms. As soon as I’m settled on the table, the doctor comes in with a smile on her face. She’s short, about five one, with jet-black hair that sits at the edge of her jaw, making her already striking Asian features stand out even more.

“Myla.” She pats my leg then looks at Kai and mutters, “Hi.”

Did I mention that she hates my husband? Okay, *hate* is a strong word; she strongly dislikes him. During my first visit, Kai freaked out when I started spotting after the internal exam. He threatened to have the clinic shut down. That did not go over well at all. I swear I thought the small woman was going to murder him. It took ten full minutes to get Kai calm enough to listen that I was okay and it was normal.

“How are you?” I ask her. She smiles then looks at Kai and glares.

“I’ve been good.”

“That’s good,” I mutter, squeezing Kai’s hand hard enough that I see his skin turn a shade lighter in color.

“Let me get stuff set up for the ultrasound,” she says quietly, walking over to the sink to wash her hands.

“Sounds great.” I put on my cheerful voice, and her face softens some, but then it goes hard when Kai moves and reminds her that he’s still in the room with us.

When she comes back, she feels around on my belly for a moment then squirts the clear gel onto my skin and begins moving the device that looks like a remote control around on my stomach. The *swoosh, swoosh* sound comes before the rhythm of a quick heartbeat fills the room.

Kai’s hand tightens around mine. This isn’t the first time he has heard our baby’s heartbeat, but even now, I can see the look of wonder in his expression as he searches the screen in front of the doctor.

I was scared when I realized I was late for my period, but the more I thought about it, and the more I thought about who the father of my child is, the more excited I became. I knew that Kai and I still have a lot to learn about each other, but I also knew there was no one else I would want to have a family with. I knew that Kai would always do everything within his power to protect me and any children we have together, and really, when you’re looking for someone to be the father of your child, I think that is the most important quality there is.

“I need you to sit up a little for me,” she says.

My back comes slightly off the table. Her hand presses around on my stomach before helping me lie back down.

“Let’s see if that helped.” She begins rolling the device around on my stomach again before looking up at me and smiling.

“There you go.” She gets a strange smile on her face then looks at Kai. “You’re having a boy.”

“I know,” Kai tells her.

She narrows her eyes then looks at me like, *What the hell are you doing with a jerk like him?* All I can do is shrug, ‘cause the way I see how Kai comes across to everyone else is *not at all* how he is to me. I can count on one hand the amount of times he’s even slightly raised his voice at me.

“He’s been saying for weeks that it’s a boy.” I smile, looking up at him.

His eyes come to me and his face lowers as he presses a kiss to my lips before he stands to his full height again.

“Would you like some pictures to take home with you?” she questions, ignoring my last comment.

“Yes, please,” I whisper.

She begins clicking away on the screen as I try to see more. Once she’s done, she prints off a few of the pictures and hands them to me before making her way out of the room without even saying goodbye.

“I think we’re going to have to find a new doctor, or you’re going to have to find a way to apologize to her somehow so that she doesn’t make it uncomfortable for me to be here.”

“You’re uncomfortable?” he asks.

I look up at him and wonder if he’s oblivious to what just happened. “Yes, I’m uncomfortable! It’s awkward to be in the same room with you two.”

“I’ll apologize,” he promises, taking the towel I was using to clean the gel off my stomach away from me and cleaning me up.

“I didn’t even get to enjoy the moment,” I pout. When his eyes change slightly, I immediately regret saying anything.

“Do you want her to come back and to do it again?”

“No.” I shake my head frantically. “Just apologize to her.”

“Told you I would,” he mutters, but I can see it in his eyes that he doesn’t want to.

“Good.” I slip off the table and fix my pants, my mind finally focused on what the doctor said.

“We’re having a boy,” I breathe, adjusting my clothes. “You’re really not surprised that we’re having a boy, are you?”

“No. I knew.” He kisses the top of my head and opens the door.

“How?” I ask, pausing in the hall to search his face.

“Don’t know. I just knew it was a boy.”

“Strange.” I shrug and begin walking again.

His arm goes around my shoulders, and we make a quick stop to schedule our next appointment before heading out to the car. We don’t talk on the way back to the house, but our hands stay locked together on my lap, the fingers of my free hand running over his skin.

“Thank you,” I tell him, looking down at our entwined fingers when he pulls up to the house and puts the car in park.

“For what?” he questions, confused.

I lift my head and look at him, thinking about all the things I want to say. “For giving me everything.”

His eyebrows pinch, and I soften my voice.

“For marrying me, for loving me, for giving me a child. Even if I was never expecting any of this, I’m still thankful for all of it.”

“The gods had written you into my destiny a long time ago, *makamae*,” he says quietly. His face softens as he lifts my hand to his mouth, where he places a kiss on my ring.

EXPLOSION

“P IKA!” I YELL from upstairs when I see my friend sitting in the living room, looking out at the ocean.

His head turns towards me, and I carefully run down the stairs and throw myself into his arms. He catches me on a *humph* and gives me a squeeze before pulling away and removing his hands from me.

“How are you?” I smile, happy to see him.

“Good.” He smiles back then looks me over, his eyes settling on my round stomach for a moment.

“You look happy,” he says as his eyes meet mine again.

“So happy,” I whisper, and he nods as his face softens.

“Myla.” I turn my head to look at Kai and smile, putting a hand on my hip, giving him a mock glare.

“You didn’t tell me Pika was coming home.”

“It slipped me. Can I please see you in my office for a moment?” he asks, and I notice the agitation in his voice as he speaks.

“Um...” I look at Pika then back at Kai, wondering why the guys are acting so strange.

“Sure,” I tell him then turn and give Pika another hug, whispering that I’m glad he’s back before pulling away, but not without noticing the embrace is not shared and his hands stay at his sides. Before Kai came home all those months ago,

I would often lean on Pika, so the distance he's putting between us is slightly unsettling.

"Myla," Kai growls.

I nod then head towards his office, wondering what the hell happened. He's standing in his doorway when I get there, and all I can do is pray that something bad hasn't happened. Things have been quiet lately, and I would like them to stay like that. As soon as I cross the threshold, he closes the door behind me and begins pacing back and forth.

"Is everything okay?" I whisper, sitting down in his chair and watching him.

"Do not touch Pika again."

Of all the things I thought he might want to talk to me about, this was never one of them. I study his face and notice that his jaw is tight and there is a slight tick in his right cheek—the tick he gets when he is pissed off.

"Can I ask you why?" I question softly, leaning back in the chair.

"Because I don't like it."

"Kai—"

"No, Myla. All I need you to say is that you won't touch him again."

"You act as if I tried to make out with him," I mutter.

"You threw yourself at him," he snarls, ripping a hand through his hair, his gaze going out the window.

"I missed him. He's my friend," I say softly, watching him.

He prowls towards me until his face is inches from mine. "Do not do it again. Got it?"

I lean back, struck by his words and the intensity in his voice.

"Do not tell me what to do, and do not *ever* get in my face like that again." I go to stand and his hands go to either side of the chair, caging me in, forcing me to stay seated.

“You do it again, Myla, and I will send him away. And this time, it will be for good.” His tone is so deadly that a chill slides down my spine. I have never, not once, been afraid of Kai, but this guy in front of me right now is not the man I fell in love with. This guy is someone completely different—someone who I don’t like very much. I want to ask him what happened and why he’s acting like this, but instead, I nod and swallow the hurt down so that I can get away from him.

“I won’t do it again,” I whisper.

His position in front of me doesn’t change, and he searches my face for a moment then leans in. When I see his intention, I turn my head just in time for his mouth to miss mine and his lips touch my cheek.

“Myla,” he says softly, and that softness only helps to piss me off further.

“I don’t feel well. I think I need to go lie down,” I say, looking back into his eyes. Concern transforms his features and guilt settles in my gut, but I don’t let that stop me.

“Let me help you to bed.” He stands to his full height but doesn’t step back.

“No. I’ll be fine.” I drag my eyes from him and use the wheels of the chair to scoot back enough to stand. I walk around him and pause when my hand touches the knob.

I turn my body around and straighten my shoulders, knowing that, if I just leave right now with the things he just said ringing in my ears, I won’t be able to even look at him or myself in the mirror.

“I don’t know what happened or why you’re acting the way you are, but let me make one thing clear so this doesn’t happen again.” I inhale a deep breath, letting it out slowly, making sure the words are well defined in my head before I spew them out. “I’m not one of your men. I’m not someone you can boss around and tell what to do. I’m your wife by choice, and like all choices in life, they can always be changed. So if you ever talk to me like that again, we will be talking through a lawyer when you’re done.”

I turn, open the door, and step out, shutting it behind me before taking off to our room. As soon as I reach our door, I notice that Aye is standing in the hall. I give him a wave, walk into the room, close the door behind me, and lean my head back against the wood as tears begin to slide down my cheeks. I know that jealousy was fueling his emotions, but I just don't understand why.

Then his words filter into my mind. He said that he would send Pika away for good this time, meaning he had sent him away before. I had never even thought about Pika—or Aye, for that matter—in a sexual way. Kai had consumed my every thought from the moment I'd met him, and he'd continued to do so.

I step away from the door and begin pulling my clothes off as I step towards the bed. My reflection in the mirror over the dresser catches my attention, and I pause, looking at myself. My hand goes to my stomach and I lay my palm over our son, whispering a silent prayer that his dad and I can find a way to work things out.

I feel a flutter and press my hand closer to my stomach, trying to feel it again. I have never felt him move before, and a smile spreads across my lips when there's another flutter, this one stronger than the last. I go to the bed and lie down on my back, placing my hands on my stomach and smiling again when there's another movement. It feels like butterflies are dancing in my stomach, and I can imagine my tiny baby boy rolling and doing flips.

“Why are you smiling?”

“The baby's moving.” I smile then press my lips together when I realize I have just spoken to Kai when, only moments before, I had plans to give him the silent treatment for a few days at least.

“You can feel him?” he asks, and I can actually feel him getting closer to me, his energy wrapping around me.

I don't want to answer him, but I can't help it.

“I can feel him,” I tell him, not opening my eyes.

The bed dips, and his hand slides under my palm to settle on my stomach. I place my hand at my side and silently lie there, listening to him breathe. I don't like feeling uncomfortable around him, but right now, I don't even want him to touch me.

“Do not ever threaten to leave me again.” My chest compresses, and I inhale through my nose at his words. “I shouldn't have spoken to you the way I did.”

Got that right, jerk, I think.

“Look at me, Myla.” I squeeze my eyes tighter in refusal, and his free hand comes up to hold my jaw. “He told me he was in love with you,” he snarls, and my eyes fly open. “Do you know how it feels to know that another man is in love with your wife?” His fingers at my jaw move so his thumb can run over my bottom lip. “Knowing that, when you were not around, she accepted comfort from him?”

“I nev—”

He cuts me off, pressing his thumb over my lips as his face dips closer to mine. “It doesn't matter. I've tried to tell myself that it didn't mean anything, that you didn't feel the same.”

“Pika is a friend, the same as Aye,” I whisper.

“I know this, Myla,” he growls. I scoot away from him leaning against the headboard. “My world is consumed by you and thoughts of you. The idea of someone interested in you makes me fucking homicidal. Knowing that he's someone I consider a friend, someone I entrust with your well-being, does not make me feel better. Then seeing you happy to see him, watching your face light up when you realized he was back—it was like a fucking knife to my gut.” He moves closer to me, and his body turns so that one hand goes on either side on my hips. “I reacted poorly, *makamae*,” he says gently, and my heart hurts from the vulnerability I see in his eyes. I hate this.

“I don't even know what to say right now. You really scared me.” I close my eyes then feel his arms wrap around my waist and his head lie gently on my stomach. We are going

to have to find a way to work this out or it will be something that drives both him and me insane.

“I love you and only you,” I tell him, lifting my hands to run through his hair. “You said that I consume you. Well, you have consumed me too, from the moment I wake in the morning until I go to bed at night.”

I take a breath and tug on his hair until his eyes come to me. “I love you, Kai. When you make me mad enough that I swear I could spit fire or happy enough that I feel like I’m walking on air, I’m always yours and no one else’s.” I whisper the last part.

His eyes search my face for a moment before he ducks his head, kisses my stomach, and then lifts up, taking my mouth in a kiss I feel throughout my body, one that causes the warmth to seep back in.

“I don’t know how I will be able to handle your friendship with Pika, but for you, I’ll try,” he tells me, pushing my hair away from my face.

“If you would have explained to me what was going on without freaking out, I would have respected your feelings,” I assure him, lifting my hands up to run along the underside of his jaw. “You have to learn to talk to me without talking *at* me.”

“I’m working on it,” he says, leaning down and pressing another kiss to my lips before rolling to his side and placing his hand on my belly. Then he looks up at me.

“Did you really feel him move?” he questions as a look of fascination fills his eyes.

“I did. It was more of a flutter than anything, but I felt it.”

“I missed it,” he says, and I can see the disappointment in his eyes. I shake my head.

“No, you didn’t. I don’t think anyone can feel him moving yet but me,” I tell him, running my hand over his hair.

“Next time, tell me when it happens so I can try,” he says before he kisses my stomach again. Then he rolls to his back

and pulls me to lie at his side, being careful of my belly as he adjusts me until my body is draped over his. His hand runs lazily over my back, and before I know it, I fall asleep only to wake hours later to an empty bed.

I get up, find a shirt and a pair of sweats, and then make my way out of the bedroom. I pad across the house to Kai's office. His door is slightly ajar, so I walk in, finding him sitting at his desk, looking at the phone.

"What's wrong?" I ask him.

His head lifts and his eyes sweep over me before he takes my hand and gently pulls me into his lap.

"Kai," I whisper as his face goes into my neck and he inhales. "Talk to me."

"I need to make a phone call."

"Okay," I say, confused.

"A man I know told me a woman was hurt last night and she's in bad shape," he says quietly.

"What happened?" I ask, wrapping my arms around him.

He's quiet for a long time, and I think he's not going to talk to me.

"She was shot at close range," he says.

Every muscle in my body goes tight. That is not what I thought he was going to say.

"Thankfully, she was right outside of the hospital when it happened, and they were able to get to her fast enough. She almost died." He whispers the last part as his arms go tighter around me. "This wasn't supposed to happen. The men involved agreed that she was off-limits."

"I'm so sorry."

"This is why I will fucking work myself to death until we don't have to worry about this kind of shit. She was innocent, just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

I can tell he's having a hard time keeping it together, so I get as close to him as I can.

"What are you going to do?" I ask him softly while watching every emotion cross his face.

"When Kenton called a while back, he asked if I'd be willing to put in a call for him. I did, and it was agreed upon at that time that she would be off-limits. I set that meeting up."

I nod and hold his cheek.

"My guess is he wants to set up another meeting so that he can figure out what happened and why the order to leave her alone was ignored."

"Do you know why?" I ask.

"She witnessed a hit. She was the only living witness. The man who went after her is known for not always doing what he's told and going his own way. This time wasn't any different."

"Oh my God," I whisper as my heart breaks for her. "I know that you're torn about getting involved, but you should call him."

"I know, love."

He lays his forehead against mine and his hand over my stomach before lifting his head and kissing me. Then he adjusts me in his lap and picks up the phone, dialing a number then putting the phone to his ear.

"I was told you need to speak with me," he says, and I'm surprised by the coldness in his voice after the moment we just had.

"I'm sorry about your situation, but—" he replies after a moment then is quiet again for a few seconds. "You're putting me in a very bad position," he growls. Then his hand around me tightens even further before he snarls, "Kill every single motherfucker who even thought about hurting her."

I know he's talking about me when he says those words.

“I’ll make the call, but you owe me,” he replies, and I look at him, wondering why he would say that. His voice softens when he says, “I’m very sorry about what happened,” before hanging up.

“I have to go to Vegas,” he tells me.

“I know.”

His nostrils flare, and he pulls me tighter against his body. “I know this is the place you feel the safest, but I need you to come with me.”

“Of course,” I assure him, sounding much braver than I feel.

“Nothing will happen to you. You have my word.”

“I know,” I whisper, wrapping myself tighter around him.

“This will not always be our life. I promise you,” he vows.

“How did this become your life?” I ask softly, pulling away so I can see his face.

He exhales, lifts me off him to stand, and then takes my hand and begins leading me out of his office. I think he’s taking me to bed, but instead, he leads me outside, down to one of the loungers that is set up near the water, and sits before pulling me to sit down between his legs.

“My family was involved with the mob since my great grandfather first moved to America from Fiji. He started a business in Hawaii and knew that, if he wanted it to expand, then he would need people with money to back him. This was not easy. No one wanted to take a chance on him, and no one believed that his business would take off, but then one day, a man came to him with an offer. He would help him if my great grandfather would, in return, do him a favor. Every month, he would receive a shipment, and that shipment would contain drugs or other items that would be distributed in the black market in Hawaii. My great grandfather agreed, thinking his hands were clean and that, if anything ever came to light, he could say he was in no way involved.

“After a year, he got greedy and decided to begin moving some of his own items. Five years in, he was one of the wealthiest men in Hawaii. It was around that time that he met a young socialite, fell instantly in love with her, and demanded that she marry him.”

I smile and shake my head.

“She made him realize what was really important, and he started becoming concerned with his business. He could no longer say that his hands were clean, so he began cutting his supplies down and trimming back on orders.

“He and my great grandmother were married in a private ceremony on the beach, and nine months after they said their vows, my grandfather was born. He believed he had everything he could ever want. The day he went to pick up his wife and son from the hospital, his wife was murdered.”

“No,” I whisper.

“After that, my great grandfather lost all hope and began doing everything within his power to take over and get rid of the men involved in killing his wife. He vowed that, one day, he would take control of all of them and then crush them. *I ulu no ka lālā i ke kumu.*”

“What does that mean?” I ask as his fingers slide away my tears.

“*The branches grow because of the trunk.*” He tilts my head so that our gazes connect. “He died before his wish could be realized. My grandfather, father, and now I have become stronger than they are, and we have been slowly cutting their supplies, making them turn against each other. One day, they will fall, and I will be the only one standing.”

I pray that he is right, that, when this is all over, we will all be standing.

“I’m scared,” I say, vocalizing my fear.

“A lot of thought has gone into this, Myla. This is not something that will just happen. This is something that has been planned for years. I will not say it’s easy to do, but every day, we’re one step closer.”

He moves and helps me lie down next to him with my head in the crook of his arm and his hand resting on my belly. We lie there in silence, looking up at the night sky, then watch as the sun rises up over the ocean, and only then does he take me inside and climb into bed with me.

“WE’RE LANDING,” KAI tells me, kissing my hair. I lift my head, look around the plane, and feel lighter. After Kai told his mom and dad what was going on, they insisted they come with us to Vegas.

We didn’t know how long we would be in Vegas, so having them with us puts my mind at ease. I also think Kai was relieved that his dad would be with his mom and me, someone he trusted completely, since, from what I understand, most of my time would be spent at the house while Kai takes care of business.

It takes another ten minutes for the plane to land. As soon as we touch down, Kai is up and getting a bag down from the overhead compartment, which he sets on the seat he was sitting in, and opens it up, pulling out some leather and slipping it on like a vest. I notice that it has a holster for a gun under one arm and then a place for a knife under the other. Once he has the holster in place, he pulls a large knife out of the bag then a gun, and he clicks them both in place. He then reaches up, pulls his suit jacket down, and pulls it on, hiding away the weapons.

“Do you always carry weapons like that?” I ask as the feeling of unease comes back.

His eyes come to me and go soft as he squats down in front of me. “I don’t plan on anything happening, but I need to be cautious.”

“Cautious is good.” He smiles and leans in to touch his forehead to mine.

“You guys are my life, and I would die before something ever happens to either of you,” he says as his hand comes up

to hold my cheek.

“Don’t say that,” I whisper.

He grunts and presses a kiss to my forehead then lips. “I want you to stick close to Pika when I’m not around.”

“I will,” I say as everyone on the plane begins to stand and retrieve their things from the overhead bins.

He nods and kisses me once more before standing and helping me get my things together so we can get off the plane.

“Are you sure you don’t want me with you?” Uncle Frank asks Kai, and I turn my head away from them to keep from laughing.

“Frank, I told you before that your son will be with me while I’m here.”

“I think you should let me go with you. You never know what could go wrong.”

“I know what could go wrong,” Aye mutters and then winks at me when I laugh.

Uncle Frank is a good guy, but he is seriously a disaster waiting to happen.

“Fine. I’ll help look out for Myla,” he grumbles, grabbing his bag and heading off the plane.

“This is going to be a long trip,” Kai’s dad says, shaking his head, watching as Frank stomps down the plane stairs.

“He means well,” Kai’s mom says.

“He’s still not helping me out. He will end up doing something stupid, and then I will have to clean up his mess,” Kai replies.

“He thinks you’re still mad about him teaching Myla to shoot a gun,” Leia tells him.

“I *am* still mad about that, and he didn’t teach Myla anything except that she should never agree with anything Uncle Frank says.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” she concurs.

“I am right.”

“He just wants to feel useful,” his mom mutters, and his dad rolls his eyes.

“He’s not going with me, and I don’t care if he stomps around for the next few days. It’s not happening,” Kai says. His mom nods then turns and walks off the plane.

“She’s right, you know. Uncle Frank is just trying to help,” I say quietly.

“That may be, but right now, I have my hands full and can’t babysit him.”

“I know,” I mutter, walking out of the plane and into the sun. As soon as my eyes adjust to the light, I notice two large SUVs.

“We’re riding with Junior,” Kai tells me, leading me to one of the SUVs, where there’s a large guy who looks like Uncle Frank standing with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Brother,” Kai says. The guy uncrosses his arms and greets him with a half hug before stepping back, and I notice that he’s one of the guys who was there when we got married.

“You remember Myla,” Kai says, reintroducing me. The guy leans in to kiss my cheek, saying, “Myla,” quietly before pulling away.

“How have you been?” I ask as Kai opens the door.

“Been good.” He shrugs, and I realize how different this guy is from his dad.

“That’s good,” I mumble when he doesn’t say anything else. Kai helps me into the car, and he and the Junior sit in the front seat talking quietly while I sit looking out the window in the back seat.

WHEN WE ARRIVE at the house, I’m stunned by how beautiful it is. Kai told me that he knew that it wasn’t our house in Hawaii but it was good enough for us to stay in while we were in Vegas. My husband is obviously crazy because the

house isn't just okay—it's beautiful. The outside is white, and the texture reminds me of icing. Around the windows are red shutters that match the red beams that are sticking out of the roof. When we get inside, I am even more blown away the floors, which are all white marble that is cool on the bottom of my bare feet. Everywhere I look, there are windows that display the vast desert landscape.

“It's beautiful,” I whisper as Kai wraps his arms around me.

“I'm glad you think so.” He kisses the back of my head then holds me like that until he tells me that it's time to leave.

DEMON SLAYER

I KISS KAI and get into the back of the SUV with Pika and Aye, watching as Kai walks towards a group of men. Even through the dark, I can see one of the men that he was walking towards is struggling to keep himself under control, and I know that is Kenton.

“Will they be okay?” I ask, not taking my eyes off them.

“You know they will.” Aye answers. I nod. He’s right. Kai wouldn’t be helping if he thought for one moment that something could go wrong. I put my finger to the glass as we pull away, and then I see *him*. My gut goes tight and bile crawls up my throat, making it hard to breathe. I knew he was in Vegas, but the idea of seeing him never crossed my mind, not even once. Like he realizes that I’m near, his head turns and his eyes lock on me through the tinted glass. His face goes hard for a moment, but then a sinister smile appears on his mouth and he winks, lifting his chin. I swallow, turning away from the window as my hands begin to shake.

“You okay?” Pika asks.

I nod and lower my face to my lap, taking deep, silent breaths. I don’t want them to call Kai and have him worried about me—not right now, not when he’s dealing with something that needs his full attention.

“Myla, talk to me,” he says gently, moving to sit closer to me.

I shake my head and scoot away from him. I do not want to be touched by anyone. I place my hands on my ever-

expanding stomach and try to calm down. One thing I know is that freaking out would not be good for our son, and I would never do anything to endanger him.

“Do you want me to call Kai?” he questions.

My eyes lift to meet Pika’s, and I know that it would be so easy to call my husband and have him make me feel better, but I can’t.

“No, I just...” I pause.

“I just have a bad case of heartburn,” I lie.

He searches my face then nods once, and without another word, we take off back to the house. As soon as we get home, I go directly to our room, not even saying anything to the guys before putting PJs on and crawling into bed. I wake up when the bed dips and the scent of Kai fills my nose.

“Myla, I need you to wake up.”

I roll over at the sound of pain in Kai’s voice. I go to sit up, but his hand at my waist keeps me in place.

“Is everything okay?” I ask sleepily, pushing my hair out of my face. He shakes his head, and anguish appears on his handsome face.

“What happened?”

“I need you to talk to me, Myla. Pika told me that you saw Thad tonight and immediately closed down. I know that this is something you don’t want to talk about, but I need you to open up to me. I need you to make me understand why, even if his name is mentioned, fear floods your eyes and your body goes rigid. I’m honestly begging you to talk to me about it, to trust me with whatever it is. I do not want our child growing inside you to feel that energy, and I don’t want that for *you*,” he whispers quietly.

Each and every one of his words causes pain to expand in my chest. The only person I have ever spoken to about what happened was my therapist in college. But I know I need to open up to Kai. He deserves to understand, and it’s not fair for me to keep even the darkest parts of my life from him.

“Please,” he whispers sounding completely gutted.

“Will you lie with me?” He nods and slips his clothes off before getting into bed with me. He wraps himself around me, and that feeling of safety gives me the courage I need. I swallow and squeeze my eyes closed. I hate that this is something I have to share with him. I don’t want what Thad did to me to taint what we have. I open my eyes and look up at him.

“My life was amazing growing up. I know my real parents suffered, but they did give me to a family who loved me and wanted me.”

His face goes soft, and his hand runs over my hair and down my back, pulling me closer.

“Did you know that my mom couldn’t have more kids?” I ask. He shakes his head no, and I continue. “She and my dad had tried for more kids after having Rory and Thad, but it just never happened, so she gave up, just happy to have them. Then my dad came to her one day after talking with my father, and he told her about me and the situation with my parents.” I pause and let out a breath. “She said yes immediately. She was excited to have another child, and even more excited to be getting a daughter. My life was good. There was never a time that I felt like I wasn’t wanted or like they didn’t love me,” I stress, wanting him to know that this wasn’t my parents’ fault. None of this was their fault. They were victims as much as I was.

“I get that, Myla.”

I take a breath and let it out slowly, gathering the courage to say what I have to say next.

“On my sixteenth birthday, my mom and dad took me and a group of my girlfriends out to dinner. Birthdays were always a big deal, but it was a school night, and I wouldn’t be having my party until the weekend, so they wanted to do something small until my party.” I lift my hand, tracing his lower lip. “I remember having so much fun that night. My friends and I were all boy-crazy at that point, and my dad was always a good sport, joking that he would invite whatever boy was near

over to our table and introduce us to him. My dad was the best. Still is.”

“He’s a good man,” he agrees, and I snuggle closer to him.

“That was the night my life changed...or life as I *knew* it, rather. When we got home, I went upstairs to my room, did my homework, and then went about getting ready for bed. My brother Rory came in and told me about some game he was going to be in that Friday and made sure I knew what was happening for the weekend. We had all the same friends, so my birthday party was going to end up being more than just the girls I hung out with. I was excited to have my first boy/girl party, and Rory was just as excited because he had a crush on one of my friends at the time.

“Not long after he left, my mom and dad came in and kissed me goodnight like they had always done. I was lying in bed thinking about how awesome my day had been when the door opened and a small beam of light shone in, only showing the outline of a figure. I wasn’t even afraid.” I feel tears fill my eyes and I rub my face against his chest.

“Thad came in, closing the door behind him, causing pitch blackness to fall over the room. I wasn’t even worried that he didn’t answer when I called his name, and I didn’t even think to be nervous when he came and sat down on the bed next to me.” I whisper the last part.

“Stop!” he thunders, making me jump. But I don’t quit. I can’t. I need him to understand.

“He raped me for three years,” I whisper. “It wasn’t every night, but it was often.”

“He’s dead. I’m going to fucking rip off his dick and feed it to him. I swear to Christ, he will not be alive long.”

“He told me he would kill my parents if I told them, and I believed him. I hated it, but I didn’t know what to do. I felt like I was alone.” I sit up and pull away until my back hits the headboard. “I stopped doing well in school. I stopped caring about life in general. All I wanted to do was get away. That’s

why, when I got accepted into culinary school, I took it and ran.”

“I wish I would have known then,” he growls.

“No one knew. I was worried about him killing the only people I considered family, two kind people who had accepted me with open arms into their family. I hated it, every second of it,” I cry, covering my face with my hands.

“Come here, *makamae*,” Kai says, pulling my hands away from my face and tugging me into his chest. Even though he’s comforting me, I can feel that every muscle in his body is taut, like he’s preparing for battle.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I just couldn’t, no matter how many times I tried to convince myself to,” I whisper.

“I know now,” he whispers back as his hand at the back of my head travels down over my hair and to my back so that he can pull me closer to him. After a few minutes, he pulls my face away from his chest and tilts my head back to look at me.

“I’m going to go get Mom so that she can stay with you while I’m gone,” he says.

My body instantly stills.

“Where are you going?” I breathe out in a panic.

“I’ll be back.” He evades my question as I attempt to cling tighter to him.

“I have to go, *makamae*. I’ll be back. I promise.” He kisses my hair then pulls me off him as I struggle to keep ahold of him. He walks to the door, leaving me on the bed sobbing.

A few minutes later, his mom comes in, crawls into bed with me, and holds me until I cry myself to sleep.

Kai

“GET UP AND get dressed.” I kick Aye’s bed then walk across the hall and do the same to Pika’s.

It takes two minutes for them to come out of their rooms dressed and ready to go. I knew in my gut what was going on with Myla, but I didn't want to believe that something so fucking horrific could have happened to my beautiful girl.

"What's going on?" Pika is the first to ask as he tucks his gun into the back of his jeans.

"I need you two to help me track down Thad."

"What happened?" Aye asks, but when my eyes meet Pika's, I see understanding.

"We'll talk in the car," I mutter, heading towards the front of the house.

I know where Thad was a few hours ago when I saw him, and I don't want to miss the opportunity to get him while I can. And since he has been hanging out with Paulie Jr., there's a good chance he would hide him away if he found out I was looking for him.

"Now do you want to tell me what's happening?" Aye asks as soon as we're in the car and heading towards downtown.

"Fuck!" I roar, pounding the steering wheel as a fresh wave of rage begins to pump throughout my body.

"What I'm going to tell you is never to fucking leave this car. Got me?" I say through clenched teeth.

"You got it," Aye says softly. I see Pika nod out of the corner of my eye.

"I know that each of you has been around when Thad's been brought up, and I know you have seen Myla's reaction to even his fucking name," I start, trying to take a calming breath as I feel my hands grab the steering wheel so hard that the rubber compresses under my touch. "He raped her."

I hear my voice crack, and I know I'm on the edge of losing it. Knowing that my wife—the woman I love, the mother of my child—suffered at the hands of someone like him causes my chest to crack open.

"You cannot be fucking serious!" Aye yells, punching the back of my seat so hard that I jerk forward from the blow.

“He’s dead,” Pika grits out.

I stop the car in the middle of the road and turn so that I can look at both of them. “He’s mine. The only way you guys get a shot at him is if something goes wrong and I can’t finish him myself.”

“We both care about her,” Aye says, but I shake my head.

“He’s mine,” I reiterate, and they both nod reluctantly. I put the car in drive and head towards the warehouse we were at when I saw Thad earlier. The parking lot is empty except for a large, white van, and I know instantly that they are just here for cleanup. I pull my phone out and send a message to Kenton to tell him that I’m cashing in my marker. His man Justin will be able to get me whatever information I need almost instantly. It takes less than a minute for me to get a message back from Kenton, and less than three for Justin to send me everything I need to know about Thad.

I send a reply message, letting him know that the offer I gave him a year ago still stands. I tried to have the kid come work for me, but he wouldn’t budge.

His reply of, *Sorry, Charlie*, almost makes me laugh. I have to respect that, because loyalty is rare these days. I put the car in drive and head towards the Strip. Thad used his credit card there twenty minutes ago, and based on the amount he withdrew, he was sitting at a table.

“He’s at Bellagio,” I say then look in the rearview mirror. “Aye, he doesn’t know you, so I need you to get close to him once we’re inside.”

“What’s the plan?” he asks, cracking his knuckles.

“I’m going to find a woman who will help me get him outside.”

“Where do you want me?” Pika asks.

“I need you in the car,” I tell him, and he nods. We drive the rest of the way in silence. Every scenario is playing out in my head. It’s not going to be easy to get him out alone, but I know men like him, and if I can make the offer sweet enough, he won’t be able to resist.

When we pull up outside of the hotel, Pika comes around and hops behind the wheel as Aye and I make our way inside.

“Message me when you spot him,” I tell Aye as I head in the direction of the bar.

It takes me less than ten minutes to find two women who are more than happy to take me up on my offer. I tell them that one of my frat buddies is in town and we’re going to play a little joke on him. At first, they are slightly unsure, but after I pull out a wad of cash, they’re more than willing to play along.

It takes another ten minutes to get a message from Aye about where Thad is, and just like I guessed, he’s sitting at one of the blackjack tables. I send the two girls over to him, and they do just what I asked, both of them flirting and whispering in his ear. Even from across the room, I can see that he’s eating that shit up. Eventually, they convince him to go outside with them, and I know the exact moment it happens, ‘cause he pulls one of the girls into his lap and grabs the other by the back of her head, kissing her then forcing her mouth to her friend’s. They all stumble their way out of the casino as Aye and I follow behind them and make sure they stay on course.

Once we’re outside, the girls do just as I said and get him into the back of the SUV, closing the doors. After a few seconds, I make my way over and open the back door, getting inside.

“What the fuck?” Thad shouts as both girls scramble out the other door.

Aye climbs inside to sit on the other side of Thad, who’s in the process of pulling up his pants.

“Where to?” Pika asks as he pulls away from the curb.

“Dino’s,” I tell him, and he nods as we pull out onto the main road.

“I asked you *what the fuck?*” Thad shouts. Aye puts his arm around his shoulders and pulls him back into him.

“Take off your shirt,” I tell him. He looks at me like I’m crazy as the weight of the situation finally begins settling in.

“I said...take off your shirt!” I roar. He holds his hands up in front of him, unbuttons his shirt, and slips it off, handing it to me. I set the shirt in my lap and begin taking my cufflinks off. Then I roll up the sleeves of my own.

“I don’t have a wire,” he tells me.

I laugh in his face. Then I pull my knife out, stabbing him in the gut twice before pressing his shirt to his stomach to staunch the blood flow.

“You just stabbed me,” he whispers.

I lift his face so that he’s looking at me and not at the blood that’s now turning his shirt red.

“I’m going to kill you tonight. I’m going to hurt you until you eventually pass out from blood loss, but then I’m going to wake you up and feed you your own fucking cock until you choke on it before taking your dead, lifeless body into the desert, where the fucking wild animals will fight over what’s left of you!” I roar as my hand on his jaw tightens to the point that both pain and understanding fill his eyes.

“She told you,” he says.

I lean forward until our noses are touching.

“Yeah, she told me,” I say, and I then lean back enough to elbow him in the face.

His body slumps forward, and I wipe my hands off before turning away from him to look out the window. I was raised to do this. Every cell in my body knows exactly what needs to be done, all of them preparing for what’s to come, and when it’s over, I know I’ll go home to my wife and tell her that she never has to be afraid again because I slaughtered her demon.

I roll my window down as soon as we pull up outside Dino’s. His front door opens and he steps out onto the porch. Dino is about three hundred pounds, six seven, with a bald head. As soon as he realizes who it is, he swings his shotgun up to rest on his shoulder.

“Haven’t seen you in a while,” he says, looking at the occupants of the car.

“It’s been a while,” I confirm.

Dino has a house in the desert on two hundred acres. About fifteen years ago, he had bomb shelters built into the ground around his property. These shelters are soundproof and safely enclosed, the perfect place to kill someone and take your time doing it.

“I need a room tonight,” I say, getting out of the SUV and walking over to the porch.

“Sure thing.” He greets me with a handshake and waves for Pika to follow him.

“I’ll lead you guy out,” he mutters, getting onto a four-wheeler while I walk back over to the SUV and climb into the front seat.

“This place is fucking creepy,” Aye mutters as we drive through the desert.

Every once in a while, we drive past a part of the sand that has a red light sticking up out of the ground, the light signifying that the room is occupied. There is only one reason to come here.

After driving for about thirty minutes, we come to a stop, and Dino gets off his four-wheeler, and I meet him at the door of the shelter.

“You know the rules. You’re locked in until you call. There are clothes and supplies inside, and make sure you leave your keys in the car so I can have someone come out and pick it up.”

“Got it,” I mutter.

He opens the door and the smell of cleaning supplies hits my nose. I inhale one last breath of clean air before walking into the room behind Pika and Aye, who are carrying Thad.

“Call when you’re done,” Dino says, shutting the door and locking it behind us.

FOR THE NEXT six hours, I tortured him until he couldn't even hold his head up on his own. Then I cut off his dick and shoved it down his throat like I'd told him I would.

Call me evil, but when I walked away from his lifeless body, I felt cleaner.

There was one last piece of shit in the world preying on the innocent.

When we arrived home, I went to our room and got into the shower before getting into bed with Myla. The moment I lay down, her body curved against mine and she looked up at me with tears in her eyes.

"It's done," I tell her.

Her beautiful eyes close open, and she leans forward, pressing a kiss to my chest. I gather her closer to me, and with her wrapped in my arms and my hand on her belly, I feel my son move for the first time.

"He moved," I whisper in awe, waiting to see if I can feel him again.

"He's been doing it all night. It's almost like he's trying to tell me that it will all be okay," she whispers.

I exhale a long breath. "You have nothing to fear now, *makamae*," I tell her.

She nods her head against my chest, and I wait, listening as her breathing evens out before following her off to sleep.

REDEMPTION

WE'VE BEEN HOME from Vegas for three weeks, and I know it may make me a horrible person, but knowing that Thad is dead and can never hurt me or anyone else again makes me feel lighter. I still felt bad for my parents when they called to tell me that he had gone missing. I know they were heartbroken over the loss of their son. I wanted to tell them the kind of monster he was, to make them understand they shouldn't mourn his loss, but I know that, in the end, it didn't matter. He had paid with his life for his crimes. I even got up enough courage to speak to my brother Royce, and even though the conversation was awkward, it felt good to talk to him.

My relationship with Kai has also changed since coming back to Hawaii. The wall that had been keeping us separated finally crumbled. He now knew everything there was to know about me, and I now know he will be there to help me battle any demons I may have.

I silently lie here, looking out at the ocean, willing myself to sleep, but I can't get over the feeling that something is going to happen. I know that something is brewing. I don't know what it is, but the energy over the last few days has changed, and Kai is more anxious than before. But every time I bring it up, he explains that, when the time is right, he will share it with me.

"I need to go out for a couple of hours, love," Kai says, coming into the room, where I have been lying down, trying to take a nap.

I turn my head on the pillow and take him in, noticing that he looks worried.

“Do you want me to come with you?” I ask him.

He shakes his head, leans over me, and presses a kiss to my lips. When he pulls back, his fingers run down my cheek.

“I won’t be gone long,” he says, but the anxiety I see in his eyes has the worry in my chest expanding.

“Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine. You just rest.”

I study his face and take notice of the way his jaw seems to be harder.

“I love you,” I tell him as I lift my hand to run my fingers down his jaw.

His eyes go soft and his face changes slightly.

“I love you too. I’ll be back,” he tells me, and this time, I hear the conviction in his voice when the words leave his mouth.

“We’ll be here waiting for you,” I tell him instead of doing what I really want to do, which is attach myself to him, making it hard for him to leave without taking me with him.

His lips press against mine as his hand moves to my belly one last time before he leaves the room. It takes all of my strength to stay on the bed and not follow him out of the house.

Soon after he leaves, I get up and phone his mom to see if she knows anything about what’s going on. She tells me that Kai didn’t tell her anything and she is sure it is just the hormones that are making me feel like something is off. When I get off the phone with her, I go into the kitchen and start baking to help keep my mind busy until he comes home.

I LOOK AT the clock and then over at Pika, who has been hanging out with me since I got out of bed earlier. When I notice that he’s looking at the clock as well, I give up and go

get the phone. I have never called Kai when he has told me that he'll be working, but right now, I need to make sure he's okay so the feeling in my stomach will hopefully go away.

I wrap one arm around my waist and then use the other to dial his number before putting the phone to my ear. My eyes stay locked on Pika's, and I can see that he's waiting to get some relief as well.

“Kai—”

My heart soars then crashes to the ground when I realize it's only the message for his voicemail.

“Hey, I...I just wanted to make sure you are okay.” I pause and let out a shaky breath as my head drops forward and tears fill my eyes.

“Please come home,” I whisper and then hang up.

“He didn't answer,” I tell Pika, placing the phone on the counter.

“I'm sure he's okay.”

“Me too,” I agree halfheartedly.

“He's probably somewhere where he can't answer,” he says, trying to convince both himself and me, but even as I nod, that pit in the bottom of my stomach gets bigger.

I pick the house phone up when it rings once, hoping that it's Kai telling me that he's okay and he's on his way home.

“Hello?”

“Honey, Meka's on her way to you now, and Bane and I are on our way,” Leia says.

“What happened?” I ask as tears begin to fill my eyes. I know that whatever she is going to say is going to rip me apart.

“I don't know. No one knows exactly what happened. After you called me, I became concerned, so I asked Bane to look into what Kai was doing,” she whispers. “He found out that Kai was meeting someone and they were taking the person's yacht out. Bane made Kai promise he would call in

an hour, and when we didn't hear back from him, Bane called the Coast Guard. They told him that a Mayday was sent out, and when the Coast Guard arrived at the location, only pieces of boat were left. They think there was some kind of explosion."

"No." I close my eyes and my stomach dips as I try to avoid getting sick.

"They've been searching, but as of yet, they haven't found any survivors," she cries, and I collapse onto the couch behind me.

"We're going to go over to the station and see if we can get any more information," she says, but her words begin to sound garbled, like I'm underwater.

I feel the phone slip out of my palm and hear Aye ask for Bane, but after that, everything becomes a blur until I hear my name yelled. "Myla!"

I stand from where I was sitting on the couch as Meka comes rushing into the living room.

"Oh, God," she whimpers, rushing towards me with tears streaming down her cheeks.

"No," I breathe even though I just spoke to Kai's mom. I don't want to believe that it's true, but there is no denying the look in Meka's eyes as she looks at me.

"I'm sorry." She cries harder, and my chest compresses under the weight of devastation I feel.

My knees give out and I fall to the floor as a sob rips from my chest. I feel her wrap her slender arms around me, and her tears seep through the shirt I have on. I don't know how long we stay there in the middle of the living room crying, but after some time, I feel Pika and Aye pull us away from each other.

Aye helps me get settled on the couch just as Kai's mom and dad walk in, and a fresh wave of tears springs to my eyes.

"Honey," Leia says, coming to sit next to me.

Her hands go around me, and I know she is not here to tell me good news. It takes everything in me to focus on breathing,

to remind myself that I have to breathe for our son. I cannot even begin to think of how I will make it without Kai. I don't know how I will live when I have to say goodbye to my soul.

"We didn't even pick a name," I whisper staring off into the ocean, which is turning orange as the sun begins to set.

"What, honey?" Kai's mom asks, using her hand on my cheek to turn my face towards her.

"We didn't even get a chance to pick a name." I shake my head. "Kai said he wanted to wait until after he was born so he was sure to get a name that fit him, and now, he won't be here to give him his name."

"Oh, Myla," she whispers. "Don't think about that right now. Right now, just pray that they find him." She chokes out the last part, and I can see it in her eyes that *she* doesn't even believe they will.

"I'm going to be sick." I get up, rush out of the room, and go to the toilet, the contents of my lunch coming up. I wait until the nausea passes before standing and going to the sink to splash some water on my face. The reflection looking back at me when I look in the mirror is not one I have ever seen before, not even during the worst years of my life.

No, the girl looking back at me looks lifeless.

"Can I come in?" comes from the other side of the door, along with a quiet tap.

"I'm coming," I say in a hoarse whisper. My throat feels like it's on fire from crying, and the passageway feels too tight to even take a complete breath.

As soon as I open the door, I come face-to-face with Aye, who looks me over from head to toe before pulling me into an embrace.

"He's a fighter," he tells me.

I nod, because that's true. I don't know what happened on that boat, but if there was a way for Kai to get out alive, he would, even if that meant swimming to shore.

Aye leads me back out to the living room and places me in a chair. He leaves and then comes back a few minutes later with a cup of tea and some saltine crackers before walking off to stand with Pika. I look at my two guys and close my eyes when I see not only them looking at me with concern, but also the pain I feel reflected in their eyes at the thought that they have lost their friend.

We all sit around the living room until the coastguard calls to say that they are calling off the search for the night due to a storm that was slowly making its way ashore. I lose it again. The idea of my beautiful husband in the middle of the ocean, with the only help available to him unable to reach him, causes me to lose the small thread of hope I was holding on to.

“Honey, why don’t you go and try to get some sleep?” I look from the ocean to Kai’s mom and shake my head.

“You need to rest,” she says gently as her eyes glance to my belly.

“Okay, but come get me if you hear anything please,” I tell her. She nods, murmuring that she promises. As soon as I get to our room and open the door, I’m bombarded by his smell, and it takes everything in me not to turn around and run. I close the door behind me then go to the dresser and pull out one of his shirts, holding it to my nose and noticing that, even though his scent is lingering in the material, it doesn’t smell completely like him.

I drop the shirt to the floor, walk over to his closet, and find his shirt from yesterday, one he put aside to have dry-cleaned. I put it to my nose and inhale a lungful of his scent, holding my breath until I feel light headed. I only let it out when I have my clothes off and I’m slipping his shirt on. I walk over to our bed, pull back the covers, pull the phone off the nightstand, and then climb into bed, bringing the covers up and over my head as I dial his phone number. His name is the only thing he says, but the sound of his voice, repeating it over and over, eventually lulls me to sleep.

“*Makamae*,” I hear whispered as I feel a finger run down my cheek.

I cuddle closer to the scent and warmth, not wanting to wake up if this is a dream.

“Wake up.” This time, the voice is close to my ear, which causes goosebumps to break out along my skin.

“Kai?” I whisper, not wanting to open my eyes.

“Myla.” I feel fingers run up my thigh and a large hand curve around my ass.

My eyes fly open, and a hand covers my mouth as I start to scream.

“Shh. It’s okay. I’m here, but I need you to be quiet.” I nod, and he moves his hand away from my mouth. I look at him with just the help of the moonlight.

“Am I dreaming?” I whisper. He shakes his head, and then I see that he has a few scratches on his face.

“Oh my God, you’re hurt.” I go to sit up and turn on the light, but he pins me to the bed.

“I’m fine. Just a few scratches.”

“What’s going on?” I ask him when I notice that he’s acting strange.

“No one can know I’m alive, Myla. Not yet,” he whispers, and I feel pain slice through my chest.

“What? Why?”

“I have the perfect opportunity to make a move. Everyone who was involved in what happened yesterday believes I’m dead. They won’t be expecting me.”

“Your mom and family?” I whisper as tears begin to fill my eyes again.

“I know this is going to be difficult for you to do, but I need your help,” he says softly.

I know he wouldn’t ask me to do this if he didn’t have to, but that doesn’t mean that it’s going to be easy to lie to people who I know are completely heartbroken over the fact that they think their son, brother, and friend is dead.

“I had to see you before I left, but you can’t tell anyone, *makamae*. Not yet,” he whispers.

I know that this is him talking to me. This is him being honest. This is the thing I have needed from him all along, so now, I have to prove I can handle it.

“I won’t tell anyone.” I press a kiss to his chest, and the warm feel of his skin against my lips causes a sensation I thought I would never feel again.

His hand travels down over the curve of my ass, and he pulls me closer to him, so close that I can feel his erection against my belly.

“Kai,” I hiss.

He rolls me onto my back. His hips settle between my thighs, and his arms go onto the bed on either side of me, making sure to keep his weight off my belly.

“I love you,” he whispers fiercely, right before his mouth crashes down on mine and his taste explodes on my tongue.

I lift my hands and run my fingers through his hair as I kiss him back with everything I have, so grateful that I’m able to have this with him, that he’s here with me now. He pulls his mouth from mine and kisses down my jaw and neck before pulling back enough to get the buttons of his shirt undone.

As soon as I’m exposed to him, his head drops down and his tongue licks my nipple before he pulls it into his mouth, sucking hard then doing the same to the other one. My body begins to wither under him as I fight hard not to scream out his name. He slowly licks down my body. Every inch of skin he touches feels like it’s directly linked to my core. When he licks across the top of my pubic bone, I bite my lip so hard that I taste blood in my mouth.

“You smell so good, *makamae*. Sweet, like pineapple,” he groans. Then his fingers hold the lips of my pussy open and his tongue begins flicking and licking my clit before he pulls it between his lips.

My hips begin to grind as I hiss out, “Please.”

“Please what?” he asks. Then one finger slowly circles around my entrance while his tongue continues to torment me.

“I need more,” I plead, looking down my body at him.

His eyes meet mine, and he enters me with two fingers, only to pull them out seconds later.

“Don’t stop!” I cry. I know I’m going to come the minute his fingers touch that place inside me he seems to be the master of finding.

His mouth latches on to my clit, and his finger at my entrance dips in then out, the sensation causing a slow burn to begin.

“So close,” he says.

I nod. Or I think I nod; everything seems blurry. Then I explode as his teeth graze my clit and his fingers fill me, both of them working in sync to pull me over the edge, and at the last second, I cover my mouth with my hand, muffling the scream that rips from my chest.

I feel lightheaded, and it takes a moment to come back to myself, but when I do, Kai is undressed and his hips are between mine. The moment our eyes lock, he presses inside me, filling me with one long stroke. My legs lift and wrap around his waist, and my hands travel up his back. I watch as his eyes get darker right before his head drops and he kisses me again, his tongue wrapping around mine as his hips rotate, the angle changing deep inside me on each stroke.

I moan into his mouth and press the heels of my feet into his back, lifting my hips up to meet him on each thrust. His pace picks up, and his mouth leaves mine so that he can lick down my neck, and then he bends and pulls one nipple into his mouth, making me turn my head and bite into the pillow to avoid screaming. I dig my nails into his back and use my leverage to fuck him, taking him all the way to the hilt each time, every stroke hitting that spot deep inside me that causes me to see stars.

“I’m going to come,” I gasp.

“Let me feel it. Let me feel you milk me,” he groans, and I lift my head and bite into his shoulder as my orgasm erupts through me.

I start to come back to myself when I feel his hips jerk and his face go into my neck, where he groans his release. I wrap myself tighter around him, and he shifts slightly to the side, pulling his weight off my belly. I lie there in awe, knowing that, earlier tonight, I thought I would never have this again.

“How did you get off the boat?” I ask as my mind begins to clear.

“Fucking Frank. I swear he doesn’t listen, but this time, I’m glad he ignored my order. He knew who I was meeting with and insisted he follow us in another boat. I told him, ‘Absolutely not,’ because I didn’t want the guys I was with to see him and get spooked, but lucky for me, he ignored me.” He pauses and runs a hand down my cheek. “When we got out into the open seas, the guys jumped ship, leaving me alone on the yacht. I called for Mayday but knew something was up, so I took off all my clothes and got into the water right before the boat exploded. A few minutes after that happened, Frank pulled up on a small boat, looking smug. I told him then that no one could know I’m alive. Their stupid plan to kill me, and Frank’s ignoring my order, gave me the perfect opportunity to finally clean up a situation that has been needing my attention for a while,” he says carefully.

“You have to come back to me when this is over. I need you to be there when our little man is born so that you can give him his name,” I say as tears fill my eyes.

“I’ll be here for that,” he promises, and his hips begin to rotate as he rocks in and out of me slowly.

He drops his forehead to mine until we both come together, my orgasm hitting me slowly as the feeling spreads through my body, making my whole being feel heavy and causing my eyes to close right before I hear Kai whisper, “I love you.” I mumble the words back to him, and then I feel him button my shirt up and cover me up. I feel something slide onto my finger before I can no longer stay conscious.

When I wake up in the morning, the night before comes back to me, and tears begin to fill my eyes when I don't see Kai with me. But then I become aware of the wetness between my legs and I pull his shirt away from my chest, seeing that he left love bites around my nipples. I lie back down and pray that he comes back to me soon.

I roll over and begin to tuck my hand under my cheek when I notice that the ring I have on now has a band that wasn't there before tucked close to it. This one is the same gold as the original, but all around the band are round diamonds. I slip the ring off my finger and hold it up to look at it, but then an inscription on the inside catches my attention.

M & K ~ This is our story.

Tears fill my eyes as I slip the ring back in place. He is right. This is our story, and our story is just beginning.

SNIPER

KAI

I GET OFF the flight and fight my way towards the exit. I haven't flown commercial in years and had forgotten what a pain in the ass it is. I knew that, if I was going to get to Vegas unrecognized, I would need to make a few changes. The first change was shaving my hair completely off and trading my suits for jeans and tees so that I matched the appearance of my new ID. The second was flying like any other middle class citizen.

I had to make sure everyone I knew still believed that I'm dead. Growing up, I learned early on that, if an opportunity presented itself, you needed to take it immediately, so that's exactly what I did yesterday.

"So, how are we going in?" Frank asks, pulling a pair of dark shades over his eyes.

I look at him and wonder once again how the fuck he convinced me to let him come.

"I told you you're staying at the hotel," I mutter, walking outside into the hot Las Vegas sun.

"I saved you yesterday," he reminds me for the hundredth time, and I grind my teeth together in annoyance.

He did save me. He also unknowingly helped me orchestrate the perfect plan, one that, until the ship I had been on blew up, making everyone believe I was dead, would never have been possible. Paulie Jr. had no idea that the idiots he'd sent to kill me were going to be the ones who helped me pull off his death.

“You’re not coming,” I say as I look around for Sven.

“You’re going to let some guy you don’t really know help you do this, but not the man who has been with you your whole life?” He shakes his head, muttering under his breath something about how my mom should have raised me better.

I ignore him and keep walking. Then I spot Sven posted up next to a small sports car.

“What’s up, man? How have you been?” Sven greets us as soon as we’re near.

“Good. How are things?” I shake his hand and place my small bag in the back seat. Then I lean the seat forward so that Uncle Frank can get in.

“You have got to be shitting me,” Uncle Frank complains, looking at the seat then back at me.

“Sorry, man. My assistant is using my other car, so I had to bring this,” Sven apologizes as my uncle stuffs himself into the small back seat then gripes when I put the front seat back in position so I can get in.

“Just ignore him,” I tell Sven once we’re all in the car.

“We still have some time to kill, so I figured we could all go to my house and get the details worked out before doing what you came here for,” Sven says.

I nod then ask him about his club, which is close to the area of downtown that Paulie Sr. has recently started running drugs out of.

He tells me that the drugs have recently begun seeping into his club and a few women who have gone to the club have been roofied. When he went to the cops, he had a dead body and a note telling him to shut his mouth show up on his front step.

When we pull up at his house, I’m slightly taken aback by the normalcy of the area and home. I know that Sven has money, and a lot of it, so the fact that he’s living in a neighborhood has me raising a brow.

“I have a penthouse but have recently been staying here,” he mutters, shutting down the car.

I get out as well then lean the seat forward so Frank can get out before grabbing my bag from the back seat and following Sven up the front steps and into the house. The house is large. The moment I enter, I walk into a large foyer that has a round staircase leading upstairs, and then there is a library off to one side and a living room on the other.

“Let me see if Mag’s home,” Sven murmurs.

We follow behind him through the living room and into a large, open kitchen that has a small dining room off to the side.

“Oh good. You’re here. I got all the crap you asked for,” a woman’s voice says as we walk around the corner.

I wonder who she is. Her hair is dark brown, and it hangs down the middle of her back. She’s slightly chubby, but she has curves in all the right places.

“Meat is not crap, Mag,” Sven tells her, but I can see softness in his eyes as he looks at her.

“Stop calling me Mag. It’s Maggie, for the millionth time, and meat is gross.” She shakes her head then swings around to look at Uncle Frank and me when she realizes we’re standing there. Her face is soft and round, but the color of her eyes is what makes her beautiful. They are so light that they look like honey.

“You have zero manners.” She looks at Sven again as she scolds him then looks at us, and her face transforms and a smile lights up her face.

“He’s rude. Sorry about that. I’m Maggie, this guy’s assistant. Nice to meet you guys.” She shakes my hand then takes Frank’s, who holds on to her and pulls her closer.

“Nice to meet you, Maggie,” my uncle says, kissing her hand.

“Aww, you’re so cute.” She pats his cheek then steps back and looks at Sven. “I’m going to head out. I have a date tonight.”

I look at Sven, and his jaw begins to tick as he shakes his head.

“You need to work tonight,” he tells her, but his jaw is so tight that I’m surprised the words even come out.

“I don’t work nights.” She laughs.

“Nice meeting you guys,” she says as she walks over to the counter, picking up her bag before walking out of the kitchen with Sven’s eyes glued to her ass.

“I’ll be right back,” he growls then storms out of the kitchen after her. Then we hear the front door open and slam shut.

“That was awkward,” Frank says, but I have a feeling I know what’s going on.

Sven looks like the kind of guy who could walk into a room full of women and have his pick. Now, the woman he wants is not falling at his feet, so he has no idea what to do. It only takes a couple of minutes for the front door to open back up, and then the loud bang of it slamming echoes before we hear Sven storm into the kitchen.

“She makes me fucking mental,” he growls, walking to the fridge and grabbing a beer.

“I swear to fucking Christ I’m going to end up being put in a goddamn hospital because of her and the stress she causes me,” he says before tilting the beer back and taking a large pull.

“You gonna be able to handle tonight?” I ask him after a moment.

He looks at me, and a different look fills his eye.

“Fuck yes,” he mutters, and I nod once.

“Let me show you guys to your rooms.” He walks out of the kitchen then leads us upstairs.

“You guys can stay in these two rooms. Mag’s room is down the hall next to mine,” he says.

I start to laugh ‘cause he is setting himself up for fucking mental issues.

“You don’t even have to say it. I already fucking know,” he grumbles then looks between Frank and me.

“I’m gonna shower. We’ll meet downstairs in an hour to talk about what the plan for the night is,” he says, running a hand through his hair before walking off towards his room.

“That kid has it bad,” Frank mumbles, shaking his head before walking into his room.

I turn and walk into my room and close the door behind me. I want to call and check on Myla, but I can’t until this is done. I was going to leave her in the dark about what happened yesterday, but I knew, if I did that, she would be pissed, not only about what I was doing, but that she had been forced to believe I had died. I couldn’t imagine someone telling me that she was dead and living with that news for even ten minutes.

I walk to the window and look out, and I see Maggie standing in the driveway and talking on the phone while looking at the house. My first instinct is that she somehow knows who I am, but then I see her wipe her cheeks and look up at the sky, saying something I can only make out as, “He’s a jerk,” before getting into her car, slamming the door, and backing out of the driveway.

I leave the window and sit on the bed, looking down at my hands and twisting my wedding band around my finger. I slip the ring off my finger and place it in my pocket. In a few hours, when I put it back on my hand, our whole future will look different. It will just be us.

I wait a few more minutes then go downstairs, where Sven and Uncle Frank are laughing in the living room when I walked in. Uncle Frank has that quality about him; he can always lighten up a situation. And as pissed off as he makes me sometimes, he is family, and he really did save my ass.

“Ready?” I ask.

Sven stands, and we walk into the dining room, where he has some papers spread out on the table.

“Justin did some searching and found out that Paulie is always at Steam on Fridays. I guess he buys out the VIP section and shows off how much money he has. He’s always with these two guys.” He hands me a picture. “This guy is missing”—he points at Thad—“but this guy is still around.” He points at a man I have never seen before.

“Did Justin find any info on him?” I ask as I look at his picture.

“Nope. I guess he showed up a couple of years ago, and he and Junior have been tight since then. His name’s Ivan.”

“He’s undercover,” I mutter.

“What?” He takes the pictures and holds it up, looking at it. “We need another plan, because I can guarantee you they will be at that club together, and if he’s undercover like you think he is, we can’t risk him seeing anything.”

I know he’s right. I also know that the club would be the best location. Not only would his guard be down, but also, there would be so many people around that the risk of being seen would be minimal.

“Plan still stands,” I tell him. I can see that he’s not convinced, but this is what I was raised to do.

Long before I took over for my father, I was his watcher, the eyes in the back of his head. I knew exactly what someone would do before they did it, and that kind of conditioning doesn’t go away.

We talk for a few more minutes before I head back up to the room and change. I put on a white tank and a dress shirt over it, and I keep the jeans I was already wearing on. Once I’m changed, Sven meets me downstairs dressed similar to me.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come? I can wait in the car,” Uncle Frank mumbles, walking us to the door.

“We’re not going to the grocery store,” Sven says. I shake my head.

“What if you need backup?”

“We won’t,” I assure him as we leave the house, shutting the door behind us and leaving my pouting uncle at home. We drive to the club and park down the street. It is after midnight, but the sidewalks are still packed with people.

“Where’s your club?” I ask when I notice this block has clubs lining the street.

“A block over. This area is new, but the nightlife here is one of the reasons people come to Vegas.”

“This area is also connected to the mob,” I tell him, and his eyes come to me as he runs a hand through his hair.

“This street used to have nothing but old warehouses on it. Back in the day, a bunch of men bought up these lots, knowing that Vegas was going to expand. I wouldn’t be surprised if Paulie actually owns the club we’re going to.”

“Justin didn’t say that.”

“Just because his name isn’t on the papers doesn’t mean anything, kid.”

Once we reach the club, we go to the front of the line, where Sven knows one of the bouncers at the door, and they let us in without a word. Once we walk in the door, we know where the cameras are, so we avoid them at each turn.

From Justin’s intel, we know that the club has three levels. The top is all VIP, which has smoked-glass panels with red backlights every twelve feet, making it look like a steamed shower with dancing people silhouetted behind the glass.

The second floor has the same panels, but these are blue and techno music is loudly pumping. The first floor is a large bar that goes around the whole perimeter of the room, with a dance floor in the middle.

“Let’s head up and see the layout,” I say.

We walk towards the stairs that will take us up a level. We know where Paulie would be hanging out, but seeing it on paper and being here in person are two different things.

“Sven?” a woman says halfway up the first flight of stairs.

“Hey, babe. I don’t have time right now.” He removes her hands from him then jogs to catch up with me.

“Sven,” another woman says.

I look over at him and frown when he says the same thing he just said to the last one.

“Hey, stranger,” a blonde says, stepping in front of him.

I shake my head. I have had my fair share of partners, but this is fucking ridiculous. No wonder Maggie is running away from him.

“It’s not normally this bad,” he tells me once he’s free from yet another woman.

“I should have had you stay home with Frank,” I mutter, looking around the second level.

“Fuck off,” he grumbles then points toward VIP, where there is another set of stairs, this one blocked off by a red, velvet rope and a woman standing there with a clipboard in her hand.

“We need to get up there,” I tell Sven.

He smiles and walks towards the rope. The woman’s face lifts and she smiles as he gets near. I follow close behind him and hear her say his name. His hand goes to her waist, and he dips his head close to her ear.

She looks over at me then nods and pulls the rope. He kisses her cheek then says something else before we make our way up the last set of stairs.

We walk up to VIP and look around. There’s a bar off to the side with steam rising up out of the glass behind the bar. Sven taps my shoulder and nods to the right. I see the guy from the photo, the one I swear is undercover. He’s standing off to the side, his head lowered as he talks on the phone.

“Where’s Paulie?” I question, knowing he has to be close.

I hear someone yell, “Fucker!” and I start toward the commotion while staying in the shadows.

Paulie is standing over some kid, who is lying on top of a busted-up glass table. His hands are in front of his face, and I can see that he's bleeding from open wounds on his arms. Paulie leans over him and spits, and then he starts to laugh before looking around at the people who have formed a circle, making sure they're laughing too.

"Get up and get out of here," Paulie says, kicking the guy, who rolls to his stomach before scrambling to his feet and taking off.

"That guy is a fucking dick," Sven says, and I can't agree more. He is a fucking egomaniac.

"We need to find our opening. You watch Ivan, and I'll keep an eye on Paulie."

He nods and walks off to the bar while I stay in the background. Every once in a while, a woman stumbles over, but as soon as they're in my space, I give them a look that has them turning around and finding another man to fuck with.

I still don't even understand how being with Myla came so easily. It's like the gods sent me everything I could have ever asked for in a wife, qualities I didn't even know I was looking for.

I watch as Paulie stands, pulls the blonde who's been all over him to her feet, and leads her towards the bar. My pulse starts to quicken as extra adrenaline begins pumping through my system. My eyes zero in on him as he leads the girl behind the bar and down a hall that is almost dark with strobe lights that flash every few seconds. I follow behind them; this is it—the opportunity I have been waiting for. I watch as he picks the girl up. Her legs go around his waist, and one of his hands works between them. I get closer and pause when I feel a whiz slice through the sleeve of my shirt. I turn my head to see where it came from, and when I turn back around, Paulie is down on the ground. The blonde he was about to fuck up against the wall is screaming at the top of her lungs as she tries to stop the blood that is pooling out of his shirt.

Sniper.

I scan the area again, and then my eyes land on Sven. I have no idea what just happened, but we need to get out of here. Commotion begins to build around us as the crowd moves in on Paulie, who is still lying there, only blood is now bubbling out of his mouth. I lift my chin to Sven, and we both make our way outside. I see him moving quickly ahead of me. Just as I get to the club exit, the lights turn on. I step out onto the sidewalk and through the crowd that has begun to spill out of the club, and then I head towards the street we parked on. When I get there, I spot Sven.

“What the fuck happened?” he asks as we both get into the truck.

I ignore him, pull my off shirt, and look at the sleeve. There is a small tear in the fabric where the bullet that hit Paulie tore through.

“There was a sniper in there,” I tell him as he stops at the stop light.

“Fuck. Do you know who it was?”

“No clue.” I think, trying to pull up anyone I know with that kind of background.

“Where was Ivan?” Sven asks.

“He was still on the phone, and when Paulie went down, I saw him take off.”

“What now?”

“I go home,” I mutter, not knowing if I’m pissed or relieved.

“This isn’t over,” he reminds me.

“No, it’s not, but now, we have to wait for his dad to make his move.”

“How long will that take?” he sighs.

“No idea. The first thing he’s going to want to do is figure out who took out his son...even if he knew the fucker was trying to take his seat.”

“That does not make me feel better.”

“Did you ever play with blocks when you were a kid?” I ask him. He looks at me and shrugs.

“Sure,” he mutters, obviously wondering where I’m going with my question.

“What happens when you take out the block at the bottom of the building?”

“It falls?”

“No, it gets weak, and then, when you take another, and another, the structure continues to weaken until it eventually falls to pieces.”

“How many more pieces until this is done?”

“One,” I tell him, and the rest of the car ride is silent. Once we arrive back at the house, we tell Uncle Frank what went down, and he has the same questions we do, but I have no answers. Sven offers for us to stay, but there is no reason for me to stay in Vegas another night, so I decline his offer but do take him up on using his plane to get back to Hawaii. While we’re getting out of his car at the airport, he gets a text and starts laughing. I don’t expect him to share it, but he tilts his phone towards me and I can’t help, but grin.

Justin: Tell Hawaii sorry about his shirt.

I shake my head and move to the plane.

I WALK INTO my house, and everyone sitting in the living room stops to look at me, but my eyes are on Myla, whose eyes instantly fill with tears.

“*Makamae.*”

She comes to me, wrapping her arms around me, and the moment I have her in my arms, a sob tears from her that rips through me.

“I’m home. I told you I would be.”

“I know!” she cries.

I tilt her head back and kiss her, absorbing her taste, letting her soak back into my system.

“I was so worried.” She holds me tighter, and I do the same.

“Nothing could keep me from you. Not even the devil himself,” I whisper into her ear.

She nods then lifts her tear-filled eyes to mine. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” I hold her face in my palms and kiss her again, the salty taste of her tears mixing in with her natural sweetness.

“Oh, God,” my mom whimpers.

Myla wipes her cheeks then steps back.

“You’re not dead?!” my sister cries.

I shake my head.

“I had to take care of some business,” I explain.

“I should kick your fucking ass,” Pika yells, rushing towards me, and I brace myself, ready for impact.

“Pika, I knew all along!” Myla cries. Pika stops halfway and looks at her.

“He came and saw me the night he went missing. I wanted to tell you guys, but I promised not to tell anyone,” she whispers.

Aye glares at her. “You cried and screamed about keeping the search going. You flipped out whenever we talked about giving up and having a funeral.”

She drops her head, looking at her feet.

“I didn’t want to have a funeral. I didn’t want you guys to give up hope,” she whispers.

“This isn’t her fault. This is on me. I made her promise not to tell anyone.” I go to her and wrap my arms around her. “I

didn't want anyone to know what was going on. I couldn't risk anyone finding out I wasn't dead."

"I know that we raised you to always do what needs to be done, but this is going too far. Your mom was a wreck, and your sister and brother were devastated," my father scolds.

"Sorry, Dad, but I had to make sure that, when my son takes his first breath, nothing and no one can harm him," I explain, and I see understanding flash in my father's eyes.

"We thought you were dead. I believed I was going to have to plan a funeral then figure out how to get Myla through this pregnancy without her having a meltdown!" my mom shouts.

Guilt strikes me hard. She would have done it. She would have put her own pain away to make sure everyone else was taken care of.

"I love you, Mom," I tell her as she comes to me, wrapping her arms around me.

"You ever do anything like that again and I really will kill you," she says.

I hear some grunts of agreement around the room, but I ignore them.

"I needed to make things safe for my son," I repeat, and my mom nods against my chest.

Since Myla became my wife and we found out we're having a baby, I have worked tirelessly to make sure she can have a normal life and our boy has a chance to experience normalcy.

"I have been blessed to have you guys as my parents, but I don't want my kids growing up in a house where there has to be men with guns hanging around all the time. I want to enjoy my family."

"I can understand that, honey."

"Runt." I look at my baby sister, and she comes to me, winding her arms around Mom and me.

"Don't ever do that again," she whispers.

“I won’t,” I promise then look at my brother.

He closes his eyes then comes over to us. He wraps his arms around all of us, muttering that he’s going to kick my ass.

“I’m sorry, guys, but thank you for taking care of Myla for me,” I tell Aye and Pika.

“Always,” Pika says, and for once, there is no feeling of jealousy— just gratefulness.

“You don’t even have to thank me,” Aye says. I nod then step away from my mom, my sister, and me brother, and step towards my dad. Then I hug him like I haven’t done since I was a kid.

“I love you, son, and I’m proud of the man you have become,” he tells me.

I pat him on his back then step away and walk right to Myla to scoop her up.

“What are you doing?!” she shouts.

“We’re going to bed,” I tell her, looking at her beautiful face.

“Your family’s here, and you just got home.”

“I don’t care.” I lift my head and look at my family.

“No offense, but I’m taking Myla to bed. You guys can stay or go,” I tell them then turn and walk to our room, where I carefully set her on the bed then get down on my knees in front of her, lifting her shirt up so I can press my mouth to her stomach.

“You shaved your head,” she says quietly, running her hands over my buzzed hair.

I close my eyes, relishing the feeling of her touching me. “Yeah.”

“I’ll miss your hair.” I open my eyes and smile.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she repeats, resting her forehead against mine while her hands curve over my skull.

“It will grow back.”

“You look good in jeans,” she teases.

“Yeah?” I chuckle.

“Definitely,” she whispers, placing her mouth on mine. I let her take charge for a moment then push her to her back, taking over. This is what I would kill for—the woman under me and my child she is carrying. They make everything worthwhile.

EPILOGUE

KAI

“YOU CAN DO it, *makamae*,” I tell Myla, kissing the top of her head while she bears down on another contraction.

“Oh, God, Kai!” she screams.

I wish I could take her pain away. Since the moment we arrived five hours ago, she has been in pain. They gave her the epidural as soon as we got here because she was already dilated five centimeters, but it only numbed the left side of her body.

“You’re doing so good.” I press my forehead to hers as she lies back on the bed, looking exhausted.

“One more, Myla,” the doctor says.

I want to tell her to shut up, that my wife is exhausted, but when the nurse hands her a blanket, I relax.

“He’s almost here,” I tell her as her foot presses into my hand and she pushes again, her face turning so red that it looks purple.

“Five-count,” the doctor says.

We all start counting. Once we reach five, Myla collapses back onto the bed, breathing heavily as a loud cry fills the room.

“I’m so proud of you,” I whisper, kissing the skin above her ear as our son is placed on her chest.

“He’s really here,” she whispers, running her hand over his still-wet hair.

“He is so beautiful.” Her eyes lift to meet mine, and the wonder I see there takes my breath away.

I lean in and whisper against her lips, “He *is* beautiful.”

His skin is lighter than mine but darker than Myla’s. His hair is black, and it already has a little wave to it. His nose is wide—like mine and the rest of the men in my family.

“We need a name,” she says. I look at her then at our son. Since the moment we talked about naming him, I have said that I wanted to wait until we met him. I knew I wanted our son to have a strong name, a name that demanded respect, one that a good man, a man of honor, would have.

“What do you think of Maxim?” I ask her.

Tears fill her eyes as she looks down at him again and whispers,

“Maxim,” then kisses his head. “It’s perfect.”

“I’m going to take him and get him cleaned up,” a nurse says softly.

I look at her then my son and want to say no, but I know she has a job to do.

“I’ll bring him back,” she assures me.

I nod, and Myla kisses his head once more before the nurse takes him from her arms.

“I can’t believe he’s here,” she says as we watch the nurses clean him up.

I knew the moment I met Myla that she was going to change my life. I just had no idea to what extreme it would be. Not only did she make me a husband and father, but she made me want to be better, someone she would be proud to call hers.

“Love you, *makamae*,” I tell her.

She shakes her head and lifts her hand to run down my jaw.

“Love you too,” she whispers.

One year later

Myla

“KAI!” I YELL as my hands go to the top of his head between my legs. I woke up with Kai behind me on the bed. His hand was wrapped over my waist, his leg over the top of mine so I couldn’t move as his fingers slid in and out of me, torturing me. When I was going to come from his fingers, he turned me over then tormented my breasts while holding my hands against my stomach.

Now, his head is between my legs, and I finally have the ability to touch him, but that doesn’t mean he is giving me what I want.

“I really want to come,” I tell him, and his fingers slowly slide into me, lifting up when they reach that beautiful spot.

“Kai, please,” I whisper.

That must be what he wanted, because his mouth latches on to my clit and his fingers pump quickly, making the orgasm that was building detonate. My legs start to shake, and my hands go to my sides on the bed, bunching up the sheets in my fists, My hips lift higher to his mouth as he drinks my orgasm, the strokes of his fingers and tongue slowing.

I try to get my body back under control as I feel his mouth on my belly. Then it’s on my breast as he moves up my body until his hips are snugly between my thighs.

“Good morning.” He smiles as his hand wraps around the back of my neck.

His mouth comes down on mine, stealing the last of my breath as he enters me with one long thrust. The taste of me and him is on my mouth as he consumes me. I lift my hands to his back as his hand travels down my side, over my hip, and then under, lifting my thigh higher as he goes deeper.

“Right there,” I hiss when he hits that spot deep inside me that has my toes curling and my thighs squeezing his waist

tighter.

“I feel it. Squeeze me.”

He groans as his fingers dig into my skin and his hips pump faster. I lift my other leg higher and he wraps his arm under it, lifting up so he can pound harder.

“Oh, God!” I scream, putting my hands above my head, pressing my fingers against the wall.

He dips his head and pulls my nipple into his mouth, and I feel my pussy begin to pulse around him, pulling him deeper as my orgasm overtakes me. His hips jerk. Then he plants himself deep, his forehead falling to my collarbone as I feel his chest moving rapidly and the beat of his heart pounding against my sweat-soaked skin.

“That had to be it,” he breathes, lifting his head to look at me.

“Be what?” I ask in a daze, my orgasm still lingering in my system.

“The time I got my girl.” I shake my head and start to laugh. We decided a while back that we would start trying for another baby, and since then, Kai has insisted he wants a girl. But unlike the first time we got pregnant, this time has seemed to be a little more work. Yesterday, when I took an ovulation test, Kai sent Maxim away to his parents’ house for a few days when it came up positive in hopes that lots of sex during this time would get us what we wanted.

“It will happen,” I tell him. He rests his head against my chest again.

Four years later

WHAT WE DIDN’T know then was that Kai was right. That was the moment he got his girl.

I look down near the shore as Kai chases Melanie, our youngest. Her cries of joy and laughter fill the air as her long, curly, blond hair flies around her head.

“No, Daddy!” she screams, making me laugh.

Kai has been chasing her for the last few minutes, trying to get her to put her swim bottoms back on, but every time he gets close to catching her, she runs off again.

I take in the hotness that is my husband when he pauses, crossing his arms over his chest. His shirtless torso is defined by hard muscle covered by smooth, dark skin. His hair is down, and the shorts he has on show off the V of his hips. His eyes come to me and he shakes his head. I know what he’s thinking. *She’s cute, but a pain.* The moment he held her in his arms—actually, before that—she had him wrapped around her little finger. I guess that’s not surprising since she is his only girl.

Melanie pauses, looks over her shoulder, realizing that her dad isn’t chasing her, and then runs back past him just out of arm’s reach before running towards me, screaming, “Save me, Mommy!”

I catch her in my arms, careful of my belly, and pat her cute, bottomless little toosh.

“Easy, baby,” I tell her, quietly pulling her close to my chest.

“Sorry,” she says, patting my belly, where her baby brother is growing.

“Got you.” Kai chuckles, plucking her out of my arms and quickly putting her pants on her before she has a chance to wiggle away again.

“You know she’s just going to take them off again.”

“I know,” he mutters, pulling me closer, kissing first my forehead then my lips.

“Are you excited to see your mom and brother?” he asks, pulling me closer to his side.

“Yes! I can’t wait to see all the kids together. And I know my mom is excited to be here for the baby shower,” I tell him, leaning deeper into his side.

He kisses my hair again.

“What do you feel like doing for dinner?” I ask him after a moment. His eyes come to me and go soft. This is what he worked so hard to achieve, and even though it is something so small, I know that these are the moments he is always thankful for.

“Whatever you want.”

“Does that mean I’m cooking?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

“Fine. I’ll grill,” he mutters, kissing the look off my face.

“Yum.” I smile, and he shakes his head.

“You owe me a cake,” he whispers. I feel myself squirm at the word *cake*. Since having the house to ourselves, Kai has a lot of cake, and—lucky me—normally, I’m the plate he prefers.

“Daddy, come play with me!” our son Maxim shouts as he squats down in the sand in front of a castle he’s working on.

“Yeah, Daddy! Come help us!” Melanie shouts, and I notice that she is, once again, naked.

“Go on, Daddy,” I tell him, pressing into his side. He turns towards me, where I’m sitting on the ground, and gets on his knees. Then he wraps his hand around the back of my head as he lays me back in the sand, taking my mouth in a kiss that steals my breath the same way he stole my heart.

“Love you,” he whispers then jumps up, walking over to the kids before I can reply.

I look at my husband and my babies and thank my mom and dad, wherever they are. I know that it’s because of them I have all of this.

The End

Have you or someone you know been the victim of sexual assault? If you need someone to talk to, there is someone available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

1.800.656.HOPE (4673)

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

DISTRACTION

ABOUT DISTRACTION

Distraction: The great intensity, novelty, or attractiveness of something other than the object of attention.

Sven is a man who takes pride in his ability to separate himself from his emotions. He's a man who knows who he is and where he's going in life, a man who needs no one, because needing someone, anyone, is a weakness.

His past taught him love isn't enough.

Maggie wants the happily ever after, but has never picked the right men, or stuck around long enough, to build a forever. It's always been easier to get out early, before emotions make things messy.

When Maggie wakes up naked in Sven's bed, with no memory of the night before, these two must be honest about their feelings and face their fears, so they can build a future together.

Will love be enough for them to get their happy ending together, or will a threat from outside strike them down before they ever have a chance?

This book contains an over the top alpha who knows what he wants, it also contains sexual situations that may not be suitable for younger audiences.

To those who are strong because they have no other choice.

PROLOGUE

SVEN, AGE TEN

WALKING DOWN THE dimly lit hallway to my dad's home office, I stop just outside the door, watching him pull off his glasses and rub his eyes. I hate bothering him, but I really need my permission slip signed for my field trip tomorrow, and I can't go to my mom because I know she'll freak. She's always freaking out about something these days. Pulling the folded up form out of my back pocket, I step through the door then pause, feeling my stomach turn and get upset when I see my mom asleep on the couch under the window behind the door.

"What's up, bud?" Pulling my eyes from my mom, I look at my dad and take a step backward.

"She's asleep. It's okay," he says softly, studying me.

"I can come back," I whisper, swinging my eyes to my mom to make sure she didn't wake when I spoke.

"I gave her her sleeping pills. She'll be out for awhile," he says gently, and I ball my hands into fists, crushing the paper in my grip. It sucks that I'm afraid of my own mother. Licking my lips, I pull my eyes from her on the couch, move swiftly to the side of my dad's desk, and unfold the paper, placing it on top of the stack of paperwork sitting in front of him.

"We have a field trip tomorrow and I need this signed," I tell him quietly, moving my eyes to my mom once more as fear makes my hands shake.

"Where are you guys going?" he asks, uncapping one of his fancy pens, one of the few Grandma got him for Christmas.

One of the hundred he has, because she always buys him pens, the same way she always buys me socks. Her gifts suck, but she never fails to bring peanut butter cookies with Hershey Kisses on top that she bakes fresh, which makes her lame gifts worth it when she comes to visit.

“Um...some museum,” I tell him, licking my lips again then feeling my heart stop when my mom moans and rolls over on the couch to face the back of it.

“That sounds fun.” He chuckles. I wish I could laugh with him, but I can’t breathe as I wait anxiously for him to sign the paper so I can leave.

“Did you get something to eat?” he asks, placing the pen to the paper.

“Yes,” I lie. When I got off the bus from school, I went right to my room, did my homework, and stayed there until now, because I didn’t want to accidentally run into my mom who I knew was home because her car was parked out front, half on the drive way and half on the grass, like she was in a hurry when she pulled up.

“I know things haven’t been easy, bud, but I promise they’re going to get better,” he says, and my eyes meet his. I wish he was telling the truth, but I know he’s lying. No matter how many times my mom comes to my school and embarrasses me, or how many times the police come here when she’s freaking out, he still acts like nothing’s wrong. He always just says things will get better, but they never do.

“I know,” I lie back, watching his eyes flash with something before dropping to the paper and signing his name across the bottom.

“Do you need any money for tomorrow?” he inquires, shifting to the side, shoving his hand in his pocket, and pulling out a large wad of money before I can tell him yes or no.

“You may want to buy a souvenir or get something to eat,” he murmurs, pulling off two twenties from the wad, wrapping them in the permission slip, and handing it back to me.

“Thanks.”

“Go get some sleep. I’ll take you to school in the morning so you can sleep in.”

“I can catch the bus,” I rush out, knowing that if I don’t, I will have to see my mom in the morning, and nowadays, I do everything within my power to avoid any kind of contact with her.

“We need to talk about something, so I’ll drive you.”

“Sure,” I agree as his hand comes up to rest on my shoulder, giving it a squeeze before letting me go.

“Night, bud.”

“Night,” I mutter, rushing out of his office and down the hall to my room. Unfolding the paper, taking both twenties to my desk, and opening the top drawer, I add them to the pile of money I already have. My dad is always giving me money, whether I want it or not. I think he uses it as a way to not feel guilty for how crappy things have been lately.

At first I thought it was cool because I was able to get whatever I wanted, but not now. Now, I hate it. Closing the drawer, I go to my backpack and shove the permission slip inside one of the pockets then dig to the bottom of the bag until I find the candy bar I bought from the vending machine at school. I scarf it down, hating the way my chest hurts as I remember the times we used to have dinner like a normal family.

Jumping out of my sleep, my heart starts to pound. I don’t know what woke me, but fear rushes through me as I turn to look at my bedroom door and see the hall is dark through the crack along the bottom. Closing my eyes, I do what I always do when this happens and play funny cartoons in my head, trying to get my heart to calm and get back to sleep.

Hearing a strange noise, my eyes spring open and my heart pounds hard once more. Getting out of bed quietly, I open my door and peek each way before tiptoeing as quickly and as silently as I can down the hall, through the living room, and toward my parents’ bedroom on the other side of the house, wondering if they heard the noise too.

When I reach the hall to their room, some of the fear in me leaves. Their light is on, and I can hear murmurings coming from inside, letting me know they are awake and I'm not alone. Taking a step toward their door, which is open an inch, I feel warm wetness soak the front of my pajama bottoms. When I look through the crack, my mom is standing over my dad with a knife in her hands, her arms and the front of her nightgown covered in blood. Covering my mouth with my hand, I stumble away from the door, fall on my bottom, and then roll over, taking off and crying out in fear when light floods the hall. I hear my mom yell something behind me.

Running to the kitchen, I grab the phone that sits on the counter and a knife from the butcher block. I go to my room, not hearing anything behind me as I scurry into the back of my closet and hide in the crawlspace where I used to play when I was little. Breathing heavily, I dial nine-one-one on the phone and wait only one ring for the operator to pick up.

“911, what's your emergency?”

Clutching the knife to my chest, my voice chokes as I whisper, “My mom just killed my dad.”

YOU'RE A LINT-LICKER

SVEN

“GET ON YOUR knees,” I tell the blonde in front of me. One thing the women who want me to fuck them learn right away is that I don’t say anything twice. Watching her eyes flare, she drops to her knees and her hands go behind her back. Her thighs spread, showing off her bare pussy.

“Open your mouth,” I murmur, running my hand softly along her jaw in approval. When her head lifts and she looks up, I feed her my dick inch by inch until it hits the back of her throat. Hearing her gag, I pull back, only to surge forward again.

“Lick it, just the tip,” I command, watching her tongue swirl around the crown then press into her mouth, letting my head fall back as she bobs up and down along my length until I feel that familiar rush in my spine.

“Stop,” I growl, pulling her to her feet, turning her to face my desk and bending her over the top. Hearing her moan I kick her feet apart and roll the condom on. My hands slide around her waist, one cupping her breasts and the other zeroing in on her clit, skimming over it as her hips tip back and I slide in. This is only about one thing; it’s only *ever* about one thing. Stroking in and out of her, I feel her walls begin to spasm as I plant myself to the hilt and drop forward, coming hard. I take a second to catch my breath, and I can still feel her shaking in my arms as I pull out and step back.

“You can go,” I tell her, pulling off the condom and tying it off before walking into the adjoining bathroom, tossing it in

the toilet, and then washing my hands and dick.

“I can go?” she repeats, not moving away from my desk or adjusting her dress that is still up around her waist. Turning to look at her, I’m sure she’s someone’s daughter or sister; she may even be a nice girl, but she means nothing to me. Like all the other women that my security asks to come up here, they come without knowing anything about me except what the rumors are.

“Yes, you can go,” I tell her, tucking myself back in and adjusting my shirt before walking over to my desk and taking a seat.

“You’re a prick,” she mumbles, wiggling her dress back down over her ass and stomping in her heels across the carpet to her bag that she dropped on the couch when she came in.

“You got what you wanted,” I remind her as she angrily shoves her arm through the strap of her bag. I may be a dick, but I didn’t fill her head with false expectations before fucking her and telling her to get out. She knew what was going to happen before she walked her ass up the stairs to my office, or at least she had a good idea of what was going to occur, and I sure as hell didn’t force her to her knees to suck me off.

“Whatever,” she says, looking at me once more, and I know from the look in her eyes that all I’d have to do is call her back and she would come. Annoyed by that, I look down at the spreadsheet in front of me, hearing the door slam hard.

Turning my chair, I look out over the club through the large window. There are hundreds of people below and some nights, like tonight, I’ll scan the floor and tell my security which woman I want. They’ll approach her and give her the choice to come to me or not. I have never had a woman say no, and most of the time they leave happy. But then there are times they leave pissed, because they think their pussy is made of gold and I should ask for seconds or drop a ring on their finger. Scanning the club, a flash of light catches my attention, and my eyes land on a woman who is between two guys with her phone in her hand. She is pointing at them then her cell phone. Normally, I wouldn’t think much about it, but

something in the woman's eyes isn't right. Picking the phone up off my desk, I dial two.

"Already on it," Zack, the head of my security, states and hangs up. Moving back to the window, I watch Zack and Lane approach her through the crowd then frown. She's not dressed like she's out for a night of fun with her friends; she looks like she's wearing pajamas, and not even the sexy kind. Living in Sin City, you see a lot of shit, and chicks show up to the club in the strangest outfits, especially if they are having a bachelorette party.

Once Zack reaches her, he shoves one of the guys toward Lane then bends his face toward the woman, who lifts her phone to him. Squinting, I try to make out what's on the screen, but the distance and lighting in the club makes it difficult to see anything. Shaking his head, the woman points at the phone again, and Zack touches his ear as my desk phone rings.

"Yeah?"

"She's looking for someone who drugged her sister," Zack says over the music and the crowd downstairs.

"Drugged and beat the crap out of my sister, at this club," the woman screams into the mic.

"Bring her up," I snarl, hanging up the phone, lifting my jacket from the back of my chair, slipping it on, and then straightening my tie. I don't need this shit—not right now, not while all this other shit is going on around me. Over the last few months, a multitude of women have been drugged while partying here, but no one has ever gotten hurt—no one I'm aware of anyway.

"Put me down right now!" the woman yells, kicking her feet and hitting Zack in the back as she enters my office over his shoulder. Lowering her to the ground, he grunts as she pokes him in his chest and yells, "I'm not paying for your chiropractor bills, you giant, overgrown jerk."

"Miss, can you please have a seat?" I ask, and her head turns toward me, her big honey-colored eyes catching me off

guard. Seeing the look in her gaze does some shit to my chest that makes me uncomfortable.

Pulling my eyes from hers, I sweep them down the length of her body.

I have no fucking idea how she got into the club wearing pajamas, but she did. The blue plaid bottoms that are about four sizes too big are dragging under her flip-flops. The thin, tight, white tank top she has on allows a glimpse of her breasts and dark nipples. I wouldn't say she's fat; she's all curves, with large breasts and wide hips. Her long, dark hair is in a low ponytail, and her face is round and soft, almost innocent-looking. She's beautiful in a way I'm not accustomed to.

"How did you get in here?" I ask when my eyes meet hers once more.

"I paid the guy at the front a hundred dollars to let me in," she says, glaring at me and crossing her arms over her chest, accentuating her cleavage. Looking over the top of her head, my eyes meet Zack's and he nods before stepping out of the office, closing the door behind him.

"Do you want to tell me why you're here?" I ask, taking a seat and motioning for her to do the same across from me.

"My sister was here earlier tonight," she says, reaching into the top of her tank top, pulling out a cellphone that must be twenty years old, flipping it open, and shoving it across the desk. Picking the phone up, the grainy image of a smiling woman who looks similar to the one across from me is on the screen. She's much slimmer than her sister, so slim she looks ill.

"You told Zack she was drugged here and beat up. If you don't mind me asking, why aren't the police here instead of you?" I query, watching her face close down almost instantly.

"If this is some kind of ploy to get money, it won't work," I tell her, pushing the cell phone back across the top of the desk.

"A ploy to get money? Do you mean like blackmail?" she growls, grabbing the phone and clasping it tightly in her hand.

“That’s exactly what I mean.” I nod, watching her stand.

“You’re a...you’re a real lint-licker, you know that?” She paces in front of my desk, lifting her hand and pulling out her hair tie, allowing her mane to cascade down her back and over her shoulders.

“Lint-licker,” I repeat, trying not to smile as I watch her.

“Lint-licker.” She nods then stops pacing and turns to look at me.

“I don’t want money. The police won’t come, because my sister isn’t healthy. She has a drug problem, and they don’t care what happens to her. She’s just one more faceless druggie in a sea of fricking druggies. But I love her. She’s my sister, so I want to find the scum buckets who did what they did and turn them in myself,” she says, and my hackles instantly rise.

“You’re never coming back here again,” I snarl, standing and placing my hands on the top of my desk, leaning onto them.

“You can’t stop me.” She shrugs, and just like that, she turns her back on me and leaves my office before I can even comprehend what just happened. Following after her, I run downstairs through the crowded club. Once I reach the front entrance, I catch a glimpse of her right before she gets into a car the size of my desk and takes off down the street.

“Everything okay, Boss?” Turning my head to look over my shoulder, I glance at Zack and shake my head.

“She’s gonna be a problem,” I warn him, rubbing my chest as I head back inside.

“BOSS, SHE’S HERE again.” Glaring at Teo, who just stepped into my office, I turn to search through the large glass window that looks out over the club floor below. Spotting her sitting at the bar with a drink in front of her, I know it’s cranberry juice, the only thing she ever orders.

“Who the fuck let her in this time?” I ask turning around, watching Lane shrug and a smile with a twitch in his lips.

“Zack said he was going to ask Maggie if she wanted a job.” He smiles.

“Who the hell is Maggie?”

“The girl...that’s her name. Maggie.”

“You guys are on a first name basis now?” I ask, leaning back in my chair and tilting my head back, feeling a headache coming on.

“Well, she’s here everyday. It would be rude not to know her name.”

“This shit’s getting ridiculous,” I mutter to the ceiling. The damn woman has shown up every night over the last two weeks. She gets here when the club opens and stays ‘til closing. She no longer asks people if they know her sister, but she does inspect drinks, and talks to the women at the bar about making sure they are being safe. She is driving me fucking crazy.

“She’s kinda cute.” Lowering my head, I look at Teo and narrow my eyes, watching him raise his hands in front of him.

“But she has a boyfriend,” he adds with a smile.

“Who?” I ask without thinking.

“Don’t know.” He shrugs, walking over to the window, looking down toward the bar.

“Well, the guy is obviously a piece of shit if he lets his woman out of the house every night to come to a club alone,” I mutter under my breath.

“What are you going to do about her?” he questions, turning to look at me.

“Give her a job,” I half joke. She’s persistent as fuck, and if things keep going the way they have been, she’s going to end up causing trouble, and I don’t need anymore trouble. *At least, that’s the lie I’m telling myself.*

“You do need a new assistant.”

“Fuck no,” I snap, loosening my tie. The last assistant I had ended up being a clusterfuck. The woman was pissed that I wouldn’t fuck her. I finally had to fire her ass when she brought another woman up to my office and proceeded to try and get me to join them on my couch when I walked in on them half naked. Work is work. Yes, I might invite women up to fuck, but never anyone I work with.

“It’s not like she’s your type,” he says, and I feel my jaw tick. “Besides, if she’s up here with you, she’ll stop harassing the men down there.” He nods toward where she’s sitting and my eyes follow the movement, seeing her talking to a girl who looks a little startled by whatever it is Maggie is telling her.

“It’s not happening. You guys need to keep her out of the club,” I tell him, turning away from the window.

“Just saying it would be a good way to keep an eye on her,” he gripes, patting my shoulder before leaving my office and closing the door behind him.

Letting out a frustrated breath, I turn away from the window and try to focus on all the shit I need to get done.

“Yeah,” I pick up my desk phone when it beeps and looking at the clock, seeing that an hour has passed since Teo left.

“Look out your window,” Zack says, and I spin my chair around and scan the floor, wondering what he wants me to see. Then I spot Maggie with a man’s head tucked under her arm as she leads him toward the front of the club, with Lane and Zack following closely behind them.

“What the fuck is going on?”

“That guy tried to put something in some chick’s drink, and Maggie saw him and went postal on his ass,” he explains almost proudly.

“Jesus Christ, what the fuck do I pay you for?” I gripe.

“I saw the whole thing. I was getting ready to step in when she stood up on her barstool, jumped on the guy’s back, and then did some fucking ninja shit, wrapping her arm around the

guy's head and forcing him to his knees. She won't let him go. She said she wants to ask him some questions."

"I'm on my way down," I say, slamming down the phone and jerking open the door to my office, taking the stairs two at a time. Reaching the front of the club, I see Zack holding the guy and Lane's arms wrapped around Maggie's waist, trying to drag her away.

"What the fuck is going on?" I roar, and all eyes come to me except Maggie's, who takes the opportunity to grab the man's ear and twist, making him drop hard to the ground on his knees.

"You think it's funny to drug innocent women, you flaming turd bucket?" she yells, hitting the top of the guy's bald head, and Zack chuckles along with Lane, but I don't see one damn thing that's funny about this shit.

"Maggie, let him go and come here," I growl, and she raises her eyes to meet mine, looking startled.

"He—"

"I said get your ass over here now!" I yell, cutting her off and feeling the vein in my neck bulge as I point to the ground at my feet.

"Fine." She pouts, letting the guy go, walking sullenly toward me as Zack pulls the man to his feet, taking him with him around the corner, with Lane following behind them with his phone to his ear. I'm sure they are going to have a talk and wait for the cops.

"Let's go," I say, wrapping my hand around the back of her neck, leading her through the club and up the stairs to my office. Sitting her in the chair in front of my desk, I walk over to the cabinets where I keep my personal bottle of scotch and pull out the cap. I then lift the bottle to my lips, taking a swig while trying to calm down.

"Alcohol isn't good for you," she informs me as I take a seat behind my desk.

"Do I look like I give a fuck about that?" I ask her, taking another swig.

“You might not care about what it can do to your body right now, but you may want to know that it lowers sperm count and stamina in the long run.”

“Jesus.” I shake my head and rub my eyes in aggravation.

“Just saying it’s not good for you,” she mutters, dropping her eyes to her lap.

“What happened downstairs isn’t okay, Mags.”

“Maggie,” she corrects, still not looking at me.

“Whatever,” I drone, taking another swig. “You could have gotten hurt.”

“I have a black belt—”

“Look at me,” I demand, cutting her off and slamming the bottle down on the top of the desk, waiting for her eyes to meet mine. “You could have gotten hurt or worse. Do you understand that? He could have had a weapon on him.”

“You don’t understand,” she whispers as tears fill her eyes, but I harden myself against them, needing her to understand this isn’t a fucking movie. This is real life, and there are bad—*really* fucking bad—people in this world.

“You’re not allowed on the club floor anymore,” I state firmly.

“I’m going to find the guys who hurt my sister,” she states, and I see the determination in her eyes that make me proud and pissed at the same time.

“If you come, you come to my office, and if something happens down there”—I point to the club floor over my shoulder—“you’ll be the first to know.”

“Why would I come to your office? I need to be at the bar where I can see what’s going on.”

“You just got the job as my new assistant,” I tell her, watching her frown while wondering what the fuck I’m doing. This chick is a distraction I do not need right now, or ever for that matter.

“I already have a job,” she says as her frown grows deeper.

“Well, quit. You’re here every night, Mags, and you don’t leave ‘til the club closes at one. I can tell by the bags under your eyes that you’re exhausted.”

“Why would you want me to work here?”

Now, isn’t that the million dollar question?

“Either take me up on my offer, or I’m going to have a restraining order placed against you and you won’t be allowed within a few hundred feet of the club.” I shrug like it’s all the same to me.

“You know this is malarkey, right?” she stands and I take her in fully for the first time tonight. Her loose, sheer, black dress is cinched with a thin belt emphasizing the dip in her waist between her full hips and breasts. Her hair is down in a mass of messy waves, and her makeup is subtle but still draws attention to her eyes, which look even more golden now that she’s standing in front of me looking pissed off.

“I’m not messing around with you anymore either. You take me up on my deal, or I’ll call the police and have them escort you off the premises,” I tell her, ignoring the fact I’m getting hard just looking at her.

“This is total crap,” she mumbles, looking around before meeting my eyes again.

“Take it or leave it.”

“Jeez, can I have a second to think?” she cries, and I feel my lips twitch, so I rub my hand down over my mouth to hide it.

“Ten,” I state, watching her eyes narrow.

“Nine...eight...seven...” I continue counting, watching as she looks at me like she’s ready to kill me.

“Six,” I raise a brow.

“Five...”

“Fine!” she yells when I open my mouth to finish my countdown.

“Thought so,” I say triumphantly.

“You’re such a...you’re such a bigasterd,” she growls.

“A what?” I ask, and I can’t help it, I laugh at that one.

“When do I start?” she asks, ignoring my question while red spreads across her cheeks and down her neck.

“Tomorrow. Be here at five, and I’ll show you around the club and tell you your responsibilities.”

“Fine.”

“Now, let’s go. I have shit to do,” I tell her, standing and putting on my suit jacket.

“What?” she asks, backing up.

“I’m taking you to your car,” I tell her, walking past her toward the door.

“I can walk myself,” she says as her brows pull inward.

“Yeah, and I know you are your own brand of chaos, so I can’t leave you alone in the club until we build up the trust between us.”

“That is so...so stupid,” she mutters looking adorable.

“Now,” I tell her, swinging the door open and motioning her out ahead of me.

“Lint-licker,” she murmurs under her breath as she passes and then stomps down the stairs in front of me, giving me a view of her ass and legs that will be burned into my brain for years. Once we reach the club floor, I wrap my hand around the back of her neck, gaining a glare from her that I ignore as I lead her through the crowd.

Passing Teo, who is manning the front door, I give him a chin lift, watching his eyes dart between Maggie and me.

“You good?” I hear him ask, thinking he’s talking to me. I look at him like, *Why the fuck are you asking that?* Then I see his eyes are on Maggie.

“Yeah, thanks, Teo. Have a good night,” she says softly, smiling at him, which pisses me off.

“Where’s your car?” Her eyes fly to me, losing the softness instantly and she try’s to pull away.

“Down two blocks. I can walk myself. We’re outside, so you don’t have to worry about me causing any problems.”

“Come on.” I ignore her and take her hand, feeling the softness of it against my palm, and then tighten my fingers when she tries to pull away again.

Walking the two blocks, I try to understand what’s going on in my head. I have never let a woman effect me, but this woman has done just that without even realizing it, and I have no idea what the hell I’m going to do about it.

“This is my car,” she tells me, forcefully tugging her hand free of mine.

Looking at the car, my anger comes back tenfold. The thing looks like I could pick it up and toss it with one hand tied behind my back. It sure as hell doesn’t look safe for anyone to drive, especially in this town.

“What the hell is this?” I ask, watching her pull a key out of her bra—where I’m thinking she must keep everything, since the last time I was with her, that’s where her phone was.

“It’s a car.” She rolls her eyes.

“This is a death trap, Mags. One little bump in this piece of shit and you’re done,” I say, running a hand through my hair.

“It’s Maggie, M-A-G-G-I-E, Sven, and it’s safe. Plus, it’s good for the environment.”

“Yeah, because it kills people off, so there is one less person on Earth to fuck it up.”

“You’re very dramatic and you curse a lot,” she says, pushing me back a step, getting in behind the wheel, and slamming the door. Once the car is on, she rolls down the window. “See you tomorrow, Boss.”

“Drive carefully, and call the club when you get home,” I tell her, knowing she doesn’t have my cell number, which I’m going to have to fix tomorrow. Plus, I’ll get her a phone that

isn't from the dark ages and tell her it's for work, because I know she won't take it any other way.

“Yeah, I'm not calling you, but I'll see you tomorrow,” she retorts and then pulls out of the small space, narrowly missing a car that's passing by. Letting out an annoyed sigh, I turn and walk back to the club, mumbling under my breath the whole way, asking myself what the fuck am I doing?

SHOW ME THE MONEY

MAGGIE

LOOKING AT MYSELF in my full-length mirror, I turn to the side and make sure I look okay. Since I'm working with Sven, who I've seen wear nothing but suits, I chose to wear my sheer black sleeveless dress shirt with a high collar that ties with a bow at my neck. My cream colored high waisted skirt fits snugly against my curves leaving my legs bare, showcasing one of my favorite pairs of leopard-print heels that have a pointy toe and a thin, spiked heel.

I left my long hair down except for my bangs, which I swept to the side and pinned back away from my face. I kept my makeup minimal, with just mascara and a little blush, not really in the mood to do a full face of makeup. Picking up my bag from my bed, I head into the living room where I find my sister, Morgan, sitting on the couch, watching TV. She has healed a lot over the last couple weeks, but she's still carrying bruises that remind me of what could have happened, that I could have lost her.

"Are you going to work?" she asks, pressing pause on the show she's watching.

"Yeah, there are leftovers in the fridge if you get hungry. I'm not sure what time I'll be home, but if you need me, I have my cell on me," I tell her as I pick up my car keys from the counter in the kitchen.

"I can take care of myself," she grumbles, picking up a bag of Cheetos from the coffee table.

“I know,” I agree, not wanting to point out that she’s done a horrible job of taking care of herself so far.

“I may go out tonight,” she says casually as she un-pauses the show she’s watching.

“Where?” I ask while my tightly controlled facade slips.

“I don’t know. Amy called and said I needed to get out of the house, and I agreed with her.”

I hate my sister’s best friend. I’ve never trusted her, and anytime Morgan has gotten in trouble, Amy has been involved in one way or another.

“You still have bruises from the last time you went out with her,” I point out hoping she will see for herself the kind of friend Amy really is.

“It’s not fair for you to make what happened seem like Amy’s fault.”

“Will you call and tell me where you’re going?” I ask, knowing it’s completely pointless to argue with her about her relationship with Amy. I don’t think she will ever see how being friends with her is affecting her.

“I’ll call,” she says absently while shoving her hand into the bag of Cheetos on her lap and looking at the TV.

“Love you,” I tell her, getting a nod in return before heading out the front door and down the stairs to my car.

Walking into Sven’s office, I fight the instinct to turn around and run right back out when I see he’s on the phone. I have no idea what I was thinking agreeing to come work for him, but then again, my life has been a series of events just like this one.

“Hold on, Mags,” he says, startling me.

Pulling his phone away from his ear, he motions for me to take a seat in one of the two dark blue, velvet high-back chairs in front of his large oak desk. Rolling my eyes at him, I take a seat, watching the corner of his mouth lift before he covers it

with his hand. I hate that he calls me Mags—or that’s what I’m telling myself, anyway. But then again, it’s better than the nickname my parents gave me at my spirit ceremony, when they called down the moon goddess while standing naked in the middle of a field on my tenth birthday. I think I’m still traumatized by that experience.

Crossing one leg over the other I pull in a breath while I study him. Sven is gorgeous in a way that is completely unfair to the rest of the men on Earth. He’s tall enough that I could wear my six-inch heels and he would still tower over me. His body is lean, with just the right amount of muscle. His dark blond hair is overgrown on top and little shorter on the sides, giving him an unkempt, sexy look. His eyes are a startling blue that look green when he’s angry, and the long, dark lashes that surround them make them appear that much more enticing.

His nose is straight, his cheekbones are high, and his lips are full and are surrounded by a five o’clock shadow that takes his hotness up a few notches. He looks like he could be on the cover of GQ—hell, for all I know, he *has* been on the cover. The few nights I sat down at the bar, I heard women talk about him, and from what I gathered most of the female population of Vegas knows who he is. I swear every single leggy blonde, redhead, and brunette knew exactly who he was by name, and judging by the way they spoke about him, they probably screamed it a few times.

“Nice of you to show up, Mags,” he says, pulling me out of my perusal and setting his phone on top of the desk. Sitting up a little taller, I narrow my eyes and watch as he walks around the desk toward me, unbuttoning his suit jacket and taking a seat on top of the wooden surface, leaning a little closer than necessary.

“You said be here at five, it’s five.” I hold up my hand when it looks like he’s going to say something else.

“And we need to discuss my salary,” I state, uncrossing my legs then re-crossing them in the other direction, ignoring the way his eyes watch the movement and change color.

“Salary?” He frowns, and I can’t help the smile that forms on my lips at the confusion on his face.

“Yes, my salary. I mean, you didn’t actually think I was going to come work for you for free, did you?” I ask, raising my brow.

“Of course not. I’ll start you off at thirty-five thousand—”

“Yeah, that’s not going to work for me. At my old job, the one I just quit to come work for you, I made one hundred and seventy-five thousand a year, with four weeks paid vacation and one week sick pay,” I say, cutting him off. I actually make much more than that modeling, but he doesn’t need to know that.

“Where the hell did you work?” he growls, making my girly parts tingle.

Ignoring my body’s reaction to him, I wave my hand around in front of me and continue, “That doesn’t matter now, so since I’m just starting out here, I’ll take one hundred and fifty thousand, but I want the same for paid days off, including sick days.”

“*No.*”

“Yes.”

“Jesus, what the fuck was I thinking?” he asks, tilting his head back and looking toward the ceiling for an answer to his question.

“You’re thinking you just got yourself the best assistant money can buy,” I retort then press my lips together to keep from smiling at the look of gloom on his face when his eyes meet mine.

Running his hand through his hair, his eyes scan me over and he shakes his head. “Fine, but you’re at my beck and call. That means twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, if I call, you come running.”

“I don’t work weekends.” I smirk then wonder why the hell I love fighting with him so much.

His eyes study me for a long time, so long that I fight the urge to squirm in my seat. “Fine, but five days a week, you’re mine twenty-four seven.”

“Sure.” I shrug, knowing he has no idea what he’s in for.

“So what do you want me to do today?” I ask looking around his office, noticing it’s tidy. The top of his desk is clean with his top of the line computer and a neat stack of papers. The upper and lower cabinets to the right of his desk with a counter between are bare, only a crystal decanter that is half full of dark liquid and two glasses sitting on top. The leather couch behind me with the round, rustic wooden coffee table is clean with a stack of books on top, which I’m certain no one has ever read and is there just for show.

Everything seems to have a specific spot, but there is nothing overly personal in the space. Not a single picture of family or friends, no mementos of places he’s gone. It looks like a magazine ad for a man’s office. The little devil, who has taken up a place on my shoulder since meeting Sven, is begging me to move stuff around just to see what will happen if I do, while the angel on the other side is shaking her head in disapproval.

Frowning, he looks at me then glances around as well before bringing his gaze back to mine. “There are some orders that need to be filled. You can watch me do that, and then I’ll take you down, show you around the club, and introduce you to everyone.”

“It’s your show, Boss.” I smile and watch him take off his suit jacket and lay it neatly over the edge of the desk, and then I scoot back in my chair as he walks toward me so he can pick up the chair next to mine. Carrying the chair around the desk, he sets it down next to his on the opposite side.

“You can sit here...unless you want to sit on my lap?” He smirks while nodding to the chair he placed next to his.

“Does shizzle like that actually work for you?” I ask him, standing from the chair I’m currently sitting in and walking around to take the seat.

“Do you ever curse?” he counters, ignoring my question, and I feel his knee lean against my thigh.

“Yes.” I shrug. I may not curse with the same words he does, but the meaning is the same.

“Say ‘fuck,’” he challenges me with a raise of his brow.

“Frick.” I smile, pulling my leg away from his when it seems he’s not going to move.

“That’s not the same thing.”

“Says who? Everyday, words are added to the English language. Who’s to say that ‘frick’ won’t mean the word you said in a few years?”

“You’re something else,” he mutters under his breath while his eyes stay locked on mine.

“Are you going to show me what I need to know, or stare at me all day?” I question, pointing to the screen, needing him to look away, because him looking at me is causing a range of emotions I’m not comfortable with to run through me.

“I’m definitely going to show you something,” he grunts, pulling his eyes from mine. Sitting back, I ignore the warm feeling in my lower belly and watch for an hour as he shows me how to use the computer system to place orders for the club. Then, I follow him down to the club floor, where he introduces me to everyone and shows me around.

“I’m going to order in some food. Would you like something?” I ask Sven, standing from the couch, where he told me to sit three hours ago after handing me one of the most boring books in the world about Vegas night club codes and policies.

Stretching, I look at him and frown, noticing he hasn’t moved.

“Sven,” I repeat, walking toward his desk. “Hey.” I snap my fingers close to his ear, making him jump.

“Are you okay?” he asks, running his hands through his hair.

“I need food. Would you like anything?” I repeat, looking at the clock on the wall and seeing it’s a little after eleven.

“Sure,” he mutters, reaching into his back pocket, pulling out his wallet, and holding it out toward me.

“Do you have any preference?” I ask, ignoring his outstretched hand.

“I’ll have whatever you’re having,” he says, taking a hundred dollar bill from his wallet, attempting to hand it to me instead.

“Are you sure you want to eat what I’m eating?” I inquire as he frowns, studying me then the money in his hand.

Shaking his hand, he shoves the money toward me again. “I’m sure, now take the money.”

“I can buy my own food.” I grab my cell phone from the top of his desk, where I plugged it in to charge.

“You’re not paying,” he states, standing.

Ignoring him, I turn on my heel and leave the office, hearing his curse as I head to the bottom of the stairs, where I make a call to one of my favorite Indian restaurants before heading through the club to wait outside for the delivery.

“Does Boss Man know you’re out here?” Teo asks me as I step through the doors and to the side, smiling at a group of men who say hi as they pass me on their way inside the club.

“He knows I’m getting food,” I tell him, wrapping my arms around myself as the night air moves across my exposed skin, sending a chill through me. I met Teo the first night I showed up here after my sister was attacked. He took a hundred dollars from me and let me into the club. The second time I came back, he took another hundred from me, but on the third he gave me all my money back.

“Didn’t jump anyone on your way out?” he questions with a grin before taking money from a couple in line.

“Ha, ha. Very funny,” I mutter, but feel my cheeks burn at the thought of what happened yesterday when I was here.

“Just asking.” He laughs as I lean back against the wall, cringing when three women step to the front of the line wearing what looks like skimpy lingerie. This is Vegas, so their choice of attire doesn’t really surprise me, but as a woman, I will never understand the need to wear clothes that leave nothing to the imagination.

“Did that guy get arrested?” I ask quietly as the women head into the club.

“He got arrested and is still waiting bond.”

“That’s good,” I say, letting out a relieved breath that at least one creep is off the streets for now.

“How’s your sister?” he asks, folding his large body in half as he sits on a small metal stool that looks ready to give out under his weight.

“She’s doing better,” I respond softly, leaning my head back to look up at the night sky.

“Here.”

I look down at his extended hand and the card he’s holding out to me.

“What’s this?” I ask, taking the card from him. The front is blank, and the back only has a phone number.

“If your sister wants help, I know some people who can give it to her,” he says quietly, and I study him for a long-time, wondering how he knows. Tears fill my eyes as I nod holding the card tightly in my hand, wishing it were as easy as making a phone call.

“Sometimes, you don’t have a choice and you have to let go,” he mutters, but lucky for me, I don’t have to respond because the delivery driver for the food I ordered pulls up just in time. Paying for the food with a fifty, I tell the driver to keep the change then walk past Teo, giving him a short wave as I head back into the building and around the packed club floor. Spotting Zack, Sven’s head of security, at the bottom of the stairs that lead to his office, I feel a smile form on my lips as his eyes lock on mine.

“Hey, Maggie,” he greets softly, leaning in to press a light kiss to my cheek. Zack is a beautiful black man, with large, bulky muscles, dark, creamy skin, a bald head, and soft, soulful eyes. He is the kind of man I normally find myself dating, and is the opposite of my current boyfriend of seven months, Wyatt.

I met Wyatt on a photo shoot we did together when I was working on an ad campaign for one of my favorite plus-size brands. Wyatt is the boy-next-door type, with sun kissed skin, dark blond hair, and blue eyes. He’s not much taller than me, and I can never wear heels when we go out, but his smile and gentle manner make being with him easy.

“You okay?”

“Great.”

I smile then feel my spine stiffen when a woman asks in a squeaky voice, “Is Sven upstairs?”

Looking at her I notice she’s one of the women from outside wearing lingerie. Grinning, her friends come to stand on either side of her.

“Sorry, doll. He’s not accepting company at this time,” Zack says, and something in my chest pinches.

“Well, I brought my friends this time. Can’t you call and ask him to look down here? Maybe he’ll change his mind when he sees us,” she says with a pout.

“I’m gonna head up,” I say softly, getting a soft look and a nod from Zack as I head up the stairs as quickly as my heels will take me. Getting to the door at the top, I take a deep breath push it open and step inside.

“Is it safe to walk barefoot in here?” I ask Sven, who stands from behind his desk as I turn to shut the door behind me.

“Why are you asking that?” he questions, walking toward me.

“I don’t know how much DNA is on the floor, and my heels are killing me,” I tell him as he takes the bags from my

hands.

“DNA?” He frowns, placing the bags on the coffee table, then turns toward me crossing his arms over his chest. I notice that while I was gone, he lost his tie and unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt, exposing his tan neck.

“Well, a group of women—who obviously don’t understand that it’s called Victoria’s *Secret* for a reason—are downstairs. They’re asking to come up to play with you, because their friend was up here a couple weeks ago, and now they want to see if it’s all hype.”

“Jesus,” he mutters, rubbing his jaw and looking toward the door like he expects them to break it down.

“Don’t worry, Zack is down there standing guard. But can I take my shoes off, or should I leave them on?”

“Take off your damn shoes, Mags,” he prowls past me to the door, slamming it behind him as he leaves.

“Alrighty then,” I mumble to the empty office as I kick off my shoes off by the door. Going to the couch, I pause and then turn around, going to the bathroom I grab the can of Lysol to spray the couch and the floor.

“What the hell are you doing?” Sven asks, making me jump. I was so caught up in disinfecting that I didn’t even hear him come in.

“Disinfecting,” I tell him with a wave of the Lysol can, which he grabs away from me and takes back to the bathroom, coming back a second later looking annoyed as he waves his hand in front of his face.

“If you want, I can leave for a little while and come back when you’re done with playtime and in a better mood,” I offer, watching as a smile twitches his lips.

“Stop being a smartass and feed me,” he mutters, unbuttoning the cuffs of his shirt and rolling them up, giving me a glimpse at tattoos I never would have guessed he had. “Earth to Mags.”

Untying the bow at my neck that has suddenly gotten too tight, I take a seat on the couch, noticing he hasn't moved.

"Do you have drinks? I didn't even think about ordering any," I add, ignoring whatever look it is he's giving me.

"What would you like?" he asks gruffly before clearing his throat.

"Do you have any juice?" I question as I pull the food out of the bag and set it on the coffee table.

"Sure." He grabs two bottles of orange juice from the fridge then takes a seat next to me on the couch.

"What did you order?" he asks, opening the Styrofoam containers and sniffing the contents.

"Vegetable korma, tikka masala, and cheese naan," I say as I hand him a napkin and a fork. Then, I dish out rice on two plates and hand him one.

"Where's the meat?" he questions with a frown as I add vegetable korma to my plate.

"You said you would eat what I was eating," I remind him, taking the plate I handed him out of his hand, spooning out the tikka masala onto the rice, and then handing it back to him.

"Is this tofu?" He pokes one of the chunks of tofu with his fork while his face scrunches up like a little boy who was told he had to eat his vegetables.

"It's good. Try it," I encourage him while scooping up some with my fork and holding it near his mouth like I used to do with the kids I babysat.

"Are you seriously trying to feed me right now?" he asks as his eyes shine with amusement.

"Sorry," I mumble, and begin to pull away the fork, but before I can, his mouth closes around the fork and my eyes lock onto his lips, feeling my core clench. I watch him chew, and then laugh when he grimaces.

"That's awful."

“Try this.” I scoop up some of the korma from my plate and hold it out toward him. This time, his eyes lock on mine as his mouth closes around the fork. The look in their blue-green depths has my pulse singing in my ears. Swallowing, I pull the utensil away then drop my eyes from his to his mouth.

“Better,” he says roughly as his warm hand comes up and wraps around my lower jaw. Startled, my gaze meets his for a moment before his eyes drop to my mouth and he begins to lean in.

“Let’s eat before it gets cold,” I blurt, turning my head so his hand is forced to let me go.

“You can have this, since you don’t like the tikka,” I tell him, handing him my plate and fork and taking his off his lap while avoiding looking at him. Settling back into the couch, I stuff my mouth with a piece of naan and chew slowly so I don’t do something absolutely dumb, like push him back onto the couch, rip off his shirt, and see if he’s hiding anymore tattoos.

“So either you’re a vegetarian, or you’re testing me,” he says, and I chew then swallow before looking at him.

“I’m a vegetarian,” I agree, watching him sit back and place his ankle to his knee.

“Why?”

“Why what?” I frown.

“Why are you a vegetarian?”

“It’s just something I’ve always done. My parents are vegetarians, and they raised me to be one.”

“Have you ever tried meat?”

“Once, when I was in high school. There was never much on the lunch menu for vegetarians. I’m a big girl and was starving to death most days, so I attempted to eat meatloaf. That was the first...and last time,” I add with a smile as his eyes rake over me.

“You’re not big,” he states, almost like he’s offended on my behalf.

“I love my body and have accepted it for what it is. I have a pooch, hips, and an ass. When I was young, I would get teased, but now I know I have the body of a woman and I’m okay with who I am.”

“You should be. You’re beautiful,” he responds immediately, the sincerity of his words and the look in his eyes making my belly warm.

Wow. I don’t know what to say to that, since most men who look like him wouldn’t even glance in my direction.

“Where’s your boyfriend?” he asks, catching me off guard while he leans forward and takes a piece of nan out of the foil on the table.

“Who told you I have a boyfriend?” I frown.

“The guys said you mentioned him.”

“Oh,” I mumble, lifting my feet to the couch and resting my plate on top of my knees. “He lives in Seattle, but is here in town most weekends.”

“How does he feel about you working here?”

“He’s okay with it.” I shrug. Wyatt doesn’t really have strong opinions about anything. I know he cares about me, but he’s not the kind of man to say, *‘No, you can’t do this or that.’* He’s much too passive for that.

“Really?” he asks with a tone laced with disbelief.

“Yeah.” I shrug again.

“So you only see him when he’s in town...like you’re a booty call?” he questions, making my cheeks heat in embarrassment and my spine stiffen in annoyance.

“Wyatt is a perfect gentlemen,” I hiss, setting my feet to the floor. No way will I tell him that I’m saving my virginity until I find the man I know I will spend the rest of my life with. Since I was a little girl, I have watched my parents, their friends, and my sister sleep around like sex means nothing to them. Hell, when I was sixteen, my mom and dad told me that I was free to have sex with whoever I wanted, and even invited me to one of their free love parties. I just couldn’t do it. And

yes, I tried at other times, but every time things got to the point where sex was imminent, I would close down.

“It’s just a question,” he says low, like that should make me feel better about him being an intrusive jerk.

“How often do you sleep with women you meet in this club?” I ask, and his jaw tics.

“What? It’s just a question.” I get up from the couch and take my plate to the garbage can, shoving it in with a little more force than necessary.

“Come sit down, Mags.”

“No.”

“I won’t bring up Wyatt again,” he says, spitting Wyatt’s name out like it tastes bad.

“Good, my relationship is none of your business,” I tell him firmly, crossing my arms over my chest.

“For now.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I cry, throwing my arms in the air.

“He’s bound to come up eventually, Mags. You work here, remember?”

“So you’re telling me that I have the right to ask you about the women you’re spending time with outside of the time we’re working together?” I ask, watching his nostrils flare and his eyes dilate in anger.

“I didn’t think so. I expect the same respect I’m showing you,” I tell him, slipping on my shoes.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” he asks, watching my every move.

“I’m using one of my sick days. I suddenly don’t feel so great,” I retort, grabbing my purse from the hook near the door and swinging it over my shoulder. Giving him one last look, I leave the office before he can stop me. The moment I get downstairs, I spot Zack coming toward me with his hand on his ear, and I know he’s speaking with Sven.

“I’ll walk you.”

“I’ll walk myself.” I shake off his hand and rush through the club and out the front door.

“You okay?” Teo asks when he spots me.

“Fine, have a good night,” I say, giving him a shaky smile as I hurry past him to my car. I know it seems like I’m running, but I don’t like the feelings Sven evokes in me, even if it’s because it’s the first time I’ve felt them in a long time.

HER NAME'S MAGGIE, NOT
MAGS

MAGGIE

“SO HOW LONG is it going to be until you talk to me?” Sven asks as soon as I open the office door and step inside. Carrying my cup of coffee in one hand and a stack of folders in the other, I balance them carefully as I turn and use my foot to kick the door closed. It’s been three days since our blow up, and in those three days we haven’t spoken...or I should say *I* haven’t spoken to *him* unless it has to do with work. No one has ever set me off the way he had, and that alone gave me pause when dealing with him.

“I talk to you everyday,” I murmur as I place the stack of folders on his desk then use my coffee as an excuse to avoid looking at him directly.

“You ask me what you need to do, but avoid any kind of communication otherwise,” he says, sounding frustrated, and when my eyes meet his, I grudgingly notice the lavender shirt he has on today makes them even more gorgeous.

“If you’re finding me lacking, you can fire me.” I shrug, watching his eyes narrow and turn a darker shade of blue-green.

“I think I’ll keep you,” he replies in a tone that sounds like a threat, but it does something strange to my belly making it dip.

“So what did you need me to do today?” I ask ignoring my body’s reaction to him.

“I have to meet with a friend to discuss business and would like you to come along,” he says as I take a seat across from

him.

“Oh.” Looking down at my black jeans, I run my finger over one of one of the rips in the material, trying to think of a way to get out of going, then raise my eyes to his.

“Is it necessary for me to be there?” I finally ask, and a small smile twitches the corner of his mouth.

“Are you my assistant? The best assistant money can buy?” He raises a brow in a silent dare.

“Touché,” I mutter under my breath, dropping my eyes again when I see him smile his gorgeous smile.

“Give me five and I’ll meet you downstairs.”

“Alrighty then.” Taking my coffee with me, I leave the office with- out a backward glance and head down to the floor below. Walking through the empty club, I make my way toward the bar when I see Eva standing behind it, wiping out empty glasses.

“Hey, girly,” she greets when she spots me.

“How are things?” I ask, climbing up onto one of the barstools, setting my bag and coffee on the countertop.

“Busy as ever.” She smiles, setting down one glass and picking up another.

“How’s school going?” I question as I take in her tired eyes. Eva, like most women who work behind bars in Vegas, is beautiful. Looking at her, I can see her Native American heritage and can picture her dressed in custom tribal attire with bright clothing that would accentuate her caramel skin, and braids with feathers in her hair dark.

“Thank God I only have a few months left,” she sighs, setting yet another glass down.

“Then you’ll take the bar exam?” I ask, knowing she is studying to be a lawyer.

“Yep.”

“You don’t seem too happy about that,” I note quietly.

“I’m happy about finishing school, but my whole future from then on out is completely mapped out for me. I know when I pass my bar exam, I’ll work for my father and our tribe, I’ll marry someone I’ve probably known my whole life, and then I’ll have two kids. All I can hope is, somewhere in there, I’m happy.”

“You can always make your own way,” I say quietly as I study her somber expression.

“I wish it was that easy,” she mutters then nods behind me, and I turn to look over my shoulder at Sven, who is walking—no, *prowling*—across the empty club floor. He’s looking more handsome than I’ve ever seen him, in jeans and a plain tee with Converse on his feet.

“Please be careful with him,” Eva whispers, and I pull my eyes from everything that is Sven to look at her.

“You don’t have to worry about me, honey,” I whisper back with a smile as I slip off the barstool.

“Ready?” Sven asks, nodding at Eva behind the bar once he reaches my side.

“Yep,” I agree then ask, “Am I overdressed?” as we step outside.

“We’ll stop and get you some sneakers,” he says absently, typing into his phone.

“I have shoes in my car,” I tell him, half tempted to take the phone out of his hand and toss it into the street. He’s always on his phone or looking at his computer and as much as I hate to admit it I like when his attention is on me. Walking away from him, I head to my car and grab my own Converse from the trunk.

“I thought you said we were meeting with a friend of yours to discuss business,” I mutter as I exchange my heels for my sneakers.

“We are.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask, folding up the bottom of my jeans so my look is more casual, then stand and

unbutton my dress shirt.

“Leave the shirt.”

“What?” I question, turning to face him.

“Fuck.” He frowns as his eyes move from my breasts up to my face. “This guy loves women, so just do me a favor and leave the shirt on.”

“This tank covers the girls,” I say, looking down. Yes, I have cleavage, but it’s not too extreme, and it sure as heck is less than a lot of women show, especially here in Vegas.

“I know they’re covered, but please, for my sanity, wear the shirt.”

Rolling my eyes, I take off the shirt and toss it into the trunk along with my heels.

“You’re such a pain in the ass,” he gripes.

“Yeah, and you’re Mr. Perfect,” I mutter as I head across the parking lot to his SUV, before coming to a halt when he grabs my hand and leads me toward the street.

“Are we walking to your friends?” I ask, taking my hand from his.

“No, my driver is taking us.”

“You have a driver?”

“Yep,” he says, distracted by his phone dinging in his hand. Grabbing the stupid thing, I shove it in my back pocket and then walk backward away from him.

“Mags, give me my phone.”

“I’ll give it back to you when you stop being rude and look at me when you’re talking to me,” I tell him, jumping away from him when he lunges for me.

“Maggie, stop fucking around.”

“Promise you’ll stop being rude, and I’ll give you your phone.” I dodge him once more.

“Seems you’ve got your hands full, boy’o,” an older gentleman, who is standing next to the open backdoor of a

Town Car, says as I duck Sven again.

“Tell me about it, Ken,” Sven says as he glares at me.

“I told you I’d give you your phone back when you promise to look at me when you’re speaking to me.” I shrug.

“Fine.” He holds out his hand.

Taking his phone out of my pocket, I hold it above his hand then move it before he has a chance to wrap his fingers around it.

“Mags,” he sighs, fighting a smile.

Giving in, I hand him his phone, but then squeal when he lunges, wraps his arms around me, and lifts me off the ground.

“Put me down!” I yell as he spins me in circles.

“Are you going to behave?” He laughs.

“Probably not,” I tell him honestly just as my feet find purchase on the sidewalk.

“You’re lucky I like you just the way you are,” he whispers against my ear, causing heat to flood my body before he takes a step back and embraces Ken with a one-armed hug.

“How’s Ann?” Sven inquires as he takes a step back toward me.

“She’s sent her love and an invite to dinner.”

“I’ll send her a message this week. I need a good home cooked meal,” Sven replies with a grin.

“She’d like that,” Ken remarks with a warm smile that reminds me of my grandfather, and then his eyes move to me and he asks, “And who’s this?”

“Maggie, I’d like you to meet Ken. He’s been putting up with me ever since I moved to Vegas.”

“Nice to meet you, Ken.” I smile as he wraps his hand around mine and uses his free one to cover both our hands.

“You too, dear, and don’t let this boy get away with too much.” He winks.

“I won’t,” I promise, looking at Sven and smiling, and then I stick out my tongue.

Shaking his head at me, he mutters, “We need to get on the road if we’re going to make it in time.”

“It shouldn’t take long once we get to the highway,” Ken assures him with a shake of his head as he drops my hand.

“Why aren’t you driving?” I ask curiously as Ken steps away from the open backdoor.

“I need to work, and I can’t do that if I’m driving,” Sven replies as he motions for me to get into the car.

“Where are we going?”

“I think it’s best I don’t tell you,” he mumbles, sounding distracted as I crawl across the wide backseat. Looking over my shoulder, I expect to find his eyes on his phone. Instead, I find them locked firmly on my upturned rear. Feeling my cheeks heat, I fall to my bottom and scoot close to the opposite door so he can get in next to me.

“I don’t like surprises, so I’d rather you tell me where we’re going,” I grouch as the door is closed and the interior of the town car goes dark.

“Do you trust me?”

“No,” I answer immediately, but then feel bad when his jaw jerks.

“Don’t take it personally. I don’t trust anyone, not even my family,” I add quietly.

“Trust me this once. I won’t let anything happen to you.” Studying his expression, I try to figure out what the look in his eyes means and why this moment seems so important. I have been let down by my sister and the people who raised me more times than I would like to admit, and they have made me wary of trusting anyone.

“Promise,” he quietly states, and I nod before turning to look out the window, feeling my throat grow tight.

Feeling a light touch down my cheek, I hear Sven's voice break through my unconsciousness, stating, "We're here."

I groan and ask, "Where's here?" without lifting my head or opening my eyes.

Chuckling, he mutters, "Open your eyes and see."

Opening one eye then the other, I pull my face away from the door, where I rested it and apparently fell asleep, and then feel my heart lodge itself in my throat as I look out the window. I see the words *Kip's Skydiving* proudly written in bold letters from nose to tail on a small plane.

"Um...why are we here?" I ask, though I'm not sure the words are loud enough to be heard over the pounding of my heart.

"We're going skydiving."

"You mean *you're* going skydiving," I reply, pulling my eyes from the window to look at him and glare.

So much for the whole trusting thing.

"No, *we're* going skydiving." He grins as Ken opens the back door, allowing light to fill the car.

"I think I'll just wait here," I tell him, scooting as far away from the open door as I can possibly get while wishing I were a chameleon so I could blend in with the leather of the car.

"You told me you would trust me."

"That was before I knew you wanted to strap a piece of fabric to my back and hurl me from a moving plane at hundreds of miles per hour toward the Earth, where I'm likely to splatter into a bazillion pieces," I breathe out in a rush.

"You're going to be strapped to me." He smiles like that makes it all okay.

"That's not making me feel any better," I cry then try to tug my arm free from his hold as he pulls me across the seat. Getting away, I grab onto the door handle and hold on for dear life as he grabs both my feet and pulls.

“Sven, let me go!” I yell, and then my body stiffens as an all too familiar deep baritone voice calls, “Maggie?”

“No,” I whisper, letting go of the door to look over my shoulder.

“How do you know Mags?” Sven growls, letting my feet go so he can stand to his full height, which only slightly towers over Ace, a man I dated on and off for a few months. A man who makes Sven’s womanizing ways look like child’s play.

“We dated.” He frowns then looks between Sven and me before asking, “How do you know Maggie?”

“I work for him,” I state as I get out of the car and adjust my clothes.

“Oh.” Ace grins, showing off his perfect teeth and dimple, which is made even more adorable by his dark skin.

Jerk.

“You dated him?” Sven asks from my side, and I turn to look at him.

“I know. Big, huge, *giant* mistake.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Ace mutters as three blondes who all look almost identical walk up to our group, giggling.

“Yeah, it was that bad,” I tell him as Sven stiffens at my side when one of the blondes stands next to him.

“Why are you working for Sven? I thought you were still modeling?”

“Modeling?” Sven asks, and the three women begin to giggle louder, like they can’t believe their ears.

“I thought we were skydiving,” I state, changing the subject, because at this time, I would much rather be falling to my death than in the middle of this situation.

“Who’s your friend?” the blonde standing at Sven’s side asks, raking her eyes over him.

“Sorry, ladies. This is my friend, Sven, and this is Maggie.” He smiles, nodding toward me.

“And you dated her?” a different blonde questions, looking between Ace and me with a puzzled look on her (sadly) beautiful face.

“I did.” Ace nods, still smiling.

“But she’s fat,” she mutters, looking me over.

“Pardon?” Sven snarls as Ace growls, “Crystal.”

“Sorry,” she whispers, taking a step back toward the safety of her friends.

“Let’s go.” Grabbing my hand and not giving me a choice, Sven pulls me away from the group and leads me toward the building, swinging his arm over my shoulders, asking, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It’s not the first time someone has called me fat.”

“I mean with Ace.”

“Oh, him? Yeah.” I shrug.

“Really?”

“Of course, we dated casually for a few months. It wasn’t serious. Like you, I don’t think he will ever settle down with one woman.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” he snaps, sounding insulted as he pulls his arm from me like I just burned him.

“Hey, don’t be offended. There are two types of men in this world: the kind who want a family, and the kind who want to have a good time. As long as you’re okay with who you are, nothing else matters.”

“Who said I don’t want a family?”

“When have you ever had a serious relationship?” I ask, and his face closes down.

“Exactly,” I mumble as we step out of the hot sun and into the cool interior of the building.

“So what, you and Ace just hooked up?”

“No.” I shake my head then whisper so Ace, who is following close behind, can’t hear. “I think I caught him during a time he believed he wanted something more, only he didn’t really want the pressure or the fidelity of a real relationship.”

Just then, thankfully, a tall, older gentleman who Sven introduces to me as Kip, the owner, comes out to greet us and takes us back to the hangar.

“Since I have more jumps under my belt, I think Mags should jump with me,” Ace says as I put on the jumpsuit the instructor just gave me.

“She’s jumping with me, and her name is Maggie, not Mags,” Sven grumbles from my side as he reads over some paperwork Kip gave him.

“You call her Mags?” Ace states, crossing his arms over his chest with an amused grin.

“She’s mine.”

“I’m not a thing. I’m a human, and I’m not yours.” I roll my eyes at Sven then look at Ace.

“I’m not jumping with you. Take Dumb, Dumber, or Dumbest,” I say with a nod to the three blondes, who are each looking confused as the instructors attempt to help them get into their gear.

“Is that jealousy I hear in your tone, Maggie?”

“No, I just don’t want to be close to you.”

“If I recall correctly, you used to like being close to me,” he says quietly enough for just me to hear.

“I also used to like strawberries until I found out they were the cause for the hives I kept getting,” I mutter, and he chuckles.

“You always did make me laugh,” he says softly.

“That’s me, always good for a laugh,” I grumble, turning away from him.

“Will you be okay while I go talk with Ace for a few minutes?” Sven asks, placing his fingers under my chin, forcing my eyes to meet his.

“Of course,” I whisper, wishing in that moment he would kiss me, which is absolutely ridiculous.

“I’ll be just a couple minutes,” he whispers back searching my gaze then shakes his head, drops his hand, and turns placing his hand on Ace’s shoulder leading him away. Watching them, I wonder what kind of business they need to talk about. Ace is a poker player who first made a name for himself in online gambling, but has since grown into one of the biggest names in Vegas. I haven’t seen Ace since the day I told him I couldn’t see him anymore two years ago. He was always searching for the next adrenaline rush, while I was searching for a happily ever after. It looks like we’re both still looking. Ignoring the sadness that thought makes me feel, I finish getting ready, take a seat, and wait for Sven to come back.

“ARE YOU READY?” Sven asks close to my ear, so I can hear him over the loud roar of the plane’s engines. Shaking my head, I squeeze my eyes closed then grab onto both his thighs when the plane bounces.

“I promise nothing will happen to you,” he says gently, giving my waist a squeeze, pulling me closer to him, which seems impossible since I’m literally sitting on his lap.

“We’re at diving altitude,” the pilot announces over the loud speakers that run the length of the interior of the plane. Opening my eyes, I watch one of the instructors unlatch the door and pull it open, causing the interior to fill with cool air.

“We’ll jump last,” Sven yells.

I nod then call back, “If I die, I’m going to come back and haunt you.” It only serves to make him laugh so hard that my body, which is strapped to his, shakes with it.

“See you below!” Ace hollers as he heads past us with one of the blondes strapped to his front.

“Good riddance,” I grumble then feel Sven’s body shake under mine once more. Watching Ace jump from the plane, followed by his other two girlfriends who are strapped to instructors, I feel a surge of adrenalin rush through my system.

“Let’s go, babe,” Sven says standing up, leaving me no choice but to go with him toward the open door. Looking down, my eyes fill with tears. I have taken plane trips a lot over the years, and I have always loved when I’m able to get the window seat so I can look out over the world as we fly above it. But knowing I’m going to be falling toward the quilted-looking ground below is a different feeling altogether.

“Cross your arms over your chest, baby,” Sven instructs, lightly taking my wrists in his hands and placing them across my front.

“I hate you.”

“On three. One, two...” And then we’re falling.

“You motherfucking asshole, son of a bitch!” I gulp as air rushes toward me so fast that my mouth opens and fills, causing my cheeks to expand. Forcing my mouth closed, I grab onto the straps near my shoulders and hold on for dear life, even though I know they can do nothing to save me. Squeezing my eyes closed, we twist and turn as my stomach dips and drops.

“I’m gonna open the ‘chute.”

“Good idea,” I yell, and our bodies are jerked backward and my eyes spring open.

“See? Not so bad, is it?” Sven laughs, and I look over my shoulder and notice he looks happy, really happy right now. The stress he normally carries around his eyes is gone and is replaced by laugh lines that make him even more beautiful.

“We still have to land,” I tell him, and his smile broadens.

“But until then, just feel and watch.”

Pulling my eyes reluctantly from his happy ones, I look around and then below. I hate to admit it, but this is one of the most amazing experiences I’ve ever had. Floating through the

air, the view of the land below and the sky above, leave me in awe. The feeling of freedom as we fall. Sven against my back, his arm around my waist, making me feel safe in a way I've never felt safe before. As we get closer to the ground, I tuck my knees up toward my chest and close my eyes, not wanting to see the ground coming swiftly at me. As quickly as it began, it's over and I feel the ground under my bottom and my eyes open slowly.

"That was awesome!" I laugh, looking over my shoulder at Sven as two men come running up to us and help us get out of our gear.

"I knew you would love it." Sven smiles as we stand.

"I didn't love it," I lie, and he smiles, muttering, "Liar." While wrapping his arm around my shoulder and leading me toward the truck that will take us back to the hanger.

As soon as we arrive back to the hanger, Sven leaves to talk with Ace who got back before us, so I head inside to get a bottle of water then notice they have pictures available from our jump.

"I would like two of this one," I tell the girl working behind the desk inside Kip's as I point at a picture of the two of us smiling at each other after Sven opened the parachute.

"Would you like to add the commemorative frame for twenty dollars more?" she asks, pointing at a glass picture frame with the Kip's Skydiving logo and a small plane painted on it that is sitting on a shelf behind her.

"Can I get two of them?"

"Sure." She smiles before disappearing through a door behind her. Turning around to make sure Sven is still distracted, I spot him and Ace standing next to the town car, while all three of Ace's girlfriends lounge in the sun on a picnic table a few feet away. All three of them have taken the opportunity to take their shirts off leaving them in different color bikini tops.

"That will be sixty-two dollars," the girl says, pulling my attention from the window, as she places a bag on the

countertop.

Pulling a hundred dollar bill out of my bra, I hand it to the girl, take the bag and pictures from her along with my change, and then make my way out toward Sven, planning to wait in the car until he's ready to go. But the minute he spots me, he gives me a smile that has my steps faltering.

"I hope you didn't pay for those things," he says as soon as I'm standing next to him.

"Why wouldn't I pay?"

"Me and Ace gave Kip the money to start up this place a few years ago. In return, we don't pay when we want to jump, and *you* don't have to pay if you want a souvenir."

"Well, I'm happy to pay," I mutter, and he swings his arm over my shoulders, shaking his head, then looks at Ace, who is looking at us with a knowing smile on his face. What he thinks he knows I have no idea.

"We'll talk in a few days," Sven tells him as he opens the door for me to get into the idling car.

"Thanks, man." He shakes Sven's hand then drops his eyes to me. "You still have my number. Call me."

Snorting at that, I mutter, "Goodbye," and get into the car, hearing both guys laugh behind me.

"Did you have fun, dear?" Ken asks as his eyes connect with mine in the rearview mirror and I slide across the back seat.

"Don't tell anyone, but it was amazing." I grin, and he chuckles then mutters, "Your secret is safe with me."

"What secret?" Sven asks, getting into the car and shutting the door behind him.

"Nothing," Ken and I say in unison.

"Did you have fun?" Sven inquires, and I look at Ken in the mirror briefly before looking at Sven.

"If you consider being afraid that you're going to pee yourself while watching your life passing before your eyes

fun, then sure, I had fun,” I state with a straight face, hearing Ken in the front seat laugh out.

“You loved it,” Sven mutters before pulling his phone out of his pocket. Looking out the window, I smile to myself then glance at Ken, whose eyes are on me, and I wink.

“You cursed.”

Pulling my eyes from the view going by quickly as we drive back toward Vegas, I look at Sven and frown, asking, “Pardon?”

“When we jumped, you cursed like a sailor.” He grins.

“I thought I was going to die,” I explain, not denying it. I don’t even know what came over me, but every bad word I have ever thought of came tumbling out.

“It was cute,” he mutters quietly before going back to work on his phone. Pulling my old cell phone out of the front pocket of my jeans, I flip it open and frown. The screen has turned completely black. Closing it again, I flip it open once more then tap the numbers and they light up.

“What’s wrong?” Sven asks, and I turn to look at him and hold my phone up.

“It’s not working.”

“Let me see.” Taking the phone from my hand, he pulls the battery off the back then puts it back in place and presses the on button. “I think it’s time for you to get a phone that’s not from 1999.”

“I’ve had that phone since I was twenty,” I mumble, taking the phone from him and pressing the buttons once more. “It’s always been trusty.”

“Well, it seems to me that it’s finally kicked the bucket.”

“I wonder if I can have it fixed,” I grumble, tapping the screen again.

“We can stop and pick you up a new phone.”

“But this has all my numbers in it,” I complain, pressing buttons, hoping something will happen and the screen with

magically light up, but all that happens is one of the numbers presses in and sticks.

“Sorry, babe.”

Narrowing my eyes, I look at him. “You don’t sound sorry.”

“That phone is old, and I can’t imagine it was reliable. You need something that will work when you need it to work, and I need you to have a phone so I can reach you.” He shrugs then tells Ken to stop at one of the local cell service stores.

By the time we are done picking me up a new phone and having dinner at a small diner, we make it back to the club a little after eleven, and the line outside is already stretched around the building. Walking down the street and past the waiting line, Sven stops when a group of women, who obviously know him, call him over. Waiting a few feet away, I pull out my new phone and power up the screen. I have no idea what the heck I’m going to do with a phone that seems smarter than me and that didn’t even come with an instruction manual.

“Ready?” Sven asks, making me jump. Looking over my shoulder as he leads me down the sidewalk, I see the group of women all watching us with sneers on their faces.

“Sven,” someone called, and he places his hand on my lower back.

“Give me a minute, babe. Just wait here,” he mutters as he walks toward another group of women, who all smile and laugh as he heads toward them.

Watching him from a distance, I can’t hear what the women are saying, but their body language screams everything loud and clear. Something ugly shifts through me as I watch him smile, and I find myself walking away alone toward the club entrance, not wanting to witness any more than I need to. Smiling at Teo when I reach the front of the line, he grins back and lifts the red rope, allowing me to slide under his arm. Feeling a body press against me and hands wrap around my hips, pulling me back into a hard erection, I look over my

shoulder, ready to tell whoever it is not to touch me, when Sven shoves his way between people and pulls the guy off me, tossing him to Teo.

“Get the fuck out of here,” he roars as Teo shoves the kid toward the sidewalk.

“I was just fucking around, man,” the kid grumbles, looking nervously between Sven and Teo.

“Go inside, Maggie, and straight to the office,” Sven demands without taking his eyes off the kid.

Hating that I’m following orders like a dog, but not really having a choice, I stomp into the club and stop when I see the stage. The DJ spinning tonight is well known and has thousands of followers who trek to whatever club he’s playing to watch him spin. The crowd on the dance floor is going crazy, and the music is so loud I can feel my bones vibrating with the beat.

Moving around the dance floor, I push my way through the people gathered around the edge chatting, and head upstairs to Sven’s office. Shutting the door behind me, I move to the couch, set down the bag with the pictures from today, take out my new cell phone, and press the button so the screen lights up. I sent Morgan a message earlier on Facebook, letting her know I got a new phone and to text me from her number so I can store it, but she still hasn’t messaged me back, and that has me worried. Jumping when the door slams, my pulse skitters as Sven storms toward me with a look of fury in his eyes.

“I told you to give me a minute. I told you to wait for me, but you didn’t listen and you could have gotten yourself hurt.”

“Um...” I breathe, unsure what to say or why he looks ready to strangle me.

“*Um?*” he snarls as his face twists with rage.

“No, Maggie, not *um*. Fucking listen to me when I tell you to do something,” he roars, making me flinch, and I hate myself for showing fear to him.

“Stand back,” I tell him, but then lean forward when he doesn’t budge and yell in his face, “Stand the heck back, Sven,

before I punch you in your stupid face!”

“Those kids down there are all high.” He points to the floor. “Who knows what would have happened if I didn’t see what was happening to you.

“Cause I’m weak, right?” I tilt my head to the side. “I’m just a girl, and I can’t take care of myself?” I ask sweetly in a little girl’s voice, and the muscle in his cheek starts to twitch rapidly. Raising myself a bare inch from the couch, just enough that I have a little bit of leverage, but not enough for him to notice. I ask again, “Do you think I’m weak, Sven?”

“You’re a woman, Maggie.”

Yeah, wrong answer.

I use the leverage I gained moments ago and propel myself forward, shoving my shoulder into his waist while my hands wrap around the back of his thigh. His thud hitting the ground makes the glasses on the shelf near the bar rattle. Putting my foot against his groin, I dare him to say anything else.

“Oh, did you fall?” I ask sweetly as he blinks up at me in shock.

“You need to be more careful, Sven. You never know what might happen to you,” I tell him, pressing my foot down as a reminder.

“Mags.”

“Do not *ever* doubt that I have the ability to take care of myself, Sven. I may be a woman, but I have been taking care of myself since I was a little girl,” I whisper the last part then take a step back.

“I was worried.” He gets up from the ground with his nostrils flaring and the pulse in his neck working so hard it can be seen from where I’m standing near the door.

“Well next time, instead of coming at me like a crazy person, maybe you could say that instead,” I suggest, going back to the couch and taking a seat.

“Sorry,” he mutters, but I pretend I don’t hear him as I pull the frames out of the bag, along with the pictures of us

skydiving. “I was worried.”

“Yeah, you said that,” I mumble, not looking at him as he takes a seat on the couch next to me. Finishing placing the picture in the frame and closing it up, I tip it upright and look at the image.

“Here.” I hand him the frame as I take the other one out of its box and open the back. Putting together the one I got for myself, I place it back in the box it came in then rest it on the coffee table, chancing a look at Sven. His eyes are on the picture of us in his hands.

“You,” he whispers under his breath so quietly I almost miss it.

“Me what?”

His head lifts when our eyes meet. This time they’re full of a sadness I don’t understand.

“I like you, Mags, but I’m no good for you.”

His words hurt more than they should, so I do what I always do, and joke. “It sounds like you’re trying to break up with me.”

Shaking his head, his hand suddenly strikes out and wraps around the back of my neck as he pulls me to him. Pressing his lips to my forehead briefly, I feel their sting as his arms wrap around me in an embrace that has tears pooling in my eyes. He says he’s no good for me, but I think it’s the other way around. I’m no good for him.

ARE YOU CRAZY?

MAGGIE

“Y OU OKAY?”

Looking up from my cell phone, my eyes lock with Sven's. I shrug in response, and his eyes go soft as he sets his phone down on top of his desk then walks around to where I'm sitting. He takes the seat next to me, placing his elbows on his knees, getting even closer.

“You still haven't heard from her?” he guesses softly, and I pull my bottom lip between my teeth and shake my head as anxiety and worry washes over me. Morgan disappeared the day Sven and I went skydiving, and since then, I haven't heard from her. Feeling my heart constrict in my chest, I fight back tears. I love my sister, but I hate the person she's become. Her drug problem has gotten progressively worse over the last three years, and I don't know what to do anymore. It kills me that I can't fix this for her, because she doesn't want help.

“I thought she would change,” I tell him weakly. I thought for sure she would change when the police called me in the middle of the night to tell me that she was in the hospital. I remember thinking, *This is it. This is her wake up call. She will finally understand she is putting her life at risk.*

I was crushed walking into the ICU, seeing her hooked up to machines, covered in large black and blue bruises. When she told the police and me what happened at Sven's club, I demanded they do something, but they refused. They told me that even though she was beat up badly, her story didn't add up. They believed she probably tried to steal from a dealer and her injuries were a result of that. That's when I

decided to take matters into my own hands and go to Sven's club to see if I could find anything out. Looking back now, I honestly don't know if I believe her story from that night. I don't know what to believe when it comes to her anymore.

I don't even know who she is anymore.

"It's going to be okay." His arm wraps around my shoulders and he pulls me into his side. Turning my face, I press my nose to his neck, allowing myself a brief moment to escape the turmoil going on inside me and accept comfort from him before pulling away.

"Did you need anything else?" I question as I stand and adjust my skirt. His eyes scan my face for a long moment then his hands clench into fists as he stands to his full height, which towers over me even in my heels.

"Mags, if she—"

"She'll be back," I cut him off, speaking with more conviction than I feel, wanting so badly to believe my own lie. His hand wraps around the side of my neck and his thumb runs down the column of my throat as his eyes soften further.

Prior to Morgan moving in with me, it wasn't abnormal for her to disappear for days at a time before turning up strung out, wearing the same clothes she disappeared in. Even though I know deep down this time it's something different, there's nothing I can do. When I went to the police, they were hesitant to even fill out a missing person report, because they know her history. They know she has a drug problem, and to them, she was just one more druggie in a long line of missing drug users.

"I'm here for you," he says gently, moving his thumb in soothing strokes that cause me to lean into his touch instead of pull away like I should. I want to believe him, but I know people. I know you can only really depend on people until they get what they want, and then they turn their backs on you. My family is a shining example of that. My whole life, I have been the person my family turns to when they need something. I have always been the adult, always the responsible one, and always the one left holding the bag when they get what they want and walk away.

“Thanks,” I choke out, feeling that pressure in my chest press in on my lungs, making it hard to breathe.

“It will be okay,” he says, leaning in, pressing his lips to my forehead, and letting them linger there until the feel of them is imprinted on my skin. Then, he pulls back enough to catch my eye.

“Why don’t you have dinner with me tonight?” he asks softly, searching my face.

“I think I’m just going to go home and get to bed early,” I tell him, taking a step back before I can say something stupid, like ‘yes.’ I like Sven way too much, and the more time I spend with him, the *more* I like him.

“Sure.” He nods. “Get some rest.”

Seeing the brief flash of disappointment in his eyes right before he turns his back on me makes me waiver in my decision to keep my distance, but then I remember what has happened every time I let someone in.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I murmur as I step out of his office, taking the stairs down to the main floor. I walk through the empty club, waving at Eva, who’s on the phone behind the bar, as I pass her on the way to the door.

“You heading home already?” Teo asks when I step outside.

“Yep, Sven had me up early to run errands, so I’m off now.”

“I’ll walk you to your car.” He stands from the small metal stool he was sitting on and tosses a half smoked cigarette into the street.

“You don’t have to do that,” I assure him, motioning for him to sit back down.

“Sorry, I mean I *am* walking you to your car.” He grins, wrapping his giant hand around my bicep.

“Fine,” I sigh, knowing there is no point in arguing with him. Since I started working here, there has never been a time

I have gone to my car alone. Even in the middle of the day, someone is with me.

“You know Sven doesn’t like you leaving the club alone,” he says, leading me around the side of the building to the parking lot. Ignoring his comment and the way it makes me feel, I try to keep up with his long stride in my heels as we walk past Sven’s giant SUV to my car that is about ten times smaller in size.

“Sven doesn’t like much of anything,” I say under my breath, hearing him chuckle.

“One day, this shit’s gonna go nuclear.”

“What?” I ask, tilting my head back to peer up at him as we stop at the back of my car.

“Nothing.” He shakes his head as a small smile forms on his lips.

“If you say so.” I frown as his eyes study me, running over my hair and face then down over my body before stopping on my shoes, moving back up to meet my eyes once more.

“Fucking nuclear.” He shakes his head, and his smile broadens, confusing me even more.

“Um...”

“Get home safe,” he rumbles, opening the door to my car.

Giving up on understanding him, I lean up on my heels to give him a quick peck on the cheek. “See you tomorrow.”

Nodding, he steps back, allowing me to slide behind the wheel. Starting my hybrid, I check the battery and make sure I have enough of a charge to make it home before backing up and waving at Teo as I pass him.

Getting home, I head up the stairs that lead to my apartment and unlock the door, silently praying that Morgan will be inside, but she’s not. The place is quiet and is exactly the same as I left it this morning before I went to run errands for Sven.

Heading to my room, I slip off my heels and toss them onto the pile of shoes in the bottom of my closet. My bedroom is my favorite room. After my first modeling job, I splurged and bought a bedroom suite that was made for a princess. The white, four-poster canopy bed with sheer curtains that hang down around the sides remind me of a bed from *Sleeping Beauty*. The white matching dressers, one tall, the other long, have etched glass mirrors on the front of each drawer, with shiny silver handles. The side tables match the dressers, and each has a blown glass lamp on top; the Tiffany blue color matches the duvet on my bed.

Walking to my long dresser, the one covered in frames of different sizes, I pick up a picture of Morgan and me. I must have been about six at the time, and Morgan was around four. We were sitting outside my parents' house on the wooden steps that lead to their front door. My arm was wrapped around her shoulders, and we were naked, wearing nothing but rain boots and covered in mud. We were happy. *She* was happy. Picking up another picture of us from around four years ago, I run my finger over her face, wondering where her light went. There was a time her smile lit up the room; people would gravitate toward her without even knowing they were doing it. I don't know what happened to take away her light.

"What happened to you?" I whisper, gaining no answer. I set down the picture and put my hands behind me to unzip my skirt then slip out of my blouse, tossing both items toward the bathroom, where the washer and dryer is located. Then, I slip off my bra and go to the laundry basket next to my bed that is full of clothes I need to put away. I find a pair of sweats and a shirt and put both on and then head down the short hallway, past the guest bath and Morgan's room, which used to be my office. Stopping in the living room, I turn on the stereo, allowing Adele to fill the silence, and then toss the remote on the sectional across from the television.

Heading toward the kitchen, a letter sitting on top of the stack of mail I brought inside yesterday catches my eye when I see my mom's swirly handwriting. Sliding my finger under the edge of the envelope, I pull out the folded up letter and read it quickly. My parents don't have phones or internet, so my mom

keeps in contact with letters, and this one is just like the rest: a short update about her and my dad and an invite to come visit when I can.

Sitting down in one of my dining chairs, I write a quick note telling her that Morgan has once again disappeared and that I probably won't be able to visit for awhile, but will send a letter when I can. I know my mom will be concerned about Morgan, but she will say what she always says: *This is your life, so you have to make your own decisions*. Shoving the letter into an envelope, I place it in my purse so I can mail it tomorrow. I get up and go to the kitchen, pulling out a pot to boil water.

I was raised in a small community outside of Phoenix, where they didn't believe in the government or in most modern amenities. When I was ten, my parents offered me the opportunity to join public school and I accepted. That was when I figured out how different we were from everyone, and how much my parents had prevented me from learning. My first year of public school was really difficult, and I ended up being held back a year so that I could catch up with everyone else. After that first year, I excelled, and by graduation, I was top of my class.

I don't regret how I grew up, but I still resent my parents for not being parents. Most of my major life decisions were ones I made for myself, even before I should have been allowed to, and if there was ever a problem, I knew I would have to find a solution on my own without the help of the two people who should have been there to guide me.

Shaking the depressing thoughts about my parents out of my head, I toss some angel hair pasta in the boiling water and pull down a bowl from my cabinet then go to the fridge to grab the butter and a bottle of orange juice. Once the pasta is soft, I strain it and put it in the bowl along with some butter, salt, and pepper then pour myself a cup of orange juice, taking both to the living room.

LOOKING FROM THE door to the clock on the cable box, the bright red numbers read 11:36. Looking at the door again, I feel my eyebrows pull tight as the door handle jiggles like it did moments ago. Getting off the couch, where I planted myself a few hours ago to watch TV, I walk slowly to the door, feeling something strange slide down my spine as I get up on my tiptoes and press my hand to the wood to look through the peephole. The porch light is off, but the light from the streetlamp near my building has cast a glow around two men on the other side of the door.

Backing away slowly, my heart pounds so hard in my chest that the sound of my blood pumping fills my ears. Moving as quickly and as silently as I can down the hall to my bedroom, I shut my door, whimpering when I realize there is no lock. Scurrying around the bed, I grab my phone off the charger then run to the bathroom in the hall, knowing there's a lock on that door and if someone breaks in, he will have to break down that door, which will give me a few more seconds. Getting into the tub and pulling the curtain around me, I fumble with the phone as I dial and place it to my ear.

"911, what's your emergency?" the dispatcher answers as I hear foot- steps sound somewhere in the apartment.

"I'm at 267 Hemming Way, apartment 17. Someone is in my apartment," I whisper then scream as the bathroom door crashes open and the shower curtain is shoved aside.

"Help!" I shout as hands grab me by my hair, pulling me up from the tub. Dropping the phone, I fight back, elbowing the guy in the stomach, then turn and bring my hand down hard on his shoulder, which causes him to drop to the ground instantly.

Click, click.

My body freezes and fear rushes over me as I look up, coming face-to-face with the barrel of a gun. Raising my hands in front of me, I'm not prepared for the blow to my stomach that has me doubling over, gasping for air.

"You fucking cunt," the guy I took down moments ago says, backhanding me so hard I hit the wall. Wrapping his

hands around my hair, he drags me stumbling out of the bathroom, down the hall behind him to the living room, where he shoves me to my knees.

“Where is your sister?” the man holding the gun roars, smacking me with the butt of his weapon across my face so hard that my head flies to the side and I taste blood in my mouth.

“I don’t know,” I tell him, lifting my eyes and trying to focus on his face.

“Don’t lie, bitch,” he says, pressing the gun into my forehead.

“I don’t know,” I whimper in fear as the guy behind me uses my ponytail to pull me up off the floor.

“Your cunt sister stole ten grand from me,” the one holding the gun says as his face comes close to mine...so close I can smell the scent of mint on his breath.

“I can give you the money,” I sob as I feel my hair being ripped out of my scalp when I’m jerked back and forth.

“Do you really think it’s that fucking simple?” he asks, wrapping his hand around my throat.

“No one fucking takes from me. No one!” he snarls, squeezing my throat tighter as stars blur my vision.

“Cops,” the guy behind me says as the sound of sirens off in the distance gets louder.

“Tell your sister I’m coming for her.”

Falling to my knees, I gasp for air then roll into a ball as his booted foot connects with my side. Watching them run out of my apartment. I don’t know how long I lay there but I eventually pull up enough energy to get to my feet and stumble toward the door.

“Freeze.”

My head lifts and I swallow as tears stream out of my eyes, seeing two uniformed police officers standing at the top landing in front of my apartment.

“They’re gone,” I croak through the soreness of my throat, leaning into the door.

“You know which way they went?” one of the officers questions while taking a step toward me.

“No,” I say then shake my head when the words aren’t loud enough to be heard.

“I’ll stay with her. You go and check around and let me know if you find anything,” the cop before me says, putting his gun away as the other takes off back down the stairs.

“Come on, honey,” he instructs gently as he takes my arm. He leads me over to my couch, where he helps me sit before getting down in front of me and pushing my hair away from my face. “You got some ice?”

“Peas,” I murmur, watching him get up and go to the kitchen, coming back a few seconds later with a bag of frozen peas in his hand. Taking it from him, I press it to my throat then to my face, blinking rapidly, trying to control the tears I feel filling my eyes.

“Would you like to call someone?”

How pathetic is it that my answer was, “Not really”? But that was the truth, wasn’t it? I have no one, no one I can depend on, no one I can count on when I need anything. My parents don’t even have a telephone I can call them on if there’s an emergency. *Like now*, I think bitterly. Then, my sister, seeing how she’s the reason I was in this mess. I knew that even if I were able to get ahold of her she wouldn’t be able to help me. Hell, she would probably run away when she found out the guys she stole from were looking for her. Wyatt is out of the question, since I broke up with him yesterday after realizing it was pointless to be in a relationship with someone who lives hundreds of miles away. My mind flashes to Sven, but I don’t want him to worry...or at least that’s what I’m telling myself right now.

“No, I don’t want to call anyone.”

“I’m gonna call an ambulance and have them come look you over.”

“That’s not necessary,” I whisper through the soreness of my throat.

“Honey, I’d really like to make sure you don’t have a concussion.”

“I don’t think I do,” I tell him, dropping my eyes to his badge. “Officer Jenkins.”

“Not sure you would know that.” He smiles.

Sighing, I give up and mutter, “Fine,” and he smiles bigger then pats my knee. He puts his hand to his chest and leans down, telling dispatch to send an ambulance.

“Do you know who broke in?” he asks as soon as he gets the con-formation that the ambulance is in route.

“No, they were looking for my sister.”

“Did they say what they wanted with her?” he asks, moving to sit next to me on the couch.

Shaking my head, I start to lie then squeeze my eyes closed and open them back up. “They said she stole money and they were going to pay her back.”

“I see.” He nods, and I fight the urge to defend her, even though I know she has gone too far this time.

“None of the neighbors heard anything, and I didn’t see anyone on the street,” the other officer says, walking through the open front door, followed by two paramedics who come directly to me. It doesn’t surprise me that no one heard anything. My two closest neighbors are older; one uses a hearing aid most of the time, and the other usually has the television on so high that he wouldn’t hear it if the world was coming to an end outside his door.

“As soon as they check her over, we’ll go over the details of what happened,” I hear Officer Jenkins say to his partner as the paramedics begin to examine me. When they’re done, they tell me to take some Advil for the pain, but assure me I will be fine. Officer Jenkins takes the seat next to me on the couch once more as the other officer, Lent, leads the paramedics to the door and closes it behind them, coming back a second

later, grabbing one of the chairs from my dining room table, and sitting on it across from me.

“I already explained to Officer Lent that the men who broke in were looking for your sister,” Officer Jenkins says as he pulls out a pen from the pocket of his shirt.

“Can you tell me anything else about them?”

Pressing my lips together, I try to remember any details about the two men, but my mind comes up empty. “It all happened so fast. They were both white, and dressed similar in black t-shirts, jeans, and boots, but I didn’t get a good look at either of them.”

“Do you know where your sister is?” Officer Lent asks, sitting forward and studying me.

“No, I filed a missing person report on her. I haven’t heard from her in two days,” I tell him, and his eyes scan my face and I know he sees I’m holding something back.

“What are you not telling us?” he asks gently, and that’s when the dam breaks and tears begin to fall silently from my eyes, down my cheeks, and onto my shirt.

“She has a drug problem. She was doing really well for a few weeks, and I thought this time she was going to stick with it and go into rehab, but she lost her way again, and now this happened.” Covering my face with my hands, I try to get myself back under control. Crying like a baby won’t solve anything right now, even though that is exactly what I want to do. Sitting up straight, I look between the two policemen and ask, “What do I need to do now?”

“There isn’t much we can do at this time. We don’t exactly know who we’re looking for, and I doubt your sister is going to show up and tell us who she stole from,” Officer Lent says softly like he regrets his words.

“I’d really like you to stay somewhere else tonight,” Officer Jenkins says quietly after a moment, and my eyes go to him.

“I’ll go to a hotel. I wouldn’t be able to sleep here if I wanted to, not while knowing there is a possibility those guys

might come back.”

“I don’t think they’ll come back tonight, but I’d rather you be safe somewhere else, at least for a few days. You also need to have your locks changed and a deadbolt put in before you do stay here. The guys who broke in were able to pick your lock easily, and to be honest, you’re a woman living alone. You should have some form of protection.”

“I’ll call a locksmith tomorrow and have them put in new locks,” I agree, instantly ignoring his ‘you’re a woman’ comment, ‘cause all that does is annoy me, even if he is right. But then again, there was a gun involved, and if not for that, I probably could have kicked butt...or at least that’s what I’m going to tell myself.

“Go get your stuff, honey, and we’ll follow you to the hotel,” he replies, looking as if he wants to say something else but thinking better of it. If this had been any other time, I would have taken an extra moment to appreciate how handsome he is. But now is not that time, so I get off the couch, walk back to my bedroom, pull out my large duffle bag from my closet, and stuff it full with enough clothes to last me a few days. Once I’m done, I drag it into the hall behind me.

“This is my card. If you think of anything or need anything, just give me a call,” Officer Jenkins says as he picks up my bag then turns his attention to Officer Lent. “I’m gonna take this down and phone into the station to let them know we’re following her to the hotel and getting her checked in.”

“I’ll help her lock up then we’ll be down,” he replies as I go into the kitchen and turn out the light then to the living room to do the same and turn off the TV before heading for the front door.

“I shouldn’t be telling you this, but I have a sister your age, and I know if something like this ever happened to her I would want her to have whatever protection she could get her hands on,” Officer Lent says quietly as I step outside with him and lock my front door. “Every other week at Lawson’s, I teach a class on gun safety, and I would be happy to have you in my next class.” He hands me a card, and I look at it then

back up at him. “Guns can be dangerous, but they can also save your life, and in my class, I’ll teach you how to be comfortable handling a gun and what to do in different situations. You don’t have to buy a gun if you don’t want to, but you can come to the class and find out for yourself if that is something you want to do or not.”

“Thank you,” I tell him sincerely as I place both cards in my bag. I’ve never thought about owning a gun, but after tonight, it might not be a bad idea to have one.

“WHAT THE FUCK happened to your face?”

Jumping in surprise, I lift my eyes from the computer screen in front of me and my gaze collides with Sven’s blue ones. I didn’t even hear him come into the office.

“Nothing,” I tell him then lean back when his hands go to the top of the desk and his body looms over until his face is just inches from mine.

“That bruise on your face doesn’t look like nothing. Wanna try again?” he taunts as his face twists in anger.

“Not particularly,” I mumble sitting further back in my chair.

“Too bad. What happened?” he rumbles, lifting one hand, touching my cheek gently.

“My sister stole money from some guy,” I say, and then regret it instantly when his energy changes and wraps around me so tight that my breath comes out in a rush.

“He put his hands on you?” His words are soft, but the angry, vibrating energy I feel coming off of him grates against my skin. “Tell me everything.”

“Sven.”

His body leans even closer to me as he snarls, “Now.”

“Sheesh, fine.” I take a deep breath and let it out then tell him about hearing someone at the door and thinking that my sister was home but that she lost her key. Then I tell him about the guys breaking in and the police showing up. I only stop talking when I tell him that I stayed at a hotel last night and he roars.

“You didn’t call me?”

“I knew you were probably busy.” I shrug, trying to make it seem like it’s not a big deal.

“I wasn’t. Goddammit, Mags! You should have fucking called me.” He paces back and forth in front of the desk then goes to the window behind me and looks out over the club. “You’re staying with me until your sister cleans her fucking mess up.”

“N... No, I’m not,” I choke out in distress at the idea.

“You are, and if you even think about going anywhere but my penthouse, I will track your ass down and drag you back with me.”

“Sven, don’t be stupid.” His penthouse is nice, really nice, but it only has one bedroom, and his couch isn’t even one you would want to sleep on if left with no choice. It’s modern and edgy, but in no way does it say ‘come sleep on me’.

“Do we need to go to your place to get some stuff?” he asks, ignoring me.

“I’m not staying with you,” I repeat.

“You are,” he says, storming out of his office. Digging my compact out of my bag, I look at myself in the mirror. I thought I had done a good job covering up the bruises, but apparently I hadn’t.

“Mags.”

“What?” I huff, looking up from the computer once more when he storms back into the office.

“Get up. We’re meeting with a realtor in thirty minutes.”

“Pardon?”

“You’re right. My place now doesn’t really have space,” he grits out as he walks over to the bathroom and shuts the door halfway then continues talking through the small gap.

“We’re going to look at a few houses,” he says, and I can hear him flush then the water turn on before the door opens and he steps out. “Do you need anything before we head out?”

“Are you crazy?” I ask, frowning and standing from the chair I’m sitting in.

“Nope,” he denies, walking toward me. Taking my elbow, he stops at the door and grabs my bag then pulls me with him out of his office, down the stairs, and through the club. He then leads me to his SUV and sets me inside, yelling for me to put my belt on as he slams the door.

“Put your seatbelt on,” I mimic under my breath as I slide it around me, locking it in place.

CROSSING MY ARMS over my chest, I glare out the windshield. Five hours ago, we met up with a guy named Don, who I learned moments after meeting him was a realtor. Don seems like a nice enough guy, but since meeting up with him, we have seen ten houses—okay, not houses, *mansions*—and now we’re on our way to view another.

“You haven’t even attempted to appreciate any of them,” Sven grumbles, and I turn my head and transfer my glare to him.

“Do you know how crazy it is to buy a house that you don’t even want?” I ask, really wondering if he understands how ridiculous this is.

“I want a house,” he says, shifting in his seat, suddenly looking uncomfortable.

“For what, Sven?” I ask, holding up my hand and ticking off my fingers one at a time. “You’re single, you don’t have a wife or kids, and you don’t need more space.” I sigh, placing my hand back in my lap. “You’re talking about spending

millions of dollars just so I have a room to sleep in for a few days. That is the definition of crazy.”

“Do you want to sleep in my bed with me?” he asks, and this time it’s me who shifts uncomfortably. If I was to ever be honest with myself, I would like to sleep next to him, but what red-blooded woman wouldn’t want that?

“Let’s just go buy a comfortable couch if it’s that important to you, and I’ll sleep on it,” I tell him, but then stop talking altogether when we pull down a street with kids outside playing on sidewalks and front lawns, and families talking and visiting with their neighbors. Spotting a for sale sign in one of the yards, I feel a smile on my face for the first time in hours. The two-story terracotta stone house with curved windows and doors, and a wooden shingle roof, looks like something out of a fairy tale and is my dream home.

“You like that house?”

Looking from the house to Sven, a feeling of disappointment hits me as we drive past it.

“It’s a cute house,” I murmur, looking over my shoulder one more time as he turns onto another road then another until we’re pulling up in front of a house that looks like all the others we have seen today.

Completely atrocious.

“Wait here.” Getting out of the car, he walks toward Don, who is standing on the front porch. They talk for a brief moment before Sven walks back toward me.

“What’s going on?” I ask when he gets in behind the wheel.

“We’re skipping this one,” he mutters, looking over his shoulder to the street behind us.

“Bummer,” I say sarcastically, watching as his lips twitch as he backs out of the driveway. Looking out the window, I realize we are heading back toward the neighborhood we drove through earlier, and when we pull into the driveway of the terracotta house, I sit up a little taller in my seat.

“You like this house?” he asks, surprised, looking at the house in front of us. It’s not a mansion, but it is a really beautiful house in the perfect little neighborhood. The kind of house I wish I had grown up in.

“Some people strive for normal,” I say, getting out of the car and walking through the thick grass in the front yard then up to the large bay window, where I put my hands to the glass and press my forehead close so I can see inside.

“Mags, you don’t need to peep through the window. We’re going to go inside,” Sven says, and I feel his warmth at my back and his fingers curve around my waist.

“You want to view this house?” I ask doubtfully.

Ignoring my question, he pulls me from the window and leads me toward the front of the house, where Don is unlocking the box attached to the door handle. Pushing the door open, he motions for us to go inside. The moment I step into the foyer, I’m in awe. It’s beautiful, with high ceilings and natural light. To the left is a large library, and the right, a sunken living room with comfortable couches that make you want to kick off your shoes, grab a book, and hang out awhile. The kitchen is in the back of the house, with a long island, and a breakfast nook that is surrounded by windows. Upstairs are five bedrooms, including a master with a walk-in closet and a bathroom bigger than my bedroom at home, plus a bonus room the pervious owners set up like a theater.

“You’d be happy in a house like this, wouldn’t you?” Sven asks, and his eyes go from where he’s looking outside to sweeping over me as he shakes his head. “Most women want bigger, Mags, and then there’s you.”

“I don’t want to be like most women,” I tell him, feeling like I need to defend myself.

“I know,” he says quietly, stepping away from the window and coming to stand in front of me.

“I fucking hate these bruises.” He whispers running his eyes over them before meeting my gaze again. Looking into his eyes, my body leans into his as his fingers wrap around my

jaw and his lips touch my forehead in a spot that I've decided is his.

Closing my eyes, I only open them back up when I hear his voice in the distance yell, "Come on, Mags. We have a house to buy."

"What's happening to me?" I ask the empty room, but gaining no answer from it, I follow him down to the first floor, where the realtor is waiting.

Wrapping his arm around my waist as soon as I reach his side, he tells Don, "We'll take it."

"Are you sure? This is kind of small." Don frowns looking around.

I have no idea in what world five thousand square feet is small, but the way he's looking at me and Sven gives me the impression he really believed this house was far too small for anyone to live in.

"How long until we can close?" Sven asks, ignoring Don's comment and pulling me closer to him as I struggle with his fingers, attempting to remove them from my waist.

"The average closing time is about a month right now."

"See if we can rent it from them until closing. Also let them know that if they agree to my terms and can close within the next week I will add ten grand on top of asking price."

"Sven," I hiss, swinging my gaze up to his.

"You love this house, Mags."

"You can't just throw money around, Sven."

"Sure I can." He shrugs then turns me with him toward the front door.

"Send the offer and get back to me by the end of the day," he tells Don while leading me out of the house.

"I'm pretty sure you may be insane," I tell him as we drive back toward downtown.

“The most important thing my father taught me is you never let an opportunity pass you by, and this is one opportunity I wouldn’t dream of missing out on.”

“That makes no sense,” I tell him, studying his profile.

“One day, Mags, I guarantee you that it will,” he says quietly, pulling on a pair of sunglasses and turning up the stereo.

Looking from him to the windshield, I wonder why I feel so relaxed, why I’m not stressed about this, and why I actually feel happy.

THE MORNING AFTER

MAGGIE

I 'M PRETTY SURE *he's trying to torture me*, I think as Sven comes into the kitchen, using his T-shirt to wipe the sweat from his face and chest. Tearing my eyes from him, I wait for my toast to pop up while silently praying he puts the shirt on. It's been three weeks since we moved in together, and every day feels like torture. Not that things have been bad. Things have actually been really great. But working together, having meals together, and seeing Sven half dressed in the mornings and at night is messing with my head.

“Morning,” I hear him say, but I don't turn to look at him as I reply quietly,

“Morning,” while staring at the toaster, hoping I can make it through one morning where I don't drool all over him.

God, give me strength.

“How'd you sleep?”

“Good.”

“Are you mad?” he asks sounding concerned.

Tugging my eyes from the toaster, I look at him then regret it when my belly dips and my mouth floods with saliva. Sven in a suit is a sight to behold. Sven in jeans and a tee is mouthwatering. But Sven shirtless, his hair mussed from sleep, and his eyes soft on me is completely unhinging.

“No, why?”

“Just wondering.” He grins then takes a step toward me and places his thumb on the corner of my mouth and swipes it

under my bottom lip. Watching his eyes grow darker, I feel my pulse speed up.

“Toothpaste,” he grunts, dropping his hand away from me but staying in my space. Licking my bottom lip, I take a step back and wipe my mouth, feeling my cheeks heat.

“Thanks.”

“I have a couple friends coming into town tonight. Do you mind picking up some groceries?”

“Not at all.”

“Meat, Mags, not tofu.” He smiles, and my belly does that dip-drop thing again and gets warm.

“I already know that,” I grumble back, rolling my eyes at him. Then I turn back toward the toaster and take my bread out, pulling down the peanut butter and slathering both slices. Taking my plate with me, I go to the table in the breakfast nook to sit down then take a moment to appreciate him while he moves around the kitchen.

“Do you want coffee?”

Feeling my cheeks heat, I pull my gaze from his abs and raise them to meet his eyes.

Busted again.

“Orange juice,” I mumble, covering my hand with my mouth as I chew. Nodding, he pours me a glass of juice then comes to sit across from me, holding his cup of coffee in his hand.

“Thanks.”

“No problem,” he replies, studying me, and then runs his hand over his jaw.

“So tell me about your modeling. Why did you stop?”

Great. This is something I had hoped he forgot about since he never asked me about it after Ace brought it up. Apparently, I couldn't be so lucky.

“My first job was actually for a friend of mine, who designed her own clothing line when she was in college. She asked if I would do some pictures wearing her clothes for her website. Two months after she launched her line, I got a call from an agency and they wanted to represent me. I really didn’t take it seriously at first, but then I got my first paid job, and like they say, the rest is history.” I take another bite of my toast.

“Why did you stop modeling?”

“I didn’t exactly stop. I just haven’t had a job in a few months. When things happened with Morgan, I knew I couldn’t risk leaving her alone, so I told my agency that if the job was out of town to pass it on to someone else.”

“Did you enjoy it?” he questions, taking one of the slices of toast off my plate, taking a bite, and then setting it back down.

“It was fun. When I was younger, I loved it because it gave me a chance to travel, but I don’t think I would have done it for much longer. Staying in hotels and being away from home was getting old.”

“Do you have any of your pictures?”

“A few, but not really. I’m sure you could Google me and see some.” I shrug then watch horrified as he pulls out his cell phone from the pocket of his sweats.

“What name did you use? I tried searching before, but nothing ever came up.”

“You tried looking me up before?” I whisper.

“Yes.” He raises a brow smirking.

Sighing, I mutter, “Star Laurence, my middle name and my grandmother’s name.”

Typing into his phone, his hand holds the cell tight in his grasp as he swipes his finger across the screen.

“Jesus,” he sits back in the chair then looks me over.

“What?”

“You’re half naked.”

“What?” I ask, grabbing his phone from his hand then paling when I see that he’s come across some of the photos for a plus-size lingerie line I did a year ago. Feeling suddenly embarrassed, I exit out of the web browser, set his phone down on the table, and then take my plate to the sink.

“I’m gonna go get ready. What time are you leaving?” I ask while avoiding looking at him.

“Mags, you looked beautiful.”

Looking up at the sound of his quiet words, I wonder what I should

“Honestly, beautiful,” he says earnestly.

“Thanks,” I whisper, dropping my eyes from his, focusing all my attention on scrubbing my plate.

Putting some more soap on the sponge in my hand, I wash out my cup then jump when I feel his arm slide past me so he can set his mug in the sink.

“I’m gonna leave for the airport in about an hour.”

“Okay, I’ll see you later,” I tell him, or tell the sink, when I pick up his cup and wash it out as well. His lips touch the top of my head then he’s gone. Letting out a breath, I set the dishes in the drainer then head up to my room and plop myself down onto my bed, covering my face with my hands. I don’t have body issues. I’m totally comfortable in my skin. My parents may not have been the best parents, but there was never a time I was made to feel less beautiful than my sister, even though I was a few sizes bigger than her. We were taught there was beauty in all shapes and sizes, but Sven seeing me half naked wearing close to nothing isn’t something I’m exactly okay with, especially when I didn’t have the courage to look into his eyes to see what he thought. Groaning against my palms, I get up and go to the bathroom in my room and get into the shower, figuring I can beat myself up about it later after I go to the grocery store.

PUTTING AWAY THE groceries I picked up, I hear the door open and boots hit the marble in the entryway, and I know Sven is home. By the time I got out of the shower, Sven was already gone and had taken my car keys, something he had started doing recently so I wouldn't drive it. Without any other option, I took his SUV to the store and got the items on the list I made yesterday, along with a few steaks for him.

While I was out, I also called Eva to see how things were going at the club, since neither Sven nor I would be there tonight. After talking for a few minutes, she asked if I had plans for the evening. I explained to her about Sven's friends coming in to town, but then she shocked me and said she had a friend she thought I should meet and asked if tonight was a good night to have dinner with him. My first response was to say no, but the more I thought about it, the more I wondered, *Why not?*

I haven't dated anyone since my breakup with Wyatt, and my feelings for Sven were starting to confuse me. Living with him and working with him meant we spent most of our time together, and I was starting to more than like him, meaning the lines of our relationship were beginning to blur, and that wasn't good. Even though he gets on my nerves and has a tendency to piss me off, the good outweighed the bad. He is the kind of man a girl could fall in love with, without ever knowing she was doing it. And that's the exact reason I agreed to go on a date tonight.

"Oh good, you're here. I got all the crap you asked for," I tell him, shutting the door to the fridge as he walks into the kitchen.

"Meat is not crap, Mags," he replies with a smile.

"Stop calling me Mags. It's Maggie for the millionth time," I say, then regret it when I see his smile leaves, but I need to keep strong. I need to separate.

"And meat is gross." I shake my head then turn to look at who just walked in.

Holy cow.

Sven is gorgeous, but the man who is standing in the kitchen right now looks like some kind of Hawaiian warrior, and the whole scary look definitely works for him in a big, big way.

“You have zero manners,” I say, turning to look at Sven then back to the man, only to realize there is another older gentleman with him wearing a bright Hawaiian shirt and a lot of, probably too much, gold jewelry around his neck and on every one of his fingers.

“He’s rude. Sorry about that. I’m Maggie, this guy’s assistant. Nice to meet you guys.” I take the big man’s hand, noticing he doesn’t return his name, then place my hand out for the other guy, who takes my outstretched hand and pulls me closer.

“Nice to meet you, Maggie,” he says, lowering his lips and brushing them over the back of my hand.

“Aww, you’re so cute.” I pat his cheek then step back and look at Sven.

“I’m going to head out. I have a date tonight,” I tell him, ignoring the way his jaw tics and the shake of his head.

“You need to work tonight,” he grits out, narrowing his eyes.

“I don’t work weekends.” I laugh, trying to cover up the nausea I feel turning in my stomach.

“Nice meeting you guys,” I tell the two men, who are both looking at me curiously, then walk over to the counter, pick up my bag and my key Sven dropped when he came in, and head out of the kitchen before he can say anything else. Shutting the door behind me, I make it down the stairs, only to hear a loud bang that has me spinning around.

“You go on a date tonight and you’re fired, Maggie.”

“Wh...what?” I stutter out as he prowls toward me, eating up the distance separating us.

“You heard me. Go to the club. I’ll let Teo know you’re on your way.”

“You can’t be serious.” I whisper taking a step back.

“Deadly,” he snarls. If his tone didn’t tell me he was serious, his body language would have spelled it out for me. I have seen Sven mad before, but right now, he is completely enraged. I just don’t understand what set him off.

“Fine, you win,” I breathe out, feeling my throat get tight but fighting it, not wanting to cry in front of him.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Sure,” I agree then watch his jaw clench again before he turns away from me and walks back toward the house. Standing in the driveway, I look up at the house and pull out my cell phone.

“Maggie, what’s up?” Eva asks on the second ring.

“I need to work tonight, can you please tell your friend I’m sorry, maybe we can meet another time.”

“You we’re supposed to be off.”

“I know,” I whisper, dropping my eyes to the concrete below my feet as I swipe a tear off my cheek.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Sven,” she whispers, and I lift my head and look up at the house, my fairytale house, the house I would have picked if I ever got married, the house I would want to raise kids in.

“He’s a jerk,” I tell her then turn and head for my car.

“It will be okay, Maggie.”

“Yeah,” I agree, “I’ll see you in a bit.”

“See you,” she says, hanging up. Getting into my car, I drop my phone in the cup holder then my forehead to the steering wheel for a moment before turning on my car and backing out of the driveway heading toward the club.

I WAKE UP with my head pounding, the feel of a bare hairy leg over the top of mine, and a hand wrapped around my breast. I open one eye and close it immediately when I see dark golden hair, a nose, and lips I know too well.

Sven.

I try to recall last night, but my whole memory is blank. My heart starts to beat more rapidly as I notice I'm completely naked—and so is the man asleep on top of me.

“What have I done?” I whisper as I recognize the space between my legs is sore.

Tears fill my eyes as I realize the thing I promised myself I would only give to my husband has been given to a man who has had more partners in and out of his bed than he can even count. And the worst part is I don't remember anything.

“Why are you crying?” Sven asks, pulling his hand from my breast and moving it to my face, where his fingers slide over my cheek, swiping away a tear.

“What happened?” I ask, opening my eyes as he gets up on his elbow, his eyes travel from mine to my breasts, and I pull the sheet up, covering myself.

“What do you mean what happened?” he asks, looking confused.

“Why are we naked in bed together?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

“That's not funny, Mags,” he says as his eyes slide over my face again.

“Sven,” I whisper, clutching the sheet tighter against my chest.

“Jesus, you have to be shitting me right now, Mags.” He jumps from the bed and begins pacing along the side of it. Sitting up, I watch as his naked form moves back and forth in front of me.

“I made love to you.” His voice is anguished as he runs his hands over his head then down over his face.

“I...”

“You told me you love me,” he groans, holding his hand to his chest like the words cause him pain.

“Oh, God,” I whimper. I’m in love with Sven, but I would never tell him that. I would never trust him with that information. I also would never risk what I have with him.

“I fucking knew it,” he stops next to the bed to look down at me. “I fucking knew I should have followed my gut.”

Okay, that didn’t feel good. In fact, those words cut something deep inside me—something I didn’t even realize was vulnerable when it came to him.

“Goddammit,” he roars then storms to the bathroom, slamming the door, leaving me sitting cross-legged in the middle of his bed, naked, confused, and hurt.

Getting up quickly, I look around for my clothes that are nowhere to be found then wrap the sheet around myself, leaving the room to go to mine, which is right next to his. I pull on a pair of panties and a bra then find a pair of shorts and a tank top, slipping on my flip-flops, then rush to the stairs and stop dead. From the bottom landing to the top stair, our clothes are scattered. Whimpering, I stumble down the steps, picking up the pieces of my discarded clothes along the way until my hands are full. I grab my bag and keys from the table near the door, rush out of the house, throw the clothes into my back seat, and then back out of the driveway.

Biting my lip to keep from crying, I drive faster.

“What have I done?” I whisper to my windshield as I pull up in front of my apartment. Sven didn’t want me to keep it, but when I was moving in with him, I left my sister a note on the kitchen counter, explaining what happened with the guys that came and how she could get ahold of me. I honestly didn’t think she would ever come back, at least not alive. The next time I stopped by to check the mail, I found a note from her telling me that she was okay, but she was trying to find a way to fix her mess. After that, I decided to keep the apartment; that way, she would have a place to crash if she needed it.

Getting into the apartment, I shut and lock the door with the three extra locks I purchased after the break-in and head directly to my old room, stripping off my clothes. Catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror, I inhale sharply. My nipples are darker than I have ever seen them and are surrounded by tiny hickeys.

“Stop marking me.” I laugh as his head lowers, pulling my nipple into his mouth, making my back arch. Lifting his head above mine, he smiles softly and I run my fingers through his hair.

“I like knowing you’re carrying my mark around under your clothes,” he whispers before stealing my breath with a kiss.

Stumbling back, I sit on the edge of the tub and lower my face into my hands. I have no idea if that’s a real memory or just something my subconscious made up.

Reaching over, I start up the shower and get in to stand under the running water. Making quick work I wash my hair and body then get out and wrap my hair in a towel. Going into my room, I put back on the clothes I arrived in, since everything else is at Sven’s house, and head for the living room, thankful that I left the couch.

Grabbing a Diet Coke, one of the only things in the fridge, I wander into the living room and take a seat on my couch, setting my Coke on the floor. Holding my phone in my hand, I try to decide what to do. I press my hand to my forehead and replay the events from last night in my head. After I got to the club, Teo escorted me straight to the office, where I stayed until around one. Instead of leaving and going home, I decided to sit at the bar and talk to Eva, since we didn’t have a chance to chat earlier. I remember she asked me if I wanted a drink, but like always, I chose cranberry juice, since I knew I had to drive. After she poured me a glass, we chatted between customers. After that,

Nothing

My mind is blank.

Pressing the button on my cell phone, the screen lights up and I see there are twenty-seven phone calls and ten text messages from Sven. I don't read any of the messages as I type quickly.

Sven, I'm okay. I just need the night to think.

I press send then sit back on the couch, close my eyes, and before I know it, I'm asleep.

"I'm never letting you go."

Waking suddenly, I pant looking around in the darkness then squeeze my eyes closed, trying to calm my breathing and rid my mind of the image of Sven above me, his muscles tight as he fills me. Opening my eyes again, it's pitch black, and my neck hurts from the awkward angle it's bent at. I hold my phone away from my face and press the button, seeing it's after midnight.

Groaning, I sit up and rest my head in my hands for a moment while I go over all the variables for the conversation that will happen between Sven and I. Worst case scenario, I lose Sven forever. Best case, we pretend like nothing ever happened. Neither of those scenarios makes me feel good, but I need to understand what happened last night, and judging by Sven's reaction to me not remembering, he needs to know too.

Knowing Sven is probably at the club and I have a couple hours to figure out what to say to him when I see him, I pull the pepper spray out of my bag and make my way to my car. Taking the long way home I pull into the driveway at a little after one. Not recognizing the car parked in the driveway it takes me a second to remember Sven has friends in town. Feeling embarrassment hit me, I shut off my engine, and stare at the house until I finally build up the courage to get out and head inside. I don't even register the sound of the car door slamming behind me. The only thing I'm thinking about when I open the front door is the smell of a woman's perfume as I step into the house.

"It took you long enough."

Turning on the foyer light, my heart falls into my stomach as a woman wearing nothing but a pair of sheer panties and heels walks around the corner out of the living room. My blood starts to pump so fast and so loud that I can't even hear what she's saying as she gets closer. But I know she's speaking to me as I watch her lips move and a snarl form on her pouty mouth.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Sven roars from behind me, and I swing my head around to look at him and stumble back, caught off-guard by the anger in his voice and the look in his eyes.

"I—"

"Get out now," he thunders, and I follow his eyes to the woman standing naked in the entryway of the house. Her arms cross over her chest and she looks at Sven then me and back again.

"Whatever." She turns on her heels and heads back into the living room, grabbing a coat off the couch and putting it on, tying the waist.

"Your friend still owes me," she says as she passes by Sven, who is holding open the front door. As soon as she clears the door, Sven slams it closed and presses his hand to the wood, dropping his head forward to hang between his shoulders.

"I was waiting outside of your apartment. I must have fallen asleep, 'cause when I woke up, your car was gone. Do you know how fucking scared I was?" He turns to face me and pins me in place with the look in his eyes. "First, you run out on me, and then you send me a message saying that you need time to think." He shakes his head, running his hand over his stubble-covered jaw. "What you need to think about, I have no fucking clue, because you have no idea what I'm feeling."

"Sven," I whisper as tears clog my throat.

"No, Mags, I've given you time. I've done everything but write it in the sky, and you still do not understand I'm in love with you. I loved you before I even understood the pain you

caused in my chest.” He steps toward me then pauses as his eyes sweep over me and go soft.

“Then you gave yourself to me last night, gave me a gift that I know I’m not worthy of, but I took it anyway, only to wake up this morning in a fucking nightmare,” he says, and my heart that had been soaring begins to crash to the ground in a fiery ball of flames. “I’m at a loss, baby. For the first time in my life, I feel lost on what to do. I love you, but if this isn’t what you want, I need you to just leave, because I don’t have the strength to do this anymore.”

Tears begin streaming down my cheeks and I try to swipe them away, but they are coming so quickly that I don’t have time to catch them all. There is no way I can walk away from Sven, but the idea of being with him scares me.

“Why?” I shake my head, not sure what I’m asking. Why does he love me? Why is he telling me this now? Why is he doing this to me? Why am I not jumping for joy?

“Why?” he repeats, taking another step toward me and I nod. “I’m not sure. I wasn’t even looking, but then one day you were there and I knew you were it.”

“I’m not even your type,” I point out on a quiet sob as I cover my mouth.

“What type would that be?” he asks tenderly, pulling me up against his body, where I go willingly, melting into him.

“The beautiful, sassy, smart type?” he questions, wrapping his arms tighter around me.

“You’re my boss.”

“Yeah, and if you’re *mine*...” He smiles a smile I’ve never seen before then dips his face closer to mine. “I’ll finally be able to do what I’ve wanted to do every time you’ve pranced around my office in those tight skirts and tights with the sweet little designs on them.” I feel heat hit my cheeks then duck my head so he can’t see how his words affect me. I have always been attracted to Sven, but to know he feels the same thing for me is overwhelming.

“We have to talk about last night.” I swallow and pull away, needing to put some distance between us so I can think clearly.

“Let’s go sit down.” His tone has my eyes flying up to meet his.

Long gone is the sweet smile, and in its place is rage.

Leading me over to the couch, he sits then pulls me down onto his lap.

“Maybe I should sit over there.” I point to the chair that sits catty-corner to the couch.

“No, I need you right here when we talk about last night.”

Searching his gaze, I agree with a quiet, “Okay.”

“What do you remember about last night?” he asks, pushing some hair behind my ear as his eyes run over me.

“Nothing,” I say, feeling a chill slide down my spine.

“Nothing,” he repeats as his hand on my thigh moves in soothing strokes. “What was your last memory from yesterday?”

“I didn’t want to come home, so I went down to the bar to hang with Eva for awhile. When I got there, she still had customers, so she poured me a cranberry juice and we talked a bit, but she was busy.” I end letting my words hang in the air between us.

Leaning back, he pulls his hand from my thigh and runs it over his face. “When I got to the club, you were laughing and having a good time, but you weren’t blitzed.”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember anything. I don’t even remember seeing you.”

“Jesus,” he groans, wrapping his arms around me, burying his face in my neck. “You had to have been roofied and I didn’t even think about it. I just knew you were finally opening up to me and that was all I saw, so I took my shot.”

“Wouldn’t I have been passed out or something?” I whisper.

“I would never have gone there if I believed for one second that was the case, Mags. You have to believe that.”

I do actually believe he wouldn't take advantage of me. I know deep down that if he thought for one second I had been drugged, I would have been in the hospital, not in his bed doing whatever it is we did last night.

“I believe you,” I tell him, running my hand through his hair. When his face comes out of my neck, the worry in his eyes is still there. I hate that look on him, but I have no idea how I can fix it.

“Where do we go from here?” he asks so quietly I'm not even sure those are the exact words.

“What do you mean?”

“You told me last night you were in love with me. Was that real? Do we even have a shot at fixing this?”

“You're my best friend. I don't want to lose that,” I tell him my deepest fear. Before Sven, I didn't have anyone to lean on, anyone to protect me. I wasn't sure I could trust what he was asking of me, but I also knew in my heart I would be stupid not to find out.

“What exactly are you looking for?”

“Forever,” he says immediately, catching me off-guard.

“I'm barely accepting the fact you would want to be with me. I mean, there was a woman in the house naked when I came home tonight.” *A woman who looked like she could have been on the cover of Maxim, for God's sake, I think but leave out.* I know I'm pretty. I have been told that my whole life. I have no qualms about my size-twelve shape, but I have curves that take a lot more to cover.

“I have no idea who she was or how she got inside. I haven't touched another woman since the night we met. I want you, Mags, and no one else.”

“You haven't been with anyone sin...since we met?” I breathe out, searching his face for any sign of deceit.

“No one.”

I swear I feel my eyes pop out of my head at that comment. Sven is young, wealthy, and attractive. I know for a fact women throw themselves at him all the time. I have been there on more than one occasion when it's happened, but if I really think about it, he's not lying. I have not seen him return any of the advances he's received. I don't even see his phone light up constantly like it used to when I first started working for him, with names like Bambi and Lexus. I haven't heard of him hooking up with anyone at the club.

"I'm no good at relationships," I admit.

"I've never been in a relationship, so my standards are pretty low." He smiles and I shake my head, wrapping my fingers around the side of his neck, needing him to understand how serious I am.

"After I broke up with Wyatt, I did some soul searching," I say, ignoring the way his nostrils flare at the mention of my ex. "I realized I've constantly picked men who couldn't let me down, because I didn't have any expectations for them to live up to. Like Ace—I knew he wasn't looking for anything serious, or Wyatt, who lived hundreds of miles away. I wasn't invested in them, because I didn't have to be."

"Don't put me in the same category as them," he flips me to my back, making me squeak as he moves his face above mine. "This is me and you. I'm invested in us, and I expect you to be, too. I won't let you off the hook or let you downplay what we have between us."

"I wasn't—"

"It sounded like you were making excuses for why this won't work," he cuts me off, holding my face in his hands. Crap, that's exactly what I was doing, reassuring him that when things come to an end that it won't be his fault, that it's me who isn't good at relationships. "I'm not saying things are going to be perfect, but the idea of not having you, all of you, isn't going to work for me anymore. I tried to ignore what I'm feeling, but you got under my skin, permanently branded yourself there without me even knowing it."

Tears fill my eyes and slide down into my hair at his confession.

“This is a lot to take in,” I sob as his fingers slide under my eyes.

“This has been happening for a long time, baby,” he says, gently brushing his lips across mine.

“I know,” I agree, crying harder while clutching onto him. Rolling us to our sides with me tucked into the back of the couch, he presses my face into his chest, holding one hand behind my head, the other wrapped tightly around me.

“I love you, too,” I whisper. His body stills and his arms tighten before he lets out a long breath.

“I know, baby.” Feeling his lips at the top of my head, I lean my head back to look at him.

“Are your friends still here?”

“No they caught a flight out before I went to the club last night.”

“That was a short visit.”

“It was just business,” he mutters then searches my face.

“Did you sleep?” he asks studying me.

“Yes.” I nod, pressing my forehead into his chest.

“Did you eat?”

“No, I had a Diet Coke,” I say, cuddling deeper into him, feeling myself relax.

“You need to eat, and then I want to take you to the hospital.”

“Why do I need to go to the hospital?” I ask, feeling my muscles grow tight.

“I want them to take some blood so we know what you were drugged with.”

“Oh,” I whisper, tilting my head back to look at him. “You have a camera over the bar.”

“I do. Zack sent over the video, but it didn’t capture anything out of the ordinary. The only person who poured your drinks was Eva—”

“She wouldn’t drug me,” I say, cutting him off, and his lips brush over mine.

“I know she’s your friend, baby, but everyone is a suspect right now.” He’s right, and that sucks. I like Eva a lot, but she is the only one I remember giving me a drink, and knowing me, I never would have left that drink unattended. “We’ll face that bridge when we come to it, but for now, I want you to eat something so we can go to the hospital.”

“Okay,” I agree as he rolls us off of the couch and takes me to the kitchen, making me sit as he makes me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Then he sits with me as I eat it before putting me in his SUV and taking me to the hospital.

“ARE YOU ON any kind of birth control?” the nurse asks as another woman places the needle in my arm.

“No,” I tell her, absently noticing the way Sven’s body has gone tight next to mine.

“Are you on any medication?”

“No,” I repeat, watching the woman in front of me place a small cylinder on the end of the needle then let out a ragged breath as the tube fills with blood.

“Have you taken any drugs in the last twenty-four hours that your aware of?”

“No.”

“We should have the results for this test back in the next week. If the drug is still in your system, we will let you know what we find.”

“Thanks,” I tell her then watch her and the other woman leave the room. After putting on my sweater, Sven takes my hand and leads me out of the hospital to the SUV and helps me inside, making sure I’m buckled before going around the front

to get behind the wheel. Once we're halfway home, I look over at him, realizing he hasn't spoken.

"Are you okay?" Lifting my hand to his lips, he kisses my fingers then says something against them I can't make out as he drops our entwined hands to his thigh.

"What was that?" I ask, studying his profile.

"We didn't use protection."

Blinking, I wonder if I heard him correctly then blink again as his fingers tighten around mine. "It sounded like you just said we didn't use protection."

"I did."

"As in condoms?" I ask, and his face turns toward me as he pulls up to a stop sign. "Holy crap."

"I assumed."

"You assumed," I repeat, because apparently that's all I can do as I study him.

"Fuck."

"Ditto," I whisper back then blabber, "The chance of getting pregnant from having sex once is like almost nonexistent right? I mean, that kind of thing doesn't happen like ev—"

"Four times."

"What?" I breathe, looking over at him.

"It was four times, not once." He clarifies.

"Four?"

"Four," he repeats, turning onto our block.

And I don't remember even one time.

"Was it even good?" I ask without thinking.

"The best I've ever had," he says immediately.

"I was a virgin," I whisper, wondering how the heck I could possibly be the best he ever had when I had never done it before.

“I know, and it kills me that you don’t remember.”

“Well,” I mutter, having no clue what to say now.

“I guarantee you will remember the next time,” he says as he pulls into the driveway and shuts down the engine.

Oh wow, okay.

Without another word, he gets out, comes around to help me down, and then leads me inside and upstairs. Pulling his hand when we reach the top landing, his eyes come to me.

“That’s my room,” I tell him with a nod of my head toward my door.

“You’re sleeping with me.”

“Um...”

“Sleep, Mags.”

“I...” I mutter trying to come up with something to say.

“Let’s go.” He tugs my hand. I follow him past my door and into his room then into his bathroom where he set’s up his toothbrush for me. Without a word I brush my teeth while watching him watch me in the mirror. When I finish I watch as he uses his toothbrush. When he’s done, he takes my hand again, letting it go when I’m standing at the side of the bed. I watch him kick off his shoes and pull his shirt off over his head.

“Come here.” He takes a seat on the side of the bed then drags me to stand between his spread thighs.

“What are you doing?” I ask as he unbuttons my shorts and slides them down over my hips, letting them fall to the floor leaving me in a pair of cotton boy shorts.

“You need sleep,” he mutters, pulling my sweater off my shoulders, letting it join my shorts, and then he runs his hands up my back, under my tank, unhooking my bra.

“Sven,” I whisper to the top of his head.

“Just sleep, I promise, baby.” He kisses my stomach then reaches under the strap of my tank top to slide my bra straps

down my arms. He pulls each of my hands out gently before coasting his up my stomach, under my tank, making my muscles tense as he grasp the front of my bra and pulls it out, dropping it to the ground.

Okay, that was hot...seriously hot, I think, as the space between my legs tingles.

Standing, he puts his fingers to the button of his jeans then pushes them down and kicks them to the side. My eyes automatically go to his waist then drop to his very aroused manhood.

Holy cow.

“Not tonight.”

Lifting my eyes to his, I swallow then squeak as he pulls me down with him into the bed and adjusts us until my head his pillowed against his chest. Tugging the blankets over us, he then reaches over, picks up the remote for the light, and hits the button, turning the room dark.

“Sleep, baby.”

I want to tell him I’m not tired or that there is no possible way I will be able to sleep, but my eyes grow heavy, and before I know it, I’m asleep exactly where I want to be.

TRUTH BE TOLD

SVEN

L YING WITH MAGGIE in my arms, her soft breathing letting me know she's asleep, I squeeze my eyes closed.

It's not safe for her to be with me right now, but the idea of her being anywhere else is enough to drive me mad. Paulie Amadio, the mob boss for Lacamo, is sure to put two and two together with Kai's sudden return to life and Paulie's son being dead. Regardless of the fact his son was going to take him out, he will want revenge for his death. I trust Kai and Kenton. I know both men want to put an end to Paulie's rein of terror, but until he's taken out and his power extinguished, no one is safe, including Maggie. And that's not okay with me, which means I need to take every precaution necessary to make sure she stays safe.

Pulling her closer to me, her warmth settles into my skin helping me drift off to sleep.

WAKING TO THE soft, warm woman in my arms, her ass cradled against my thighs, my hands full of her curves, and the scent of her in my nose, I regret that I have to get up soon. All I really want to do is roll her to her back and listen to her breath hitch, like it did every time I slid into her. I wasn't lying when I said she's the best I've ever had. Her body alone is enough to bring me to my knees, but the way she looks at me, the way she says my name, and the feel of her skin against mine all give me something I didn't know I was missing when it came to sex. Something I didn't care about before her, an intimacy that made being with her almost unbearable.

My possessiveness when it comes to her is an emotion I never expected to experience firsthand, and nothing could have ever prepared me for it. I knew I wanted Maggie when I first met her, but after feeling my first bite of jealousy, I knew what I was feeling for her was more than just infatuation and lust. I knew I would do everything within my power to make sure she never looked at or touched another man again. I knew I would do whatever necessary to make sure she was mine. I just didn't realize the walls I thought I built up around myself were nothing compared to the walls she has around her. She guards herself so closely, never allowing herself to be vulnerable for anyone. But I won't accept anything less than all of her. I want her—no, *need* her—to feel for me what I feel for her.

Turning in my arms, her face goes into my chest and my eyes drop down to see if she's awake, only to find her eyes closed, her dark lashes resting against her cheeks, her mouth in a soft pout. Kissing her forehead, I wrap my arms tighter around her and rest my chin on top of her head. I'm not happy about the shit I have to do today, but knowing what could've happened had I not shown up at the club when I did has had me on edge since yesterday afternoon when I woke with her in my bed with tears of confusion and horror in her beautiful eyes.

Regardless of the fact things worked out in my favor, someone is going to pay for what's been done. Then I have the issue of figuring out who the fuck the chick was in my house last night, how she got in, and who sent her. If Maggie wasn't Maggie, that whole fucked up situation could have lead me to losing her before she ever realized she's mine, and that is not okay with me.

Hearing her moan my name as her legs move restlessly against the sheet, I pull my head back to look down at her and watch as her nipples press against her tank top and her legs twitch again. Running my hand down her side and over the curve of her hip, I pull her closer, hearing her moan once more.

“Baby,” I whisper against her ear, only to have her whimper. Then her body stills and my head dips, finding her eyes open on me, a deeper honey color than I’ve ever seen, giving me an inkling of what she was dreaming of. “You were dreaming.”

“I...” She squeezes her eyes closed and her chest heaves.

Rolling her to her back, I wrap my hand around her calf and pull it up around my hip. Kissing her mouth, her cheek, and then her ear, I whisper, “What were you dreaming about?”

“I don’t remember,” she murmurs her lie as her hands slide up my sides and her head dips back into the pillow, allowing me access to the curve of her throat.

“You do,” I tell her, dragging my tongue up her throat, and then ask, “Was I doing that?”

“No,” she moans, and I grind my erection against her.

“Hmm, what about this?” I coast my hand up her thigh, along the curve of her waist, and cup her breast, running my thumb across her nipple. Her back arches off the bed and her eyes open to meet mine.

“I...I don’t remember,” she whimpers, raising her hands to my shoulders then one smoothly up the side of my neck, into the back of my hair. Lowering my mouth down onto hers, I kiss her bottom lip then slide my tongue across the seam of her mouth as I pinch her nipple between two fingers. I use her gasp to slip my tongue between her lips, touching hers. Moaning into my mouth, I side my hand up then down under her tank and cup her breast in my palm.

“Oh, God,” she cries into my mouth as I roll her nipple.

Kissing down her throat, I bend my head and pull her nipple into my mouth, sucking hard, loving that my marks are still there. Her legs lift and wrap around my ass, and my free hand moves between her legs, sliding over her panties, feeling the wetness on the material as my fingers pass over it. Pressing my cock into the bed, I raise my head to look at her then slide along the inner seam of her underwear, and groan when my fingers slip through her slick heat.

“You’re so wet, Mags, so fucking wet for me,” I praise, gliding my finger around her clit, causing her hips to buck.

“Sven.”

“I’m right here.” I pull her nipple back into my mouth then move to her other breast and do the same.

“Please,” she cries while my fingers glide down, one then two, entering her and feeling her clamp down on them like a vise.

“So tight, so fucking hot.” I rise up, taking her mouth again, freeing my cock from my boxers, and move her panties to the side to slide the tip over her clit then down, putting just the head inside. Pulling back, I watch her eyes go half-mast and listen to her breath hitch as I press fully into her, gritting my teeth against the exquisite pleasure of having her wrapped around me. Leaning back on my knees, I pull her forward to tug her top off over her head then lean forward again, pulling out then sinking back in.

“Jesus, fucking, heaven.” Wrapping my fist around her hair, I tilt her head back and take her mouth again.

“What...?” she whimpers as I pull out of her and sit back on my calves.

“Shhh,” I hush, sliding her panties over her hips and down her thighs, dropping them to the bed. I kick off my shorts and move between her legs again, wrapping them over my arms, then dip my face to pull her nipple into my mouth, sliding into her at the same time. Releasing her nipple with a pop, her hands wrap around my shoulders and her head falls back onto the bed while her eyes slide closed.

“Look at me, Maggie,” I demand, and her head tips down, her eyes meeting mine. “So beautiful, baby, you’re so fucking gorgeous taking my cock, taking all of me,” I praise her, sliding out then back in slowly.

“Faster, please,” she whispers, running her hand down my chest and over my abs.

“Just like this,” I whisper back, focusing on her face.

I swallow when her hand wraps around the side of my neck and her gaze locks on mine while her eyes fill with tears.

“Don’t cry.” I drop her legs then my forehead to hers, never losing eye contact as I sink into her slowly, sliding my cock along her walls, feeling them ripple and tighten around me.

“Oh...” she whimpers, bringing her legs higher around my hips, forcing me impossibly deeper.

It takes everything in me not to slam into her, but I want this moment, I want her to have a memory of what it was like our first time. I want her to know without words how much she means to me.

“Let yourself go, baby.” I kiss away the tears as they fall from her eyes. “Give yourself to me completely, Mags.”

“I...I don’t know if I can,” she whispers, and I know she’s talking about more than just this moment, but I’m not willing to accept anything less than all of her.

“You can. Trust me and let go,” I tell her softly, watching again as tears fill her beautiful eyes, eyes that hold me captive as she loses herself, clutching her arms and legs tighter around me as she rides out her orgasm. Burying my face in her hair, I lose myself deep inside her.

Mine! My mind screams as I roll to my back, taking her with me, never losing our connection as she falls limply against my chest. Roaming my hands over her smooth skin, I kiss the top of her head and close my eyes trying to get my heart rate and breathing under control.

“I get flashes. I’m not sure if they are real or not,” she says quietly, and my hands still. “I remember laughing when you... when you were marking me.”

“That happened,” I tell her, moving my hands again.

“I...” She lets out a long, deep breath then raises her head to rest her chin on my chest. “I hate that I don’t remember.”

Running my fingers down her jaw, I watch her eyes slide half closed.

“We’ll make new memories,” I assure her, adjusting my hips, leaving her warmth, but then dragging the blanket over us.

“We’ll also make a baby if I don’t get on birth control,” she mutters, looking over my shoulder at the pillow. Feeling my mouth lift, I run my fingers along her bottom lip, gaining her eyes again. I could think of worse things than her having my child, but she was right; we don’t need a baby, at least not yet.

“I’ll make sure we’re more careful from now on.”

“Thanks,” she whispers, and I study her beautiful face then ask the question that has been plaguing me.

“How were you still a virgin?” I didn’t know there were such thing as virgins, at least not in this day and age, not women older than nineteen at most. If she hadn’t told me she was before I slid into her, I wouldn’t have known. She is far too beautiful and far too seductive; hell, looking at her, all you can think about is sex.

“I didn’t have sex,” she says, pressing her lips together to keep from smiling. Tugging a piece of her hair, I wait for her to answer my question.

“I don’t know. I guess it has a lot to do with my parents.” Feeling my body turn to granite, she shakes her head.

“They never did anything to me. They just...” She pauses then searches my face for a moment.

“Sex was never made to seem like a big deal. When I was sixteen, they told me I was free to make my own choices about my body and what I did with it. They made it so casual that it scared me. My parents have both had relationships outside of their marriage. I mean, I know they love each other and they were honest about what they were or are doing, but I didn’t understand. I still don’t understand how they made it seem like it wasn’t a big deal to share a piece of themselves with someone they didn’t or don’t care about.” She pauses, pulling in a breath.

“The few times I’ve been close to losing control, something in me couldn’t let go and I would pull away. I know it’s stupid and unrealistic this day and age, but after a while, I got it in my head that I would only ever give myself completely to the man I planned on marrying,” she says as her cheeks grow pink and her bottom lip goes between her teeth.

“You didn’t close down with me,” I tell her, not even referring to the first time, but to this time.

“No, even my subconscious knows what you are to me,” she says softly, raising her hand to my jaw.

“And what’s that?” I ask gently, studying her features as they move over mine.

“I’m not sure. Important. Vital. Even if we don’t last, I know I’ll never regret giving myself to you,” she says, and my chest aches because I know I’m not worthy of her, not even close. But she needs to know that what she has given me means something to me.

“Sex has never meant anything to me. It’s always been just a release, a way to get rid of pent up energy. I never knew it could be more,” I tell her, watching her eyes grow soft. “Being with you is something different, a completely different experience, one that takes sex to a whole new level. Makes me feel connected to you in a way that transcends time.”

“What?” she whispers in awe, and her face softens in a way I have never seen before.

“I didn’t wait for you, baby, but you have a piece of me no one else does.” I take her hand, resting it over my heart.

“Sven.” Her forehead drops to my chest, and I wrap my arms around her and roll her to her side.

Holding her, I look at the clock and let out a frustrated breath. “I wish I didn’t need to get up, but I need to go to the club.”

“I’ll go with you,” she says, starting to pull away.

“No, you’re staying home.”

“Sven...”

Before she can say anything, I roll her to her back, smooth her hair out of her face, and settle my hands under her jaw.

“I need to know you’re safe. This isn’t something that’s up for debate. Until I’ve discussed what happened yesterday with Zack, Lane, and Teo and get their feedback about the situation, I’m not willing to let you step foot in the club.”

“I can take care of myself,” she growls, and I drop a kiss to her pouty lips then lean back and grin.

“I didn’t say you couldn’t take care of yourself, Maggie. I know you’re a fighter.” I smile then shake my head.

“I don’t want you to have to fight, and I don’t want something to happen to you that I can prevent. Last night, you were drugged. I know we’re good now, but this situation could have been completely different had I not shown up at the club when I did.” My gut twists and I pull in a breath.

“I fucking hate thinking about it like this, baby, but I took you when you didn’t know what you were doing.”

“Sven,” she whispers, bringing her hand up running her fingers along my jaw.

Turning my head, I press a kiss to her palm. “It’s true, baby. Fucked up, but true.”

“Okay, I’ll stay home,” she agrees, and I can tell she doesn’t want to, but is doing it for me.

“Good, now kiss me. I gotta shower,” I tell her, watching her eyes heat in a way that makes me groan and my cock grow hard once more. Pulling her toward me, I wrap a fist in her hair and force her head to the side, kissing her until she’s breathing heavy and clawing at my chest. Slowing down, I pull away with once last nibble to her lips.

“While I’m gone, I want you thinking about what I’m going to do to you when I get home,” I growl, pulling her breast into my mouth, leaving another hickey before reluctantly leaving her in bed.

AS SOON AS I walk through the door of the club, all eyes come to me. Seeing the concern on the faces of my employees, I walk toward their small huddle around the bar.

“Where’s Maggie?” Eva asks, looking toward the door.

“Home, she won’t be in today,” I tell her, and her hands wring together in front of her as her eyes fill with worry when they lift to meet mine.

“I called, but she didn’t answer,” she whispers.

“She was getting in the shower when I left. I’m sure she’ll call you back when she checks her phone,” I assure, not positive if I’m lying. I know Maggie wants to believe Eva is her friend, but after last night, she has doubts about who she can trust. And as fucked up as it is, that works for me. Between what happened with Maggie and things coming to a head with Paulie and his crew, the list of people I know I can trust is small, and growing smaller by the second.

“If she doesn’t, will you tell her I’m worried about her?” she asks, straightening her shoulders.

“I’ll let her know,” I mutter then look at Zack, Teo, and Lane.

“We need to talk,” I tell them, leaving the bar, knowing they’re following without looking. Getting to my office, I slip off my jacket and toss it on the couch then wait for all of them to enter. As soon as the door is closed, the vibe in the room changes.

“Is Maggie okay?” Lane asks first, breaking the silence. Studying him, I notice his eyes are full of worry, a worry that matches Zack’s and Teo’s. My woman has made an impression with these guys, and I know the concern I see is out of care for her, but the jealousy in the pit of my stomach still bubbles to the surface.

“She’s home in our bed, resting,” I tell him, letting the words speak for themselves.

“Fucking told you,” Teo mutters, looking at Lane and Zack.

“Told them what?” I question, crossing my arms over my chest and raising a brow.

“You said *our* bed, meaning a bed you share. I told these fucks that you and her were together. I knew.” He grins then mutters, “You fucks owe me a hundred each.”

Pressing my fingers to the bridge of my nose, I let out a breath then lift my eyes to Teo and narrow them.

“As entertaining as it is to know you’re betting on my relationship, we need to talk about Maggie and what happened,” I growl, and the energy in the room instantly shifts once more. “I looked over the tapes and didn’t come across anything out of the ordinary. I know from the timestamp that Maggie got to the bar a little after one, and she didn’t move from her seat until I came in.”

“She was at the bar the whole time. Lane and I made sure no one approached her while she was sitting there,” Zack says, and I nod my thanks to him.

“No one even got close,” Lane agrees, crossing his arms over his broad chest.

“Eva got close,” I say, looking between the three of them.

“Why would she drug her?” Teo asks as his brows draw together in confusion.

“I don’t know,” I finally mutter, running my fingers through my hair.

“She’s the only one who would’ve had a chance. I watched the tapes a hundred times. Marco was down at the opposite end of the bar the whole night. He didn’t even acknowledge Maggie, except to give her a chin lift when she first sat down. No one else had an opportunity.”

“I agree Eva is the only one who had the opportunity, but what would be her motive?” Teo asks the million-dollar question, the question that has been plaguing me since I saw the tapes.

“I’m not sure. That’s what I need to find out.”

“So what are we going to do until we find out?” Zack asks as I walk to the window that looks down over the club floor.

“Maggie isn’t going to sit at home while I figure this shit out,” I mutter to myself, hearing them chuckle behind me, and I can’t help but smile, even though I’m annoyed. Regardless of her understanding this morning, there is no way she will be willing to sit at home until it’s safe for her to come back here.

Turning around to face them once more, I study each of them. A friend of mine, Nico Mayson, knew Zack, Lane, and Teo from his bounty hunting days. He handpicked each of them to work for me after he found out my previously hired security was helping filter drugs into the club for Paulie, taking a cut from the sale of product and the recruitment of girls. Luckily, I caught that shit in the early stages before my club was overran and I was forced out, or worse—shut down. Being in Vegas means you’re constantly watching your back; people are always trying to make money any way they can, and that includes using you when you don’t even know your being used.

“I’m gonna put a call in to a friend of mine to see if he can dig up anything on Eva. In the meantime, I want you guys to keep an eye on her when she’s here, and tell me if you notice anything out of the ordinary with her.”

“No problem,” they all agree as I take a seat in my chair, and they head for the door.

“And guys, if Maggie’s here, make sure she doesn’t get into any kind of trouble,” I add, hearing them laugh as the door closes behind them.

Pulling my cell out of my pocket, I press send on Justin’s number and wait for him to pick up. Justin is not only a friend of mine, but he’s a computer guru who is somehow able to find shit out that I’m sure would scare our biggest government agencies. He not only works for Kenton, doing intel and searches; he also runs an online group called the Winds of the North, a group of online hackers and activists who help to shut down terrorists and extremists through their websites.

“Seven-Eleven,” he greets after the second ring, making me chuckle, but his next words make me see red and cause my blood to boil. “You sent my gift away from your house without a word. What the fuck, man? She was paid for and everything.”

“You motherfucker,” I roar, feeling the pulse in my neck beat against the collar of my shirt.

“What?” he asks casually.

“How the fuck did she get into my house, Justin?”

“I let her in,” he mutters like *duh*, which only serves to piss me off even more.

“Maggie is the one who opened the door and found her there,” I whisper, because otherwise I’m going to blow the window out of my office. I swear if he was in front of me, I would kill him.

“Did you and Maggie sort your shit out?” he asks, and I pull the phone away from my ear and look at it, wondering how the fuck this guy is able to do the shit he does when he’s obviously stupid as fuck.

“Me and Maggie are none of your fucking concern.”

“I’m taking that as a yes. So you can just tell me thank you.”

“Why the fuck would I tell you thank you, motherfucker?”

“I helped you guys get past your stupid issues, and now you’re together,” he says, the smile evident in his voice.

“Maggie was roofied. I didn’t know that shit, and we got together while she was drugged. The next morning, she took off on me and went to her old apartment. I waited outside her place and must have fallen asleep for a second, because when I opened my eyes, her car was gone. She got home before I did, and when she walked in, there was a random piece in our house. So please forgive me for not fucking telling you thanks for your fuck up.”

“What?” he whispers in distress.

“Yeah, now you’re getting it,” I growl, standing from my desk so I can pace the floor of my office.

“Fuck, man, is she okay? I saw her on the feed for her apartment, but I just thought you guys had a fight. I wanted to help, man. I swear I never would have done that shit otherwise.” Hearing the genuine concern in his tone does a little to alleviate the anger I’m feeling, but just a little.

“She’s fine now. Yesterday, fuck no she wasn’t okay, and thank fuck she believed me when I said I didn’t know who the chick was in the house or how she got there.”

“I’ll tell her it was me.”

“What the fuck is that going to do?” I roll my eyes and rub my forehead.

“Okay, good point,” he mutters under his breath.

“From now on, keep to your profession, ‘cause your matchmaking skills are lacking severely.”

“Got it,” he agrees.

“You owe me, man, and I expect you to pay up,” I tell him. Normally, I pay Justin for his services, but this one is going to be on him.

“Anything, just tell me what you need.”

“I need you to find me whatever you can on Eva Locklear. She works the bar here at the club and—”

“You think she has something to do with your girl getting drugged?” he asks, cutting me off, and I hear him typing through the phone.

“They’re friends, but she’s the only one who would have had a chance to do it. I watched the tapes, and no one else had an opportunity.”

“Got it,” he mutters, distracted.

“Have you found out anything new on Maggie’s sister?” I question, sitting back down.

After the men broke into Maggie's apartment, looking for her sister, I put in a call to Justin to see if he could find out anything on her whereabouts. His search came up empty-handed; she didn't have any cards in her name and wasn't working, and her friend she hung out with was a dead end as well.

I couldn't honestly give a fuck about the woman, but until she turns up and cleans up her mess, Maggie is in danger. Plus, I know it's hurting my woman that her sister is in danger, and that's enough for me to put my own personal feelings aside to look for her.

"Nada, she's still ghost, and it's been two weeks since I've seen her on the camera I put up at the apartment."

"Fuck." I run a hand through my hair.

"I'm in Vegas, and I'll be here for a few days, so I'll see if I can find out anything on the street about her."

"I'd appreciate that."

"No problem, and I'm sorry about your girl."

"Thanks, man," I grumble. If Justin was anyone else, I would hunt his ass down, but I know him and know that in his fucked up way, he really thought he was helping.

"I'll message you what I find."

"Sounds good." I hang up and look at the clock. "It's gonna be a long fucking night."

WALKING INTO THE house, the light in the foyer is on, and I smile, knowing Maggie left it that way so it wouldn't be pitch black when I walked inside.

Walking toward the kitchen, I stop in my tracks when I find her asleep on the couch with a book held loosely in her grasp. Taking the book from her, I set it on the coffee table then sit on the edge of the couch and run my finger down her cheek. Her eyes open slowly, and she looks confused for a moment then smiles softly.

“Hey,” she whispers, bringing her hand up to my jaw.

“Hey,” I whisper back, taking her hand, kissing her fingers, which curl around mine.

“I fell asleep,” she tells me and I grin.

“I see that. Did you eat?”

Rolling her eyes, she sits up and mutters, “Yes,” and I lean forward, kissing her before pulling back and searching her face, loving the way her eyes soften every time my mouth leaves hers.

“I didn’t eat. Do you want to hang in the kitchen with me while I find something?” I ask.

“I made dinner. It’s in the oven on warm.” She smiles, pushing my hands away as they make their way under the edge of her shirt.

“You made dinner?”

“I did, but it’s vegetarian.”

“Is it tofu?”

“No.” She smiles, standing from the couch. “It’s eggplant parmesan.”

“I’ve never had it,” I admit as she takes my hand and leads me toward the kitchen. Turning on the light, she leads me to the table then pushes me to take a seat, running away quickly when I try to pull her down on my lap.

“You need to eat. No funny business, mister.”

“I missed you,” I tell her as she goes to the stove and opens it. Her eyes come to me and go soft once more.

“I missed you, too,” she grumbles like she shouldn’t have missed me, which only makes me grin. Pulling a plate out of the oven, she then goes to the fridge and grabs a bowl, pulling a piece of saran wrap off of it before grabbing the plate and bringing both to me.

“What would you like to drink?” she asks, going to step away after setting the plate and bowl in front of me.

Grabbing her hand, I stop her and pull her back to stand between my legs.

“Kiss me,” I demand, wrapping my hands around her waist. I wait for her to touch her mouth to mine then fist my hand in her hair at the back of her neck to keep her in place. I take over, nipping her lip until her mouth opens so my tongue can slide between her lips. The first touch of her tongue against mine and her taste flooding my mouth are enough to bring me from hard to painfully erect. I can't get enough of her taste, and the thought of eating her instead of food is sounding better by the second.

“You need to eat,” she breathes against my mouth, trying to pull away.

“Come sit on the table and feed me then,” I take her mouth again then adjust my legs, sliding one between hers while pulling her down so she's straddling my thigh. Feeling the heat of her pussy through my slacks drives me to take the kiss deeper.

“Sven!” she cries as I move us to the floor and slip her shirt off over her head.

“Shhhh.” I grab both of her wrists and pull them up above her head.

“Keep them there,” I tell her, kissing her neck then down over the edge of her lace bra, over her stomach, then along the edge of her cotton shorts.

Grabbing the waist, I drag them down her ass and sit back long enough to pull them off her legs. Spreading her thighs wide, I take in the beauty of her body then duck my head to run my tongue up her center, collecting her sweet taste on my tongue.

“Fuck, I could live off your essence alone and never go hungry.”

“Oh, God.” Looking up her body, I see her eyes are closed and her chest is rising and falling quickly. Licking up her center again and again, I build her up until I know she's right on the brink then slide two fingers into her and suck her clit

into my mouth, pulling hard until she's screaming and flooding my mouth. Grabbing a condom out of my pocket, I make quick work of my pants and slide it on, adjusting her hips and burying myself deep within her.

Dropping my head forward, I breathe in through my nose, trying to control the urge to come. Her tight heat is still pulsing with her orgasm, squeezing my cock in rapid succession.

"Sven," she gasps, lifting her legs, wrapping them around my back.

"Fuck, baby, that's not helping. You wrapped around me, feeling your pussy gripping me like it never wants to let me go, is driving me to the brink of losing control," I confess on a groan, pulling out slowly as her walls try to grab and drag me back in. Grabbing her hands, I keep them above her, pressed to the floor.

As I rock in and out of her slowly at first, I then pick up the pace, dipping my head and rolling my tongue around her nipple, and then bite the tip and tug. Her core tightening and her loud moan have me kissing across her chest to her other nipple, rolling my tongue around it and biting the tip, tugging it, too. Her loud cries and the way her head starts to thrash tell me that she's close. Holding her wrists with one hand, I glide my fingers down her side then move them between her legs, strumming her clit.

Her scream fills the house and I slam my mouth down over hers, groaning down her throat as my own orgasm suddenly crashes over me. As I release her wrists, her arms wrap around my shoulders, and she lifts her head, burying her face against my neck.

"You okay, baby?" I question, turning my mouth toward her ear.

"Yeah," she breathes as I pull her face back so I can see her eyes.

"Good," I whisper softly, pulling out of her slowly, hearing her mewl of loss. Kissing her forehead then her lips, I help her

up then smile when she turns and abruptly drops to her hands and knees, turning red as she looks around.

“What are you doing?”

“The blinds are open,” she hisses, crawling toward her shirt on the floor. Groaning, I feel myself get hard once more as I watch her ass bounce. Grabbing her shirt, I hand it to her, slip off the condom, and adjust my pants. I go to the blinds in the dining room and close them while she puts on her shorts.

“Your food is probably cold now.” She frowns as I toss the condom in the garbage.

“It was worth it,” I mutter, wrapping my arms around her waist when she brings my plate to the microwave.

“Actually, I’m not even hungry anymore,” I nip her neck, making her giggle a sound I don’t think I’ve ever heard her make, a noise I love so much that I plan on making her make it more often.

“You’re too much,” she whispers, dipping her head as my mouth licks over her skin.

“You love it.”

“Maybe a little,” she agrees, turning in my arms and getting up on her tiptoes. Her hands run through my hair and I pause just to look at her. I never knew I could have this and feel content. The idea of loving anyone in the past would have sent me into a panic, but Maggie makes it easy. Everything about her makes being with her easy.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asks quietly.

“You’re perfect.”

“Not even close,” she murmurs with a shake of her head.

Running her fingertips across my jaw, she whispers, “Perfect is unattainable and an unrealistic expectation. No one is perfect, and if you think they are, you will be let down when you see they are flawed, just like everyone else.”

Studying her face and hearing her words, I know she’s right, but she’s also very fucking wrong. She’s perfect for me.

I just hope I can be the same for her.

CHOICES

MAGGIE

MY STEP FLOUNDERS as I walk into the bathroom and see Sven wearing his loose basketball shorts, standing shirtless at the sink with his toothbrush in his mouth. Moving my eyes down his chest and abs, I feel a flutter in my lower belly and a tingle between my legs, reminding me of what he did to my body not fifteen minutes ago. Moving my eyes back up to his face, he smiles around the brush in his mouth, looking all too smug.

“Nice shirt,” he mutters through the foam in his mouth as I slide up next to him, pulling out my toothbrush from the cup next to the sink.

Six weeks ago when we became an us, we moved all of my stuff into his room, a room that is now ours.

“Thanks.” I fight my smile and a shiver when his eyes heat and rake over me. When I finally got up enough energy to pull myself out of bed, where he left me still panting for breath, I grabbed his shirt and slipped it on.

“I really like the lace,” he tells me—something I already know, as his hand smoothes over my ass and I inhale at his touch. The lacy boy shorts I have on are the same ones I put on this morning, only to have them removed a few minutes later when Sven tossed *me* onto the bed then tossed *them* to the floor.

“You need to go to work,” I remind him quietly, as he moves to stand behind me and slides his hands over his shirt around my waist then up under my breasts.

“I know.” He frowns, running his hands down to settle on the curve of my waist. “You’re not putting up much of a fight about staying home.”

He’s right. I’m not. Him telling me I should take the day off fits with what I need to do today. Last night, I got a message from my sister asking me to meet her. I know if I tell him about the message, he will likely flip out and do something ridiculous like forbid me from going to see her. I don’t want that, not right now, not when things seem to be going in a direction I like. *A lot.*

I know ignorance is not always bliss, but in this case, I have to believe that what Sven doesn’t know can’t hurt him, and judging by his previous comments regarding my sister, that’s exactly what will happen if I tell him she contacted me and that I want to meet with her. Hell, when I told him I wanted to keep my old apartment in case she needed somewhere to stay, he was pissed. He didn’t think I needed to do anything for her, not after what happened, but I can’t turn my back on my sister; I just can’t.

“I know you’re worried about me and I don’t want you to worry,” I lie, and his eyes move across my face in the mirror then settle on mine. Fighting the urge to look away or squirm, I hold his gaze and my breath.

“Thanks, baby.”

Guilt instantly washes over me at his words, and I drop my eyes and place my hands over his, mumbling a quiet, “You’re welcome.”

“Do you want to shower with me?”

Feeling my lips lift slightly, I shake my head then raise my eyes to look at him once more. “I better not. You’re going to be late.”

“You’re right, but seeing how I’m the boss, I think I can make an excuse.”

Rolling my eyes at that one, I turn in his arms and rest my hands against his abs.

“Go shower. I’ll make you coffee,” I tell him, kissing the underside of his jaw, only to have him pull me back against him and kiss me properly before releasing me and dropping his shorts to the floor. Swallowing, I watch his cock bounce against his stomach.

“You’re looking at me like you want to get wet with me.” He smiles, and I take a step back then another, and then run out of the bathroom, leaving him laughing behind me.

HEADING ACROSS THE parking lot toward the Starbucks where I told my sister to meet me, I scan the lot, looking for anyone out of place. My stomach is a jumbled mess and my nerves are on edge from not only lying to Sven, but from knowing I’m about to see my sister for the first time in months. I know I shouldn’t exactly trust her after what she’s done in the past, but I really hope she’s ready to tell me she wants to get some real help this time, the kind of help only a professional can give her.

Pulling open the door, the overpowering smell of coffee assaults me, making my stomach roll. Scanning the patrons, I spot Morgan sitting at a small round table in the back near the restrooms. I didn’t think it was possible for her to lose any more weight, but she has. The black tank top she has on shows off her extremely thin arms, and the jean shorts she’s wearing give me a view of her legs, which are so thin I can make out the bones of her knees and ankles.

Making my way toward her, I feel myself pale; she looks frail and sick. Her skin has lost its golden hue and is now a greyish color, and her hair is so thin I can see her scalp. Long gone is the beautiful girl who would turn heads as she walked down the sidewalk, and in her place is someone I don’t even recognize.

“Maggie,” she whispers, standing to greet me with a hug. Hugging her back, my arms can almost wrap around her twice and tears burn the back of my eyes. Releasing me, she takes a step back.

“God, you look awesome, Maggie, totally fucking awesome.” She smiles, but I still catch the sadness and pain in her eyes as she speaks.

“Thanks,” I mutter, feeling guilty for every ounce of happiness I’ve felt over the last few months—months she’s obviously been slowly deteriorating.

“Do you want coffee?” she asks, taking a seat.

“No, thanks,” I reply, sitting across from her. We both stare at each other for a long time, and I have no idea what to say. I want to yell at her for being selfish, but I also want to tell her I miss her so much. Not the Morgan she’s become over the last few years, but the Morgan who helped me get even with my first boyfriend when I found out he kissed another girl, the Morgan I could tell anything to, the Morgan who was my best friend.

“Thanks for meeting with me,” she says quietly and I nod.

“I want to get help,” she blurts loudly, so loudly that a few of the people around us stop to look at us.

“You want to get help?” I repeat quietly, not able to keep the surprise or doubt out of my voice.

“I know I’ve messed up.”

“Yeah,” I agree. I’m not going to coddle or sugarcoat things for her this time. I always do that, and it never, ever works. “You could have gotten me killed.”

“I...I’m...I’m sorry. I wish I could change that,” she whispers as my phone in my purse rings. Pulling it out, I look at the screen and see Sven’s calling. Pressing the silence button, I squeeze the phone in my hand and feel my heart rate speed up.

“If you need to take that, it’s okay,” she says, studying me. I really, really do not want to answer the phone. I really don’t, but I also don’t want Sven to worry. Sliding my finger across the screen, I place the phone to my ear.

“He—” I drop my eyes from my sister to my lap as he cuts me off.

“Where are you, Maggie?”

I can tell he’s not asking like he needs to know. He’s asking to see if I will lie about it. How he knows where I am, I have no idea, but I can tell he does.

“Starbucks,” I reply, biting my lip when I hear something on his end of the phone slam down, and I know without even being in the same room with him that it’s his fist hitting the top of his desk.

“Who are you with?”

“Sven...”

“Who the fuck are you with, Maggie?” he asks quietly, and I swallow.

“My sister.”

“Jesus, what the fuck are you thinking?!” he roars, and I see my sister jump at the sound.

“Can I call you back when I leave here?”

“Call me when you get in your car then come straight here,” he demands.

“I—”

“Call me when you get in your car then come straight here,” he repeats, and I feel my spine stiffen at his tone, but I know now is not the time to get into it with him.

“Okay,” I agree and his phone goes off, and I know he hung up without even a goodbye.

“Who was that?” Morgan asks as I drop my phone back into my purse.

“My boyfriend,” I tell her while my insides twist into a knot, because that may not be the case for very long.

“He sounds like a dick,” she states.

I glare at her then hiss, “He’s worried.”

“He still sounds like a dick, and why would he be worried?”

“I don’t know Morgan, maybe because you have a tendency to bring trouble with you wherever you go,” I bite out sarcastically.

“That’s not fair,” she whispers, and I run my palm across my forehead and notice my hands are shaking.

Trying to get my thoughts together, I close my eyes then open them back up to look at her.

“You said you want to get help, so what is your plan?”

“I need to borrow some money so I can get it back to Carmine, and then I’ll go into rehab.”

“Morgan.” I close my eyes again and feel myself deflate.

“Maggie,” she calls, and I open my eyes once more to look at her. “I know you don’t have much of a reason to believe me or trust me, but this time I really do want to get help.”

Studying her, I see the truth in her gaze, or maybe I’m only seeing what I want to see.

“How much?” I hear myself ask, and watch relief flood her features.

“Fourteen thousand.”

“Fourteen thousand?” I choke.

“I know it’s a lot of money, but once I finish rehab, I swear I’ll pay you back, every penny.”

“Morgan, I just...I just don’t know. That’s a lot of money to just give to you.”

“I don’t have anyone else to ask,” she whispers, dropping her eyes to the coffee cup on the table which she’s turning slowly around and around.

My heart twists in my chest as I watch her. If I don’t help her she could really end up dead. If I do help her, she could run with the money and end up dead anyway. *This is a double-edged sword if there ever was one.*

“You’re going to have to follow me to the bank. I don’t have that kind of cash on me,” I say, and the cup stops turning,

her eyes meeting mine and are flooding with relief.

“Morgan, this is it. This is the last time. I love you, but I can’t keep doing the same dance with you. If you don’t get help this time...” I shake my head, letting the unspoken words hang between us.

“I know,” she whispers.

Letting out a long breath, I stand from the table. “How did you get here?”

“Amy dropped me,” she mutters then continues when she reads the look of distaste on my face, “I’ve been staying with her the last few days.”

“Morgan—”

“Don’t say it, okay? I already know what you’re going to say, but you don’t need to.”

“Fine, you can ride with me,” I tell her, pulling my bag closer to my body. Once we’re in my car and on our way to the bank, my phone rings again, but I ignore it knowing without looking that it’s Sven. If I tell him what I’m doing now, not only will he be pissed, he will be *PISSED*, and I can’t deal with that right now.

“Do you want me to come in with you?” Morgan asks as I park in front of the bank.

Looking at her, I turn off my car and shake my head. “I’ll be back. I don’t know how long this is going to take.”

“I’ll be here,” she mumbles as I slam the door. It takes surprisingly less time than I thought it would to get the money. I don’t know why I thought it would be a process, or that I would have to sit down with a banker, but all I had to do was go the teller and tell them how much I needed, show ID, and sign off on the amount.

When I walk back out to the car, I see Amy standing next to the passenger side door of my car, talking to Morgan through the open window. Ignoring her, I get back into the car, trying to keep myself in check.

“Hi, Maggie,” Amy says, but all I can do is mutter a quiet acknowledgement back before asking, “Can you give me a minute to talk to Morgan?”

“Um, sure,” she agrees, looking between the two of us before stepping back. Rolling up Morgan’s window, I turn in my seat to face her fully.

“I asked her to come. She said she would give me a ride. I don’t want you mixed up any more than you have been,” she tells me before I can tell her how much her hanging with Amy will kill any chance of her getting better.

Pulling out the envelope from my bag, I hold it out to her but keep it in my grasp as I tell her quietly, “This is it, Morgan. I can’t do this again. I *won’t* do this again, so if you go back on your word this time, we’re done.”

“I know,” she whispers, taking the envelope from me. “As soon as it’s done, I’ll call you and tell you where I am.”

“Sure,” I agree, not really believing her, but hoping she’s being honest all the same.

“Promise.” She holds her pinky out to me. Feeling tears fill my eyes, I place my pinky around hers and hold her eyes.

Releasing me, she gets out of the car quickly without saying another word. I wait there for a few minutes until she and Amy are long gone then pull out of the parking spot and head toward downtown, praying Sven will understand why I had to help her.

“You didn’t call,” Sven informs me in a tone I’ve never heard from him before as I push through the threshold into his office.

I take him in as he sits at his desk with a pen in his hand and his head bent toward a paper before him, but his eyes don’t lift to meet mine, not even as I close the door and mutter, “I know, I—”

“Did you know this morning you were going to go meet up with your sister?” he asks, cutting me off before I can finish my sentence.

“I did,” I tell him truthfully, freezing in place when his eyes finally lift to meet mine.

“I’m so fucking mad at you right now,” he whispers, and I sink into the chair in front of him, at a loss for words. I knew he would be mad, but this is more than mad, and more than pissed. The warmth he normally holds in his eyes for me is gone, and in its place is a completely blank look, one that scares me more than his anger.

“I know,” I agree, feeling my lip tremble.

“My mom almost killed my dad, and then she tried to kill me,” he says, stunning me. My body stills completely; everything in me stops. I swear even my blood ceases pumping through my veins. I have asked Sven more times than I can count about his parents and his family, but he has always changed the subject, never giving anything away. I thought that maybe he lost them and it was still too painful for him to talk about. I never, ever would have thought he went through something like that.

“I—”

“She was schizophrenic. I was a kid, so I didn’t know, but my dad did. She was taking medication for it, to keep it in check, but then one day she quit taking her meds, started tossing them in the garbage, convinced that my dad was trying to kill her. She would show up at my school and flip out, or flip out at the house and call the police, tell them that my dad or I were trying to kill her. He knew she had a problem, but he was in denial about it. He convinced himself that she had it under control once and could get it back under control if he helped her.

“I would avoid being home with her. I couldn’t even be in the same room with her without feeling like I was going to piss myself, because I was so afraid she would freak—something she did often.”

“I’m so sorry, honey,” I whisper, but I don’t even think he hears me as he continues on, the blank, distant look in his eyes never changing.

“I didn’t know until later, until it was too late, that a multitude of doctors told my dad that my mom needed to be placed somewhere she could get help. He didn’t listen to them, thought that if he loved her enough he could love her through her issues, but that’s the thing. You can’t love someone through shit like that. Sometimes people are beyond help. My dad found out the hard way, when my mom stabbed him twelve times in the chest while he slept next to her.”

Covering my mouth with my hand, I feel a sob crawl up the back of my throat and tears stream silently from my eyes.

“I woke up that night thinking someone was in the house. I didn’t know the sounds I heard weren’t someone breaking in, but my mom hacking away at my dad’s chest. When I made it to their room, the door was cracked, and I saw my mom standing over my dad, covered in blood.”

“Please stop,” I whisper, feeling like he’s punishing me with his words. The thought of Sven as a small boy witnessing something so gruesome kills me. I hate that for him. I hate he went through something like that. And I hate more that this is the time he’s choosing to share this with me.

“How many times have you helped your sister, stood by her, bailed her out?” he asks, tilting his head to study me. Swallowing through the pain, I shake my head. Our stories are not the same, not even close.

“How many?” he repeats on a rumble.

“It’s not the same, honey,” I whisper gently. I really want to go to him to wrap my arms around him, but his body is so solid I know he doesn’t want that, not at all, not from me.

“You lied to me. Standing in my arms, you fucking lied to me.”

Okay, that cut deep, not that it wasn’t true. It was, *but...*

Dropping my eyes from his, I pull in a few deep gulps of air. I would do it again and again; I will always run to help my sister, because I remember there was a time she would have done the same for me I know that deep in my gut.

Hearing my phone ring in my bag, I cringe at the loud sound.

“Leave it,” He snarls, and I bite back the tears I feel gathering in my eyes and pull my cell out of my bag.

Unknown Caller is on the screen, and I know, just *know* it’s Morgan. Sliding my finger across the screen, I ignore Sven’s curse and answer with a quiet, “Hello.”

“It’s done. Can you come get me? I need to get somewhere safe tonight.”

“Where, when?” I rush out, standing.

“I’ll meet you at the Galleria Mall. I’ll have Amy drop me there— fifteen, twenty minutes tops.”

“Kay.” I hang up, dropping my phone back in my bag, and look at Sven. The blank look is gone, replaced with rage.

“I need to pick Morgan up. She’s going into rehab,” I tell him, expecting him to look surprised or relieved, but his expression doesn’t change.

“You do this...” He shakes his head and rips a hand through his hair. “That’s it, Maggie.”

I cringe at the sound of his tone and feel my heart split in two, not only from the look in his eyes, but the amount of finality in his words as he spits them at me.

“I have to help her,” I whisper through the pain the tears in my throat are causing as I swallow them down.

“She’s going to end up getting you killed. Do you not see that?” he yells, standing, causing the chair he was sitting on to slide back and hit the wall behind him with so much force that the window rattles.

“Sven.” I shake my head as my body begins to shake.

“No! Her or me, Maggie, you choose.”

“You can’t ask that of me,” I tell him, lifting my hand toward him as I take a step in his direction around the desk. His eyes drop to my hand and he takes a step back.

“Make your choice.”

“What?” I breathe as nausea and anxiety fill my stomach.

“Make your choice,” he roars, and I stumble back a step while my heart shatters.

“That’s not love, Sven. You asking that of me is not love,” I tell him quietly. Then I turn on my heels, run from his office and down the stairs, passing Lane, who’s eyes lift toward Sven’s office, looking pissed as they come back to me. I’m not crying now, but I feel the tears building in my chest and I know...I know I don’t have long before I break down.

“Maggie!” Eva yells, rushing toward me from behind the bar when she spots me.

“Sorry,” I whisper, running past her.

“Slow down, girl,” Teo says, stopping me with his large hand wrapped around my arm as soon as I pass through the outside door.

“I need to go,” I cry, attempting to wrench my arm from his grasp.

“What’s going on?” He frowns, studying my face.

“Let me go, Teo, please,” I beg, feeling desperate. I want to cry. I want to scream, but more than anything, I want to get away.

“Let’s go inside,” he says gently.

“Let me go,” I repeat, and his hand loosens and I’m able to get free. Running to my car, I get in then lock the doors. I don’t think anyone is following me, but I can’t risk anyone trying to stop me, not again. Putting my car in reverse, I hit the gas then slam on the brakes, causing the car to jerk and my body to slide forward in my seat. Putting the car in drive, I press the gas then swerve to miss Sven, who is standing at the entrance for the parking lot. I don’t even look as I pull out onto the road. I just say a prayer there isn’t a car coming and that I don’t die.

When I reach the mall, Morgan is standing out front with a backpack on the ground at her feet. As she spots my car, she

picks up the bag and rushes toward me.

“I didn’t think you were coming,” she whispers, getting in and buckling her belt, reminding me that I need to put mine on as well. I never go without a seatbelt, but I didn’t even think to put it on.

“Are you okay?” she asks, and I don’t look at her. I can’t. I just put the car in drive and take off toward the highway without answering.

PULLING INTO OUR parents’ driveway, Morgan asks,

“Seriously, Maggie?”

Once again, I ignore her, the same way I ignored her when she asked me where we were going when we got on the road. Then again, when I took the exit for Pullman, the community my parents live in, I honestly would never have planned on coming here, but the longer I drove, the more I thought about it, and the more I realized it’s my mom and dad’s turn to step the hell up.

I have been doing more than my fair share of taking care of people. It’s time someone had my back. And that thought hurt, because Sven should have been the one to do just that. He should have put his personal feelings aside and had my back. Even pissed, he should be here for me, but he wasn’t, proving to me that once again I picked the wrong man, but unlike all the others, he was able to hurt me.

Putting my car in park when I reach the end of the dirt road that stops near the front porch of my parents’ home, I mutter,

“You want help, Morgan, then you do things my way this time.” I open the door, getting out without another word.

“MoonPie?” My mom calls in surprise, walking out onto the porch followed by my dad. They haven’t changed much since the last time I saw them. My mom is beautiful for a woman her age, with long white-grey hair, big blue eyes, and a small frame. You can tell she takes care of herself, eats right, drinks water, and exercises—or in her case, does yoga

regularly. My dad's age is starting to show, but he's still handsome. His hair is still thick, and is now greying around the edges, but blends in with the blond. His skin is dark from the Arizona sun, and his body is firm from working outside daily in his garden or on the house.

"Morgan," my dad whispers a second later with worry etched in his tone, and I look across the hood to see that Morgan has gotten out of the car and is staring up at the front porch at both of them.

"Oh my," my mom gasps, stepping down the stairs, only to pause on the last step and cover her mouth with her hand.

"Can we go inside?" I ask, slamming my door, probably a little harder than I need to, but I'm angry. I'm angry they didn't care when I told them that Morgan was missing. I'm angry they didn't send out the troops like most parents would and search for their troubled daughter. But I'm *pissed* they left all of this to fall on my shoulders while they pretended like everything was hunky-dory.

"Come on, we just sat down for dinner," my dad mutters, his eyes going hard in a way that's surprising. My parents are passive; they've always have been passive, never letting much of anything bother them, so seeing the look of anger and disappointment my dad is directing toward Morgan is more than a little startling.

"Do you have any bags?" he asks, turning his eyes to me.

"No," I tell him, gaining a nod before he takes my mom's elbow and leads her inside. Following behind them, I take Morgan's hand and head in, letting her know silently that she's not alone.

My parents' house looks the same as it did when I was a kid. Three long steps lead to a large covered porch that has been white-washed every winter since I can remember. On one side of the porch is a hammock big enough to hold two people, a two-seated white wicker couch with brightly colored pillows, a wicker coffee table with a large metal plate full of different sized candles, and a bright red outdoor rug, where my mom always does her yoga.

Walking through the front door is more of the same vibe. The living room is small, but is done in bright floral colors with live plants on almost every flat surface. The kitchen is old but well kept, the wood topping the counters is the type you would find on a cutting board. Instead of cabinets, there are open white shelves holding dishes, and more plants, but these are herbs and things my mom cooks with. Stopping with my dad, I notice the round four-seated table is set for two, with a big covered pot in the middle. One of my mom's big things has always been family dinners around the table, and even with my sister and me long gone, she has still stuck to that tradition.

“Get two more plates, Maisy,” my dad orders my mom, who hasn't looked at my sister or me again. Nodding, she goes to one of the shelves in the kitchen and grabs two more plates, along with silverware.

“I'm not hungry,” Morgan tells Dad, and his head turns, his eyes pinning her in place then dropping, taking her in, and I know he sees what I see when I look at her.

When his eyes meet hers again, I can see his unchecked anger as he commands, “You're gonna eat.”

“Okay,” she whispers, shifting on her feet.

Dropping her hand, I take a seat. I know she's as surprised by Dad's behavior as I am, but I have to say I'm happy this is his reaction. When my mom comes back to the table a second time, she has two glasses full of water and sets them both down before taking a seat.

When my dad sits, Morgan does the same, and my mom opens the large pot in the middle of the table. Scooping out some kind of rice and vegetable mixture, she places some on each of our plates, the whole time avoiding looking at Morgan or me directly. I have no idea what that's about, but it's starting to annoy me.

No one says anything. I don't really eat; I push the rice mixture around on my dish, but am happy to see Morgan clean her plate and take seconds. My dad, who is across the table from me, is glaring at his food like it's the cause of all the

problems in the world, and my mom is doing much like me, moving the food from one side of her plate to the other.

“Can I stay for a few days?” I ask. I don’t know why that’s my question, and not, ‘What the heck are we going to do about Morgan?’ but that’s what comes out, and that’s when everyone’s eyes come to me.

“You know you can, MoonPie,” Mom whispers, and my dad grunts something I can’t decipher, with a nod.

“I thought you would be going home to your boyfriend,” Morgan chimes in, but her words sound almost accusatory when she says them. Pain rushes through me at the thought of Sven, but I ignore it, because now isn’t the time to have a breakdown, and I know once I really let myself think about him, that’s exactly what’s going to happen.

“You live with a man?” Dad asks, looking at me.

I really, really want to kick Morgan under the table for opening her big, fat mouth, but instead, I just mutter, “Something bad happened and—”

“What happened?” Dad asks, and I feel Morgan tense at my side, but I’m not going to lie for her. If one good thing came from Sven’s story, it’s that you can’t protect the people you care about by covering for them, and I’m done covering for Morgan.

“Morgan stole some money from a guy. He came looking for her and found me. He roughed me up and—”

“What?” Dad hisses, turning to look at Morgan as Mom whispers, “Oh my,” at the same time.

“Is this true?” Dad asks.

“I know it was wrong.”

“You know it was wrong?” Mom repeats in disbelief.

“I...” She drops her voice. “I know I messed up. I—”

“I gave her the money to pay him back.” I cut her off.

“Hopefully it’s done and we can move forward with getting her the help she needs,”

“I want help,” Morgan says softly, and I find her hand under the table and give it a squeeze then drop it.

“What are you on?” Dad questions, and I freeze, because Morgan has never been honest about that. She’s never told me straight out what kind of drugs she’s taking and has always denied using, even when she’s been picked up by the cops and taken in.

“Crack mostly, prescription drugs when I can’t get enough money for a fix,” she tells us, and my body sinks back into my chair.

“You’re gonna go through withdraws. You ready for that?” Dad asks, and she wraps her arms around herself and nods, dropping her eyes to the table.

“Star,” Mom calls, using Morgan’s nickname, and my sister’s eyes go to her, and this time they’re wet. “We love you. I know we’ve mostly let you girls find your own way, but we love you and your sister.”

“Why?” I ask, and Mom’s eyes come to me.

“Why what MoonPie?”

“Why have you let us find our own way?” I ask as tears burn my eyes and my throat aches as I swallow the tears back.

“You girls have always been smart,” Dad cuts in, and my eyes go to him and my brows draw downward.

“No, I was a kid. Morgan was a kid when we left home. Yes, we were both eighteen, but we didn’t know much about the world outside of this place, only what friends told us and what we saw when we were at school. Neither of us were at all prepared for the real world, and you both just left us to find our way.”

“You did okay for yourself,” Mom argues, and I close my eyes and let out a frustrated breath.

“I didn’t, not at first anyway. I was free to make choices, and a lot of them were bad ones.”

“You never said anything,” Dad defends, and I shake my head.

“Even if I wanted to ask you guys for advice, it would take days to get word to you.”

“We didn’t know,” Mom murmurs, and I look at her.

“That’s my point. You guys as parents should have wanted to know what was going on, how we were doing. Not, ‘They will find their own way.’ Even when I sent you letters explaining things that were going on, you weren’t there. You two just live here in your little bubble, where nothing ever penetrates. It’s not fair to me, and it it’s not fair to Morgan.”

Turning when I hear Morgan’s whimper, I watch tears fall from her eyes and her body shake.

“We’re sorry you felt like that way,” Dad says gruffly, and I hear a sound of distress come from my mom as she gets up and moves to Morgan, wrapping her in a hug.

“I can’t do this alone, Dad. I’ve been doing it alone for too long, and I can’t do it anymore,” I whisper, and his hand comes across the table and I place my hand in his.

I don’t know if things are going to change, but I really hope they do.

SECOND CHANCES

SVEN

“**I** FUCKED UP,” I mutter as soon as Asher answers the phone.

Asher has been my best friend since I was ten. I would hide out at his house every chance I got. He knew what was going on with my mom, was there when shit went down, and his parents took me in while my dad recovered in the hospital. He’s the best man I know, a man I respect and a man who laughed his ass off when I told him months ago that Maggie was driving me to the brink of insanity.

“Give me a sec,” he mumbles, and I hear him moving around. I’m sure he’s in bed with his wife, November, or has one of his girls close and is trying to get away so he can talk. Hearing a door open on his end, I wander into the den and take a seat in the dark, feeling my nostrils flare when I sit on something hard and know it’s one of Maggie’s books. When Justin called and told me that Maggie was with her sister, I didn’t even think, or I did, but none of it was good. All I kept seeing was my dad, his constant excuses for my mom’s behavior, what that led to.

It’s not an excuse for my behavior, but it’s the truth. By the time I realized what the fuck I did, what I asked Maggie to do, it was too late.

“What happened?” Asher asks, and I press my fingers to the bridge of my nose, trying to get my thoughts in order over the pain in my chest.

“Maggie and I got together a few weeks ago.” I tell him, realizing how long it’s been since we last spoke.

“We both knew that was coming,” he mutters, not sounding at all surprised. “That doesn’t explain a middle of the night phone call, unless you’re calling so I can congratulate you on finally pulling the stick out of your ass.”

“Fuck,” I curse under my breath, feeling pain slice through my chest, the same pain I felt when I saw tears in Maggie’s eyes and heard her soft words.

That’s not love, Sven. You asking that of me is not love.

She was right; me asking that of her had nothing to do with love.

“What did you do?”

“Told her to choose between me and her sister.”

“What the fuck, man?” he rumbles, sounding pissed.

“Yeah.” I agree.

“Jesus, you seriously fucked up.”

“I already know that. Now I need to know what the fuck to do to get out of this mess.”

“Where is she now?” he asks, blowing out a breath, and I know he thinks I’m as fucked as I think I am.

“At her parents’.” When she left, I had Justin follow her to make sure she was, and still is, safe. I wanted to go after her, but after what happened, I didn’t want her to spot my car, get pissed, and get hurt while trying to get away from me.

“Can you go there?” he asks quietly.

“Not sure how that’s gonna go over, and not sure I want the first time I meet her parents to be the same time I’m dragging her kicking and screaming from their house.”

“Kicking and screaming?” He chuckles, but I’m not joking. If I got there and she refused to come home with me, I’d bring her back with me no matter how that came about.

“You’re not joking.” His laughter dies and I shake my head, even though he can’t see me do it. “You call her?”

“Yeah, voicemail.”

“Christ, man.”

“What the fuck do I do?” I growl, standing from the couch.

“Go get her,” he states softly. “If it was November, I’d go get her ass and bring her home. No way I’d let her stew on that shit.”

“You think that’s the right move?” I ask, already heading for the door.

“You love her?”

His question has my hand pausing on the handle, and I drop my head forward and close my eyes.

“Yeah, man,” I mutter, feeling a pain in my chest at the thought of her not being mine, of losing her.

“Go get her, plead your case, and bring her home.”

“Thanks, man.”

“Anytime, you know that.”

“Yeah, man,” I agree, hanging up the phone. Getting in the car, I have no idea what the fuck I’m gonna say when I see her. I just hope that whatever I come up with is enough to convince her to give me a second chance.

PULLING ONTO THE side of the road, I watch Justin get off a Harley and do a double take. The kid who once looked like a high wind would blow him over, now looks like he could take Teo on in a fight and would come out on top.

I roll down my window when he gets close, and he grins as I ask, “You start doing steroids?”

“Seven-Eleven,” he replies, ignoring my comment.

“Good to see you, man.” He places his hand out toward mine and I shake it once.

“She still at her mom and dad’s?” I ask, and his face changes.

“Yeah, she’s still there. All’s quiet.”

“Thanks for looking out, man.”

“You know I got your back, just glad I was in town and could help.”

“You didn’t tell me you we’re still searching for her sister.” The call from Justin telling me Maggie was with her sister was unexpected. I didn’t even know he was in town, let alone following Morgan.

“I was working a separate case and spotted her, followed her then saw she was with Maggie and called you.”

“What case?” I ask studying him and seeing something’s off.

“Talked to Kenton and Kai. Shit’s going down with Paulie,” he says effectively changing the subject.

“Fuck,” I rumble, squeezing the steering wheel.

“Go get your girl. The guys will be in town in a few days. We’ll figure everything out then.”

“Not looking forward to that,” I tell him something he already knows as I look out at the empty desert beyond my windshield.

“We’ll probably set up shop at Kai’s place. He’s got the best location and the best security. The women can all stay there while we figure out our next step.”

Rubbing my forehead, I wonder how the fuck this is gonna go down. We all knew things would come to an end with Paulie, but none of us thought it would be happening this quickly.

“Just go get your woman, and the rest can wait.”

“You going back to the city?”

“Yeah, I have a few things to take care of before everyone gets to town.”

“Don’t go off half cocked, Justin. Wait for us to meet.”

“What do you take me for?” he asks, taking a step back, holding his arms out at his sides.

“What the hell happened to you?”

His eyes go darker, a darkness that comes from seeing too much, doing too much. I don’t know what the fuck happened to him, but something flipped in him. But right now, I don’t have time to talk to him about it.

“Go get your girl,” he rumbles as he hits the hood of my SUV once then walks back to his bike and throws one leg over it. He starts it up, the loud rumble sounding through the quiet desert as he takes off.

Turning down the dirt drive toward Maggie’s parents’, I see houses scattered here and there, and lots of green houses between them, along with pens holding goats, chickens, cows, and such. I know from rumors that this community sticks to itself, most people living off the land or using the barter system to live among each other. They make their own rules and don’t accept outsiders often. When I turn down another dirt road, a two-story house appears in the distance. The bright blue color stands out, even in the dark.

Pulling in a deep breath, I let it out and stop in front of the house. The moment I park, the front door opens. As I hop down from the cab, a woman who looks like an older version of Maggie steps out onto the front porch.

“Are you here for my daughter?” she asks in a soft voice that reminds me of the way my mom used to sound when I was a kid before she stopped taking her medication.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“She cried herself to sleep. Didn’t think we could hear her, but the house is old and I heard,” she says as I step onto the bottom step.

Rubbing my chest over my heart, I’m at a loss for words.

“My MoonPie is tough, always has been,” she says quietly, looking over my shoulder.

“I don’t know what happened between you two. She didn’t tell us anything, but I know she must love you,” she whispers studying me.

“Maisy,” a man calls, stepping out on the porch, stopping when he spots me. Just from looking at him, I know he’s Maggie’s dad. They have the same eyes, and the same expression when they’re pissed, which he obviously is.

“Who are you?” he demands, letting the door slam close behind him.

“Sven, sir.” I take the last two steps up the porch and stick out my hand. His eyes drop to it then lift to look at his wife.

“Go inside, Maisy.”

“Monroe.”

“Go inside, check on Morgan, and make sure she’s okay,” he tells her, and she looks at me then at her husband before nodding and heading toward the door, stopping when she has it open an inch.

“I hope to see a lot more of you, Sven,” she says quietly before disappearing inside.

Monroe’s eyes go from the closed door to me and he nods toward the desert as he takes the steps down the porch. Maggie told me her parents were hippies, but I’m not getting the peace, love, and happiness vibe from her father. In fact, he looks ready to commit murder.

I follow him into the sand and dirt off the side of the house, where he stops and places his fists on his hips.

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to bring Maggie home,” I tell him honestly. There is no sense in lying about what’s gonna happen, and whether he likes it or not, his daughter is going home with me.

“You know about what’s happening with her sister?” he asks, and guilt assaults me when I answer.

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re the man my baby girl’s been living with?” he asks, locking his eyes on me.

“Yes.” I nod, shoving my hands in the pockets of my slacks.

“Figured,” he mutters, looking me over, and for once in my life, I feel unsure and on edge. I’ve never sought approval from anyone, never given a fuck what anyone thought of me, but standing outside of Maggie’s parents’ house with her father’s eyes on me, I hope he sees something worthy of his girl.

“She’s upstairs. Tomorrow, her sister’s going into rehab, so I ask that you both stay here until she’s there.”

“I’ll do that,” I agree, and his eyes move over me again.

“Are you a model like my girl?” he asks, and I smile for the first time in hours.

“No, sir, I own a club and have a few other businesses around Vegas.”

“Good,” he murmurs then walks off, leaving me standing while he heads toward the house.

“You coming, or you gonna stand out here all night?” Without a word, I follow him into the house.

“She’s upstairs, second door on the left.” He dips his head toward the stairs.

“Thanks,” I tell him, seeing his wife come to his side, wrapping her arm around his waist.

Heading up the stairs, I stop outside the door then push my way through. The room is dark, but I can still make out Maggie’s outline on the bed. Taking off my suit jacket, I place it on the chair then kick off my shoes and socks, strip off my shirt and pants, and then go to the bed. I pull back the blanket and settle myself in, pulling her against me and feeling her wet cheek hit my chest.

“Wha—” she whispers sleepily.

Rolling her to her back, I cover her mouth with mine and her arms wrap tightly around me for a moment before moving to push me off. Pulling her arms above her head, I hold them there and whisper, “I’m so fucking sorry, baby,” against her lips. “I was a fucking dick, and you didn’t deserve that.”

Turning her face from me, she sobs, and that sound cuts me. Placing my mouth near her ear, I tell her softly, “I love you, Maggie, so fucking much. The idea of something happening to you kills me. I’m a selfish fucking bastard when it comes to you, baby.”

“Shut up,” she whispers through her tears.

“So fucking sorry,” I repeat, dropping my forehead to the side of her head.

“You—”

“I know,” I agree without knowing what she’s going to say.

Crying harder, her fingers wrap around mine and I kiss her forehead, cheek, and neck then let her hands go and roll to my back, pulling her up my body. Her face presses into my neck and tears wet my skin as she cries.

“You let me down when I needed you,” she breathes when her body has stopped shaking and the tears have died down.

Fuck.

“I know,” I agree, and her arm moves from where it was tucked between us to slide over my waist. Feeling her settle into me, my body relaxes. We lay there for a long time in silence before

I finally ask, “Why’d you lie?”

Her body tightens, and she goes to pull her arm back, but I grab her wrist and hold it in place against my abs.

“I won’t be pissed. I just need to know so it doesn’t happen again,” I tell her gently, using my free hand to run my fingers through her hair.

“You hate my sister,” she whispers, and my muscles lock.

“I don’t hate—”

“Every time I mention her, you get a look on your face.” Her cheek moves against my chest and her hair slides over my skin. “It’s not a nice look.”

“I don’t hate her, Mags. I worry about you and what will happen if you let her in again. There is a difference.”

Her head lifts and she looks down at me. “Because of your mom?”

“Yeah.” I nod, wrapping my hand around the back of her neck under her hair.

“Our stories are not the same, honey,” she whispers with concern in her tone. Lifting her hand, she places it against my jaw, and her fingers trail toward my chin. “I hate what happened to you. I hate it and I’m so sorry.”

Closing my eyes, I let her words settle through me and her touch heal a wound I didn’t even know was still wide open. Only she could do that; only she could heal me with a touch and a few soft words.

“I love you, Sven. I know I shouldn’t have lied about meeting up with Morgan. I don’t know that she’ll get better, but I know I love her enough to want her to have the chance to get help.”

“Family,” I whisper, and her face goes soft. She’s right; family does that kind of shit and our stories aren’t the same. My dad fucked up, even after he was released from the hospital. He tried to plea for my mom’s return home. Thankfully, the judge sent her away to a place where she wouldn’t be able to hurt anyone else. On weekends, my dad would go stay near the facility to spend time with her, and when I graduated high school, he moved to be closer to her. Every time my father left me to be with her, my resentment grew a little more.

If I was honest, I felt abandoned. To this day, we talk rarely. He checks in sporadically, and I do the same. Our phone conversations are never long, neither of us willing to talk about the shit that’s bothering us.

If it weren't for Asher's family, I wouldn't understand the way family worked. I wouldn't know that parents, real ones, never turned their backs on you. They didn't push you aside to get what they wanted or needed. I wouldn't know that family stuck by you. No matter what, they didn't abandon you; then again, I knew how badly I fucked up with Maggie when I asked her to choose me, testing her loyalty instead of doing what she needed me to do.

"I should never have asked you to choose."

"You shouldn't have. I understand why you did, and that killed me, but even knowing it's just a hope that Morgan will get help, that hope is enough for me to want to help her."

"You should feel that way. She's your sister," I tell her, and she presses a kiss to my chest then lays her head back down.

"How did you know I was here?" she asks after a long moment.

"A friend of mine followed you."

"Seriously?" she asks, lifting her head once more.

"Yeah, I was gonna, but didn't want you to spot me and do something stupid that would cause you to end up getting in a wreck in that death trap."

"I'm a good driver."

"Baby, you almost ran me over then pulled out on the road without even touching the brakes."

"I was upset."

"Yeah, I know. That's why I didn't follow you," I remind her.

"How did you get in the house?"

"Your dad and I talked. He told me what room you were in and sent me up."

"What?" she whispers.

"Though I gotta say, baby. I thought you said your dad was a hippy."

He sure as hell doesn't strike me as one."

"I don't know what's going on with my dad," she mutters.

"He's probably seeing that his brand of parenting hasn't been working."

"I don't know. I've never seen my dad look disappointed or angry, and he was both tonight. It was freaky."

"Freaky," I repeat with a smile that she must hear, cause her hand smacks against my chest.

"Freaky, and it's not funny; it's weird."

"I think it's a good thing. He cares, baby, and he's showing it."

"I guess you're right," she mumbles, and I run my hand down her back and pull up her shirt so I can run my fingers over her skin, and realize her ass is bare.

"Sven," she whispers as I tug her up to straddle me.

"Gotta be quiet, baby. Your mom said she heard you cryin' through the walls, which means she'll hear if you're too loud." I shift and pull down my boxers, feeling her wet heat against my abs as I do, and then whip her shirt off over her head.

"I don't know if I can be quiet," she whimpers the truth as I adjust her again and fill her with one stroke. Wrapping my arms around her waist, I hold her in place, drop my forehead to her chest, and grit my teeth to keep from coming. No matter how many fucking times I get inside her, nothing can prepare me for it.

Her hands move to my shoulders and her hips rock forward ever so slightly.

"Fuck," I hiss as I tilt my head back, smooth my hand up her back and into her hair, and pull her mouth down to mine. I then use my grip on her waist to rock her against me as I swallow down her moans. Her hands wrap tighter around my shoulders and her nails dig into my skin as her rhythm picks up. Lifting her, I get to my knees then put her on her back.

“I want to fuck you,” I whisper against her mouth, keeping my pace slow, knowing I can’t do what I want to do. Maggie’s parents are somewhere in the house along with her sister, and Maggie doesn’t know how to be quiet.

“Sven,” she whispers back as her walls contract. Covering her mouth with my hand, I dip my head and tug her nipple. Her walls contract again, this time pulling me deeper. Kissing the tip of her nipple one last time, I move to her other breast. As she moans against my palm, her legs lock around my waist and her hips buck as she comes. Lifting up, I cover her mouth once more with mine and groan down her throat as I come hard, planting myself deep, and pull my mouth from hers.

“I love you,” she says, sliding a hand up my back.

“Love you too, baby.” I kiss her softly then roll us and settle her against my side.

“We’re upside down,” she whispers then giggles, burying her face against my chest to cover her laughter. Smiling, I fix us both in the bed, settle her at my side, and drag the covers up over us.

“Tired?” I ask, feeling her smile against my chest before she answers softly.

“It’s been a long day.”

“We need to talk about one more thing before you go to sleep,” I tell her quietly, running my hand up her back again, wrapping my fingers around the back of her neck.

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“It’s not,” I agree, and her body tenses.

I smooth my hand down her back again. “Some shit’s been going down for awhile, shit that you don’t need to know the details of, but shit that has put me in the position of telling you about it, regardless.”

“Okay, now I’m freaked,” she mutters, pressing closer.

“Don’t freak, baby. Just listen and know that no matter what happens this shit won’t touch you,” I say softly then tell her the rest, filling her in on Kenton and what happened with

him and his wife, Autumn, about Kai and his wife, Myla, and then I fill her in on Paulie and his now dead son, and what that means for me and her.

“Holy cow,” she whispers when I finish, and I fight it, but I can’t help it; I feel myself smile. I just told her that we are planning on taking out one of the biggest crime bosses in Vegas, and her response is ‘Holy cow.’

“You okay?”

“I don’t know that I would say. I’m okay, but I will say that no matter what happens, I’ll have your back.”

Shaking my head, I roll her to her back and loom over her. “You’re not going to be involved in this, Maggie. When the time comes, we’ll stay at Kai’s place. Myla and Autumn will be there as well. You girls will stay put and under radar, where you will be safe.”

“So I’m supposed to just let you do whatever it is you’re doing, while I sit at home.”

“Yep,” I agree, and even in the dark, I see her eyes narrow. “Don’t get pissed, baby.”

“Too late,” she replies, and I laugh. “You’re not the boss ___”

Covering her mouth with mine, I spread her legs with my knees and sink into her so hard that her breath leaves in a whoosh, and then I spend my time keeping her quiet.

“HOLY CRAP.” OPENING one eye then the other, my gaze focuses on a woman, and it takes a moment for me to realize where I am. Moving my eyes from the woman I know to be Maggie’s sister, Morgan, to Maggie, who is holding a cup of coffee in her hand close to her mouth, hiding the smile I can still see in her eyes, I blink.

“Hungry?” Maggie asks, and my eyes move over her and they heat.

“Okay, I’ll see you guys downstairs,” Morgan mutters, leaving the room quickly, and I sit up then lean back against

the headboard.

“Come here.” I hold out my hand to Maggie, and she gets into the bed on her knees then scoots toward me. Taking the cup from her, I drop it on the side table then tug her forward. “Morning, baby.”

“Morning,” she whispers, studying my face for a moment, and then her cheeks go dark and her eyes drop to my mouth.

“What time did you wake up?” I question, noticing her hair is damp but not wet, so I know she showered a while ago.

“An hour ago.”

Running my hand up into the back of her hair, I tilt her head toward me then whisper, “You should’ve woke me.”

“You needed to sleep.”

“You still should’ve woke me up, rather than bringing your sister in here to stare at me.”

Pressing her lips together, I can tell she’s trying not to laugh, and her eyes move over my shoulder before she mumbles, “Mom was talking to her about you before I got downstairs and told her you look like a movie star, and Morgan wanted to see for herself and wouldn’t take no for an answer when I told her she couldn’t come into the room because you were sleeping.”

“She was in the room when I woke up,” I point out the obvious.

“Yeah, she made me mad, so I let her in to prove a point.”

“To prove a point,” I repeat, feeling my brows draw together.

“It’s not important,” she mumbles, trying to pull away, but I hold her in place.

“Kiss me then show me where the bathroom is.”

“Or what?” she asks, and I smirk at that, and her eyes drop to my mouth again before flaring.

“Fine, but only because I want to,” she grumbles, kissing me briefly then pulling away.

Letting her go, I can see the confusion in her eyes, but I ignore it and move to sit on the side of the bed then stand, letting the sheet drop from my waist. Hiding my smile, I tilt my head to the side and prompt, “You see my boxers, baby?”

“Boxers?” she asks, licking her lips.

“My eyes are up here, Mags.”

“Your eyes,” she murmurs, and I laugh, wrapping my hand around the back of her neck, pulling her stumbling into me.

“House is awake, baby. Everyone’s up. I’m sure they’re waiting for you and me to get downstairs, so as much as I’d like to bend you over the bed and fuck you, I can’t—not right now anyway. When we get back home, that’s a different story.”

“Right,” she whispers, dropping her forehead to my chest. “Dad and Mom want to go with me to drop off Morgan.”

“Good, I’ll drive,” I tell her on a squeeze.

“I’ll drive,” she mutters into my skin.

“Only two people can fit in your car, baby. We’ll leave your car here and pick it up when we drop your parents home.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.” I smile then kiss the top of her head. “How are you feeling this morning?”

“Okay,” She shrugs then rubs her hands down her face. “I just want this part over with.”

“You’re doing everything you can, but in the end, it’s gonna be her choice if she gets better or not, and nothing you do will change that.”

“I know you’re right,” she whispers dropping her eyes from mine. Using my fingers under her chin, I pull up.

“You gonna be okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah,” I agree, knowing she will be. “Show me the shower and I’ll meet you downstairs when I’m done.”

“Okay,” she agrees, leaning up on her tiptoes and kissing my jaw before walking to the bed, nabbing my boxers from the mass of blankets, and tossing them at me. Grabbing her coffee from the side table, she opens the door to the room once I have my boxers on then heads down the hall and pushes open the door for the bathroom. Following her inside, I watch her grab a towel from the closet then a bar of some kind of soap from one of the shelves. “I’ll be downstairs.”

“I’ll be there shortly.”

Nodding, she runs her hand across my abs then disappears, closing the door behind her.

Once I’m showered, I head back to the room and open the door, surprised when I find Morgan sitting on the bed with her hands in her lap and her head bowed toward them.

“Morgan?” I question, and she jumps briefly then her eyes run up my chest and lock on mine.

“Why are you in here?” I ask, trying to keep the annoyance I’m feeling out of my tone, and her eyes drop to her lap again as she speaks.

“I...I wanted to talk to you about Maggie.” Leaving the door open, I go to my pants and step into them then shrug on my shirt, waiting for her to say whatever the fuck it is she came to say.

“Talk,” I bark, and she jumps. “You were waiting in this room when I got out of the shower, Morgan, while your sister’s downstairs. I gotta say I’m a little pissed.”

“A *little* pissed?” she mutters like ‘*Yeah, right.*’

“Morgan,” I say, losing patience.

“Why are you with my sister?” she asks, looking up at me.

My fingers still on the buttons of my shirt and my eyes narrow. “Pardon?”

“It took me awhile to figure it out, but I know you,” she whispers the last part, and my nostrils flare.

“Maggie wouldn’t know you, because she doesn’t go out much anymore, but I know you. Women talk, and they talk about you a lot.” She drags out the last word, taking me from pissed to furious. It also has nausea turning in my stomach, because she’s right.

“Not that I need to justify my relationship with Maggie to you, but I’m in love with her, have been for a long fucking time, and there hasn’t been anyone since the moment I met her,” I growl.

“Morgan?” Maggie calls, stepping into the room.

“What are you doing in here?” she questions, looking between her sister and me.

“Just talking to Sven,” she answers while standing up from the bed and running her hands down the front of her shorts.

“I heard you,” Maggie tells her quietly, and Morgan looks at me before looking at her sister again, shaking her head.

“He’s a... You have no idea the kinds of stories I’ve heard about him,” Morgan tells her, and I feel myself still.

“You’re a druggie, Morgan,” Maggie whispers, and Morgan pales then whispers back, “That’s not fair.”

“It’s not? And why’s that?” Maggie asks, taking a step toward me, reaching back and placing her hand in mine.

“I’m going to get help,” she says, dropping her hands to her sides, standing taller as her hands form fist.

“So you’re going to change?” Maggie asks, studying her.

“Yes,” she states vehemently, and I see it then in her eyes, the will to get clean, the reason Maggie’s put herself on the line time and time again to help her.

“That’s good, Morgan.” Maggie nods taking another step back toward me.

“But I hope you remember this moment. I hope that one day, when someone is judging your character by your past,

you remember this moment,” she whispers, turning to face me, missing Morgan’s flinch as she does.

Placing her hands against my abs, her head tilts back, and I rest my hand around the side of her neck and dip my face closer to her. “Mom made breakfast, and she made a lot of it. Come eat.”

“Is it tofu?” I ask with a fake grimace.

Smiling, her hands move up my chest and she answers with a quiet, “Yep.”

“Great,” I lie, leaning in, placing a kiss on her forehead, and then standing, and my eyes meet Morgan’s, who is looking between the two of us with an almost startled look on her face before ducking out of the room without another word.

“I’m sorry about that,” Maggie says, bringing my attention back to her.

“Don’t be. She was coming from a place of concern for you.”

“Yeah, well, I’m still peeved at her for doing that,” she grumbles.

“Peeved, huh?” I ask with a smile, and she smacks my chest, rolling her eyes. Kissing her forehead once more, I grab my shoes and take a seat on the side of the bed, putting both on before letting her lead me downstairs to the kitchen, where her mom has made a breakfast for fifty instead of five, and it’s all piled in the middle of a small round table. Taking a seat next to Maggie, I lean over and whisper, “Where’s the tofu?” making her laugh and lean into my side.

“What’s funny?” her dad asks, placing a stack of what looks like whole wheat pancakes on his plate.

“Sven isn’t a fan of tofu,” Maggie tells him, smiling.

“Really?” he asks, looking at me.

“It’s not one of my favorite things to eat,” I tell him, giving Maggie’s inner thigh a squeeze, and her legs trap my hand.

“I miss bacon,” he admits, and Maggie’s mom glares at him.

“What?”

It’s true,” he grumbles.

“I didn’t even know you’ve tried bacon,” Maggie says quietly, looking at him like she’s never seen him before.

“I wasn’t always a vegetarian. Neither was your mom.”

“Really?” Morgan asks as she takes a seat between her parents on a chair that doesn’t match the rest around the table.

“Really,” their mom answers, kissing Morgan’s cheek.

“Did you sleep okay, Sven?” Maisy asks as Maggie piles pancakes and fruit on my plate.

“Slept great. It’s so quiet here.”

“Yeah, one of my favorite things about living out here is the silence,” Monroe says, and then his eyes move between his girls at the table. “But I do miss the house being noisy, like when you girls were home.”

Looking across the table, I see Maisy’s eyes fill with tears then look at Morgan, and notice hers are the same. I feel Maggie’s hand move to mine on her lap and squeeze.

“I miss you, too, Dad. I miss you and Mom both,” Maggie whispers, and her dad reaches over, giving her shoulder a soft squeeze, then his eyes move to me.

“Promise you’ll bring my girl around more?”

“I’ll do that,” I agree softly, and Maggie’s hand spasms in mine. I’m not sure what happened with them, but I can see they all want to be a family; they just got off track at some point.

“Next time you come, I’ll teach you guys some of the Kama Sutra,” Maisy says happily, and my head swings her way. I’m not someone who gets surprised easily, but that comment definitely threw me.

“Mom!” Maggie cries turning red.

“What, MoonPie? A healthy sexual relationship is good for the soul,” Maisy says seriously, and Maggie’s face turns a darker shade of crimson before she covers it with her hands.

Hearing Monroe laugh, I look at him as he mutters, “Welcome to the family,”

Jesus.

Thankfully, the rest of breakfast is somewhat normal, with Maggie and Morgan catching up with their parents. When we’re finished eating, we have a little over two hours to get Morgan to the facility for check-in at twelve, leaving us just enough time to stop on the way there to pick her up some clothes and necessities before getting back on the road.

When we arrive at Guiding Light, the rehab facility, I’m surprised to find a beautiful three-story, adobe-style home, instead of a stale hospital. The house is set on the side of a rocky cliff, with open balconies off all three floors in the back of the house. The landscape is open and done in a way that reminds me of a spa or retreat.

Looking around, I don’t doubt this place costs some serious dough, and I know there is no way in hell Morgan can afford something like this, and I don’t think Maggie’s parents can either, meaning this is all coming out of Maggie’s pocket, showing just how much faith she has in her sister’s recovery.

“I’m gonna help Morgan get checked in. Do you want to come?” Maggie asks softly from my side as I put the SUV in park. Turning, I look over at her and shake my head. Morgan doesn’t need me in there; she needs her family.

“No, baby, I’ve got my cell on me. Call if you need me,” I tell her gently, giving her hand a squeeze.

“I won’t be long.” She leans over, kissing my cheek, then opens her door and gets out, followed by her mom, dad, and Morgan from the backseat.

“Morgan,” I call before she shuts the door. Her eyes come to me, but I can tell she’s still got her guard up.

“You got this,” I tell her, and her eyes go soft and she chews on the inside of her cheek before nodding and

slamming the door closed.

AN HOUR LATER, I spot Maggie and her parents pushing through the door, and I get out of the SUV and lean back against it, noticing each of them have varying looks of sadness and hope etched into their features. I know this isn't going to be easy for Morgan, but this is also going to take a toll on their family. Watching Maggie, she takes her mom's hand and says something to her dad, who nods before Maggie leads her mom to one of the benches along the path that leads to the front door.

"Everything okay?" I ask Monroe when he's within earshot.

"It will be. The place is nice, and the doctors inside seem to know what they're talking about."

"That's good," I say quietly then look back toward Maggie and her mom, who are now hugging.

"She loves you." Titling my head toward him, I feel my throat get tight. No matter how many times Maggie says those words to me, I don't feel worthy of them, and don't know if I ever will.

"I know," I agree after a moment.

"Are you gonna marry her?"

"Definitely."

"I want to walk her down the aisle, so don't go dragging her to some chapel on the strip."

"I'll try not to, but I'm not making any promises," I mutter honestly, and his eyes crinkle.

"I just gave you an idea, didn't I?" he asks, and I laugh, 'cause fuck yes, he did.

"Never thought I'd be happy seeing one of my girls with a man like you, but I have to say I'm pretty darn thrilled."

Staring at him, I do it for a long time. I never believed myself to be a good man, or even a good person, but having

Maggie's father's approval means something more than he will ever know.

"Thanks," I mutter and he shakes his head, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Is everything okay?" Maggie asks, walking up to us, hand-in-hand with her mom.

"Everything's fine. You okay, Maisy?" Monroe asks his wife, wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

"It will be," she whispers, repeating his earlier statement while leaning into his side.

Looking down at Maggie, I place my hand against the side of her neck, pulling her closer to me, and ask, "Are you ready to go home?"

Her face goes soft and she nods then looks at her parents.

"Thank you for coming with me today," she tells her mom and dad, wrapping her arm around the back of my waist, dropping her temple to my chest.

"We love you and your sister, MoonPie," Maisy says softly, taking Maggie's hand in hers, giving it a squeeze.

"We're just sorry we weren't here for you two before now," she says and I can see the regret in her eyes.

"We'll be here from now on," Monroe, states pulling in a deep breath. Watching him with his eyes soft on Maggie I vow to hold him to that declaration.

BULLETS DON'T STOP BOSSY

MAGGIE

SHOUTING, “ARE YOU almost ready?” toward the bathroom, I walk across the bedroom to the closet while zipping up the back of my tight black pencil skirt.

“I still think you should stay home.”

My hand pauses on my top hanging on a hook near the closet, and I look over my shoulder at Sven, who is leaning against the doorjamb with his arms crossed over his bare chest.

“I’m not staying home. I’ve been gone for two days, and yesterday we took care of my family stuff, which means for two days, I haven’t been to the club. And although you keep things organized, you don’t always make sure everything that needs to be ordered is ordered,” I tell him, watching his eyes narrow in a way that proves I’m right, even if he’ll never admit it.

“Would you ever consider moving?”

Caught off-guard by his question, I ask, “What?” while taking my sheer, dark pink blouse off the hanger and slipping it on over my thin cami.

“Would you ever consider moving somewhere else?” he asks when I turn to face him, buttoning the buttons of my shirt.

“Somewhere else, like where?” I ask, studying him and wondering where this is coming from.

“Tennessee?”

“Where you grew up?” I prompt. He’s talked about his hometown a lot, and about the family he grew up with, and I

know he misses them, even if he doesn't say it.

"Yeah." He nods, uncrossing his arms and pushing away from the door.

"Do you want to move?" I question as he gets closer, and then start backing up when his eyes drop to my fingers working the buttons over my breasts then darken.

"Stay back. I need to get ready." I hold out a hand, hoping to keep him at bay.

"I think I should just keep you tied to the bed," he mutters, trapping my hand between us as my back hits the wall, and his hands wrap around my waist and slide back over my ass, pulling my hips into his.

Whispering, "That's not going to happen," I bite my lip as his mouth travels down my throat. Resting my hands on his shoulders, I push. "Sven."

"I'm right here, baby."

"We have to leave for work," I moan as his hand slides down my hip, up my thigh, and under my skirt, and as he pushes the lace of my panties to the side, his fingers zero in on my clit with such accuracy that my hips buck.

"You may have forgotten, but I'm the boss." He nips my ear. "Promise if you're a good girl, I'll let you keep your job." His lips travel down my neck and my eyes slide closed.

Running my hands up his neck into his hair, my fingers tangle with the strands and I pull back until his eyes meet mine.

"We really need to—" Words lodge in my throat as two thick fingers enter me and his mouth crashes down on mine. Thrusting his tongue into my mouth, his thumb circles my clit and his fingers work faster until I'm riding his hand.

"Give it to me," he demands against my mouth, and I do.

My core convulses, sucking his fingers deeper as I orgasm hard, my eyes slide closed, my head falls back against the wall, and my body turns liquid.

“One taste,” he whispers, pulling back, and his hands bunch my skirt up over my hips and he drops to his knees in front of me. Looking down the length of my body, I watch him press his nose into the juncture between my thighs then he rips my panties to the side and his tongue comes out, lapping at my folds. Watching his eyes close, my head falls back against the wall once more. There is nothing better than him touching me, nothing better than seeing him enjoy my body.

“Sven,” I whisper, grabbing onto the top of his head so I don’t fall over when his tongue moves rapidly against my clit and his thumbs spread me open. I’m close, so close. Rising up on my tiptoes, the feeling of his mouth on me starts to overwhelm me. Hearing a loud smack sound in the quiet room, my eyes fly open and my core convulses as the sting of his hand settles into the skin of my thigh. Tilting my head back down toward him, our eyes lock and he smacks me once more, this time harder, the sting and the look in his eyes sending me into an orgasm that has my body lighting up from the inside out, every cell detonating at the same time, sending me into the stratosphere. I don’t even realize it’s me making the whimpering noises I hear until I recognize that Sven is shushing me as he holds me in his lap on the floor. Opening my eyes, I try to catch my breath then bury my face against his neck as tears fill my eyes.

“Don’t cry,” he whispers into my ear as his hand moves over my back in a soothing motion.

“I don’t know why I’m crying.” I sniff, wiping my face with the back of my hand as I cling to him with the other.

“You’ve had a lot happen in the last few days.” He kisses the top of my head once more then pulls my forehead out of his neck and his eyes scan my face.

“I’m okay,” I whisper, and his head tilts slightly, like he’s saying ‘*Yeah right.*’

“I promise. It was just a really good orgasm,” I tell him, and he smiles his beautiful smile then rests his lips against my forehead.

“All you have to do is tell me and we’ll leave work early,” he says gently against the skin above my brow.

“I’ll be fine.”

“I know, but I want you to be more than fine, and if I have to hold you hostage in bed for another day to make sure that’s so, then that’s what I’ll do.”

“Sven,” I sigh, closing my eyes.

His hand in my hair at the back of my head tugs gently, and my eyes open back up to meet his concerned ones. “You need rest. The club’ll be fine.”

“You just don’t want me to be there,” I mutter, and he shakes his head.

“I don’t want you there after what happened, but I know that’s not realistic.”

“I—”

“I don’t want you sick,” he cuts me off before I can get any words out. “You can fight me on this all you want, but you need rest.”

“What’s really going on?” I ask, running my fingers down his jaw. “Why the question about moving?”

He moves to help me stand then stands with me and leads me to the bed.

“I’ve been thinking about us,” he tells me as he settles me against him on the bed, my body tucked alongside the length of his.

“Like what?”

“The club was good when I didn’t have any responsibilities outside of myself, but with you, and hopefully—one day—kids, I don’t think that’s true anymore,” he states, and my body goes solid against his.

“I thought you loved your club.”

“I do, or I *did*,” he mutters, looking across the room.

“Sven,” I call, bringing his gaze back to mine, and then rest my hand against his chest over his heart. “You don’t have to change—”

“I know,” he interrupts, running his fingers softly down my cheek. “I just want more. I don’t know what the next few years will bring, but I know that with you in my life, I don’t want to be working the club ‘til all hours off the night.”

“I’m there with you,” I remind him, and his eyes go soft... softer than I have ever seen them.

“If we have a child, you won’t be, and I don’t want to be a part-time parent like my father was.”

“I can understand that, but you love Vegas.”

“I don’t love Vegas. I love you. Vegas is just the place I moved to because it fit the life I was living. Now it doesn’t fit anymore.”

“And Tennessee fits?” I ask, running my hand up the side of his neck, curving my fingers there.

“It’s a good place to raise a family, the people are nice, and the town I grew up in is somewhere I can see my kids growing up. I want that for them. I want them to grow up in a town where people know who you are and care about you. You’re not just one more person to them.”

“You’ve thrown around the family word a lot in the last few minutes,” I tell him.

His brows pull together then he asks, “What?”

“You keep talking about your kids. Are you pregnant?” I ask, and his lips twitch.

“No, but you could be.”

“I’m not.” I shake my head in denial. “You know I had my period.”

“That was last month,” he mutters.

“Okay, there is a slim chance monthly that I could become pregnant, but if you’re doing all of this on the thought of me being pregnant right now, please don’t. Take your time and

think about this, and if in the end you want to move, I'll go with you."

"This isn't something I just came up with. It's something I've been thinking about for a few months now."

"We weren't even together a few months ago."

"You weren't in my bed, but there wasn't a time I didn't think of you as mine. I was just waiting for you to catch up."

Feeling my heart grow warm, I lean forward and rest my mouth against his then whisper, "What am I going to do with you?" as tears fill my eyes.

"We'll have a whole lifetime to figure it out." He kisses me softly then tucks my face into his neck. I couldn't fathom this moment a few months ago. I had no idea this kind of relationship, this kind of love, was even possible, but having it now, I know I will do everything within my power to make sure I always have it.

"How do you feel about staying in bed and watching movies today?" I ask quietly, and his body relaxes under mine.

"Is that what you want?" he questions as his hand pauses on my back where it had been moving in soothing strokes.

"Yeah," I lie. I know he needs a break from everything, and if me staying home so he will stay home gives that break to him, then that's what I'm going to do.

"Go change and I'll meet you back here."

"Okay." I nod then lean up, pressing my mouth to his jaw before sliding out of bed and going to the closet. When I come back from hanging up the clothes I had on and have changed into one of my old tanks and a pair of baggy pajama bottoms, I find Sven in a pair of basketball shorts with a stack of movies in his hands, heading across the room to the TV.

"Do you want anything from the kitchen?"

"A beer."

Nodding, I head downstairs, grabbing a beer for him and glass of lemonade for myself, along with a bag of Pirate's

Booty to munch on. When I get back up to the bedroom, the curtains are drawn and the room is mostly dark except for the light coming from the TV. Sven is in the bed with his back to the headboard, his chest bare and his ankles crossed, with the remote resting on his abs.

“I called the club. Everything’s okay,” he tells me as his eyes meet mine.

“Did everyone show up tonight?”

“Everyone except you and me.”

“That’s good. You should probably give Zack a bonus for all the extra work he’s been doing,” I tell him as I put my knees in the bed.

“He gets compensated,” he mutters then asks, “Have you seen *The Walking Dead*?” as I hand him his beer and crawl toward him on my knees, settling myself close to his side.

“No, what is it?”

“A show on TV. I got the DVDs a few months back but haven’t had time to watch them. I figured we could start now.”

“Sure.” I shrug as he wraps his arm around my shoulders and tucks me closer to him.

Five hours later, my eyes are glued to the TV and my brain is in some kind of trance as the episode we were just watching comes to an end.

“Jesus,” Sven mutters, and I turn to look at him.

“I know,” I whisper, even though I’m not sure if that’s a good ‘Jesus’ or a bad one. “This show is awesome. I mean, I feel bad for Rick, obviously, but wow. He’s a total badass.”

“Badass?” he asks with a smirk. “Isn’t that a bad word?”

“No.” I scrunch up my face and roll my eyes.

“God, you’re cute,” he mutters, searching my face, then asks, “You ready for the next episode?”

Looking at the TV then back to him, I inquire, “How many episodes are there?”

“Not sure. I think I have about four DVDs, and each has about 8 episodes.

“You know, you may get your wish.”

“What?” He chuckles, tucking a piece of hair behind my ear.

“I won’t be able to do anything until I’ve seen every episode—no work, no eating, no shower...nothing. This show is rendering me useless.”

“I’m sure I can find a way to take your mind off of it.” He smiles.

“I don’t know. Rick is growing on me.”

His eyes go funny, and next thing I know, my back is to the bed and he’s looming over me, and then his mouth is on mine.

Then his mouth is on another—better—place, proving he can definitely take my mind off the show.

Looking over at Sven and seeing he’s asleep, I reach over him, grab the remote for the TV, push pause, and then roll quietly out of bed and head downstairs. We haven’t eaten anything since breakfast, and I don’t think Pirate Booty or each other can be considered a meal. I’m hungry, and I know Sven will be too when he wakes up.

Heading into the kitchen, I open the fridge and scan the contents. There are two large steaks on one of the shelves, along with two giant mushrooms on another. I have never cooked a steak before, but for Sven, I’ll at least try. Going out the back door off the kitchen, I attempt to light the barbeque. After three failed attempts, I try once more then do a little clap when I see the bars along the bottom light up.

Going back inside, I find a pair of new yellow gloves under the sink, the kind of gloves you use to wash dishes in, so I put them on, go back to the fridge, grab the steaks, and cut them out of the plastic wrapper, setting them on a plate. I take off the gloves, search through the cupboard, and find a few seasonings, sprinkling them on the meat. Heading back to the fridge, I grab the two mushrooms, wash them both off along with a few bell peppers, and cut them in half, placing them on

a separate plate from the steaks. Done with all my prep work, I take both plates outside, along with the gloves.

“What the hell are you doing?” Looking to my right, I hold the steak in my hand up higher so Sven, who is standing just outside the sliding glass door that leads to the deck off the kitchen, can see, and then lay it on the grill before doing the same with the second one.

“The neighbors are going to think you’re nuts,” he mutters as I shut the lid on the barbecue.

“Oh well,” I tell him, pulling off the gloves. “They’ve probably already seen me naked. Me wearing yellow gloves is better than that.”

“Nothing better than you naked, baby.” He smiles, and then his eyes drop to my hands.

“Are these really necessary?” He chuckles as he takes the gloves from me.

“I didn’t want to get blood on my hands.”

“If you would have woken me up, I would have done it.”

“You needed to sleep.”

“I didn’t need to sleep. I fell asleep.”

“Because you were tired,” I point out, walking back into the kitchen, where I take out two baked potatoes from the microwave and cut them out of the plastic surrounding them.

“How long have you been down here?” he asks, leaning back against the counter watching me.

“Not long,” I mutter as I move around him to the fridge and grab the butter, stopping when he grabs me around my waist.

“I could have eaten you for dinner,” he says against my neck as his arms wrap around me.

“Oh,” I moan as his tongue licks up my neck, and then squeak as he lifts me up to the counter.

“Dinner is going to burn,” I groan into his mouth as his hands move up my sides under my shirt.

“Let it burn.” He grinds against me, then mutters, “Fuck,” when his phone rings. Stepping back an inch, he pulls his phone out of the pocket of his shorts and looks at the number.

“Give me a second,” he mumbles, kissing my forehead and putting his phone to his ear, walking away.

Letting out a breath, I hop off the counter then go to the fridge. I grab a bowl of salad and freeze when I hear Sven in the next room snarl, “You have got to be shitting me.”

Dropping the bowl to the counter, I walk toward the living room, where I hear him tell whoever is on the phone, “I’ll be there in fifteen.” Then he hangs up and looks at me.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, studying the pissed-off look on his face.

“A fire broke out at the club in one of the bathrooms. I gotta head out. The cops and the fire department are there.”

“What?” I gasp.

“I’ll call and explain everything, but I gotta go, baby.”

“I’m coming with you,” I tell him, but he shakes his head.

“Yes, I’m going with you.” Without giving him the chance to argue with me, I run through the house, out the backdoor of the kitchen, turn off the grill, and then run back through to head up the stairs, finding Sven in the bedroom. He’s already dressed in a pair of dark jeans and a grey V-neck tee. Running past him, I go to the closet, grab a pair of jeans, slip off my sweats, and put on the pants while hopping around before slipping my feet into a pair of sandals.

“You’re not coming,” he says blocking the closet door with his arms across his chest and his feet planted apart.

“I am.” I put my hands on my hips and glare at him.

“No, you’re gonna stay here. I don’t know what the fuck happened tonight, but I don’t want you there.”

“Sven—”

“Maggie, I’m not fucking around. You are not coming. As soon as I’m gone, I want you to set the alarm, keep your phone on you, and stay put.”

“I’m coming, Sven, and if you think I’m not, you need to think again, because the minute you leave, I’m in my car following behind you, so you can either suck it up and let me ride with, or—”

“Fuck!” He tilts his head back and looks at the ceiling then his eyes drop to meet mine.

“Why the hell couldn’t I fall for a chick who does what the fuck I tell her to do?” he asks, and I feel my eyes go squinty.

“You would have been bored out of your gourd with a woman like that.” I tell him the truth; he would ruin a woman who didn’t stand up to him.

“You stay at my side. You are not out of my sight, not even for a second,” he barks, and I fight my smile, ‘cause I know he won’t appreciate me gloating right now.

“I’ll stick to you like glue,” I agree.

“Don’t make me regret taking you.”

“You won’t.” I smile, then walk past him out of the closet and then rush down to his Suburban before he can change his mind.

Driving past the club into the back parking lot, my head turns as we drive past the chaos. There are hundreds of people gathered on the sidewalks out front, along with police cruisers and fire trucks blocking the road.

“I thought it was a small fire in one of the bathrooms,” I mutter to Sven as I swing my head back around to face the windshield when I can no longer see the front of the club.

“When you’re dealing with any kind of fire in a club like this, they evacuate everyone and every cop and fire department in the city shows up,” he says, pulling into the parking space reserved for him.

“I hope no one was hurt.”

“The alarm sounded, they followed procedure, and they got everyone out. No one got hurt.”

“It’s kinda weird that the fire was in the bathroom.”

“People rarely follow the rules. My guess is some kid was smoking in one of the bathroom stalls and either tossed a joint or a cigarette into the trash. It’s not the first time something like this has happened,” he says, shutting down the Suburban, unbuckling his belt, and hopping out. Unhooking my belt, I open the door then take his hand when he helps me down.

Wrapping his arm around my shoulders, he leads me to the road then moves us toward two police officers who are trying to disperse the crowd.

“I own this—” Stopping mid-sentence, Sven turns and shoves me to the ground. My hands hit the concrete right before my knees do. Starting to push myself up, his body covers mine and his arms wrap around my head. People around us scream and the sound of gunfire registers.

“Stay down!” someone yells as the windows explode, causing glass to rain down on us.

“Sven!” I scream when his big body jolts on top of mine.

“Shhhhh.” His hands wrap tighter around me, and I feel the top half of his body lift an inch and I cry out.

“Don’t leave.” Wrapping my hands around his arms at my head, I hold on tight.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he whispers gently, and tears fill my eyes.

“They’re gone!” someone close by yells, but Sven doesn’t let me up.

He stays on top of me, and I notice his breath is shallow and his weight has gotten even heavier.

“They’re gone,” I whisper, digging my fingers into the skin of his arms. Rolling him to his back, I scramble to my knees, pressing them to his side as I lean over him. Running my eyes over his torso, I see his grey shirt is turning red near his ribcage.

“Help!” I shriek, pressing my hands over the wound at his side.

“Are you okay, baby?” he asks, sounding short of breath, and my eyes swing up from my hands to his face, noticing his eyes look glossy and his face is pinched in pain.

“Stay still. Don’t talk,” I whimper, resting my forehead against his.

“Tell me you’re okay.”

“I’m okay, and so are you.” I kiss him then lift my head when a shadow falls over us.

“Please,” I breathe, looking into the eyes of the firefighter across from me. Jerking his head once, his hands move over mine and he pulls them away, and then he yells at someone behind me.

“Miss, I need you to stand back,” an officer says, wrapping his hand around my bicep. Tilting my head back to look up at him, I feel tears fall from my eyes and down my cheeks.

“I need to stay with him,” I whisper, and his eyes fill with concern. “I promise you won’t be far, but the paramedics need room to work.”

Biting my lip, I look from him down to Sven, drop my body forward, and press my mouth to his ear.

“I’m not going anywhere, but they need to look after you, honey.” He doesn’t reply or even move, but when I lift my head above his, his eyes lock on mine.

“Promise I’m not going anywhere.” I lean in and press my mouth to his, holding it there as I try to control my tears.

“We’ll stay close,” the officer says as he places his hand on my back. It takes everything in me to go with him, moving away from Sven. All I want to do is lie down next to him, to absorb his pain, to make him better. Reaching down, I grab his hand, squeezing gently, feeling his fingers tighten on mine before releasing. Moving back with the cop, I watch the paramedics and firefighters swarm, blocking him from view.

“Let’s get him in the ambulance,” I hear an EMT say, and I feel my world falling out from under my feet.

“Can I go with him in the ambulance?” I ask the officer at my side as my arms wrap tighter around my waist, trying to hold myself together.

“I’ll find out for you. If not, I’ll take you.”

“Thank you,” I whisper shakily then look toward the front door of the club. My skin prickles as I watch Zack, Teo, and Lane make their way toward me. Each looking worried and seriously pissed off.

“Maggie,” Zack says, and a fresh wave of tears fills my eyes and I move quickly in his direction.

“Sven,” I choke out on a sob, and his arms wrap around me.

“I’m so fucking sorry. We were talking to the cops inside when we heard the shots start. They wouldn’t let us out ‘til now.”

“He got shot,” I tell him, pulling away and moving my hands over my cheeks in a jerky movement.

“Who would do that? Who would shoot at us?” I ask, panting, and his eyes move over my face.

“Can you ride with Sven in the ambulance, or do you need a ride to the hospital?” Lane asks, cutting in, and my eyes turn to meet his.

“I...I don’t know. A...an officer was going to find out,” I stutter out, noticing my body has started to tremble.

“Miss, I’m going to take you to the hospital. There’s no room in the ambulance.”

“I’ll take her,” Zack says, and I look at him then to the cop, and I know I have a much better chance of getting to the hospital quickly if I’m in a cop car.

“I’m go...going t-to—” Placing my hand to my stomach when a sharp pain hits me, my eyes try to focus, but blackness seeps in around the edge of my vision until I see nothing.

Hearing low murmurs, I wonder who Sven's talking to as I fight to the surface of consciousness. Blinking my eyes open, I know I'm missing something; something's not right. Then everything comes back to me, every detail.

"Sven," I breathe, tossing the cover over me back as I groggily attempt to sit up.

"MoonPie!" my mom cries, rushing to my side and holding me down.

"Where's Sven?" I ask frantically, and my dad moves to my other side and places his hand against my chest.

"Stay down. Sven's okay," Dad says, and I look at him and search his face, seeing a deep sadness in his eyes.

"I need to see him. I need to know he's okay." I lift my hand and notice an IV line then look down and see I'm in a hospital gown.

"You'll see him. The doctor should be back in soon. Until then, you're going to lay down."

Feeling confused and lightheaded, I ask softly, "Why would I need a doctor?"

"Oh, MoonPie," Mom whimpers, and my eyes fly to hers.

"What's going on?" I question, seeing tears in her eyes.

"You were pregnant," Dad says, and my head swings in his direction.

"What?" I whisper as my hands move to rest over my abdomen, and now that it's been brought to my attention, I notice a slight pain there and can feel some kind of gauze or something under my gown.

"Mom," I whisper as she settles herself at my side near my hip and runs her hands down my hair like she used to do when I was little.

"It was a ectopic pregnancy. Your tube ruptured and they had to rush you into surgery. We got a call from a guy named Zack, and he told us Sven was in surgery as well and that we

needed to get here.” She presses her lips together and more tears gather in her eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

Closing my eyes, I lean my head back against the pillow as a feeling of loss washes over me. I didn’t even know I was pregnant, didn’t even have any inkling, but knowing I was and knowing I’m not anymore, my heart hurts.

“I need Sven,” I whisper, hearing my mom sob.

“You’ll be able to see him soon enough. He’s being taken off the ICU floor as we speak and should be here with you soon.”

“Promise me he’s okay.” I open my eyes, pinning my dad in place.

“Promise. He’s tough. He’s more worried about you than he is about himself.”

He would be; he was probably worried out of his mind.

“Does he know about the baby?” I ask, and for the first time in my life, I watch my dad’s eyes glitter with tears.

“I had to tell him. He was causing a scene, thought they were just keeping you from him. No one would give him any answers.”

Closing my eyes, pain cuts through me, and I pull in a ragged breath, feeling my bottom lip wobble.

“He told them that he wants to be moved in here with you, tossed around a few names, names of men I only know because everyone knows them, and they agreed to it,” he says, and a silent tear slides down my cheek.

“HAS SHE WOKEN?” I hear Sven ask, and my eyes fly open seeing Sven in a bed next to mine. As I try to sit up, my dad puts his hand against my chest as my eyes lock on Sven’s.

“Easy,” Dad says gently.

“The doctor said I can get up,” I remind him softly, looking up at him.

When the doctor came in to talk to me, he told me it was okay for me to move around as long as I didn't do anything strenuous. I had gotten up and gone to the bathroom on my own with only minor pain in my abdomen. But that didn't mean I wasn't in pain. My heart hurt badly. The doctor explained I was approximately six weeks pregnant and that the baby was growing inside of my left fallopian tube, which ruptured. The surgery they performed—removing my left tube completely—left me with only one, which he explained would make conceiving in the future a little more difficult, but not impossible.

“Baby.”

That one word has me coming out of my thoughts and my dad's hand moving to my elbow to help me up. Gaining my feet, I walk slowly across the space separating me from Sven, our eyes never leaving the other.

“Fuck, baby.” He reaches out to me with his left hand when I'm close.

“Please, be careful.” I take his hand in mine and pull it up to rest against my chest.

“Come here,” he demands softly, sliding his hand around my back, pulling me closer, proving that not even a bullet wound will stop his bossy ways.

“We're gonna step out for awhile,” my dad says from behind me, but I don't turn to look at him or my mom as I hear them moving around or when the door closes a few seconds later.

“I was so scared,” I whisper after a long moment of my eyes taking him in and the various machines he's hooked up to.

“I need to hold you. Climb up here with me.” He scoots over, and I know I should protest, but I need his touch right now. I need to be in his arms, where I feel safe, where the world outside of us doesn't exist. Being cautious of the IV in

his hand, I get onto the bed with him and tuck myself into his side.

“Please don’t cry,” he whispers, and I move my hands over my face, feeling wet on my fingers when I do.

“I’m so sorry baby, so fucking sorry,” he says, and I know he’s not talking about getting shot, but about the baby.

“Me too.” I move closer to him, pressing my face against his neck.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here for you.”

“You were kind of busy, not dying.” I swallow down a new wave of tears, bringing my head out of his neck to look at him, noticing his face is pinched in pain.

“How much are you hurting? Do you need the doctor?” I ask softly trying to move off the bed.

“Stay.” He pulls me back to him, wincing when he does.

“I’m worried about you. It kills me that you woke up and I wasn’t here.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine baby. I’m down for about three weeks, but I’m fine. The doctor even said I was lucky.”

“I thought you...”

“Shhhh, I’m okay. A week, and then we go home.”

Fighting myself to keep quiet, to not bring it up—not yet—I still ask, “Who shot at us?”

Yes, there were other people outside the club, but those bullets were all aimed in our direction. No one was hurt besides Sven, not one person.

“You don’t worry about that right now. The club’s closed down for now. Zack, Lane, and Teo are going to be doing security for us while we’re home.”

“They’re bouncers. No offense, but what do—”

“They we’re special ops. I trust them,” he cuts me off. “I know them. I know they care about you, and they’re the only

people here right now that I know would lay down their lives for you.”

“Don’t say that.” I squeeze my eyes closed. I don’t want to see anyone else I care about hurt. “You were on top of me when you were shot. I know that bullet could have hit me, and knowing that doesn’t make me feel any better. I don’t want any of them hurt.”

“Baby.” He pulls me gently until I’m pressed tighter against him. “Don’t think about that right now. You need to rest.”

“You need rest,” I mutter, and I hear a smile in his voice when he mutters back, “Let’s both rest.”

“You’re still very bossy.”

“Rest, Mags.”

“Fine.” I let out a breath, carefully resting my hand over his abs, thinking I would get bored if he wasn’t exactly who he is. And with that, I fall asleep in his arms, which I know now more than ever will always keep me safe.

MISSING PIECES

SVEN

FEELING MAGGIE BEHIND me, her tits are pressed tightly to my back.

Her arm is over my abs, and her leg is shoved between mine. I roll to face her, noticing the dark circles under her eyes are slowly disappearing. When I was in the hospital, she stayed with me every night, even after I told her she needed to go home and get some rest—the kind of rest you can't get in a hospital because there is someone coming into the room every fucking hour, disturbing you. She didn't agree to this and insisted she stay with me.

Knowing I wasn't going to win the battle, I had the nurses push her bed close to mine so she could sleep close by but not be disturbed. Yet she always woke anytime someone even opened the door, and she didn't sleep again until after they finished checking me over and told her I was okay. Even now, two weeks after they released me to come home, she was still waking up almost as often as when the nurses had come in to check on me. Every night I wake to find her with her hand on my chest or her fingers at my wrist, taking my pulse—literally. I knew she would be shook up for a while over what went down, but I didn't want her to dwell on it, especially when she had lost our baby the same night and hadn't really had a chance to process that.

I hadn't even had a real moment to process it either. I just know there is now a pain in my chest that wasn't there before, a pain I knew I would have for the rest of my life, because whether or not Maggie and I knew about the baby, he or she

was still ours, still something we had created together, a part of us that was now lost.

Wrapping my hand over the curve of her waist, I carefully pull her closer so I don't wake her then rest my chin on the top of her head and close my eyes. Kenton and Kai are hitting town tomorrow night, and then we're moving to Kai's place until shit gets sorted and we figure out exactly what our next move needs to be. They were going to show up after I got shot, but I told them to stay put. I didn't want to send Paulie the signal and knew I needed time to recover.

I know Paulie put a hit out on me because I got the message from Justin after I got out of surgery and got my phone back. Only I got that message way too fucking late, and by the time I got it, I had already been shot and had a six-hour surgery to repair my lung and make sure there was no other internal damage.

I didn't give a fuck about me getting shot. Yes, that shit hurt more than any pain I've experienced in my life, but nothing compared to the fear I felt knowing it could have been Maggie. That bullet could have hit her, and the way I was laying on top of her, I'm still surprised it didn't. The bullet hit under my armpit, inches away from her, so fucking close that had she moved, had I not wrapped my arms up and over her, it would have.

I'm done with this shit with Paulie. His reign of terror is coming to an end, and I don't give a fuck if I'm the one who has to put a bullet in his head to do it. Over the years, he and his son have fucked me over on a variety of occasions, but this time, he went too far. This wasn't drugs in my club or dead bodies at the door; this was him taking a shot at me and my woman. A woman who was carrying my child when he had his men do it. Yes, this shit is coming to an end, and then I'm moving Maggie to Tennessee to start over. I can't say I haven't enjoyed Vegas, but the life I was leading was a life I was never really living at all. I moved through the motions, not really connecting with anyone. I have no roots here, no family, and only a handful of people I would consider friends. I want more than that for Maggie and me. I want her to have people, family

around, bonfires, dinner with friends, and a house eventually full of kids. Vegas isn't the place I see myself building that dream for us.

I wasn't lying when I told Maggie I've been thinking about moving for a while. The day I took Mags skydiving, I set up that meeting with Ace, needing to get a feel from him about his interest in buying me out of the club. He mentioned wanting to be partners in the past, but if I left town, I was going to be out completely. There would be no looking back.

"I know you're awake," I whisper, running my hand down her back when I hear her breathing change.

"Do we really have to leave?" Her head comes out from under my chin and my eyes dip forward to meet hers. I told her last night about moving to Kai's place out in the desert. She doesn't want to go. I know this, but I also know it's the safest place for her to be while Kai, Kenton, Justin and I take care of what needs to be taken care of.

"It won't be but a few days, baby, then this shit will be done and we can move on with our lives," I tell her, pressing a soft kiss to her lips.

"I'll follow you anywhere," she whispers after a long moment, and I hear the truth in her tone. I never knew love could be like this, never understood the depth of my dad's devotion to my mother, but having Maggie, I now understand why he stood by my mother for years, even after she tried to take his life.

"HONEY, DO YOU really think you should you be doing that?" Maggie asks softly as she steps through the door of the spare bedroom, where I keep my workout equipment, and eyes the dumbbell in my hand as I curl it upward once more.

"You heard my physical therapist, Mags." I set the weight on the rack with the rest of the weights then go to her, taking her face gently in my hands.

"I know you're worried, but you need to understand I have to get back into the swing of things, and that includes working

out,” I tell her softly, and her eyes move to the weights behind me before coming back to meet mine with a look of worry and anxiousness in their golden depths.

“He also said to take it easy,” she whispers, resting her hands against my tee over my wound.

“I’m taking it easy.” I press a kiss to her forehead muttering, “Promise,” there before leaning back to catch her eyes.

“How are you feeling?” Her eyes move away from mine. Using my fingers at her jaw, I nudge her cheek gently, gaining eyes once more.

“I’m okay,” she lies. I see it in her gaze, and know she’s trying to be okay, but she’s not. I know that the loss is still hurting her even if she hasn’t brought it up.

“We’ll try again, baby.” I run my thumb over her cheek. “And if it doesn’t happen, we’ll work at it until it does or we’ll adopt.”

“I feel like a piece of me is missing,” she murmurs, closing her eyes. “I had no clue I was pregnant, but still feel like a piece of me is gone.”

“Mags.”

She opens her eyes and my heart stutters when I see the pain she’s been hiding from me there, shining so bright that it takes everything in me not to pull my eyes from hers.

“How do I get it back?” she asks as her hands clutch the fabric of my shirt.

“You find out, you tell me,” I say, dropping my voice, watching her eyes search mine as I dip my face closer to hers.

“I don’t know how you feel, but since the moment I found out, I know there’s a hole in my heart from the loss,” I tell her softly, honestly. “I’m not sure that hole will ever be filled, but I know when it does happen for us, Maggie, and it will happen for us; time will go a long way in healing that pain.”

Her eyes fill with tears and she leans in, whispering, “You...you never said anything,” as her bottom lip wobbles.

“I’ve been waiting for you to come to me. I don’t want to push you into talking about it. But I’m here baby—anytime you want to talk about it or cry about it, I’m here.”

Nodding, her forehead drops forward and lands against my chest as her arms wrap around my back, and mine do the same, wrapping around her, holding her close.

“What time are we leaving?” she asks against my shirt after a few minutes.

Looking at the clock over her head, I see it’s already after four.

“We’ll leave in three hours. Are Zack and Lane still downstairs?” I ask, and her head moves against my chest before she mutters quietly, “Yeah, and Teo was coming in when I came up to check on you.”

Pulling her away from my chest, I run my eyes over her face. The tears are gone; the sadness is not, but that’s going to take time. “You wanna tell them what time we’re heading out while I finish working out?”

“They’re coming with?” she asks, looking slightly surprised by this news.

“They will help watch over you, Autumn, and Myla while me and the guys get stuff sorted.”

“Then who will be watching over you?” she asks quietly, and I smile.

“Kenton’s man, Justin, will be with us, along with one of Kai’s men.”

“The guy I met, what was his name? Frank?” she asks, looking more concerned at the idea of Frank taking our backs.

“No, Frank will be at the house with you and will probably think he’s got guard duty, but don’t worry. He absolutely does not.”

“Thank God,” she breathes, and I chuckle, running the back of my hand down her jaw.

“This will be over soon.”

“I believe you.”

“Good, now go tell the guys what’s going on then come back up and shower with me,” I tell her, watching her eyes heat before dropping to my side where I was shot.

“I think I’ll make lunch,” she mutters, sounding disappointed.

“Maggie—”

“Do you want me to make you a turkey and Swiss?” she asks, and I fight back the smile I feel, thinking about her wearing her meat gloves and making me a sandwich.

“I want you sitting on my face. That’s what I want.”

“Sven,” she breathes, swaying toward me.

“Go tell the guys what I said then come back up here.”

“I don’t think—”

Bending my face closer to her, I repeat, “Go tell the guys what I said, and if you don’t come back to me and I have to come hunting for you, I will fuck you wherever I find you. So unless you want to piss me off, come back to me quickly.”

“Sven,” she repeats, breathlessly, leaning up on her toes touching her mouth to mine, then turns and walks out of the room.

I haven’t had her in weeks. I wanted her to heal and knew I needed to do the same, but I got the go ahead from the doctor a few days ago. She heard him tell me it was all good, and still she was keeping herself from me, but that was going to end. No way did I want to fuck her in Kai’s house with everyone there to hear her moan. Finishing my workout, I head for the bedroom and notice she still hasn’t made her way back upstairs. Giving her the benefit of the doubt, I head for the shower, turn it on, and let the water heat up while I take off my shirt. The scars on my chest are small from the surgery, but the skin is still red around the bullet wound. The doctor’s biggest concern is that since my lung has been collapsed, that could reoccur once more. He has no other worries and wasn’t surprised by how quickly I was healing. Hearing the bathroom

door open, I watch Maggie stick her head in with her eyes glued to the shower stall.

“You didn’t miss anything,” I tell her, watching her jump when her eyes swing to me.

“I...I’ve been thinking about this, and I don’t think we should do it,” she mumbles, still standing outside the door with just her head inside.

“We’ve done this more times than I can count, and I know we should do it, because if we don’t, when I take you at Kai’s house, you’re going to wake up everyone in the fucking place. I know you, baby, so I know you’re not going to want to be embarrassed when they hear you coming.”

“I’m not loud,” she hisses, and I move toward her, pull the door from her grasp, take her hand, and pull her inside.

Pushing the door closed, I mutter, “You are,” while covering her mouth with mine and moving with her as she tries to back up, only to hit the door, leaving her with nowhere to go. Her hands move to my chest to push me off, but the moment my hand moves up over her breast, her mouth opens for me, my tongue slides in, and she moans.

“Sven,” she breathes as my mouth leaves hers and travels down her neck while my hands skim her shirt up and over her head, noticing she doesn’t have on a bra. Sliding one hand into her shorts, I roll my fingers over her clit and dip my head, pulling her nipple into my mouth and biting down on the tip as my fingers work faster.

I pull back and catch her eyes. “Unless it’s just me and you, you wear a bra when there are men in the house.”

“I—” Her chest heaves and her pussy convulses.

“That wasn’t an intro to a conversation, baby. It’s just me telling you straight-up I will be pissed if you don’t do what I say, now lose the shorts.” Her hands drop from my shoulders and move to her waist. I bite back my smile as she quickly unhooks her button, pushes her shorts to the floor, and kicks them away. I slide my hand deeper between her legs.

“Wet,” I groan, slipping one then two fingers inside of her.

Her hips start to move in sync with my fingers and her hands move, one wrapping around my hip, the other moving to hold onto my hair as my mouth covers her breast, and I pull her nipple in, sucking hard.

“Counter. Bend over it now,” I order, taking a step back and feeling my chest heave. Her eyes scan my face for only a moment before she moves to the counter and tentatively bends over it. Moving behind her, I catch her eyes in the mirror, lean forward, and kiss her back while my foot kicks her feet farther apart.

“Honey,” she whispers, her back arching and her ass tipping. Moving my hands up the curve of her ass, I hold her open and watch as the tip of my cock pushes inside of her slowly, inch-by-inch. Pulling my eyes from us, I look at her and watch her head fly back, her mass of hair flying through the air, her eyes closing, and her lips parting on a gasp.

“Look at me.” I plant myself inside her, feeling her walls contract. Her head dips forward, and her eyes slowly open and lock on mine.

“Never keep yourself from me,” I grunt, pulling out slow, moving back in even slower. “Never, baby.”

“Never,” she whispers, tilting her ass higher and sending me sinking deeper.

Wrapping one hand around her hip, I slide the other forward and roll it over her clit, watching her eyes go half-mast.

“Please, harder,” she whimpers, but I don’t change my pace. I keep at her slowly while my fingers roll. When I feel her walls start to clamp down around me, I skim my hand that was around her hip up under her breast and pull her back.

Her head turns toward me and I cover her mouth with my own as I pinch her clit, sending her over the edge. Her loud moan vibrates down my throat as I shift my hips forward once more, planting myself there as I come hard, groaning down her throat when I do it. Breathing heavily, I pull my mouth from

hers and rest my forehead against the crook of her neck, placing a kiss there.

“I missed you,” she whispers, and I lift my head to catch her eyes in the mirror.

“I missed this.” Smiling at her, I watch her pull in a breath then let it out slowly. She doesn’t smile; her face goes soft, but her voice drops.

“Don’t do anything that will take this away from me.” Tears fill her eyes right before she drops them to the countertop in front of us.

“Please don’t do anything to risk this.” Losing our connection, I turn her in my arms, take her face in my hands, swipe the tears from her cheeks, and wait until I have her attention before speaking.

“You don’t have to worry. Promise. Nothing is going to happen.”

“You can’t know that. You were just shot.”

“I know, but I need to know you trust me to get this done so you and I can move on. I want to start our future, and until this is behind me, behind us, our future is at a standstill. Trust me to do right by us.”

“I do, but if something happens to you, I’m going to be so mad at you,” she mutters, and I burst out laughing. As I tug her into me, she glares. “That’s not funny.”

“It’s a little funny.” I chuckle, kissing her forehead.

“You’re so strange,” she murmurs, wrapping her arms around my back, resting her cheek against my chest.

“I love you, Maggie,” I whisper, kissing the top of her head and feeling her arms convulse. “So fucking much.”

“I love you, too,” she whispers back.

We stand holding each other for a long time, long enough for Lane to come up and pound on the door, making sure we’re good and causing Maggie to turn a shade of red that I’ve

never seen her turn before— worse than when her mom asked if she could teach us the Karma Sutra.

After that, we showered and dressed, and then got us and our shit in the car and headed out, with Zack, Lane, and Teo following behind us.

When we arrive at Kai's, I know bringing Maggie here was the right decision. The house, surrounded by a seven-foot fence, lit up like Christmas, would be a deterrent for most. But if someone was stupid enough to fuck with us here, there was no fucking way they would be able to sneak up on the house without someone seeing them coming. Kai put in the best security money could buy, and I have no doubt that even if someone was walking through the desert, we would know they were out there before they even got close.

As the gate for the driveway opens, I look over at Maggie and see she's still asleep. She passed out not long after we hit the road and would probably sleep the rest of the night if I didn't wake her. I don't want to wake her; she needs rest, and even if she was upset about leaving the house we made our home, I know she was on edge there.

Getting out from behind the wheel, I quietly shut the door and walk around to meet Pika and Aye, Kai's two bodyguards standing at the end of the sidewalk, then wait for my men to join me.

“Good to see you, man,” Pika greets, and Aye lifts his chin.

I lift mine back then mutter, “Not sure you know Zack, Lane, or Teo, but they'll be with Maggie when I'm not.”

“What's up? I'm Aye, and he's Pika,” Aye returns, dipping his head toward the other bodyguard.

“Zack?” Pika's eyes squint, looking at Zack, then he smiles. “Shit, man, how the fuck are you?”

“Didn't think you recognized me.” Zack smiles, putting out his fist toward Pika who bumps his against it.

“You're uglier now, so it took me a minute,” Pika replies, and Zack chuckles then looks at me and mutters, “Pika used to

take over the VIP in Bistros every time he was in town. He had bitches ten-deep every night, all of them cool with sharing his affections.”

“I miss Vegas.” Pika smiles then looks at Aye. “We get some time before we have to head back to the island, we’re going out.”

“Sounds good to me.” Aye grins, and I look between him and Pika, knowing that at one time, I would have been right there with them, but not anymore. Now the idea of random women isn’t even a little bit appealing.

“You wanna show me where we’re staying? Maggie’s asleep. I want to get her settled then we’ll talk,” I say, and Aye looks at the car behind me.

“Heard about her. Uncle Frank wouldn’t shut up about her,” Aye mumbles, bringing his eyes to me.

“Sorry about what happened. It’s fucked up, but in the end, you’ll get yours,” he assures, and I know he means that in more than one way.

“Yeah.”

“I can take Maggie in while you guys get shit sorted,” Lane puts in, and I look at him, but his eyes are on the Suburban where Maggie’s sleeping.

“I got her,” I tell him, and as his gaze comes to me, I see something there that sets my teeth on edge when he nods. Looking from him to Zack, I see his eyes on Lane, watching him in a way that has me wondering what the fuck I’m missing. I know Maggie and the guys are cool; they’ve been cool since the first night she showed at the club, but now I’m wondering if I missed something in all the shit that’s gone down.

“I’ll show you.”

Pika claps my shoulder, and I pull my eyes from Zack to look at him and mutter, “Thanks.”

Once I get Maggie settled in bed, I find the guys sitting in the dining room at the table talking. Pika and Aye are filling

Zack, Lane, and Teo in on the house and the parameter, including the sensors in the desert.

“Zack,” I call, and his eyes move from Pika at the head of the table to me, and I nod toward the front door.

Mumbling, “Be back,” he scoots away from the table and follows me out of the house.

“What the fuck was that?” I question, and he doesn’t even hesitate before he speaks.

“Not sure, yet.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” I run a hand through my hair.

“If he—” I pause, clipping, “Fuck,” and dragging my hand through my hair again. “This shit is not okay, not with all the other shit going down.”

“I’ve got nothing to go on but my gut right now,” he rumbles, looking toward the house. “Teo sees it. He knows something’s off too.”

“Why the fuck didn’t you bring this to my attention before I had him in our house?”

“How could I watch him if he wasn’t with me?” he asks back, and—*fuck*—I know he’s right, but this shit isn’t sitting well with me right now.

“Flipped, man,” he whispers, looking back at the house.

“What?”

“When he knew Maggie was with you upstairs today, he flipped.”

“Jesus,” I whisper, wondering how fucking blind I’ve been. “He is not to be alone with her under any circumstances.”

“You don’t even have to tell me that shit. He hasn’t been alone with her, and won’t be. Teo and I are watching, waiting for his move.”

“He touches her, I’ll kill him. I know you guys are tight, but I’ll kill him.”

“If it comes down to that, I’ll do it for you,” he mutters, and I watch his eyes change in a way that shows how serious his statement is.

“He drugged her,” I whisper to myself, knowing down to my gut I’m right. “The only one who got close to her. She fucking trusted him.”

“Fuck,” Zack hisses, and I know he sees it now too. Eva wouldn’t do that shit. She wouldn’t. I saw the worry in her eyes when she found out what happened. Justin ran her check and it came back clean, no red flags. Lane has been playing the good guy, playing me, and playing her. I close my eyes, hating that I need to fucking tell Maggie about this shit.

She’s already on edge; this shit will likely push her over.

“I can’t be here with her. With him here, I can’t risk something going down, not right now.”

Stepping closer, he drops his voice. “This is the safest place for her.”

“He’s sleeping down the hall,” I remind him, narrowing my eyes.

“Right down the fucking hall.”

“Right next to me,” he says calmly, and I shake my head in frustration. “I’ll let Pika and Aye know what’s going on. No one will allow anything to happen to her.”

“Why the fuck didn’t I see this shit earlier?” I ask myself aloud.

“No one saw it.” I know he’s right, but even knowing he’s right, I want to put her ass on a plane and send her somewhere safe, where I can deal with this shit without her being in the middle of it. “We’re watching him. He has eyes on him, and Lane isn’t stupid. Even if what he’s done is stupid, he’s not a dumbass He won’t take a chance.”

“Fuck,” I clip, when I really want to roar my frustration.

“I know this situation isn’t ideal, but right now, we need to roll with it. When he makes his next move, I’ll make mine and put an end to it.”

“No, fuck, no. I don’t know what his plan was, but he drugged her, could have fucking hurt her. He makes a move, I’m putting him down,” I rumble, letting the weight of my words sink in then continue. “We don’t show our hand, don’t change shit, and when I talk to Maggie, I’ll tell her to keep her guard up, but to play it cool. We don’t know his plan, but we also don’t know if he’s taking orders from someone else right now.”

“You think Paulie’s in on this shit?” he asks, and I shrug, having no fucking idea if he is, but I wouldn’t be surprised to find out he has something to do with it.

“Paulie has deep pockets. Money makes people do crazy shit, so it could have started out as him taking an order then turned into him wanting Maggie. Right now, I’m walking fucking blind, but I’m not willing to risk Maggie in this fucked-up game. When you talk to Pika, Aye, and Teo, you make sure they know that Lane isn’t fed anything he can pass along to someone else.”

“I’ll talk to them.”

“I’ll talk to Mags.”

“Your woman’s crazy. She may try to take him out herself,” he mutters, and I catch the smile in his voice.

“Don’t say that shit. You know she will, and that’s the last thing we need right now.”

“True, but it could be fun to watch.” He laughs, but I don’t find anything funny about this, not right now. My woman is strong, but she is going to be hurt that someone else she trusted is not someone worthy of that faith.

“We’ll get this sorted,” he mutters, reading me, and I nod.

“Fill the guys in tonight. When Kai and Kenton get in, tell them we’ll talk in the morning. I’m going to talk to Maggie then, too. She needs sleep, and I want her to have at least one good night of it before more bullshit is piled on her that will

keep her from resting easy,” I tell him then storm into the house, making sure to keep my face impassive as I nod at the guys, who are still sitting around the table as I pass.

When I make it to the room Maggie and I are sharing, she’s still out, but now she’s tucked a pillow to her chest with one leg out of the covers and thrown over it. Getting undressed, I shut off the light, get into bed, and pull the pillow from her grasp, shoving it behind my head.

The second I’m settled, before I can pull her into me, her body moves. Her leg slides over both of mine as her arm moves across my waist, and her head nestles into the crook of my arm. I never did this shit with a woman before Maggie. The idea of having someone so close all night would have annoyed me. Maggie didn’t have the option of sleeping any other way. I wouldn’t allow it. I not only want her close; I need her close.

Running my hand through her hair, I stare at the clock across the room, the green lights reading a little after ten. It’s early. Kai and Kenton will be in soon with their women. We were supposed to start talks tonight, but that shit will have to wait. Tomorrow is going to suck in more than one way, and I want to give Maggie one more night of just this—her in my arms, the world outside of us not creeping in.

Closing my eyes, I let out a breath, thinking that if her parents want to be there when we get married, they’ll have to meet us as soon as we hit town when this shit is done. Because I’m pulling over at the first wedding chapel I see.

With something to look forward to, I smile and fall asleep.

LOCKED UP

MAGGIE

WAKING WITH MY cheek pressed to Sven's chest, my hand resting over his heart, and my leg over both of his, I blink my eyes open slowly. Looking past my hand and the expanse of Sven's chest, I see lavender walls and beautiful dark furniture. Blinking again, I realize I slept through our arrival at Kai's house and had been put to bed without ever waking up.

"You awake?" Sven asks, shifting my hair out of my face and off my neck and settling his hand on my back.

"No," I whisper, wishing I wasn't, since I know that once we leave this bed, I will have to deal with everything going on outside of it, including the fact that Sven and his friends are going up against one of the biggest monsters in Vegas. A monster that put out a hit on him, and succeeded in shooting him in the chest not even a month ago.

"Wish I could let you sleep, baby, but we have some shit to talk about, and I want to make sure you're good before we walk out of this room," he says, running his hand down my back and settling it on the curve of my waist.

Lifting my head, I place my chin to his chest and meet his eyes then ask, "What is it?" seeing the worry he's trying to hide as he scans my face.

"I'm gonna ask you something, and I want you to really think about it before you answer."

"Okay," I breathe, a little scared by the tone of his voice and the way his body has gotten tight under mine.

“There is no right or wrong answer, and I swear, baby, no matter my reaction right now, I’m not pissed at you, okay?” he asks as his hand on my hip squeezes gently.

As I try to sit up, his arm holds me closer, keeping me in place, and he jerks his head no. “You stay right here.”

“You’re freaking me out,” I whisper, trying to catch my breath that has suddenly turned choppy.

His face softens and his hand comes up to run along my jaw.

“Has Lane ever said anything to you, made you feel uncomfortable in any way?” he asks, and my body stills.

“Don’t,” I whisper, shaking my head and knowing what he’s alluding to.

“Maggie.”

“I would never—”

“I know that, baby,” he cuts me off. “That’s not what I’m after. I need to know if you have ever noticed him acting strangely when you’re around?”

“What’s going on?” I ask, Lane has never made me uncomfortable, but so much has happened over the last few weeks that I wouldn’t notice if he was acting strange.

Rolling us, he settles his body over mine and his hands move to hold my face as he dips his closer. “I’m going on my gut. I have no proof right now, but I think he’s the one who drugged you.”

“You thought it was Eva,” I remind him.

He nods then mutters quietly, “I did, but now I don’t.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. That’s what I need to find out.”

Licking my lips and studying his jaw, I repeat, “You…you think he drugged me?”

“I do,” he agrees softly, and I look into his eyes and know he’s the one person I can really trust in this whole world, the

one person who will never lie to me or lead me astray.

“Why?” I ask again, and his forehead drops to rest against mine as his fingers move along my jaw.

“No idea, baby. Zack said Lane flipped yesterday when we were upstairs. Last night was the first time I saw something in his eyes I didn’t like. Right now, it’s just a feeling, but my gut has never led me in the wrong direction before, so I’m going with it.”

“He’s here,” I say softly, and his face moves away from mine. “I...what am I supposed to do?”

“One: don’t be you.”

“What?” I frown and he smiles.

“You know I love you, but you cannot do anything that will lead him to believe we’re on to him.”

“But—”

“No.” His thumb covers my mouth. “I didn’t tell you this so you would form some ridiculous plan, one I would most likely have to rescue you from. I’m telling you so you’ll keep your eyes open. If you’re in a room with him alone, you make your escape. He corners you, again, find an escape. He says anything, does anything, you tell me or one of the other men in the house immediately. You do not engage him.” He pauses, dropping his face closer, along with his voice. “Ever.”

“I won’t,” I whisper.

“Good,” he whispers back, and my hand timidly moves to the scar on his chest and I run my finger over it, changing the subject.

“I slept through meeting everyone last night.”

“The only ones here when we got here were Kai’s men, Pika, and Aye. Everyone else showed up after I came to bed.”

“Oh,” I mutter, and he smiles then bends lower and runs his lips across mine softly.

“Morgan gets a phone call today,” he tells me, something I mentioned a few days ago, and I’m actually surprised he

remembers. I know he and Morgan didn't get off on the right foot. Plus, her 'talk' with him didn't exactly make her his favorite person.

"She gets released in two weeks," I mutter, running my hand through his hair. Nothing in life is ever guaranteed, but I have a feeling Morgan staying clean is going to stick. I couldn't go see her for obvious reasons, but my parents had seen her and said she was looking healthy and happy. She gained weight and was coming to terms with some of the things she had done, and the counselors were helping her get down to the root of the problem while helping her find other ways to cope with her feelings.

It was no surprise to me that the doctors told her what I had told her a million fucking times—that being around Amy is no good for her—and that until she has a better hold on her sobriety, she needed to stay as far away from her as possible. I can't wait to see her for myself to tell her how proud I am of her.

We had a few phone calls, and when Sven was in the hospital, she wanted to check herself out of rehab to be with me. I felt like I had my sister back, and more so, I felt like I had my family back. My parents, who hate Vegas, stayed with Sven and me the week after he was released from the hospital. They took care of everything while they were with us, from groceries, cooking, and running errands, to dealing with the club when someone needed to be there. I didn't even ask them for any of it; they just gave it, no questions asked.

"She can stay at the house," Sven says from above me, pulling me from my thoughts, and my eyes go to him.

Dropping my hand to his shoulder, I feel my face go soft as I ask, "Really?"

His head tilts to the side and he studies me for a second before saying, "Of course. She needs a place to crash. As long as she's clean, she's always welcome."

"Thank you, honey," I whisper, watching his eyes go soft as I run my hand down his back. "I think her plan is to say

with Mom and Dad for awhile. I don't know if she'll go back to Vegas."

"Smart," he mutters, dropping forward and kissing me once more.

"I'm proud of her," I tell him, something he knows, and his face goes softer.

His thumbs move over my cheeks as he mutters, "You should be."

"Thank you again for having my back."

"Always, Maggie," he whispers, and hearing the sincerity in his tone, I lift up and press my mouth hard to his, needing him to know how much that means to me. By the time we pull away, we're both breathing heavily, and I know it's time to get up and face the outside world again, even though I wish we could hide away.

TAKING A SIP of coffee, my eyes take in the room. The house, like the room Sven and I stayed in last night, is beautiful, with high vaulted ceilings, huge picture windows that look out over the desert, and furniture that is not only comfortable, but also well made and gorgeous.

Scanning the room again, I stop and watch Kai hold his son, Maxim, close to his chest as he feeds him, and then I watch as his eyes soften and a smile twitches his lips when Myla throws back her blonde head, laughing at something Frank says to her. Kai and Myla fit perfectly; she's the soft to his hard, and you can tell just by watching him that he knows what kind of beauty he has in his grasp and that he would die before allowing something or someone to take that from him.

Pulling my gaze from them, my eyes land on Autumn and I smile, and she returns it then tips her head back toward her husband, Kenton, when he leans over the back of the couch. He bends toward her, placing his mouth close to her ear so he can whisper something to her. Watching a smile form on her lips, I curiously wonder what he said, and then I watch her

mouth soften and her eyes pull back to meet his. His hand moves to her lower jaw and his mouth drops to touch hers.

Dragging my eyes from them, I take another sip of coffee. I learned from Sven when he introduced me to everyone that his best friend, Asher, is also Kenton's cousin. I could see this, since I had seen pictures of Asher and knew that he was very good-looking, just not as gorgeous as Sven. Though I'm sure me being in love with Sven has some effect on that decision, still, the family resemblance was there.

"You okay?" Sven asks, taking a seat next to me, and I turn my head to look at him.

"Yes, everyone is really nice, and Myla and Autumn are both very sweet," I tell him quietly as he places his hand around the back of my neck so he can pull me closer.

"They're good women," he mutters back just as quietly.

"Kai and Kenton are both really nice too—a little scary, but really nice," I confide, and he smiles then leans in to press a kiss to my forehead, not replying to that comment.

"What is going to happen now?" I ask on a whisper, pulling back to search his face. Having eaten a huge breakfast with everyone laughing and joking, this whole thing feels like a few friends getting together for a weekend of hanging out. It doesn't at all feel like the men in this room are going to be discussing and taking out a man even the FBI fears.

"We're letting you guys settle while we wait for Justin."

"Who's Justin?"

"Remember I told you I had a friend follow you to your parents?" he asks, and I nod. "That was Justin."

"I never met him."

"Nope, but you will. He should be here in a bit," he mutters as his eyes go past me over my shoulder. I watch them narrow slightly, and then he pulls me closer by the back of my neck so he can kiss me. It's not a soft kiss; it's a kiss that has me almost dropping my coffee as I fall into him.

When he pulls away, I look at him, and his eyes hold mine for a second before moving back over my shoulder. Using my coffee as an excuse, I lift it toward my mouth then look to my right, where his eyes are pointed. Zack and Teo are standing near Kenton, and both of them have their eyes to the left. Turning that way, I watch Lane's retreating back as he leaves the room.

"What was that?" I ask Sven.

His eyes come to me and he shakes his head, but I can see annoyance there as he mutters, "Nothing for you to worry about." The whole 'don't worry your pretty little head' act is going to get old quickly. Even knowing the reason behind it, I still find it annoying.

Pulling my eyes from him, I scan the room and find Myla watching me. I smile at her, and she smiles back, but her eyes move from me to the door behind me, and I wonder if she saw what just happened with Lane. Then I move my eyes from her and see Autumn with the same curious look on her face. When her gaze comes to me, I know she's trying to tell me something; I just have no idea what it is.

"You girls are not getting involved," Sven rumbles, and I jump, turning my head to look at him.

"What?"

"You are not getting involved," he repeats, and I hold his stare then snap, "I know that."

Shaking his head, he rolls his eyes toward the ceiling. I have no idea what that means, so I ignore it and go back to drinking my coffee.

WATCHING A MAN walk into the room looking like one of the Vikings from the show on TV, I sit back on the couch and hold Maxim closer to me. Sven, Kenton, and Kai disappeared an hour ago, leaving the girls and me alone so they could go "talk". When they left, I asked Myla if I could hold her son,

and she instantly handed him over. I couldn't remember ever holding a baby, but holding him, looking into his sweet tiny face, seeing how small and delicate he is, I know I want that for Sven and myself—more now than ever before.

“Um...” I mutter, looking at the guy and wondering if I should ask him who he is or how the hell he got inside.

But Autumn gets up from her seat, runs across the room and into his arms, and cries, “Justin!” as she slams against him.

Relaxing back in the chair at his name and the way Autumn greets him, I hear him mumble, “Hey, Sweetcheeks,” as he dips his head, placing a kiss on her cheek. Then, his huge arms wrap around her in a tight hug as he lifts her off the ground.

“What's with the beard?” she asks, tugging on the end of his bushy facial hair that matches the rest of his appearance. He's hot—in a scary kind of way, but no less hot.

“My lady needs a comfortable place to sit, and I'm accommodating.” He grins, and she smacks his chest then rolls her eyes, but I burst out into a fit of giggles, and so does Myla, who is sitting next to me.

“Girls, this is Justin. Justin, this is Maggie and Myla,” she says, turning toward us with his arm around her shoulders.

“Nice to meet you both.” He smiles and we both say hi.

“Is there a reason your hands are on my wife?” Kenton asks, coming into the room, pulling a grinning Autumn away from Justin, and tucking her into his front.

“You know she loves me more.” Justin smiles, and Kenton narrows his eyes then surprises me by pulling him in for a one-armed hug.

“Glad you could make it, man,” he mutters, patting his back hard.

“Wouldn't miss it. Where is everyone?” Justin asks, taking a step back.

“We’re in the kitchen, though it doesn’t surprise me that you found the women before you found us.”

“Pussy magnet.” He taps his nose, and Autumn hits him in his chest as I start to laugh again hearing Myla giggle at the same time.

“I don’t know how Aubrey puts up with you,” Autumn says, quietly shaking her head.

“She loves me.” Justin grins, then looks at Kenton and mutters, “Let’s go. I got some information to share, and then I need to talk to Sven alone.”

That comment has my ears perking up, and I wonder what he needs to tell Sven or what he needs to tell him alone.

“You good, babe?” Kenton asks Autumn, and she nods then looks at Justin and takes a step closer to him.

“Are you coming back with us when we leave?” she asks him quietly, and when he gives her a soft smile and nods, I see her body relax.

“Good,” she whispers, and his face softens even more.

“I miss my girls.” he tells her quietly, and her face softens even more.

“I know they miss you, too.” She mumbles and he taps her under her chin with his knuckle, and then his eyes come to Myla and me.

“Nice to meet you, ladies.” He winks, and I have the urge to roll my eyes, but I fight it and watch Kenton and Justin leave the room while Autumn comes back to the couch, taking a seat next to me.

“So what’s the deal with that Lane guy?” Autumn asks quietly, leaning closer to me. Swallowing, I wonder what I should say, or if I should say anything at all, since I really don’t know what’s going on with him. “He was watching you with Sven throughout breakfast, and then more when we all came in here to sit down after we ate. I thought he was going to pull you away from Sven when he kissed you.”

“Um...” I breathe, because that is not good at all.

“Pika had a crush on me,” Myla whispers, and I look at her. “I was clueless. I thought we were friends. I had never thought of him that way, and I didn’t even know he felt anything for me until Kai pointed it out.”

“Really?” I ask.

“Really,” she answers, smiling down at Maxim when he stretches his tiny arms over his head and pouts out his lips.

“I...I don’t know what’s going on with him. A few weeks ago, I was drugged,” I whisper, and both women gasp at the same time. “Sven thought it was one of the bartenders at the club, but now he thinks different.”

“Well, from the outside, not knowing your story, I would have sworn you and Lane had history,” Autumn whispers quietly.

“We don’t. I don’t even recall him ever hitting on me, to be honest,” I tell them, wondering if Sven has this all wrong.

“You may not have history, honey, but his reaction was not a normal one. He was pissed.”

“That may be so, but it still makes no sense,” I tell them, wondering if I should just try to talk to him and see what is going on for myself. If he does have feelings for me, I may be able to just tell him that I don’t feel the same way, and we can put this weirdness behind us and focus on what’s really happening.

“I can see what you’re thinking, and I don’t think that’s smart,” Myla whispers, gaining my attention. “If Sven is anything like Kai, and I have a feeling he is a lot like him, he won’t like it, and by not like it, I mean he will probably be pissed and lose his mind.”

“I don’t know. If it were me, I would probably just ask him what’s going on,” Autumn mutters. “Even though Kenton would most likely kill me after I did it.”

“My point exactly,” Myla murmurs, looking down at Maxim when he starts to fuss, and I carefully move him into her arms then sit back on the couch.

“I’m not going to do anything. Sven made it clear this morning that he wants this to play out,” I tell them, even though I don’t know if that’s the right thing to do.

“I think that’s smart,” Myla replies, but Autumn’s eyes meet mine and I can see she doesn’t feel the same. Now I feel like I have a good angel and a bad one on my shoulders.

“I’ll give it a couple days,” I mutter, and my good angel, Myla, sighs.

My bad angel, Autumn, smiles and I bite my lip.

“I NEED TO go to the store,” Autumn says, plopping down on the couch next to me, and I turn to look at her, noticing she’s dressed for the day in jeans, a black tank, and cute black sandals that have a large silver and turquoise jewel twisted between the leather straps on the top of her foot. When I got up this morning, I didn’t even bother getting dressed. I showered, and put on a pair of yoga pants and a hoodie. Yesterday and the day before that, we spent the entire day sitting on the couch. If I was going to sit on the couch today, I was going to do it comfortably.

“That’s not going to happen,” I mutter, tucking my sock-covered feet under my bottom and looking back at the TV. It’s been two days since we got here, and the guys have been gone most of the time, leaving us with Zack, Teo, and Pika. Sven has been keeping an eye on Lane by keeping him close. I’m not sure if this is smart, but when I tried to bring it up, he made it clear he was doing what he was doing for a reason only known to him and that he didn’t want me to worry about it. Honestly, I was surprised every time Lane walked back into the house.

“I’m going with or without permission,” she tells me, and I turn to look at her again and notice she looks serious.

“What’s going on?” I ask, turning my body toward her.

“I’m late,” she whispers.

“Late for wh—” I pause when her words register.

“You’re late?” I repeat, taking her hand.

“We’ve been trying for awhile.” She shakes her head.

“With everything happening, I didn’t even think...then this morning—” She closes her eyes and drops her voice. “Kenton said something about the date, and I did some math in my head and I’m late...two weeks late.”

“Holy shit! We need to go to the store,” I whisper-hiss, and she smiles then her eyes fill with tears.

“This is awesome,” I tell her softly.

“I know, but I don’t want to get my hopes up. It could just be stress.”

“So we’ll find a way to get you a test, and then you’ll know for sure.”

“How do we go about doing that?” she asks, and I look across the room at Pika and Zack, who are sitting in front of a computer and talking quietly. Then I remember Teo went out for a run a few minutes ago, and Myla has been upstairs with Maxim most of the morning, because he’s teething and not feeling well.

“You’re close with Justin, right?” I ask, glancing at the guys again to make sure they’re still busy.

“Very.” She nods, squeezing my hand.

“The guys trust him. Maybe he can take us to the store.”

“Kenton doesn’t want me leaving the house at all, not for any reason. He even used his ‘I’m the boss’ tone when he told me so I know he’s serious.”

“I hate that voice.” I scrunch up my face, knowing Sven uses that same tone all the time and it’s annoying.

“It’s annoying,” she agrees vocalizing my thoughts making me smile.

“Okay, so if not Justin then we need to come up with a plan,” I mutter. And we do come up with a plan...even though it’s not a good one *at all*.

AS SOON AS we pull up in front of the drug store, I put the car in park, look at Autumn, and smile big, whispering, “We did it.”

“I know.” She grins.

Biting my lip, I look at her then remind her, “Now we have to get back, so let’s run in, get the test, and get out.”

“They don’t even know we’re gone.”

She’s right...or I hope she is, anyway. We left when the guys were busy upstairs. We triggered the door alarm earlier while we were still in the house, and opened the gate so we could leave without being noticed. Then we put pillows in each of our beds so it would look like we were laying down for a nap. No one followed us when we left, so for now, we are good—or once again, I hope so.

“Let’s go.” I laugh, opening my door, and then scream when a large hand presses down on the top of my head, shoving me back in my seat before slamming the door.

“Oh no,” Autumn whispers, and I look over at her then through the window and see Justin.

“Crud,” I whisper as the backdoor opens and Justin slides inside, shutting the door.

“Hello, ladies.” He smiles, crossing his arms over his chest.

“What are you doing here?” Autumn asks, and his eyes go to her.

“Sweetcheeks, do you really think you guys can outsmart us?” he prompts, and my heart starts to pound as I look around for Sven, expecting him to walk up to the car.

“Don’t worry, Maggie. Sven isn’t here,” he mutters, and I let out a long breath.

“Though he does know you two dipped out.”

“Great.” I drop my forehead to the steering wheel and pound it there a few times.

“How did you know we were gone?” Autumn asks, glaring at him.

“Zack spotted you before you even got off the property. I was heading back to the house when he phoned and told me you took off. I pulled over, and you two drove right past me.” That was alarming. I was making sure we weren’t being followed, and still missed him. “I followed you, wanting to see what the fuck you were up to.”

“Oh, well me and Maggie just need to run into the store real quick. We’ll be right back,” she tells him.

“Not happening, Sweetcheeks.” He shakes his head, crossing his arms over his chest.

“It’ll take less than five minutes,” she argues.

“Not happening. Start the car up, Maggie. We’re going back,” he tells me, but I pretend I didn’t hear and keep the keys in my hand.

“I need to go into the store, Justin, and you’re not going to stop me,” she replies, putting her hand on the handle.

“Open that door, Sweetcheeks, and I swear, I’ll shoot you.”

“You won’t,” she hisses.

“I will, because unlike you, I remember what happened to you. If something like that happens again, Kenton will lose his shit,” he says quietly, and I bite my lip, because I know from the history Sven shared with me that Autumn was shot at close range by one of Paulie’s hit men a little over a year ago, and she almost died. Kenton would lose his mind if something like that happened again; any man who loved a woman would.

“Fine, then you go in and buy the damn test,” she cries, and his smile drops.

“What test?” he asks, studying her.

“This is so irritating,” she screams.

“What test, Autumn?” he repeats, and she turns in her seat so she can face him.

“A pregnancy test,” she hisses.

His face softens as he asks, “Seriously?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I need a test.”

“Fuck.” He rubs the back of his head. “I’ll buy it. Lock the doors as soon as I’m out. And Maggie?” he calls, and I focus on him. “If you see anything, take off. Don’t wait around. Just drive back to the house.”

“Got it.” I nod and he opens the door. Putting the keys back in, I start the car up and put it in reverse, just in case.

“We’re in so much trouble,” I inform Autumn as we watch Justin walk into the store.

“Yeah,” she agrees. “You can say it was my idea.”

“It was your idea.” I laugh, and she chuckles, too, and then I press my lips together as we watch Justin walk out of the store with three hot pink boxes in his hand. Pointing at me, he comes around to the driver’s side.

“I’ll drive,” he tells me, opening my door.

“I can drive.” I glare at him.

“No offense, Buns, but get your ass in the back.”

“Buns?” I whisper irately as he leans over me, unhooking my belt.

“Backseat,” he repeats, and I glare at him, but then give up my death-look when I see I’m not going to win and climb over the middle console into the backseat.

“Just so you know, I’m an excellent driver,” I inform him when I catch his eyes in the rearview mirror.

“Sure you are, Buns.” He laughs.

“I am,” I mutter, crossing my arms over my chest and glaring at him again.

“I should have had you get me some water,” Autumn says, and I pull my eyes from the rearview mirror and watch her scan a piece of paper with directions on it.

“We’re not stopping again, Sweetcheeks. Kenton and Sven are both pissed. I should have had you both back to the house

ten minutes ago.”

“That’s why I need the water. I could drink it, pee on this stick, and then hopefully show him it’s positive and soften him up a bit,” she says, and I laugh.

“It will be okay. I mean, we’re safe, right? They should be okay.”

I hear Justin snort, but I ignore that and hold Autumn’s eyes as she mouths, *Thank you*.

Anytime, I mouth back then turn my head and look out the window, hoping we are not in too much trouble.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” Sven roars, opening the back of the car as soon as the car comes to a stop.

“I don’t believe so,” I grumble, surprised that even though his eyes are not angry but *pissed*, he still gently takes my hand and helps me out of the car.

“Now is not a time to be cute, Maggie,” he says, dipping his face close to mine.

“I’m not being cute, honey,” I reply then look over at Autumn to make sure she’s okay. I notice that at some point, she must’ve taken the pregnancy tests out of the boxes and shoved them in her back pocket, since I can see the white ends sticking out.

“This isn’t a joke,” he whispers harshly, and I place my hand against his chest, feeling his heart pounding hard before I get up on my tiptoes.

“I’m sorry,” I say calmly. “Swear it won’t happen again.”

His hands hold mine to his chest and he shakes his head. “I know it won’t happen again, because I’m handcuffing you to the bed.”

“You’re not.”

“Yeah, I am,” he rumbles, dipping his head and kissing me hard.

“We had something important to do,” I say breathlessly when he pulls his mouth from mine.

“The only important thing you need to do right now is to listen and stay put.”

“When do we get to go home?” I ask quietly after a moment, and his face softens.

“I don’t know, baby. Hopefully soon, but until then, I need you to be here.”

“I know, and I won’t leave again.”

“I know you won’t.”

“You’re not handcuffing me to the bed.”

“We’ll see,” he mutters, looking over my head.

“You good?” he asks, and I turn to look at Autumn and Kenton, who are standing much the same way as Sven and me.

“Yeah, man,” Kenton mutters then looks over the hood of the car at Justin. “Thanks for getting them back here.”

“No problemo, Boss.” Justin grins then looks at Sven.

“You need to teach Buns how to drive. Chick cannot drive, man.” He shakes his head and I narrow my eyes on him.

“Do not call me Buns, and I’m a great driver. I passed the test in one shot,” I inform him haughtily.

“Instructor was probably more interested in you than keeping the population of Vegas safe,” he grumbles, still grinning.

“Whatever,” I mutter back, because the instructor did ask me for my number after he passed me, but I wasn’t going to share that with Justin.

“Thought so.”

“You’re very annoying.”

“He is,” Autumn agrees, walking over to punch him in the arm, and then she wraps her arms around his waist, giving him a squeeze before going back to Kenton and kissing his chin as his arms wrap around her.

“You guys ready to get back to Kai?” Justin asks, and I want to pout that Sven’s leaving again, but I hold it in since I

know he doesn't need that right now.

"Yeah, man," Kenton agrees, and I look up at Sven when his arms give me a squeeze.

"Do not leave the house for any reason."

"What if there's a fire?"

"Stay inside."

"What if there's a fire?" I repeat, and his eyes close then his forehead drops to mine.

"Please stay inside, baby."

"Fine." I close my eyes, holding him a little tighter, and then I lift up, placing my mouth against his, whispering there, "Be safe and come back soon."

"Soon as I can." He kisses me softly once more then lets me go to get into the Suburban, with Kenton behind the wheel and Justin getting into the back.

"I can't wait until this is done," Autumn says, taking my hand as we watch the guys pull away.

"Me neither," I agree, smiling as Sven points at the house in a silent demand.

"Let's go in before he comes back and cuffs me to the bed," I say, smiling when she laughs.

"Not sure what you were thinking, but next time you two do some shit like that, I'm locking you in the closet," Zack says as soon as we enter the house.

"I'm sorry," I tell him, and his nostrils flare.

"You're not, but do something like that again and you will be."

"Zack," I whisper, taking a step toward him.

Holding up his hands, his eyes hold mine. "I adore you Maggie, but I'm pissed at you right now."

"I know, and I promise I will be on my best behavior from now on."

“I know you will be, because—no joke—I will lock your ass in a closet if I have to.”

“I believe you.”

“You should.”

“I do,” I agree, trying to fight a smile, but he catches it anyway.

“My man is so fucked,” he mutters, and I run to him and wrap my arms around his back, giving him a squeeze.

“Don’t lock me in the closet. I’m afraid of the dark.”

“Liar,” he grumbles, squeezing me back, letting me know we’re okay. Taking a step back, I look over his shoulder at Pika, who is standing with his arms crossed over his chest and leaning against the wall.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re safe. It’s all good, but like Zack said, we’ve got no problem locking you two away.”

“You won’t have to do that,” I assure him, and he nods then pulls himself off the wall and leaves the room.

“I’m going to my room for a bit,” Autumn says, and I turn to look at her.

“Sure, I’ll be in the living room if you need me.” I smile, and she nods before heading up the stairs.

Looking back at Zack, I ask, “Wanna watch *Born in the Wild*?”

“Fuck no.” He shakes his head as his face loses some of its color.

“Well, if you change your mind, I’ll be in the living room.” I grin then head in there, make myself comfortable on the couch, and eventually fall asleep watching a woman give birth to a baby in the woods.

TRUTH

SVEN

“THIS ISN’T EXACTLY a job you can put an ad out for,” Kai rumbles, and my eyes move through my office and over to him. Since my club is closed down for the time being, we have been meeting up here, leaving the girls at the house with Zack, Pika, and Teo.

“Yeah, but you know as well as I do that someone else is going to step in the second Paulie is no longer a part of the equation,” I reply, sitting back in my chair. “I don’t know shit about the business you’re in, but I do know business, and anytime someone steps out of a possession, there’s always someone there to take over, and I can’t imagine this will be any different.”

“You’re right. Someone else will step in, but I’m not sure our move should be leading someone else into the seat,” Kai says, placing his drink on my desk.

“I didn’t say I agreed with Justin’s idea. I do think we need a way to guarantee we won’t be collateral damage. If that comes in the form of making an alliance with someone else, then I’m all for it.”

“Aedan,” Justin puts in, and I turn to look at him.

“Guy is fucked, but he is also not fucking crazy,” he says, referring to the Irish high ranking drug dealer he’s been working with.

“He’s killed a lot of fucking people.” Kenton frowns.

“He has,” Justin agrees.

“Aedan made a name for himself at twenty- three when he took out his boss, that boss being Armando Levy, the biggest drug lord Vegas had ever seen. A man no one—not even the FBI—had the balls to stand up to,” Justin says then looks at Kai. “You know his story. You know he took out Armando because he was kidnapping women, getting them addicted to blow, and then putting them on the tracks.”

“You’re making him sound like a fucking choirboy,” Kenton chides, leaning back in his chair.

“I’m not saying he’s a fucking angel of mercy. I’m saying he has a moral compass, which is more than what Paulie has,” Justin replies, sweeping the room, looking at each of us. “Regardless of what we do, what steps we take, there will be someone who takes over. There is no way to prevent that. The only thing we can do is put someone in that seat who isn’t going to come back for us.”

“You can’t guarantee he won’t, Justin,” Kai mutters, standing from his chair to pace the room.

“I can. He is not a fan of Paulie’s.”

“Why the fuck do we need to be involved in helping him into that seat?” Kenton asks, and Justin looks at him.

“There are four main families in Vegas. Those four families control what happens in this town—who pimps, who sells dope, and who sells guns. Three of those families are tied to Paulie. Only one family is not, and that’s Aedan’s.”

“Justin has a point,” I conclude, and Kai scowls at me. Sitting forward, I put my hands on my desk and lean in. “Listen, I don’t give a fuck who does what in Vegas. The only thing I want is to live a life where I don’t have to look over my shoulder. Searching for some fuckwad who thinks he’s gonna make alliances by taking me out.”

“We all can agree on that.” Kai nods then looks to Justin. “Set up a meeting. Tell him I want to speak with him about business. We won’t mention what’s going on until we get a feel for him.”

“On it,” he mutters, pulling out his phone and stepping out of the office to make the call.

“Were Maggie and Autumn okay?” Kai asks, and I look at Kenton, seeing his expression is the same as mine.

“Autumn said she needed to go to the drug store, so she and Maggie came up with a plan to do that.”

“She could have asked one of the guys to get whatever she needed,” Kai says, and I feel my lips twitch.

“Don’t know much about Myla, but Maggie’s always down for causing chaos. Pretty sure she thrives on driving me crazy.”

“Autumn’s the same. I’m surprised she didn’t hatch an escape plan sooner, actually.” Kenton chuckles.

“Thank god Maxim is teething, Myla’s been locked in our room.” Kai mutters as Justin comes back into the office.

“Meeting’s set, tomorrow at two, he’s meeting us here.”

“Good,” I nod, rubbing my jaw.

“Now we need to talk about Lane,” Justin adds, taking a seat across from me once more.

“He still downstairs?” I ask, and he nods.

“Yep, and I don’t think this will surprise you, but I ran his phone record. He’s been keeping in contact with one of Paulie’s guys.”

“Fuck,” I clip, standing from my chair and turning to the window behind me. Looking down at the club floor, I see that Lane and Aye are sitting at the bar.

“I don’t know what they are talking about when they do talk, but the calls are constant—one a night over the last two months. I also watched the tape again,” he says quietly, and I turn to face him. “In one clip, he acted like he was pushing someone off of Maggie at the bar. That’s when he slipped the substance he used in her drink.”

“It’s taking everything in me not to fucking kill him,” I whisper.

“He’s our in,” Justin says, and I let out a breath.

“He’s going to get us where we need to be with Paulie, so when we take him out, it’s not expected. We are going to use him as a pawn and play him at his own game.

“He’s sleeping down the hall from my woman,” I remind him quietly.

“He can’t make a move without one of us knowing about it.”

“I want this shit done,” I growl. I’m so fucking frustrated by this situation, and knowing my suspicions about Lane are justified, the anger and betrayal I’ve been feeling is choking me.

“I’m not happy that he knows where the women are, Justin,” Kai breaks in, and Justin pulls his eyes off me to look at Kai, who’s still standing with his arms crossed over his chest.

“You have Zack, Pika, and Teo at the house, a security system that rivals the Pentagon’s, and enough guns to start a small war. The girls are safe, and if I thought for one second they weren’t, I would have you move them to Dino’s,” Justin says, holding his gaze.

“How do you know Dino?” Kia asks, raising a brow.

“Been here off and on over the last few months working with Aedan. I know more than I want to,” Justin answers, making me wonder what the fuck he’s been up to and why he’s working with Aedan to begin with. Justin doesn’t do work for just anyone, and I can’t imagine him helping out a drug dealer. That isn’t his style. He wants the world to be a better place.

“How close are you with Aedan?” Kai asks, studying him.

“Wouldn’t trust him with my lift, but right now, he’s an ally,” he replies immediately, and Kai studies him for a moment more before nodding and taking a step back.

“Let’s head back to the house. Myla’s been with Maxim the last few days without a break,” Kai says, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

“Works for me. I need to make sure Autumn hasn’t escaped out the window, or found a way to talk Myla or Maggie into helping her dig a hole back to Tennessee,” Kenton interjects, standing from his chair as I roll my shoulder and press the palm of my hand into it as I stand.

“You good, man?” Kenton asks, watching me.

“Yeah,” I mutter, dropping my arm to my side.

“If you need to step back, we’ll understand,” Kai assures, and my gaze goes to him.

“Not fucking happening. The bullet that hit me could have hit Maggie. I could have let all this shit go before. Now—fuck no. I’m in until this mess is cleaned up and Paulie is six feet under, preferably buried with Lane next to him,” I tell him, and he jerks his head once in agreement then heads for the door.

As soon as we reach the club floor, Aye slides off his barstool.

“Are we heading back to the house?” he asks while tucking his gun into the back of his jeans.

“We are. I’ll fill you in on what’s going down when we get there,” Kai tells him, and he nods following him out.

“I’ll ride with you,” Justin tells Lane as we step outside. “We need to stop so I can pick up my bike before we head back to the house.”

“Sure,” Lane replies with a nod, following him across the lot.

“It’ll be over soon,” Kenton says, and I pull my eyes from Lane’s back and look at him as I move to the passenger side door of the Suburban, opening it up and settling myself inside.

“Yeah,” I rumble, slamming the door closed.

“Soon,” he repeats.

“Not soon enough.” I pull out my cell and reply to a text from Ace, letting him know my lawyer will be in contact tomorrow with the contracts for the club.

“I didn’t want to come back,” he mutters, backing out of the parking space, and my eyes move to him. “I sure as fuck didn’t want Autumn to be here, but I knew I couldn’t leave her in Tennessee and risk someone going after her there.”

“I wanted to send Maggie away, but didn’t for the same reason,” I agree, shoving my cell into my pocket.

“Never thought I’d see the day you’d crash and burn over a woman.” He laughs, pulling out onto the main road. “I don’t know anyone who thought you’d settle.”

“I didn’t plan for her.” I run my hands down my face.

“You deserve to have that. To have her,” he says quietly, stopping at a red light and looks at me. “I’m glad for you, man.”

I jerk up my chin, and he shakes his head then pulls off when the light changes to green.

“I THOUGHT WE were meeting alone,” Aedan says, taking a seat on the couch in my office with his eyes moving from Kai to Justin.

“You know I don’t like surprises,” he informs him, raising a brow.

“I have a feeling you’re gonna like this one,” Justin says, sitting on the edge of the coffee table across from him. Having never met Aedan, I didn’t expect to see a thirty-something man dressed like a biker walk into my club. Most made men in Vegas dress just like what they are, men of money and power. Aedan, in jeans, a white shirt, and black motorcycle boots, doesn’t look like he fits in with any of them.

“That’s doubtful,” he mutters then waves his hand around. “Let’s get this over with. I have shit to do.”

“First, what’s your relationship with Paulie?” Kai asks from the middle of the room, where he planted himself with his arms crossed over his chest as soon as we all settled in.

“Not sure why that’s any of your fucking business, Hawaii,” Aedan replies, looking at Kai, his body alert.

Kai looks at Justin for a moment before moving his eyes back to Aedan.

“Ok, let’s do this. I know Paulie’s been making moves to take you out,” he says, and Aedan’s glare moves to Justin.

“You tell him that shit?” he asks, sitting forward, pinning Justin in place with his gaze.

“You know I didn’t have to tell anyone shit,” Justin replies quietly with an edge to his tone. “Everyone knows Paulie’s got a hard-on for you. It’s no secret.”

“Fuck Paulie,” Aedan says, pulling his eyes from Justin to scan the room. “I took this meeting out of respect, but now I’m getting pissed. Tell me what this is about. I don’t have time to play twenty-questions or feel like I’m being interrogated.”

“All we need to know is where your relationships stands with Paulie.” I stand and his attention moves to me.

“I don’t have time for bullshit. Justin here believes you want Paulie gone. Is that true or not?” I ask, and his eyes narrow on me.

“Paulie’s a piece of shit, just like his son was. No one’s sad the world he’s built is slipping through his fingers, and more than a few are waiting for him to fall,” he says and then stands.

“Like I said, I came here out of respect, but like you, I don’t have time for bullshit” he says, walking toward the door but then stops when Kai speaks.

“I’m assuming you know the story of my wife and the property she owns in Vegas.” My eyes go to him, but his are on Aedan, and I know he’s referring to the property Myla’s parents left to her before their deaths, properties worth millions, maybe even billions. Paulie’s son, before his death, planned to kidnap and marry Myla in order to gain control of that property, and Kai was almost killed because of it.

“I’ve heard about it,” Aedan confirms, turning to face him, crossing his arms over his chest.

“It’s yours,” Kai says quietly, and the room starts to buzz with an undercurrent of energy.

“What?” Aedan asks with his brows pulled together.

“That property and the land it’s on is yours...with one condition.”

“What the fuck, Kai?” Kenton asks, looking at him.

“I don’t need it, and Myla doesn’t need it. That land killed her family, and it’s about time she got something good from it. She wants to live free, and I want that for her, my son, and our unborn child.”

“Jesus,” I mutter, staring at Kai.

“What’s your condition?” Aedan questions.

“You help us remove Paulie.” He pauses then rumbles, “Permanently. No one can know the men in this room were involved in his removal, and if there is ever any backlash, that shit’s on you.”

“Why the fuck don’t you just take him out and keep your property?” Aedan asks the question I want to ask for myself.

“I told you—that property is a guarantee you’ll hold up your end of the bargain. I know you have honor. I just don’t know how deep it runs, and if someone is questioning your worth, thinking of taking you out, let’s just say that land will give you the power you need to hold onto your position,” Kai says, and Aedan moves back into the room and takes a seat on the couch once more, looking confused and a little shocked.

“There are easier ways than this,” he says rubbing his jaw.

“I’ve been in talks with a few of Paulie’s associates. A lot of them are looking to cut ties,” he adds, looking around the room and ending on Kai. “I’m not sure if you know Rael,”

“I know of him,” Kai confirms.

“Then you know he controls most of the drugs that come into the United States. Paulie’s been one of the only people Rael will deal with. He trusts no one. He’s paranoid and cautious. That was, until Rael found out Paulie’s son was skimming off the top. You see, Rael had a son around Paulie’s son’s age, and when Rael found out his son was stealing from him, he killed him himself, with no remorse.

Rael lost respect for Paulie when he didn't personally deal with his son. If you want a takeover, I have no doubt Rael would follow you faster than anyone."

"That isn't my life anymore," Kai says quietly, studying Aedan. "I made a promise years ago to my great grandfather that I would put our family on a path to redemption, and I intend to keep that promise."

"You're giving me something for a job I was going to do anyway," Aedan replies just as quietly.

"Paulie's son raped my sister; then, he beat the shit out of her and left her for dead," he says, and the room goes silent. No one even breathes. "Paulie didn't give a fuck when I brought what happened to his attention, and unluckily for me, someone got to his son before I did. I don't need your property. I'll help you no marker needed."

"Aubrey," Kenton rumbles with his eyes on Justin, and my eyes go to him, seeing him looking at his lap with his hands fisted tightly and his jaw hard.

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me this shit?" Kenton asks, and Justin lifts his head to look at him.

"You know I couldn't do that," he whispers harshly.

"I wanted her to have an abortion," Aedan says, looking at Kenton. "He fucking raped her. She never even had a boyfriend, and he fucking raped her and put his kid in her. My sister ran away. I did that. I pushed her too hard, and when Justin found out there were people looking for her, he contacted me, and I told him to keep who she is to himself. Aubrey's safe. No one knows she exists, and I want to keep it that way. My sister has too much heart for this life, and she's happy where she is and has made it clear she's not leaving Justin. Not that I'm happy about that part, but I want her to have what she wants. She deserves to be happy."

My eyes move to Justin, wondering what the fuck is really going on and who the fuck Aubrey is to him.

"You know I'll always take care of her," Justin assures, looking at Aedan.

“I know,” he mutters then looks around the room. “Paulie knows people are gunning for him. He’s not stupid, and ending him won’t be easy. Since his son’s death, his security has doubled and he’s no longer taking meetings.”

“We have an in,” Justin says, and Aedan’s eyes move to him.

“It seems there’s a lot you haven’t shared,” he says quietly, studying Justin.

“You know the important shit,” Justin replies just as low. Aedan lets out a long breath and asks, “So what’s the plan?”

“I’ve been doing some digging. Paulie has a mistress. He’s been seeing her for the last four years. His wife doesn’t know about her, but I’m guessing if she did, she wouldn’t be happy,” Justin says, and I cut in.

“I don’t know what you heard, but Paulie’s been stepping out on his wife for a long time. No way a woman, *any* woman, could miss it. My guess is she just doesn’t give a fuck what he does, as long as she gets to live the high life.”

“You’re right. She couldn’t care less about the others. But this woman is different, and I have a feeling she won’t like what’s been going on,” he says, pulling up a picture on his phone of a young girl with long blonde hair, blue eyes, and giant fake tits. “Her name is Anita Lynn. She’s twenty-six. Paulie met her at a club she was stripping at and moved her into a better place right away, only to move her into a bigger place four months later. Her house is twice the size of the one he shares with his wife, and he just recently found out she is pregnant with his child. Paulie’s been moving money around so that when he asks his wife of the last thirty-two years for a divorce, she won’t be able to take him to the cleaners.”

“You’re right. She won’t like that,” Kenton murmurs, handing Justin his phone back.

“Lane is our in to Paulie, but before we take him out, we are going to rattle his gilded cage. If things with his wife go how I think they will, she’ll send him packing. This will be unexpected, so his guards will be scrambling to cover him.

That's when we'll strike, using Lane to contact his man and tell us where Paulie is."

"Sounds a little too easy," I mutter, and Justin's eyes move to me.

"Most wars are ended in silence," he says quietly, and I see Aedan's head shake and his lips twitch.

"Justin is one scary motherfucker. I don't even question it anymore." He shrugs then stands.

"I need to get back to business. As soon as you guys have a plan in place, call me. My brothers won't ask questions, and you'll have more backup," he offers, patting Justin's back then shaking each of our hands before walking out of the office.

"I can't believe you didn't tell me that Aedan is Aubrey's brother," Kenton gripes, and Justin stands.

"It's not important. You know what she is to me, and that's all that matters," Justin says, standing and putting a gun into the back of his jeans.

"I didn't even know you had a girlfriend." I frown, crossing my arms over my chest.

"I don't have a girlfriend," he mutters then grins. "I have a wife."

"What the fuck?" I whisper.

"Why isn't she here?" Kai asks, studying him.

"She's never coming back to Vegas. She's with my mom and dad. My dad, who owns more guns than even you. She's safe with *our daughter* at my parents' home."

"Did I fall down the fucking rabbit hole?" I ask, looking around, hearing Kenton chuckle at my side.

"This information is making me second guess your relationship with Aedan," Kai says, and Justin's eyes move to him and his back straightens. "I personally don't give a fuck about the guy. My wife was scared out of her fucking head when she ran from him and her family. I know he loves his sister, but he will always put business first, and that shit isn't

okay with me. If you doubt my loyalty, then that shit's on you. I have proven on more than one occasion where my loyalties lie."

"No one in this room is questioning your loyalty," I assert calmly, and watch his body visibly relax. "But you know, Justin, even if you don't have a relationship with Aedan, you're tied to him, and that is something we should have heard about before now."

"Aubrey doesn't exist for anyone. She's been through enough. We all have one goal, and that's to take Paulie out. I think you can each understand now why this job is just as important to me as it is to any of you," he says, moving toward the door. "Now, if we're done gossiping, let's get back to the house. I have some shit to take care of before we take Lane on a trip out to Dino's."

"Lane's mine." I look at each of them, making sure they understand.

"He drugged Maggie. I don't know what his plan for her was, but I'm not naive enough to think he didn't plan on taking advantage of her," I finish, feeling the anger I've been holding in expand with each breath.

"He's yours," Justin affirms quietly, and I can see in his eyes that he knows what I'm feeling, but when he speaks, I can hear the pain in his words and recognize that he, more than anyone, knows what could have happened.

"Paulie Jr. drugged Aubrey. She..." He shakes his head, running his hands over his hair and dropping his eyes to the floor, and his voice catches when he speaks. "She went out with some girlfriends, and he drugged her after she didn't give him the attention he wanted. I'm grateful the drug erased her memory of what happened, but she still knew after she woke up in the hospital that she had been violated. If I had known what happened to her when I killed that motherfucker, I would have tortured him before taking his life. His death was too quick, and far too painless."

"Jesus," Kenton whispers, while Kai growls, "Motherfucker," under his breath.

“I’m sorry, man,” I say, but the words aren’t enough.

“It didn’t happen to me, but I promised my wife it wouldn’t happen to anyone else. That drug—the drug Paulie used on her and the one Lane used on Maggie—they were the same. I’ve never heard of it used outside that circle.”

“That’s why you’re here?”

“That’s why I’m here,” he agrees then looks through us before heading out the door.

“THIS PLACE CREEPS me the fuck out,” Justin says from the driver’s seat as we head down a sandy dirt road in the middle of the desert toward a house. I can barely make it out through the headlights and dust, Kai and Kenton’s SUV is spitting up in front of ours.

“Exactly what is this place?” I ask, and Justin looks at me, the lights of the dash bouncing off his face.

“Imagine a horror movie, and then add the mob to that shit, and this is what you would come up with,” he explains, and I look over my shoulder at Lane tied up in the backseat, and even in the dark, I notice his eyes are filled with fear.

“You picked the wrong side,” I tell him quietly, hearing him groan through the gag and duck tape covering his mouth.

Pulling up to the dark house, I watch a large man wearing a wife-beater, jeans, and boots, with a shotgun resting over his shoulder, walk up to the passenger side of Kai’s SUV. Seeing him nod and walk off toward the house, he comes back out a few minutes later, getting on a four-wheeler. Following behind him and the SUV in front of us, we drive out for miles, ending in the middle of the dark desert. Getting out when we stop, I look around then watch as the guy, Dino, heads a few feet away and pulls open a hatch.

“What the fuck?” I hiss, seeing that down a set of stairs set into the ground is a concrete room. The walls are covered with

different tools, with a metal-framed chair set in the middle bolted to the ground.

“Told you this was the shit scary movies are made of,” Justin whispers from my side, and I look at him then open the back door, drag Lane out, and then yank him down the stairs into the room.

Pushing him into the metal chair in the middle of the room, I rip the tape off his mouth and pull out the gag, tossing it to the floor.

“I can’t believe you betrayed me,” I murmur, cutting the plastic ties holding his wrists together. As soon as he’s free, he does what I knew he would do. His arm swings out. Ducking under his fist, I lift my elbow, ramming it up under his chin. His head flies back and his teeth gnash together so hard, I wouldn’t be surprised if a few broke. Grabbing a long leather strap off the wall, I wrap it around his throat and pull back. His hands rip at the strap trying to pull it off, but I hold it tighter.

“What the fuck we’re you thinking?” I ask close to his ear, as his face turns purple.

“Pretty sure he can’t answer if he can’t breathe” Kenton says blandly from my side, so I loosen the strap and listen as Lane sucks in air while Justin secures his hands to frame of the chair.

“You’re gonna die.” He laughs, rolling his head on his shoulders. “You’re all gonna die.”

“What did they offer you?” I ask and his eyes focus on mine, a creepy smile lighting his eyes.

“You’re dead,” He licks his lips, and I notice blood coating his teeth.

“I was going to make her my whore,” he whispers and my blood turns cold.

“Take her from the club, say I dropped her at home, take her away, so you wouldn’t have been able to find her. She would have been mine.” He laughs. “I would have fucked her in every hole in her fucking body, and when I was finished, I would have passed her along to someone else to use,” he says

and I search the walls of the room looking for something worthy of him. My eyes stop on a pair of lawn sheers with dark silver blades and long black handles.

“That was your plan when you drugged her?” I ask nodding to the wall. Kai’s eyes flare as he pulls the sheers down, passing them to Justin who hands them to me.

“I wouldn’t have taken her when she was drugged.” He smiles his creepy smile again as I test the weight of the sheers. “I would have waited until she knew it was me fucking her in the ass.”

Nodding, I flip the sheers over and use both hands to cut off his fingers one by one. Roaring in agony, his face pales as his blood drains onto the floor.

Dipping my face closer to his, I mutter, “Now I’m gonna cut off your cock.”

Seeing fear in his eyes, I smile. By the time I’m done with him, he’s unconscious and we’ve learned everything we could from him including who his contact with Paulie is.

“ARE YOU FUCKING shitting me?” Justin roars into his phone as he slams the door to the Suburban. Stepping around the back, I watch him pace then feel Kenton and Kai come up next to me.

“What’s going on?” Kenton asks, and I look at him and shrug then back at Justin when he pulls back his arm, tossing his phone off into the distance.

“His wife fucking killed him!” he roars, reaching his hand up and pulling his hair.

“What?” I ask, taking a step toward him.

“That was Aedan. Police swarmed Paulie’s house ten minutes after Aedan and his boys heard a shot. They just watched the police drag Paulie’s wife in a pair of cuffs to the back of a squad car. One of his boys was able to get close and heard the cops say she killed her husband— shot him in the fucking head at close range.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Kenton asks, and Justin’s swings around toward him.

“No,” he clips then closes his eyes. “What the fuck?”

“This is good,” Kai mutters, and Justin’s eyes open to meet his. “It’s done. We didn’t even have to get our hands dirty. I don’t know about you, but I have enough black on my soul.”

“All this shit was for nothing. I could have fucking sent her that shit weeks ago. I’ve been away from my wife for weeks dealing with this shit. You guys came out here to deal with it, and now—”

“It’s done,” I repeat Kai’s words, cutting him off. “Aedan gets what he wants, and we leave all this shit behind us. I got my vengeance, and now I’m going to get my girl, take her home, and then tell her in the morning that we’re getting married. At the end of the day, we all got what we wanted. None of the other shit matters.”

“Sven’s right, Justin,” Kenton says quietly. “Paulie and his son are both dead. You know where they were making the drugs thanks to Lane, and the cops are shutting the lab down, probably as we speak. It’s time to go home. You know Aubrey and Jenna need you there with them.”

Visibly swallowing, he fists his hands at his sides and I now understand what changed about him. It’s not that he suddenly became hard. He suddenly found himself caring for two people who he feels he needs to protect from the world.

“Your girls are lucky to have you, man,” I whisper, meeting his gaze. “But I guarantee they just need *you*. Believe me when I say that.”

Nodding, his head drops forward and he pulls in a breath.

“Do you want to help me find my phone?” he asks after a moment, and we all laugh, but then we spend the next forty minutes searching for his cell. Once we find it, the sun is starting to rise and we head back to Kai’s. All of the girls are awake, so we stay for breakfast then say our goodbyes and head home.

TRUE HAPPINESS

SVEN

“I’M MARRYING MAGGIE. If you want to walk her down the aisle, you need to be at the Harmony Chapel in an hour,” I tell Maggie’s dad as soon as he picks up the phone.

“I’m guessing I can’t talk you into waiting a few months?”

“Nope,” I deny, smiling at the ground under my feet.

“Does my daughter even know she’s getting married?” he asks, and I laugh, looking toward the store I sent Maggie into after she told me there was no way she is getting married without at least wearing a dress.

“She knows,” I mumble, hearing him laugh.

“We’ll be there,” he replies, hanging up.

Shoving my cell into my pocket, I look through the window, seeing Maggie talking to one of the sales girls. Knowing she’s okay I walk to the building next-door and go inside to pick up one more item before we make our way to the chapel.

Watching Maggie walk toward me with her arm entwined with her father’s I feel my heart beat kick up. She looks more beautiful than I have ever seen her. Her strapless white dress hugs each of her curves perfectly; her eyes are shining with love, and the smile on her face, fuck that smile is a smile I would kill for.

“You look beautiful,” I whisper, taking her from her father at the top of the aisle.

“You look very handsome yourself,” she whispers back.

Pressing a brief kiss to her lips, I nod at her dad then turn her toward the minister to make her my wife.

“WE COULD HAVE at least had dinner with my parents,” Maggie complains as I guide her into the private elevator blindfolded.

“We could have,” I agree picking her up when the elevator comes to a stop.

“But then I would have sat with a hard on all through dinner, thinking of all the ways I want to remove this dress,” I explain, nibbling her ear as her arms wrap around my shoulders.

“Where are we?” she asks as I set her on her feet.

“We don’t have time to take a honeymoon right now.” I pull off her blindfold, watching her face light up. “I figured we could spend a few days here naked instead.”

Biting her lips she spins in a circle taking in the penthouse.

“Oh my god,” she whispers in awe, walking to the swimming pool in the middle of the room.

“Naked in this place with you for a few days is better than any honeymoon I could have dreamt up.” She grins, walking backward and I start to prowl after her. Then I laugh when she takes off running, catching up with her when she traps herself in the bedroom, I push her down onto the bed. Lifting my weight off her, I search her eyes then lower my mouth over hers. I will never be worthy of the love I see in her eyes, but every fucking day I will try to earn it.

Maggie

HEADING TO THE bed from the bathroom, I stop in my tracks as my eyes land on my sleeping husband. I don’t know how many times I’ve seen him shirtless, but I know it’s more times than I can count. I’ve also memorized the way he looks naked, how he feels pressed against me, how he tastes, what it

feels like when he holds me. I've memorized everything about him, but the visual I have now is one I want forever.

I used to think love was a fairy tale, an impossible dream, but having what I have with Sven, I know that not only is it possible, but it's something that happens when you least expect it. It takes you for a ride you may not be ready for, but it leaves you steady on your feet when you get off.

Moving quietly to the bed, I put my knees on the mattress and run my finger over the thick platinum band on Sven's finger, admiring what it is and what it stands for.

"Why are you up?" he asks, opening one eye to peek at me while his fingers wrap around mine.

"I couldn't sleep," I tell him, falling to my side and scooting closer to him.

"You couldn't?" he asks, getting up on his elbow while his fingers run down between my breasts.

"No." I smile, parting my thighs.

"Eager, are we?" He grins, leaning down to kiss me as his fingers roll over my clit, making my hips jerk.

"I like my husband's fingers," I breathe, running my own through his hair.

"Just my fingers?" he asks, sliding one then two deep, rolling them over my G-spot, causing me to gasp.

"I don't know. I also like your mouth and your...you know."

Chuckling, he scoots down the bed, swings one of my legs over his shoulder, and licks while his fingers pump.

"I think you should tell me what your favorite is out of the three." He licks me again and my hands move to hold him in place. By the time he's done, my eyes are heavy, and if I had to tell anyone what my favorite was, I wouldn't be able to, because he's a master with all three.

Kenton

ROLLING OVER, I place my hand out on the mattress and come up with air.

“What the fuck?” Opening my eyes, I lift my head and see the bed is empty, but the light in the attached bathroom is on, and I can hear whimpering coming from in there. Getting out of bed, I don’t even bother finding my pants. I pick my gun up off the side table and slowly make my way to the bathroom door, which is open a crack, where I can see Autumn through the mirror, standing naked in front of the sink with tears in her eyes.

“Baby, what the fuck?” I ask, swinging the door fully open, watching her jump when our gazes connect.

“I...I can’t believe it,” she whispers, smiling while more tears fill her beautiful eyes.

“Believe what?” I ask quietly, setting my gun on the counter so I can take her into my arms.

“This,” she whispers, reaching behind me then tucking her arms between us.

Dropping my eyes to her hands, my heart skips a beat as I realize she has a pregnancy test in her grasp, a pregnancy test with the word *Pregnant* clear as day on the small oval screen. I pull my eyes from the test to look at her.

“Jesus,” I whisper, closing my eyes and dropping my forehead to rest against hers.

“I hope that’s a good ‘Jesus,’” she whispers back, and my eyes open to meet hers.

“Never been happier, baby. I swear, I think you give me happy, and then you top that shit with something else every fucking time,” I tell her, and a loud sob tears up her throat as she drops her forehead to my chest and wraps her arms tight around me. Holding her to me, I rest my cheek on the top of her head.

“We need to call your mom and Aunt Viv.”

Chuckling, I pull her head from my chest so I can see her eyes and shake my head.

“We’re not calling my mom, or anyone else for that matter.”

“But she’ll be so excited.” She pouts, and I lean in, kissing her softly.

“She’ll still be excited when you tell her later,” I mutter as I turn her, lifting her onto the counter.

“But I want to tell her now.”

“Sorry, baby, we’re celebrating. Then you’re gonna be too tired to call her, so like I said, that call’s going to have to wait,” I inform her, pushing her knees apart as I tweak her nipple, hearing her gasp. Gripping the back of her head with one hand, I thrust my tongue into her mouth, while my other hand leaves her breast, slides up her inner thigh, and my fingers roll over her clit.

“I’ll call them tomorrow,” she agrees, wrapping her legs around my hips as her head tips back so I can take her mouth again. Lifting her off the counter, I carry her to the bed. Planting her on the mattress, I end our kiss and make my way down her body, stopping along the way to kiss each nipple and her lower stomach, settling myself between her legs. Swiping my tongue up her center, her thighs tighten around my head and the heels of her feet press into my back, lifting her higher into my mouth. I drink down her first orgasm and settle myself between her folds for her second, where I release my own deep inside her.

Kai

“IS HE ASLEEP?” Myla asks, walking into Maxim’s room wearing her nightgown, her wet hair down around her shoulders.

“He is. How are you feeling?” I ask, pushing my fingers through her hair, tilting her head back.

“Good.” She smiles softly, running her hands up my chest.

“How’s my daughter?” I ask, sliding my hands around her waist, pulling her closer to me while travelling them down to

cup her bottom.

“We could be having another boy,” she murmurs smiling softly.

“But we’re not,” I say, nuzzling her neck while bending her back as I slide my hands down the back of her thighs, lifting her up.

Wrapping her legs around my waist, her hands move from my shoulders to grip around the back of my neck as her mouth trails lazily up the side, ending at my ear, where her warm breath whispers, “I need you inside of me.”

Pressing her to the wall in the hallway, I push her panties to the side and flick her clit.

“Are you going to feed me?” I ask on a rumble, feeling her wetness soak my fingers as I push two inside her, rubbing her G-spot.

“I’ll do whatever you want,” she breathes, riding my hand as her heels dig into the back of my thighs.

“I like that answer.” I lick over her mouth then bite down on her bottom lip. Pulling her away from the wall, I walk to our bedroom, kicking the door closed behind us. Once I carry my wife to the bed, I take my time, giving her everything before taking even more.

WALKING DOWN THE beach toward Myla and Maxim, I smile as I listen to my wife’s laughter and my son’s giggle as the waves crash into them, sitting in the sand near the shore.

“Come on, Daddy.” Myla smiles, turning her head toward me as I close the distance between us. Settling myself behind her, I grin when Maxim splashes his hand in the water and babbles.

“Are you happy, *Makamae*?” I ask, pressing my lips against her neck. Her hand comes up to wrap around the side of my head as her own turns to catch my eyes.

“This is my happiness, Kai—this moment, and a million others just like it that you’ve given me.”

Looking into her beautiful eyes, I know she's right, and now, the rest of our days will be spent just like this.

EPILOGUE

A YEAR AND A WHOLE LOT OF HAPPINESS LATER

Maggie

SMELLING BACON, MY stomach growls and I try to fight it. I really do, but this baby has a mind of its own, and I swear it only wants meat. Sitting up in bed, I push my hair out of my face, place my hand over my large, round stomach, and ask, “Why couldn’t you like tofu?” like he understands me. I feel a sharp kick right to my bladder, and I pull in a deep breath.

I didn’t even have to take a pregnancy test to know I was pregnant. One day, I woke up and the thought of tofu made me queasy, while the idea of a hamburger made me salivate. That morning, I told Sven I was pregnant. He told me I was crazy. We had only been trying to conceive for a month, and even if I was pregnant, I wasn’t far enough along to come up positive with a test. A week after my food cravings didn’t diminish, I went and bought a test. It was still a week until my period was due, but I took the test anyway, and it came up with two pink lines—one slightly darker than the other, proving I was right.

Awkwardly rolling out of bed, I put my feet to the floor and push myself off the mattress then waddle to the bathroom, brushing my teeth, and taking care of business as quickly as a nine months pregnant woman can. Pulling my robe from the back of the door, I slip it on and tie the waist then move out of the room.

Sven got his wish and we moved to Tennessee a month after all the drama went down. It didn’t take me long *at all* to

fall in the love with the town he called home, or the people he considered his family.

When we moved to town, we stayed in Susan and James Mayson's house while our home was built.

Our plan hadn't been to stay with them. We planned to rent a house for a few months, but after Susan heard this news, she went all mom-mode on Sven and me, and insisted we stay with her and James, that they had plenty of room. I obviously tried to convince them otherwise, not wanting to be an inconvenience, but I learned quickly that when Susan wanted something, she got it, and she wanted us to stay with them.

I never knew people like the Maysons existed before. People who are good through and through, people who would do anything for those they consider family, and Sven and I were just that to them. Mayson Construction built our home, and most days, Sven could be found helping the men he considered brothers with the job of building our house. It made it that much more special when it was complete, and he knew his hard work went into the place our kids would grow up.

Walking down the long hall from our bedroom, past Sven's office, I head through the great room, with its floor to ceiling windows and view of the large pond in the backyard, and into the big open kitchen where Sven is standing shirtless in front of the stove with the phone to his ear.

Spotting me, he grins then mutters, "I gotta go Ace." And he drops the phone to the counter. Ace bought the club from Sven and funny enough, he and Eva got together; I don't know how it happened, but she turned him into a one-woman man.

"Was wondering how long it would take you to get here," Sven says, using a fork to scoop out bacon from the frying pan onto a plate covered with a paper towel.

"You know it's not actually me who likes bacon—it's your son— right?" I ask, moving around the long counter and stealing a slice of crispy bacon from the plate.

"I'm glad my boy likes meat," Sven mutters, wrapping his hand around the side of my neck, leaning in, kissing my

mouth, whispering, “Morning,” and then dropping his hands to my stomach and bending down.

“I say we make a no tofu rule for the house. What do you say?” he asks my belly, and our son kicks hard at the sound of his dad’s voice.

“I’m taking that as a yes.” He smiles, looking up at me.

“I’m eating tofu. I’m only not eating tofu right now, because he makes me sick every time I try,” I tell him, something he already knows.

“Whatever you say, baby.” He grins as I reach for another piece of bacon. “You excited to see Morgan?”

“Yes, but I think she’s just coming so she can decorate and hog Maddox when he gets here.”

“She’s gonna have to fight me for my boy.”

I know he’s telling the truth, as his eyes light with a fire that’s only there when he talks about his family, especially his son. He’s excited to be a dad, and I have no doubt he will be hands-on. I honestly think I’ll have a hard time getting our kid away from him.

“I really can’t wait to see my mom and dad,” I tell him quietly as he rubs my tummy. My relationship with my parents changed drastically. They are no longer absent, but fully involved in not only my life, but also my sister’s. They even bought a small RV so they can travel to Tennessee to visit Sven and me, and to Colorado, where Morgan now lives with her fiancé.

After Morgan got out of rehab, she stayed with my parents for a few months then took a job in Colorado at a rehab facility for troubled youth. The owner of the facility, Greg, took one look at my sister and fell in love—as he puts it. They’re happy, and best of all, my sister is doing amazing in her recovery, and I really believe her helping young kids find the right path has been good for her.

“What time are they arriving?” he asks, kissing my forehead before moving away to the fridge.

“I think tomorrow sometime, but if Dad has his way, it could be late tonight,” I tell him, and he looks over his shoulder and grins.

“I’m guessing your mom is still on her ‘Kama Sutra across the US’ kick?” he asks, coming out of the fridge with eggs and a block of cheese.

“It’s so weird,” I mutter, shaking my head.

“She’s got a lot of followers.” He smiles, setting the carton of eggs on the counter. He isn’t wrong; my mom started a few social media pages and has close to forty thousand followers. When she and my dad travel, they stop along the way, and my mom teaches classes on the Kama Sutra, though she still hasn’t talked Sven into taking one. She tries every time we see her.

“It’s still weird,” I repeat, listening to him laugh.

“I still have the book she gave me on her last visit. I think we should try out a few of the positions.”

“This is kind of in the way,” I tell him, wrapping my arms around my large belly.

“I’m sure there’s something in there we could try.” He grins, and I feel the place between my legs tingle at the thought. One thing for sure—the heat between us hasn’t died down, not even a little bit, and I have no doubt it never will.

“QUIET, LITTLE MAN. Momma’s sleeping,” I hear Sven whisper, and I keep my position in the bed but open my eyes and watch him pick up Maddox from his bassinet and carry him out of the room. Sitting up, I slip out of bed and head down the hall, making sure to stay quiet as I follow behind them. Standing in the doorway of the living room, I watch as Sven walks to the kitchen to make a bottle then walks to stand in the middle of the room with Maddox in his arms, swaying him from side-to-side as he feeds him.

Biting my lip to keep from crying, I listen as Sven tells our son the story of how we met then smile when he adds that he

thought I was crazy. I have no regrets. Looking back at every single moment, the bad ones included, I have no regrets about any of it, because I know the foundation we built when we became an 'us' is solid; nothing will ever break us.

Moving back to the bedroom, I stop in the hall and look at one of the pictures I had framed right after Maddox was born. Sven is standing with his parents, his mom next to his father, both looking happy and smiling at their grandson. His mom will never be normal, but looking at them as a family, I know Sven needed that connection, and even more so, I know his parents needed it, and I'm just glad they all have it now.

Moving down the hall, I get back into bed and pull the blanket up over my shoulder, and I try to fight it, but I fall asleep.

Sven

"SHIT, MAGS." I run my fingers through the hair on either side of her head while her hand works in sync with her mouth, taking me down her throat.

"Fuck, come here," I growl, but she shakes her head with my cock still in her mouth.

"Now," I demand, raising my hips off the bed as she takes me deeper, pushing me closer to the edge. Putting my hands under her armpits, I jerk her away from my cock, flip her to her back, push her legs apart, and then slam inside her.

"I come inside of you, not in your mouth," I remind her, moving my thumb to her clit and rolling my finger over it.

"Yes, inside of me," she whimpers, wrapping her legs around my back.

"You're so wet, baby. Jesus, you love sucking me off, don't you?" I ask, rolling her clit faster.

"Yes," she hisses, and my mouth travels down her neck, nipping the skin as I go, ending on her breast. Her nails dig into my back and I pull her nipple into my mouth, biting down

on the tip and feeling the walls of her pussy contract around me.

“Sven!” she cries, and I lift my head to watch her come apart under me as I thrust faster, her orgasm pulling mine from me.

Planting myself against her cervix, I cover her mouth with mine and groan down her throat as I lose myself deep inside her. Feeling her limbs wrap around me, I pull my head back and run my fingers through her hair then roll us, settling her against me while I attempt to catch my breath.

“I love you,” she murmurs, kissing my chest, and I tilt my head down toward her and give her a squeeze.

“Love you too, baby,” I tell her, dragging the blanket up over us as she presses her face into my chest and tucks her hands between us. Hearing her breathing even out, I know she’s asleep. Kissing her forehead, I pull her closer still.

Looking at the TV monitor next to the bed, I watch my son’s chest rise and fall steadily for a moment, and then rest my chin on the top of my wife’s head, close my eyes, and fall asleep knowing I’m living the impossible dream.

INFATUATION

WITH ROCHELLE PAIGE

ABOUT INFATUATION

WARNING: THIS IS A NOVELLA,
SO BUCKLE UP FOR A QUICK,
SWEET READ THAT WILL
SATISFY YOUR CURIOSITY.

in·fat·u·a·tion: A feeling of foolish or obsessively strong love for, admiration for, or interest in someone or something; a strong and unreasoning attachment

From the moment Justin sees the beautiful blonde living in the apartment below his, he becomes curious, and over time, that curiosity turns into an obsession.

When the moment finally strikes for him to make a move, will he take it?

Find out what happens in the fourth and final book in the Underground Kings Series.

PROLOGUE

JUSTIN

H EARING THE RATTLE of an old car and the sound of squeaky brakes, I press Pause on *Call of Duty* and get up from my couch to go to the window. I pull back the curtain just enough to see outside without drawing attention to myself.

It's dark out, but the light from the street lamp in the middle of the parking lot has cast a glow on the car beneath it. The rusty, beat up, powder-blue Buick needed to go to the junkyard a few years ago. The bumper is barely hanging on by the ropes someone tied around it. The back right taillight is covered in red tape that is peeling away, and I know from seeing the car in daylight that there is more rust on the car than there is paint.

As the driver side door opens, my heart starts to pound frantically against my ribcage, the same thing it does every time I'm able to catch a glimpse of her. My neighbor, the cute little blonde who moved in with Shelly, a woman who lives in my building. I've never talked to her before, but I've watched her more than is probably healthy.

I watch her get out of the car and grimace when she tries to push the door closed and it doesn't latch but swings right back open.

"Jesus," I hiss when she takes a step back and kicks the door with so much force that the car rocks from side to side.

As she blows a piece of her long blonde hair out of her face, it flutters in the light as she stops to rest her hands on

her very round stomach. She looks about seven months pregnant, if not more. Then again, it could just be her petite size making her look further along.

When she finally starts toward the building, I wonder for the millionth time what her story is and how she became friends with Shelly. She looks and dresses nothing like the other women Shelly hangs out with. I've never seen her wearing makeup, and her clothes... well, her clothes leave everything to the imagination. They're baggy and do nothing to accentuate her figure.

As she gets closer, I notice the dark circles under her eyes and the exhaustion in her features. Every time I see her, she's either coming from or going to work. Okay, I should say I *think* she's going to and coming home from work. I've never actually spoken to her before, and she has no idea I even exist.

When she reaches her apartment door, she pauses and drops her chin to her chest. Even though she's in profile, I can see the annoyance and deflation on her face as she places her hand on the doorknob. And as she pushes in, allowing the loud music to stream outside, a roomful of people can be seen.

Seeing that, my fists clench. The urge to protect her, to do something, has me moving to my computer. Twenty minutes later, I go to the window and smile as ten people along with Shelly leave the apartment when the police show up.

Having done my part to take care of whoever she is, I go to the couch, sit down, put my headphones back on, and start up *Call of Duty* once more.

JUSTIN

H EADING FOR MY Rover the next morning, I look to the left when I hear, “You stupid piece of crap. Open. Up. Now!” I spot my neighbor pushing and tugging on her car door, trying to pry it open.

I walk across the lot toward her then stand back, tucking my hands into the front pockets of my jeans and trying not to laugh at how adorable she looks yelling at her car.

“Need some help?” I finally ask, taking pity.

Startled, she jumps back and her head flies in my direction.

I pull in a shocked breath when her eyes meet mine. I knew she was going to be beautiful up close, but I didn’t realize how fucking gorgeous she is. Her blonde hair is up in some kind of bun on top of her head, drawing attention to her big blue eyes, soft, feminine face, and totally fucking kissable full lips.

“Um... no. No, thank you. I’ve got it.” She waves me off, putting one foot on the car next to the door and pulling harder than she was before. Knowing she’s going to end up hurting herself, I get closer and remove her hand from the door handle.

“Let me help,” I tell her gently.

“Seriously, I almost had it.”

I ignore her protest and move her out of the way then pull on the door, expecting it to open for me, but then feel like an ass when it doesn’t budge. Pulling it again with more force

than before, I shake my head when nothing happens. How fucking hard did she kick it closed last night?

“It’s stuck,” I mutter more to myself than her, and she giggles. Turning to see her face, I watch her lick her lips and I fight back a groan.

“I may have shut it a little too hard last night,” she whispers, ducking her head, but I want her eyes on me. I’m not done looking at her.

“What’s your name?” Her eyes fly back up to meet mine, and I’m sure my question sounded like a demand mixed with a growl, but there’s nothing I can do about it.

“Me?” She looks around like there might be some random person outside with us that she didn’t notice before.

“Yeah, what’s your name?” I smile.

“I don’t know if I should tell you.” She frowns at me, causing a little crease to form between her brows.

“You don’t know if you should tell me your name?”

“I don’t know you.”

Chuckling, I move away from the door toward her then stop when her body gets visibly tight and her eyes fill with fear. My jaw tics and I feel my heart squeeze at her reaction.

Pulling in a breath through my nose to calm myself down, I tell her softly, “My name’s Justin. I live in apartment 210.”

I tilt my head toward the building behind us, hoping she’ll feel more comfortable knowing I’m her neighbor.

“Justin.” She swings her eyes from me to the building and back again.

“Justin,” I confirm.

Licking her bottom lip, she takes a step toward me then stops and sticks out her hand. “I’m Aubrey. I live with Shelly.”

“Nice to meet you, Aubrey.” I take her hand in mine, realizing how delicate and fragile she is. She’s so damn tiny her head barely reaches the middle of my chest.

“You too.” She pulls her hand from mine and takes a step back.

“Shelly said you’re nice.”

That news is surprising. I’ve only spoken to Shelly a handful of times since she moved in. Then again, she probably thinks I’m nice because I don’t call the cops on her every time she has a party, which is pretty much every damn night.

“Crap, I’m totally gonna be late to work,” she says, looking at her phone, and I notice it’s the kind of phone you buy for twenty dollars, the kind I use as a throwaway when working cases and don’t want anyone to be able to trace a call back to me.

“Have you tried your other doors?” I ask, and her cheeks get even darker as she presses her lips together and tucks her phone into her back pocket.

“Your other doors don’t work either,” I guess from the look on her face.

“No, only the driver side door opens. The other doors were welded shut, because they kept opening on the fly while I was driving.”

“Jesus.” I run a hand over my head and look at the car. I don’t think she’d approve of me taking her car to the junkyard where it belongs and buying her a new one. At least not yet anyway.

“I’m sure you have better things to do with your time than stand out here with me. I’ll just go in and ask Shelly if I can use her triple-A. Hopefully they can send someone out who can pull the door open for me.”

She starts to walk away, but I can’t let her go.

“I can drop you at work.”

She turns to look at me over her shoulder and smiles a smile that seems to make time come to a standstill.

“That’s really sweet, but—”

“Sweetheart,” I cut her off. “It’s gonna take at least twenty or more minutes for someone to show up, and you already said you’re gonna be late for work.”

Looking at me then her car, I can tell she’s torn.

“I promise you’ll be safe with me.” I draw an X with my finger over my heart.

“Scout’s honor.”

She turns around, studying me, and then tips her head to the side. “Were you a Boy Scout?”

“No,” I tell her truthfully, and her lips lift into a gorgeous smile then she laughs once more. This time, the sound hits me right in my gut.

“You can tell Shelly you’re going with me and send her a picture of my license.”

She blows out a breath then nods. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah, okay, if you’re sure you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. My car’s right over here.” I lead her over to my Range Rover that is parked on the other side of the lot, clicking the alarm off. I open the door for her, making sure she’s settled before I slam it closed. Jogging around the back, I get in behind the wheel and feel myself relax.

“This is a nice car,” she says, and I smile then press the button that starts it up.

“It was a gift from a friend of mine,” I tell her, and her eyes get big.

“A gift?”

“Well, more of a bribe,” I clarify. “My buddy in Hawaii tried to bribe me into coming to work for him with this car.”

“You’re in Tennessee,” she points out softly, looking around the interior of the SUV.

“Didn’t say I took the bribe.”

“But you still have this car.”

“Yep,” I agree with a smile, backing out of my parking space.

“He didn’t get mad that you kept his car and didn’t accept his bribe?”

“Nah, he knew before he tried to bribe me that I wouldn’t leave my job.”

“Then why did he try?” she asks, sounding adorably confused.

Shrugging, I smile. “Why does anyone do anything?”

“Good point.”

“Where do you work?” I question, stopping at the intersection that will lead us out of the apartment complex.

“I...” She pauses, and I look over at her and find her worrying her bottom lip.

“Do you know Dolly’s on West 21st ?” she asks quietly, and my head twitches. Dolly’s is a strip club, one of the bigger ones in town.

Beating back the sudden annoyance, jealousy, and possessiveness zapping through every cell in my body, I jerk up my chin.

“Yeah, I know it.”

“I.... That’s where I work.”

Well that answered the question of how she knows Shelly, since Shelly works at that club and a few others around town.

My eyes drop to her round stomach.

“You’re pregnant,” I point out the obvious, not that she’s not beautiful, and not that some men don’t get off on pregnant women. But I can’t imagine her working at a club like that.

“I help with the books, and on the weekends, I do the girls’ makeup and hair if it’s slow. Johnny... Johnny, my boss, has been sweet about helping me out, especially when so many other people have turned me down,” she murmurs.

Noticing her chin wobbling, my teeth grind together.

“Please don’t cry.”

“I won’t.” She shakes her head. “I don’t cry. I never cry.”

The tone of her voice puts me on edge, but when she turns her head and I see the broken look in her eyes, something in me snaps, and I vow in that moment to do everything in my power to protect her.

Always.

I reach over and take her hand, and her body jolts from the contact.

“I’m okay.” She tries to pull her hand free, but I don’t let her go.

Instead, I thread my fingers through hers.

“My statement was insensitive.”

“It’s okay,” she whispers, staring at our hands.

“It’s not, but it’s sweet that you’re telling me it is.” I squeeze her fingers and she looks up at me.

“Let me make it up to you. Have dinner with me tonight.”

Her fingers convulse around mine and her eyes grow in surprise. But then they dull a moment later before she looks away and out the window.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t have anything to wear to dinner.” She pulls at the front of her baggie shirt before letting it fall back in place. I want to tell her it doesn’t matter what she wears, but I know women. I know it will matter to her.

“I’ll cook. We can have dinner at my place.”

“You... you’ll cook for me?” She looks me over.

“Okay, so I won’t cook. I’ll order in.” I smile, and she laughs.

Her eyes drop to my mouth and her bottom lip goes between her teeth before she whispers, “Okay.”

“Okay?” I ask just to confirm.

“Yes, okay.”

Hearing that, I grin. “Cool.”

I don't let her hand go as I drive her across town, and surprisingly she doesn't try to pull away. When I reach the parking lot for Dolly's, I drive her around the back to the employee entrance.

“Thank you for the ride.” She lets my hand go to take off her seatbelt.

“Do you want me to pick you up?”

“No, I'll just get a cab.” She smiles, opening her door, and I wrap my fingers around her wrist to stop her before she can hop out. She turns to look at me.

“I'm not letting you take a cab when I can drive you. What time do you get off?”

“I'll be okay.”

“Sweetheart, what time do you get off?” My tone leaves no room for argument.

She stares at me for a few seconds before letting out a huff that causes that ever-present piece of hair in her face to float up and drop back down.

“Normally, I get off at 5:00 p.m., but some days I get done at 4:30.”

“I'll be here at 4:30 then.” I let her go.

She slides out but stops to look at me before shutting the door.

“Thanks for the ride.”

I lift my chin and she smiles, shutting the door. I watch her until she's inside then take off out of the parking lot, heading to the gym before work.

JUSTIN

MOVING FROM THE kitchen to the living room, I stop in my tracks, looking at Aubrey asleep on my couch with her head on the armrest, her feet tucked up near her ass, and her hand resting over her belly.

Letting out a breath, I move to the couch and stand over her, watching her sleep. When I picked her up from work, she looked tired but happy to see me. I knew she had to be exhausted, so when I got her to my place, I showed her around then told her to rest while I put in our order for Chinese food and returned a couple phone calls. Apparently, I took longer than I thought. I pull the blanket off the back of the couch and lay it over her then turn on the TV and lower the volume.

Hearing her whimper a few minutes later, I turn to look at her. Whatever she's dreaming about, it isn't good. Her body is writhing and her breathing is labored and choppy.

"Aubrey." I reach out and touch her shoulder, and her foot swings out, kicking me in the stomach so hard I grunt.

"No!" she screams, scooting away from me, her eyes wide with fear.

"Jesus," I whisper, and her eyes focus on me and her hands cover her mouth.

"I'm so.... Oh, God, I'm so sorry." She whispers, "Did I hurt you?"

"No, are you okay?" I ask, and her face pales as she scoots farther away.

“I’d never hurt you,” I tell her, watching her hands clench into fists.

“Never,” I repeat.

“I need to go.” She jumps off the couch.

“Sweetheart.” I reach out to grab her, but she dodges my hand.

“I’m so sorry... so, so sorry.” She grabs her sweatshirt, and before I can stop her, she’s gone, slamming the door behind herself.

“Fuck.” I rub my hands down my face then lean forward, wrapping my palm around the back of my neck. My eyes catch on her sneakers in front of my couch as someone knocks on the door. Hoping it’s her, I get up to answer it, but when I swing the door open, disappointment settles in my gut. It’s not her; it’s our dinner. I quickly pay then drop the bag in the kitchen before picking up her shoes.

Knocking on Shelly’s apartment door, I wait only a moment for it to open and am a little surprised when Aubrey pokes her head out.

“You forgot your shoes,” I tell her quietly, holding them out to her.

“Thank you,” she whispers, taking them and starting to shut the door as I hear them hit the floor with a thud.

“Your food is upstairs. Do you want me to bring it to you? Or you could come eat dinner with me.”

“I... I’m not hungry,” she says, looking up at me, and her stomach takes that moment to gurgle loudly. I raise a brow.

“Okay, I’m hungry, but I...” Her cheeks get pink and I take a step closer to her, watching her eyes widen.

“Don’t be embarrassed. One day, you can tell me about what happened, but right now, I’d just like it if you had dinner with me.”

“Are you sure? After what happened, I—”

“Don’t think about that,” I cut her off. “Just come up and eat. Please.”

Nodding, she steps out of her apartment and closes the door behind her, and I notice she slipped on a pair of flip-flops. I take her hand, leading her back up the stairs to my place, then settle her on the couch before going to the kitchen to grab the bags of food. When I return to the living room, I can tell she’s still embarrassed about what happened, but I know there’s nothing I can do about that right now. It’s going to take time for her to realize she can trust me.

“Tell me a little about yourself,” I say, handing her the food while setting a glass full of orange juice on the coffee table in front of her.

“There isn’t much to tell.” She shrugs.

“How long have you been here?” I ask, setting my feet on the coffee table, lounging back, and hoping if I’m relaxed, it will help her relax too.

“Just a few months,” she says between bites. “I was just nine weeks pregnant when I got here, and now I’m almost due.” She rubs her hand over her stomach unconsciously.

“Where’s the father?” I question quietly, and her bottom lip goes between her teeth as her eyes meet mine.

“Hopefully dead,” she whispers, catching me off guard by the fierceness of that statement.

“Does he know about the baby?” I murmur, and her head shakes side to side.

Studying her for a moment, I see there is something there, something ugly, and it takes everything in me not to drag her to my lap and hold her while she tells me about it.

“Eat, baby,” I mutter, nodding toward her bowl. “You can save that story for another day.”

Her chin wobbles as she nods. I turn up the volume on the television and sit back, pretending to watch the show on the TV but actually keeping an eye on her as she digs into her food.

“Thank you. That was delicious,” she says, and I turn my head to look at her and smile as she sets her bowl on the coffee table.

“My mom tried to teach me to cook. It never worked out. If I wasn’t able to eat out, I’d probably starve, since the only things I know how to make are mac-and-cheese, hotdogs, and eggs. I suck in the kitchen otherwise,” I tell her, watching as she tucks her feet under her.

“My parents are Irish and they both love to cook. Thankfully, they shared their talent with me.”

“Where are they now?”

“Vegas. Well, all of my family lives there—my mom and dad along with my brothers and a few cousins.”

“You came to Tennessee alone?”

“Yeah, they didn’t want me to keep my baby,” she whispers, placing her hands over her stomach protectively. “I hate her dad, but she’s half of me and innocent. I know it may sound crazy, but when I found out I was pregnant, I knew—regardless of how she was made—I loved her more than anything else in this world. And I’ll never let anyone take her from me.”

“You keep saying she. Are you having a girl?”

“Yeah.” She smiles then reaches out and grabs my hand, pulling it to her stomach. Letting her lead the way, I watch her hand press down on mine and feel movement under her shirt as the baby moves around. Looking up at her, I feel my face go soft as I watch a beautiful smile spread across hers and her eyes light with excitement. Without thinking, I use my free hand to push a piece of hair behind her ear. Her sharp intake of breath has me leaning close enough to feel her exhale against my mouth.

“I really want to kiss you, Aubrey,” I whisper, and her eyes close briefly before she leans forward, resting her lips against mine. I kiss her softly then pull away, sliding my hand behind her neck to drag her head forward so I can touch my mouth to her forehead.

“That was nice.”

I shift back to look down at her. “Only nice?”

Her blue eyes fill with humor as she smiles up at me. “Better than nice.”

“How much better?” I rub the pad of my thumb over her bottom lip, amazed by how soft it is.

She tilts her head to the side and taps her finger against her chin like she’s thinking hard about my question before she answers.

“I think it was the best first kiss I’ve ever had.”

I like her answer, but I want more.

“I think I should kiss you again, just so you’re sure. You know... so you have something to compare it to.”

“You do?” she asks with a smile. I nod, and she whispers against my lips, “Okay.”

I softly brush my lips against hers. “What do you think now?”

It takes a moment for her lashes to flutter open and for her to focus on me.

“I don’t know. I think you should kiss me again.”

“I like the way you think.” I nibble her bottom lip then soothe it with my tongue.

“Oh, that’s nice,” she says then giggles when her stomach moves between us. I lean back and rest my hand on her belly.

“Does she always move so much?”

“Yeah,” she replies softly, and I look up at her.

“Especially when she knows it’s time for me to go to sleep.” She scoots back on the couch. “I really should go.”

Fuck, I don’t want her to, but I know she’s right. “I’ll walk you downstairs.”

“It’s not a big deal. I can make it on my own.” She slides her feet into her flip-flops.

“I’ll walk you,” I repeat, standing, and she eyes me for a moment before nodding once. I open the door for her to step out ahead of me then take her hand and walk her downstairs, leaving her at Shelly’s door with one more kiss and fucking hating that she’s not going to sleep where I can keep an eye on her.

AUBREY

I STAND BACK to look at Stella, making sure the makeup I'm doing on her looks flawless. It took me a few months to get used to being backstage at a strip club. But now I don't even think about the girls who are mostly naked, primping in the mirrors, chatting about what's going on in their lives and which big spenders are in the crowd as they get ready for their turn on stage.

"Aubrey's gone and gotten herself a boyfriend!" Shelly announces as she walks in wearing nothing but sheer panties and glitter, and all the girls stop talking.

My cheeks flood with heat as they all turn and stare at me while Shelly plops down on her chair, swiveling around to fix her makeup before she goes out to work the floor.

"Shelly!" I hiss.

She meets my eyes in the mirror and lifts her brows.

"What?"

"I don't have a boyfriend."

"I call bullshit." She twirls back around and points her mascara in my direction while she taps her foot clad in five-inch clear heels. "A guy came out and worked on the doors of your car on Tuesday afternoon while you were here doing the books for Johnny. When I spoke to him about the bill, he said it was already taken care of. Who else would've paid for something like that except a boyfriend?"

I tap my chest and argue, “Me. I could’ve paid to have my own car repaired.”

“If you were going to take care of it, you wouldn’t have put it off all this time. And you just said ‘could’ve,’ not that you did,” Shelly points out.

Damn, I did say that.

“Shelly’s got a point.” Stella looks up at me as she nods in agreement. “My momma’s always sayin’ ‘Ella baby, you need to find yourself a good guy to take care of things for you.’”

“My mom says that too,” Shelly agrees.

“You sure you don’t have a boyfriend you’ve been hidin’ from us?” Stella asks.

“I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Then who’s been driving you to and from work, even after getting your car fixed for you?” Shelly asks with a smirk before she whirls back around to face her mirror.

“Oooh, girl. No way did you pay for those repairs if you haven’t even been driving your car,” Lana, another dancer, says and crosses her arms over her chest. “Are you gonna try to keep fooling us or are you gonna admit you got yourself a man?”

I look at all the women in the room, women who have been nothing but kind to me. I love them, but I know from past experience that they’re like sharks in bloody water whenever they smell gossip in the air. I also know they aren’t going to let this go until I spill my guts.

“You guys have this all wrong. And plus, the driver side door on my car is better, but I wouldn’t say it’s totally fixed. It still sticks every once in a while, and the repair guy said the others are all lost causes, since they’ve been welded shut.”

“You shouldn’t be crawling over car seats and consoles in your condition anyway,” Maria, the youngest dancer in the bunch, mutters, staring at my round belly with wide eyes. “Not when you’re ready to pop any day now.”

“Is that why the new boyfriend is still drivin’ you around?” Stella asks. “If so, that’s a good sign. Protective guys are hot, especially when they go all caveman.”

“Oh, I love a caveman.” Lana gets a faraway look in her eyes.

“Stella’s right,” Shelly agrees, catching my attention. “I know I haven’t met him yet, but he already has my stamp of approval if he’s looking out for you.”

A blush creeps up my cheeks and my gaze drops to the floor.

“Girl.” Stella grabs my hand. “That’s a guilty look if I’ve ever seen one.”

“Um. Well, it’s just that Shelly’s wrong. She definitely knows him, since he lives upstairs from our apartment,” I admit softly.

I lift my head to see Shelly’s eyes widen in surprise, and she shrieks, “Your new boyfriend is Justin? Holy fuck! How’d you get in there with the Viking hottie?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” She shakes her head, laughing. “He’s barely said two words to me in all the time I’ve lived there. He’s a nice guy, but I’ve always gotten the impression he isn’t too happy about having me as a neighbor, which is strange as fuck, since most guys are more than happy to be anywhere near me.”

Maria snorts, and Shelly glares at her, asking, “What? You don’t think it’s weird for a guy to not be interested in having all this”—she waves a hand at her body—“living right downstairs from him?”

My nose wrinkles at the idea of my Justin being attracted to Shelly. I know it’s crazy for me to think of him as mine, since we only met a week ago and I’m about ready to pop out a baby, but I just can’t help myself. My feelings for him are growing by leaps and bounds each and every day we spend together. I mean, I let him kiss me on day one, and now one week later, I can’t imagine my life without him in it. He’s

become that important to me in such a short time. It's kind of scary, but not in a way where I'm afraid. More like an exciting scary.

"Nope. I don't think it's weird at all." Maria aims a smile my way. "I really like that the guy Aubrey is dating isn't interested in his stripper neighbor. It means he has a little class."

"Hey!" Shelly cries. "I'm classy."

"Quit tryin' to make this about you, Shelly. It's about Aubrey and her new boyfriend." Lana sighs.

"He's not really my boyfriend," I say for the hundredth time, even though I'm becoming a little confused about the status of our relationship. I'm not exactly sure how the whole relationship thing works, since I've never been in one before, but I'm pretty sure you aren't boyfriend and girlfriend until you have a conversation about it.

"Did he get your car fixed for you?" Stella asks.

"Yeah."

She looks up from doing the straps on her heels and raises an eyebrow at me. "And he's still drivin' you to work?"

"Uh-huh."

"He feedin' you too?"

Stella is one of my favorite dancers, but if she keeps up with this, she might lose her spot.

"Umm...."

"He better be," Shelly grumbles. "She hasn't been around enough to touch any of the food in our kitchen all week."

Stella's smile is blinding.

"So he's been makin' sure you get breakfast, lunch, and dinner?"

Breakfast and dinner, mostly, I think but don't say.

"Umm, we eat together, but he has work too."

“Mm-hmm,” Maria hums. “He’s spending all his free time with you and taking care of you while he’s doing it. Definite boyfriend material!”

“Hold up!” Stella holds up a finger. “We skipped one important step in the boyfriend test. I know the baby is due any day now, but have you gotten physical with him? Even if it’s just kissin’?”

“Don’t you all have work to do?” I ask, knowing I’m now bright red. “

Oh, avoidance. It must have been good,” Lana says.

“How was it?” Shelly asks.

I shrug one shoulder.

“Amazing, even if I don’t really have anything to compare it to,” I reply quietly, and everyone’s eyes drop to my round belly and the ripple of my shirt where my baby girl is kicking. I know these women have seen enough of the ugly side of the world to understand how I could be having a baby and never really been kissed.

“Oh, honey,” Maria whispers, and my throat gets tight as she turns away to blot under her eyes with a tissue.

Watching her, I startle when Stella takes my hand, and my gaze meets hers for a moment before she squeezes my fingers then leaves the room and Lana does the same.

I take a seat in Stella’s now empty chair and try to fight back the tears I feel creeping up my throat as I watch Shelly put the finishing touches on her makeup.

“I know we’re complete opposites and I haven’t been the best roommate, but I’m damn proud to call you my friend. You deserve the best, and if Justin’s gonna give that to you, he’s got my stamp of approval,” she says quietly.

Tears spill down my cheeks as she comes over and squeezes my shoulder before walking out of the dressing room to head out on stage for her set. I know Shelly and I will never be best friends, but I owe her a lot. Without her allowing me to live with her, I’m not sure where I would’ve ended up living.

Finding a job would've been harder too, since she's the one who introduced me to Johnny. And I might never have met Justin, which would've been a tragedy, considering the way he makes me feel.

"Lover boy might have gotten the thumbs-up from Shelly and the rest of your girls, but I need to meet him before I can sign off on this relationship," Johnny says, and I spin my chair around to look at him as I wipe my cheeks.

I smile, thinking about how he'll react to Justin, whose nothing like I expected, not from just looking at him. And if Shelly hadn't told me he was nice, I'm not sure I would've been able to get up the nerve to accept that ride from him. Lucky for me, he's the kind of guy who won't mind being checked out by a brute and a bunch of dancers, if that's what it takes to make me happy. But that doesn't mean I'm in a rush to make it happen, at least not until I'm sure what's going on between the two of us.

JUSTIN

TWO WEEKS. TWO weeks of mornings and evenings with Aubrey, and every single one of them have left me feeling completely fucking unhinged. I want her more than my next breath and know from the look in her eyes when we talk or when I kiss her that she feels the same thing. I breathe deep, finishing my set of reps. Working out isn't helping like I thought it would. I have never been a gym rat, but with her, I'm turning into one. It's my outlet, my way of getting rid of the pent-up energy I'm now carrying around.

Drying off my face and chest, I pick up my cell and frown when I see she's called me more than once. If she's calling me over and over in the middle of the day, then something must be wrong. She's always careful about using her phone, since she's on a cheap prepaid plan with limited minutes. And so far, she's refused to let me buy her a new one or add her to my plan. The only reason I've let the argument slide is because she spends all her free time with me, so I haven't pushed the issue yet.

I call her back and my heart drops when she doesn't pick up.

"Fuck," I grunt, shoving my shit into my bag and dragging my shirt on so I can head out to my Rover. After I toss my bag into the back seat, I climb behind the wheel.

My cell rings, and seeing her name on the screen loosens some of the tension in my muscles as I answer, "Aubrey, baby, you okay?"

“No,” she snuffles out in a small voice, and my heart drops again.

My need to get to her is even more urgent, hearing how scared she sounds.

“Where are you?” I ask, starting my car.

“At my doctor’s office,” she replies, and I step on the gas, thinking about all the things that could possibly go wrong at this stage in her pregnancy.

“Can you come pick me up? I can’t get my stupid car to start.”

She’s usually okay with me driving her around, but this morning she insisted on taking her car to work. Now I get why. Last week, I took her to her appointment. She’d been embarrassed to change into a gown with me in the room, even with my back turned. And then there had been an awkward silence when the doctor had done the physical exam, and when I turned around, her cheeks and neck were the cutest pink color. For someone who is due to have a baby any day now, she seems so innocent, and that only makes me want her more.

“Where are you now?”

“Sitting in my car, praying to the gods it magically turns on.”

I chuckle.

“Leave the car and go back inside,” I order, sensing this is the opportunity I was waiting for to get rid of the damn thing. “I’ll have it towed and get it looked at.”

“We both know I don’t have the money to cover the tow, let alone what it will cost to fix my piece-of-crap car.” I smile as she grumbles, because I know there isn’t going to be a bill to fix it. And the only person who will be looking at it is the guy at the junkyard.

“Babe, go inside. I’m on my way, and I don’t like the idea of you sitting in your car.”

“Justin.”

“Please, baby.”

“I know it’s wrong to accept your help on something this big, but I’m uncomfortable and just want to be home, cuddled up on the couch with you, a fuzzy blanket, and something to drink.” I hear her pull in a breath. “It’s already been a really long day, and I’m tired and thirsty.”

As much as I wish she’d just stay with me at my apartment, she’s still living with Shelly. But I feel like we’re taking a step in the right direction with her calling my place her home, since it’s for damn sure going to be where she lives as soon as I can talk her into it. And now that I know she already thinks of it that way, I’m shaving some time off of how long I’m willing to wait for that to happen.

“Go back inside the building and sit tight, sweetheart. I’ll be there in less than ten minutes to pick you up, and then I’ll take you home and get you whatever the fuck you want.”

“Okay, Justin.”

Her easy agreement reminds me how tired she is, and I step on the gas to cut down on how long it’ll take me to get to her. At the first red light I hit, I send a quick text to Kenton’s woman, Autumn, to ask her if she has time to run out and buy a few things for me and drop them off at my place. She’s curious as fuck about why I need a fuzzy blanket and Aubrey’s favorite tea but says she’ll take care of it right away.

With that taken care of, I manage to make it across town in eight minutes, and as I pull onto the street where her doctor’s office is, I can’t help but think about how different it is from the neighborhood where Dolly’s is located. I hate the idea of her working there, but we aren’t at a place yet where I can insist she quit her job and let me take care of her. I’ve worked too hard to get close to her to fuck it up by being pushy. Or at least I keep reminding myself of that anytime the urge to chain her to my side gets too strong.

For now, I need to be satisfied with what she’s willing to give. One of those things is normally letting me be her ride to and from work, since her car really is a piece of shit. It’s a win-win for me, because I don’t have to worry about her

getting stuck on the side of the road somewhere, and it sends a reminder to everyone at the strip club that she's mine, even if she isn't ready to admit it yet.

A few days ago, when she let me drop her off, I pulled her boss Johnny aside and had a talk with him about keeping her safe while she's there. He knows I work for Kenton, and that alone would have been enough to get him to agree. But he surprised me when he turned that shit around on me and acted like a big brother as he grilled me about my intentions toward her. He wasn't what I was expecting at all. Once I made my place in her life crystal clear, he told me how relieved he was that Aubrey had someone in her life who gives a shit about her.

Giving a shit doesn't begin to describe how I feel when I pull up in front of the building and she walks outside. My heart belongs to the cute little blonde with the big baby belly making her way to my Rover. Leaving the engine running, I hop out and hurry around the front so I can open her door and help her up into the seat. Then I pull the seat belt around her, laughing when I feel her baby girl kick my hand.

"It's almost like she knows I'm here and is saying hello."

Aubrey smiles up at me. "We spend so much time together; I wouldn't be surprised if she recognizes your voice."

"If she doesn't yet, she will soon," I promise as I shut the door and go back around to my side. I like the idea a fuck of a lot more than I'm willing to admit to her. I don't think she's ready to hear that I already feel as territorial about her daughter as I do her. I might not have been there when she was created, but the baby is more mine than the piece of shit who'd gotten Aubrey pregnant. The thought of how scared Aubrey sounded when she mentioned him has my hands clenching into fists. I take a deep breath to calm myself down before I climb into the SUV and pull away from the curb.

"You want me to stop and pick anything up on our way home?"

She lets out a deep sigh and rubs her belly. “A magic pill that will put me into labor?”

“Sorry, sweetheart. I don’t think they carry those anywhere around here.”

Folding her arms over her belly, she sighs again.

“We should invent them. I bet we’d make millions off something like that.”

Even with a frown on her beautiful face, she’s so fucking cute I can’t help but chuckle.

“How good are you at chemistry?”

“Not good enough for something like that,” she grumbles. “I only took it in high school, not college. My classes there were all pretty much focused on my accounting degree. It was the only way I could convince my brother to pay for it.”

Her blue eyes go wide before her gaze darts to the window. She barely ever talks about her family, and whenever she lets something slip about them, she acts like she’s waiting for me to grill her about them. Instead, I ignore the mention of her brother and change the subject. When she’s ready to share more, I’ll be here to listen.

“Then I guess we’ll have to come up with some other idea to make our millions.”

“It’s not even the loss of money that disappoints me.” She rubs her hands over belly. “It’s just that I’m more than ready to give birth to my baby girl, but she seems to be happy staying right where she is.”

“What did the doctor say?”

“I’m not technically overdue until I’m past the forty-two-week mark.”

Thinking about her appointment last week, I ask, “You’re forty weeks now, right?”

“Yup, today, as a matter of fact. It’s supposed to be my due date.” She looks down at her belly and adds, “Which means you’re supposed to come out now.”

“Only five percent of babies are born on their due date.”

Her blonde hair spills over her shoulder as she tilts her head to the side. “How do you know that?”

I shift in my seat and shrug. “I looked it up online.”

“I guess I should’ve asked; why do you know that?”

“Researching shit is kind of my thing.” I run a hand through my hair as I stop at a red light then look at her. “And I figured it couldn’t hurt if I knew more about pregnancies.”

“Couldn’t hurt, huh?” She quirks a brow at me, her lips tilting up at the edges. “You shouldn’t try to play this down when it’s super sweet that you went to all that effort for me.”

“Looking up stuff about pregnancies online didn’t take a whole lot of effort.” I take her hand and brush my lips over her knuckles before setting it back down on her belly. *Compared to everything I want to do for you, it’s barely a drop in the bucket*, I think but don’t say. “There are a lot of reasons why it would be hard for the doctor to pinpoint when you’re due.”

“I know exactly when my baby was conceived.”

I clench the steering wheel so hard my knuckles turn white. The thought of her with another guy sparks an irrational jealousy inside me. It’s not like I don’t have a past of my own or even that I think she wants to have anything to do with that asshole again. Especially not with the darkness I saw in her bright eyes the one time she mentioned him to me.

“Hey,” she whispers, reaching out to stroke my arm as I pull into the parking lot at our apartment building. “The only good thing that came out of that night was my baby.”

I want to ask for the whole story, but she’s going to have the baby any day now and the last thing I want to do is cause her additional stress.

“I’m sure it’s hard to wait a little longer, since you were hoping to have her by today, but another two weeks is hardly any time at all,” I say, even though I’m sure I have the longest case of blue balls in the history of blue balls.

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re not the one walking around looking like a beached whale.”

“You’re beautiful,” I scold as I park then jump out. I help her down from her seat, and when her feet touch the ground, I move in. I cup her face with my palms and tilt her head back to stare into her eyes.

“I’d probably go to hell for some of the things I want to do to you.”

Her plump lips go round as she whispers, “Oh.”

I claim her mouth in a deep kiss, and she has a dazed look in her eyes when I finally pull away. “But I figure burning in hell would be a small price to pay to have you.”

AUBREY

I WAKE FROM my dream, needy and a little breathless, feelings I've gotten used to since Justin and I shared our first kiss. Only now the desire is getting harder to deal with, especially when in my dreams we always share more than just a few innocent kisses.

I don't even want to open my eyes. I don't want to lose the last image I have in my mind of Justin and me together, but at the sound of low murmuring in the next room, I realize I'm not on Justin's couch anymore. I open my eyes and look around his room, having no idea how I ended up here. The last thing I remember before I fell asleep was him rubbing my feet after making me eat something.

I start to smile as contentment fills my chest, but that emotion is wiped away when I hear feminine laughter filter through the door, mixed with his deep chuckle. A surge of jealousy courses through me at the thought of him spending time with another woman. I know I don't have any right to feel that way, but that still doesn't stop me from rolling me and my big belly off his mattress.

I walk lightly to the closed door and try to listen to what's happening in the other room. When I don't hear more than quiet murmurings, I nudge it open, hoping I can sneak down the hallway a little without getting caught. I should know better than to even try to be stealthy, since he has a way of sensing me even when he's busy with something else. More than once he's been in the middle of an Xbox game with guns

going off or working on his computer and still alert enough to hear my breath catch if my girl kicks too hard.

“Baby, what are you doing up already?”

Before I have a chance to respond, I hear him murmur to his guest, “Don’t leave yet. I’d like you to meet Aubrey.”

“Are you kidding me? I don’t care how big you’re getting now that you’re working out so much. You couldn’t pry me out of here with a crowbar. Do you know how long I’ve been waiting to meet your mystery woman?”

Mystery woman? I can’t help but smile at the description, since I’m the furthest thing from it. The only thing mysterious about me is what a hot guy like Justin is doing spending so much time with me. Well, that and the life I left behind in Vegas, but nobody in Tennessee knows anything about that.

I only make it a few steps down the hallway before Justin rounds the corner. With his blond hair, scruff-covered cheeks, crystal-blue eyes, and muscular build, he looks like he could take down an army without help. But I’ve felt nothing but safe in his strong arms and experienced nothing but gentleness when he’s touched me.

“You okay?” he asks, and I realize I’ve been standing feet away staring at him.

“I heard voices,” I say, and his expression softens.

“Sorry, baby. You fell asleep, so I moved you to the bedroom and tried to keep it down to a low roar out here so you could nap as long as you needed.”

Now I know how I ended up in his bed, and I really wish I’d been awake for the experience of being tucked in by him.

“Autumn’s here. She brought some stuff over for you.”

“Autumn?” My brow wrinkles in confusion. Maybe it’s pregnancy brain or just that I haven’t woken all the way up from my nap, but I don’t think I’ve ever heard of her.

“C’mon, she wants to meet you before she heads out.” He comes toward me and takes my hand.

I let him lead me into the living room where a stunning redhead is waiting for us. She's prettier than most of the showgirls at the big casinos in Vegas, and it makes me more self-conscious of my tousled hair, puffy eyes, huge baby belly, and swollen feet. She looks like the kind of woman Justin should date, not me. But she seems so excited to meet me that I smile back when she rushes forward to give me a hug.

"Oh my gosh! Look at you!" She slaps Justin's shoulder. "Why have you been keeping Aubrey a secret from all of us?"

Justin pulls me into his side and wraps an arm around my waist. "Look at her. Can you really blame me for wanting to keep her all to myself for as long as I can?"

"Not at all." She grins and pokes him in the abs. "Just don't expect me to be as tightlipped about her as you've been. Kenton's been wondering what's been distracting you lately, and I can't wait to brag about how I found out what it was before he did."

I don't quite understand what all Justin does for work, but I recognize his boss's name. "Do you work for Kenton too?"

"Nope, I'm a nurse." She lifts her left hand and flashes a sapphire and diamond ring with a matching band. "I'm married to Kenton."

"Oh!" I feel a big wave of relief as I grasp her connection to Justin. She's his boss's wife, and very happily taken, judging by the gleam in her eyes when she talks about her husband.

"Justin talks about him a lot," I say.

"Should I be offended that you haven't talked about me a lot?"

"Sweetcheeks, don't fucking start."

"Sweetcheeks?" I echo softly, stiffening a little.

"It's a stupid nickname Justin came up with to mess with Kenton," Autumn explains with a roll of her eyes.

"He makes it too easy." Justin shakes his head then tips his head down to look at me. "The idiot knows she's like my

sister.”

“Again, I’m thinking I should be offended that you haven’t talked about me,” Autumn inserts, and I relax completely, listening to their banter and better understanding their relationship.

“Well, I better head out. I have a few more errands I need to run before I go home, and we both know Kenton will only be able to hold off calling me for so long, wondering when I’ll be back.”

She gives us both a hug before walking to the door and turning to look at me over her shoulder. “I’d love to hang out together some time.”

I pat my belly. “I’d love that, but it’s hard for me to make plans right now, because my daughter is due any day now.”

“You’re having a girl?” She grins. “Is there anything you need? Or can I go crazy buying tiny, pink clothes for a baby gift?”

My cheeks fill with heat. “Oh! That wasn’t a hint for gifts or anything like that.”

“Don’t worry about it, sweetheart.” Justin tucks me in closer to his side. “Autumn’s just looking for an excuse to go shopping.”

She nods. “I really am.”

“Well then, I guess whatever you want to buy will be wonderful. Thank you.”

“My pleasure!” She pulls the door open. “Since Justin’s like a brother to me and I can see from how he looks at you that he thinks of you as his, that makes you and the baby, mine too.”

“Umm, okay,” I whisper as the door shuts behind her, not sure what she means.

“She’s a bit of a whirlwind, but she means well.” Justin tugs me over to the couch, gets me settled on the cushions, and hands me a shopping bag from a department store at the mall. “And she’s got great taste in shit like this.”

My head is spinning as I pull three blankets out of the bag. The first one is made from a fuzzy cream material, the second is a beige faux fur, and the third is super soft and pink.

“They’re amazing. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He sits down next to me and kisses the top of my head as I spread the beige blanket over my lap. “We’ve got to do what we can to keep you relaxed. Stress isn’t good for you or the baby.”

I cuddle against his muscular chest. “Sorry I was such a mess earlier. These pregnancy hormones are no joke, and I was hoping for better news from the doctor today.”

“You don’t owe me any apologies, sweetheart. I’m here for whatever you need.”

I tilt my head back and search his blue eyes. The only thing I see in them is complete sincerity.

“You really mean that, don’t you?”

“Of course,” he replies softly, and my throat burns.

I know my parents and brothers love me, but I ran away from Vegas because they couldn’t see past their anger and be there for me in the way I needed.

It’s been a long time since I felt like I had someone who was really on my side. It’s really, really nice. So nice that my silly hormones go crazy and I feel my eyes fill with tears. I try to fight them back, but one slips through my lashes then another and another.

“I wasn’t trying to make you cry.” He swipes his thumbs over my cheeks. “Being here for you is supposed to be a good thing.”

I nod and sniffle while I wipe away what’s left of my tears.

His blue eyes fill with worry. “Am I fucking up? You need me to back off?”

“No!” That’s the last thing I want. After what happened to me the night I got pregnant, I didn’t think I’d ever want to get close to a guy, but Justin isn’t just anyone. He’s kind, funny,

and crazy hot. And so patient with me. He's somehow managed to work his way past the wall I'd put up to protect myself before I even realized what he was doing. Now he's inside there with me, close to my heart. Honestly, I didn't stand a chance when it came to falling for him.

I grip his wide shoulders, pull him closer, and brush my mouth against his, whispering, "Please don't back off."

"Never," he groans. "That's the only thing you could ask me for that'd be almost impossible to give."

I smile up at him and tilt my head to the side. "What if I want a pony?"

"That'd be doable." His eyes light up and he grins. "The landlord allows pets, but I'm not sure what the rules are when it comes to having a horse. If we couldn't keep one here, we can buy some land."

"I like that idea, but every penny I have is going to the baby right now," I admit as my stomach fills with unease. I hate the idea of him thinking I'm using him for anything. I know he's stable. Even in his twenties, he's living a life most guys would envy. He has a job he loves, where he works from home a lot of the time, and it must pay well, since he has an eighty-two-inch television in his living room and another in his bedroom. He seems to have every game system known to mankind, and uses a computer system unlike anything I've ever seen before with six monitors and a desktop that must be custom-built. Then there's me, living with a roommate, pregnant by another man, and working at a strip club because it's the only job I could get when I moved here.

"Baby." He takes my face in his hands. "I'll get you and the baby anything you need."

"I would never ask you to do that."

"That's the thing—you're not asking me." He kisses my forehead, and a fresh wave of tears fills my eyes.

I never knew men like him existed, men who give without any strings attached. I can only hope that someday I'll be able to stop taking from him and start giving back too.

“Anything you want, it’s yours,” he says softly.

I open my mouth to say something, anything to express how much he means to me, but instead my stomach chooses that moment to let out a low growl.

He rests his hand on my belly. “Let’s start with getting you and my girl some dinner.”

His girl. He’s killing me.

“I should probably eat something,” I agree. “My stomach felt like it was in knots all day, and I don’t think I ate enough.”

He brushes his lips against mine before getting up and walking over to the kitchen.

“Were you that stressed out about going past your due date?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say, rubbing my belly. “The doctor said it’s too early to worry, but I still let it get to me. I just want her here already, and carrying her around is taking a toll on my back.”

He pulls the leftovers from last night’s dinner out of the fridge then looks at me and smiles. “It isn’t a pony, but I’ll give you a massage after dinner if you want. It might help you relax a little.”

“A massage?” I repeat softly, remembering how good it felt to have him rub my feet earlier.

“Yeah, I read online that it’s great for stress relief late in pregnancy,” he explains, and my cheeks flood with heat and my body tingles at the thought of his strong hands stroking over my naked body. “Would you like that?”

I clear my throat and answer with a quiet, “Yeah.”

Even though I’m not sure how much longer I’ll be able to control the hormones raging through my body or the need I have for him.

6

JUSTIN

I DON'T THINK I taste a single bite of the food as I shovel it into my mouth. All I can think about is getting my hands on Aubrey's beautiful body. I told her I want to give her a massage to help her relax, but truthfully I want her to get used to my touch.

Even with her only sharing bits and pieces of her past with me, I'm smart enough to know that something dark happened between her and the guy who got her pregnant. There is no other reason a woman like her would want him dead, only she doesn't know that's something I'd be willing to make happen if she ever asked me to. I want her to feel safe. I want her to know I will do whatever I need to do to protect her and her daughter. And since she ran to protect her baby, I know it might come to that. Just as long as when the dust settles we're together I don't give a fuck what goes down.

"That was delicious, thank you." Her soft voice pulls me from my dark thoughts and I focus on her.

"Do you want more?"

"No." She smiles, pushing up off the couch. Once she's standing, I watch her walk by me to take her plate toward the kitchen, and I take my last bite of food then get up and follow her.

"Just leave it," I tell her when she starts to wash her plate. "I'll clean up later."

"I don't mind."

“I know you don’t, but I want you relaxed, not doing dishes.” I take her plate and set it on top of mine then drop both in the sink.

After I shut off the water, I take her hand and lead her toward my bedroom then let her go to walk across the room and flip on the lamp.

“Lie down,” I say, and she eyes me for a moment before going to the bed.

Seeing her on my bed and smiling at me, my cock twitches.

“How do we do this?” she asks.

I know how I’d like to do this. I’d like nothing more than to flip her over so she’s up on all fours, slide her pants down her legs, lick her pussy until her juices are dripping down her thighs, then line up my cock and work it into her tightness until I’m settled deep inside her wet heat. I shake my head, clearing the vision of sinking into her, and give an answer that won’t scare her off.

“We need to get you in a position where I can work on your shoulders and back.” I trail my fingers over her rounded stomach before taking a seat on the mattress and leaning back against the headboard.

“Come up here and sit down in front of me.” I spread my legs to make room for her.

“Okay.” Her answer is whisper-soft, but she doesn’t hesitate to do as I asked.

“Like this?” she asks over her shoulder after she sits with her legs stretched out and her palms pressed against the mattress to help keep her balance.

“That’s perfect, sweetheart.” I don’t miss how her plump lips tilt up at the edges before she turns to face forward again.

My hands are steady as I reach out and begin to softly rub her shoulders. As I stroke my thumbs up her neck, my dick punches against my zipper at how soft her skin is. Every time Aubrey lets me touch her is as good as the first. Better even.

I focus on loosening her muscles with soft, long strokes of my hands. When I feel her shoulders relax, I work my way down her spine to her lower back. She lets out a little mewl as I dig my thumbs into the knots I find there. My fingers still while I try to get myself back under control, because that sound has my cock twitching.

“Don’t stop.” She sighs. “That feels so good.”

I lift the bottom of her shirt and smooth my palms against her warm skin. Then I get back to rubbing the knots out of her muscles. She makes another soft sound, and my head drops forward as I groan. The smell of her fills my nostrils, her coconut and lime shampoo mixed with what I swear is the scent of her desire. I wonder if the massage is turning her on as much as it is me, and it makes me think of something else I read about pregnant women and how helpful orgasms can be.

“I’ve never had a massage before.” She sighs, leaning into my hands. “I had no idea anything could feel this good, but now I can’t imagine not getting them on the regular. I don’t know how I’ll afford it, but I’ll have to figure it out so I can get a membership at a spa or something.”

What she’s saying finally registers in my brain and triggers my inner caveman.

“You can have as many massages as you want. All you have to do is ask me for one.” I kiss her shoulder. “You feel better?”

“Mmmm,” she moans, and my cock throbs. “I don’t think I’ve ever been this relaxed. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I kiss her neck, fighting back the urge to nip her there.

She leans back a little and looks at me over her shoulder. “I think your bed is my new favorite place in the whole world.”

I pull her against my chest and wrap my arms around her belly, lacing my fingers with hers. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Me too.” She gasps suddenly, making my heart race.

“You okay?”

“Yeah... no, I don't know. She's just so big now that every time she moves it takes my breath.” She shakes her head. “I wish she'd just come out already.”

I rub my hand over her stomach. “There's one more thing I read about that'll relax you even more and might also trigger labor.”

“Really? What is it?” She tilts her head back to look up at me.

“There's a hormone that surges when you have an orgasm, and sometimes it triggers labor.”

I don't mention how there's shit in sperm that can help ripen her cervix. Giving her an orgasm isn't about me getting off, no matter how desperate I am to get inside her.

“An orgasm?” she whispers, her blue eyes wide and full of surprise.

“Yeah.” I want to say more, but I'm not willing to push her into agreeing. Letting me touch her the way I want to has to be her decision. I feel her muscles tense back up, and I figure she's going to turn me down.

It surprises me when she says, “Umm, so if I just—umm—that's something you'd want to help me with?” Her cheeks are bright red as she stammers, and it only makes me want her more.

“I can definitely help you with that.” I slide one hand under the waistband of her leggings, stopping when the tips of my fingers reach the top of her panties.

“You can?”

“Oh yeah.” I smooth my fingers over her skin and her muscles bunch.

“And I'd love doing it.”

Her eyes widen. “You would?”

I dip my fingers into her panties and stroke the soft skin above her

pussy.

“Fuck yeah.”

“Oh.” Her eyes close, and she bites her bottom lip. “Umm, I think maybe I—umm—I’d like that.”

“I can guarantee you’ll more than like it, sweetheart, but I need you to open your eyes while we talk about this.”

She turns her head and her pretty blue eyes open, I search them for any hint of true fear. I expect her to be at least a little nervous, but I want to make sure her stammering isn’t more than that.

When I don’t find any signs that she’s afraid of me touching her, I tell her, “I also need you to tell me it’s what you want before I slide my fingers lower, run them through your wetness, and play with your clit until you scream out my name.”

Her eyes go wide and fill with desire as her chest rises and falls rapidly. “Please.”

It’s only one word, but it’s more than enough for me. I do exactly what I promised, lightly skimming my fingers over her clit and down to her wetness. Parting her pussy lips, I dip into her tight heat and bury my face against her throat, trailing my tongue over her skin while I work my finger into her. Her legs open wider, bending at the knees to give me more room. My cock is as hard as steel, pressing against her back, but it’s worth the blue balls I’ll have to feel her tremble in my arms while I send her over the edge.

“You’re wet for me, sweetheart, just like I knew you’d be.” I glide my finger over her clit again, circling, making her hips buck.

“Justin,” she whimpers my name as her fingers dig into my thighs hard enough I can feel her nails through my jeans.

“I’m here with you. I’ve got you.” I slide my free hand up and flick my thumb over her nipple.

“Oh, God,” she cries while my finger circles her clit.

I can already feel her body tightening.

“You close, sweetheart?”

She gives me a jerky nod. “I... oh, God, please don’t stop.”

“Never.” I sink my finger inside her and flick at her clit with my thumb until she cries out my name. When her pussy stops convulsing, I pull my hand out of her panties and groan, wanting so fucking bad to feel the wetness of her wrapped around my cock.

“You okay?”

“Better than okay. I just wish I’d known sooner how amazing orgasms are.” She turns to rest her head on my chest so I can’t see her face.

“You never had an orgasm?” My gaze goes to the swell of her belly.

“No. Well, I mean I’ve given them to myself, but they don’t begin to compare to how powerful that was.” She tucks her fist under her chin while rubbing her cheek against my chest. “I’ve never even had a real boyfriend. My oldest brother has an... unusual job. It made it hard for me to get close to anyone, because I never knew if they were interested in me for me or if they were trying to get closer to him for one reason or another. He was always cautioning me against getting close to outsiders, and there was no way I would ever date one of his guys, so that left me kind of out in the cold when it came to dating.”

I’m curious about what kind of business her brother is in, but that’s not what she’s trying to tell me about, so it’s going to have to wait for another day.

“But the father of your baby was different?”

“He was different.” She burrows deeper into me and fists her hands in my shirt like she’s holding on for dear life. “But not in the way you think. I didn’t know who he was. I was out with friends, trying to have some fun, and he was just some guy who didn’t seem to understand what the word no meant.” My gut twist and my muscles bunch, but she continues. “The girls and I joked about it when he finally backed off, but I

should've known it wasn't over. I should've left. I should have gone home where I would've been safe."

I pull in the strength I need to comfort her and not go out and commit murder then stroke my hand down her hair and kiss the top of her head.

"Whatever happened, you can't blame yourself. It wasn't your fault."

"That's the worst part, I think. The not knowing," she whispers. "One minute, my friends and I were laughing and ordered another round of drinks. The next, I was waking up in the hospital with no memory of the time in between."

"You don't remember what happened?"

"No, between the drugs he gave me and the blows to the head I'd taken, the doctors said there is only a small chance I'll ever get that time back." Jesus. "He left me for dead, and I tried telling myself that's all it was. I wanted believe I'd pissed him off, so he tried killing me. I wanted to think the doctors were wrong about him raping me."

Her shoulders start to shake as she sobs, and my blood heats, making it almost impossible to stay where I am, not when all I want to do is kill the man who hurt her.

"When I turned up pregnant, I couldn't deny it any longer. He took my virginity and left me with an innocent life growing inside me." Her hand covers her belly. "My brother wanted me to get rid of her, but I couldn't do it. It didn't matter to me that my baby could rip apart what he'd built in Vegas. I didn't even care who'd gotten me pregnant. The only thing that mattered to me was protecting *my* baby. Mine, not his. I might not have any memory of what happened to me that night, but I knew my baby was the only good thing that had come out of whatever he did to me."

Vegas. I fucking hate that city and the metric fuck-ton of bad stuff swirling around it. The hit Autumn witnessed before she came to Tennessee, met Kenton, and fell in love, the shit that went down with Kai and Myla, which lead to me pulling the trigger and killing Paulie Jr., and now this. They say what

happens in Vegas stays there, but that doesn't seem to be the case.

“Do they know where you are?”

“My family?” she asks, tipping her head back to meet my gaze

“Yeah.”

She shakes her head. “No, I didn't tell anyone. I couldn't risk telling my brothers or my parents. I needed to make sure my baby was safe.”

A fresh wave of tears fills her eyes.

“Shhh.” I run my fingers through her hair. “Please don't cry, sweetheart. It's okay. I've got you. I won't let anything happen to you or the baby.”

“I know,” she whispers, then between one breath and the next, she falls asleep in my arms as though sharing her secret with me gave her the peace she desperately needed.

But my world will never be the same, not until I find vengeance for her.

AUBREY

IT'S DARK WHEN I wake, unsure what pulled me from my sleep. My eyes are still tight and dry from crying earlier, but I feel more rested than I have in a long while. I guess that's what happens when you confess your darkest secret before passing out.

I lift up on my elbow and look down at Justin's gorgeous face through the dark. I can't believe how easy it was to tell him what Paulie Jr. did to me. Nobody in Tennessee knows about my past, not even Shelly. She and Johnny only know I'm pregnant and on my own. Even if they had suspicions, they've never pushed me for details.

Justin didn't push either, but I knew letting him touch me the way he had was a turning point in our relationship, and it was only right to open up about what happened. I'm relieved it's over and I don't need to worry about it anymore. I feel like the ever-present weight in my stomach is gone. He knows the worse of me, and instead of running away, he held me in his arms and proved once more I'm safe in my feelings for him.

I start to lay my head back against his chest but stop when a wave of pain hits me so hard my breath catches. My belly tightens again, and I realize I must be having contractions.

"Justin." I reach out to shake his shoulder, but pain makes me grit my teeth and fall back against the bed, holding my stomach. "Oh, God."

"Aubrey?" Justin shoots up and looms over me, placing his hand over mine. "What's wrong?"

“I... I...” I pant, squeezing my eyes closed. “I think I’m going into labor.”

“What?” He shakes his head like he’s still trying to wake up.

I lean up, letting out a sigh of relief as the contraction ends. “I’m in labor.”

“You’re having the baby?”

His gaze drops to my belly right before he hops out of bed, wearing only a T-shirt and pair of boxer briefs. I’ve never seen him without any pants on, and his butt looks even better wrapped in just a thin layer of stretchy material. My view of it doesn’t last for long, because he yanks on a pair of sweats and sits down on the edge of the mattress to put on his shoes. When he gets up, he grabs his wallet and cell from the bedside table and shoves both into his pocket.

“Your shoes and purse are in the living room. I’ll grab ‘em for you. You need to grab anything else before we head to the hospital?”

He turns to find me in the bed still dressed in my leggings and shirt with bare feet.

“I have a bag packed for the hospital.” I start to scoot toward the edge of the bed but stop when he reaches out and helps me up.

“Is it in Shelly’s apartment?”

I nod, liking that he calls it her place and not mine. I feel more comfortable with him here than I ever did living with Shelly.

“Yeah, it’s in my room, just inside as soon as you step through the door.”

“All right.” He kisses my forehead swiftly then leads me into the living room and gets me settled on the couch before bringing my shoes over. He drops down to his knees in front of me and slides them on my feet. When they’re on, he leans forward and brushes his lips against mine. “Stay right here.

I'm going to run and grab your stuff. Then I'll take you to the hospital."

I shake my head. "I think it's too early."

"Hospital's open twenty-four seven, sweetheart. There's no such thing as too early."

I point to my belly and smile.

"No, I mean it's too early in my labor. I've only had one contraction. I'm not even sure how far apart they are, because I haven't had another one since the first one hit. The doctor said it usually takes longer with your first baby. I'm not supposed to go to the hospital until they're like five minutes apart or my water breaks, and I think I have to call the office first to make sure it isn't just Braxton Hicks that are false labor pains that don't help things along, no matter how painful they might be," I mutter, praying that's not what I'm feeling right now. It would really suck to go through that pain again if I'm not really in labor.

He shakes his head as he walks to the door. "The shit you women have to go through for the miracle of birth."

"You can say that again." I blow a piece of hair out of my face and he smiles.

"Here's the plan." He opens the door. "I'll grab your bag so we're ready, and then we'll keep track of your contractions. If they even come close to being five minutes apart, we'll head to the hospital. Which one is your doctor at?"

"Vanderbilt."

"Perfect. If it's a problem, I'll call Autumn and see if she can pull any strings for us, since she's a nurse there."

I don't think hospitals work that way, but he seems so confident that I don't want to burst his bubble. Plus, I have no doubt that he'll figure out how to get me admitted if it comes down to that. Honestly, it's reassuring, especially since I figured I'd be alone when the time came to give birth to my baby girl. This is so much better than my recurring nightmare where I had to drive myself to the hospital but couldn't get the

door to my car open and I ended up giving birth in the parking lot instead.

While he's gone, I get up and go to the bathroom, wash my hands, splash some water on my face, and brush my teeth with an extra toothbrush I find in one of the drawers. When I pad back out to the living room, I feel a little more refreshed, but I am in no way ready for the next contraction as it hits me. This one is stronger than the other one I felt, and it almost drops me to my knees. I rest against the wall and attempt to breathe through the pain.

"Why are you up?" Justin asks, dropping my bag off his shoulder and rushing to my side as soon as he comes through the door. "Did you have another one?"

"Yes." I lean into him and let him help me back to the couch. I take a deep breath through my nose and let it out through my mouth. "It's over now."

I sigh in relief and lean back against the cushion.

"I don't think I was gone for even five minutes." The worry in his tone is audible.

"I don't think you were either."

"C'mon." He tugs on my hand and leads me to the door. "I can't handle seeing you in that much pain. We're going to the hospital."

"But—"

He doesn't let me finish. He goes and grabs my bag then comes back to the couch and picks me up. Cradled in the safety of his embrace, I wrap my arms around his shoulders as he carries me out the door.

"You can call your doctor on the way. At the rate you're having contractions, you'll have four more before I even get you to the hospital."

"Okay." I'm not about to argue with him, not when I'm seriously scared myself by how quickly each one seems to be coming. Especially when I read it's normal to be in pre-labor for hours with your first baby.

“Let me help.” He takes the seatbelt from my shaking hands once he has me in the passenger seat of his Rover.

“Thank you,” I whisper, and his eyes linger over my face before he clicks my buckle into place.

“Anything,” he whispers back, brushing his lips over mine before moving out the door and slamming it closed. A moment later, he climbs behind the wheel then reaches over and laces his fingers through mine, giving them a squeeze.

“I know it’s got to be hard as fuck for you to trust me, baby, but I promise you’ll never regret it.” He starts the engine and pulls out of the parking lot.

“It’s actually easy trusting you,” I admit quietly as he drives. Yes, my brain might’ve needed a little more time to catch up, but my heart seemed to know right away that he was the kind of guy any woman would be lucky to have, including me.

“That’s good to know,” he says, and I start to laugh, but it’s cut off by another contraction. While I breathe through it, his gaze darts to the clock on the dash as he steps on the gas to speed up.

A little less than a minute later, the pain passes, and I pant, “You’re everything I didn’t expect to find.”

“Fuck, sweetheart,” he groans. “How can you be so damn sweet when you’re in labor? Aren’t you supposed to be yelling and screaming at me?”

“Do you want me to yell at you?”

“Not really,” he says, squeezing my fingers, and I laugh as he stops at a red light and turns to look at me. “Seriously, baby. If anyone in this car is lucky, it’s me, not you.”

“I think that goes to prove I’m right about you.” I shift in my seat, trying to get comfortable now that my lower back is aching. It doesn’t do any good, and I grimace at the pain.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, his tone full of worry.

I try to smile at him, but my attempt doesn’t appear to reassure him much.

“The contraction’s over, but now my back hurts.” Tears fill my eyes as I start to freak out. “What if the recurring nightmare I’ve had about giving birth in the parking lot all by myself was a warning? What if we should’ve called an ambulance? What if—”

“Aubrey,” he bites out in a firm, deep voice, cutting me off. “Take a deep breath, baby.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and focus on my breathing.

“Okay, you’re right. I need to try to stay calm. Even if you have to pull over before we make it to the hospital, it’s not like I’ll be alone.”

“I’m not going to have to pull over so you can give birth. Your doctor said the first time you give birth takes the longest, remember?” he reassures me. I give him a jerky nod and keep on breathing. “We’re halfway there already. You’re doing great.”

“So are you,” I say, and he laughs, thinking I’m joking when I’m not. I’m almost sure most men wouldn’t be this calm and understanding in the same situation.

“All I’m doing is driving, sweetheart. You’re the one who’s doing all the hard work.”

“You’re not just driving.” My throat gets tight. “You’re here for me.”

“Damn straight I’m here, and I’ll *never* let you be alone again if you let me.”

I turn my head, open my eyes, and stare at him in silence as he drives for another minute or so before all the muscles in my lower abdominal area squeeze tight and I have to pant through the pain again.

When it passes, I whisper, “You better be careful what you offer right now, because I might hold you to it, Justin.”

“Go ahead, Aubrey. Don’t you get it? I want you to hold me to it for the rest of our lives.”

JUSTIN

WHEN WE PULL up in front of the hospital, I throw the Rover into park and haul ass around to the passenger side as a guy wearing a uniform steps out through the sliding doors. “What’s going on?”

“My girl’s in labor,” I tell him, and he grabs a wheelchair while I grab her bag from the backseat.

“You can’t leave your car here, man,” he says as I slam the door shut and turn to follow him.

“There’s no way I’m letting my girl out of my sight when the baby could be here any minute.”

He opens his mouth, and I know he’s about to tell me that the Rover will get towed if I leave it there. I couldn’t give a fuck, since Aubrey is what’s important to me at the moment. But I figure there’s an easy solution so I don’t need to track my vehicle down when she and the baby are discharged.

“There’s a hundred bucks in it for you if you’ll park it and bring me the keys and parking garage ticket when you’re done.”

Aubrey looks over her shoulder, rolling her eyes at me.

“We just got here and you’re already bribing hospital employees?”

“It’s not a bribe. It’s asking someone to do a favor in return for money.”

“Yeah, it’s a favor.” The attendant holds out his hand for my key then steps away from the wheelchair, letting me push it as he walks toward the Rover. “And if you decide you need any more favors while you’re here, I’m your man.”

“How much money do you have left in your wallet?” Aubrey asks ten minutes and five contractions later while we’re still waiting to go back to a room.

“Probably a couple hundred bucks, but I’m sure there’s an ATM around here somewhere.” I look up at her from the paperwork they handed us when we got here. “Why? You need something?”

“Yeah,” she pants. “A bribe for the nurse to get me into a room now!”

I press a kiss to her forehead then rise from my chair. “Gimme a second and I’ll take care of it.”

She gives me a jerky nod, and I stalk over to the desk. “How much longer? My woman is about ready to deliver her baby right here in your waiting room.”

“It’ll be just a few more minutes,” the woman dressed in scrubs says without even bothering to look up from her cell phone.

I lean closer and slam down the clipboard. “Put your goddamn phone down and do your fucking job.”

That finally gets her attention, and her head jerks up. “Step back and do not swear at me again. If you do, I’ll call security and have you kicked out.” Her lip curls up in disdain as she mutters, “Medicaid patients are the worst. Popping out babies left and right, expecting the rest of us to cover their bills while they demand the best of everything.”

Her tone is low, but I still caught what she said.

“Pardon?” I fight the urge to jump over the counter and strangle her scrawny ass.

“Sir.” Another nurse moves next to me and wraps her hand around my bicep, pulling my attention off the woman I’m currently glaring at. “I have Aubrey’s room ready for her.”

“It’d better be a private room after the shit that nurse just spewed,” I grumble. “If it comes down to it, I’ll pay the difference.”

“No worries there. All we have are private rooms in this unit.” She beams a smile at me as she moves over to Aubrey’s wheelchair and starts to wheel it toward the hallway leading to the rooms. “And even if we didn’t, I’d make sure your girl got one anyway, after you guys had to put up with Marni’s drama. You shouldn’t have had to wait that long or hear her say crap like that.”

“What happened?” Aubrey asks.

I reach down and squeeze her hand. “The girl at the desk was in no rush to get you admitted, because she was too busy being a bitch about your insurance.”

“It isn’t the first time someone’s had something bad to say about me being pregnant with a ‘Medicaid baby.’” She shrugs her shoulders. “But it’s not like I have a lot of options. Johnny doesn’t offer health insurance, and I can’t ask my family for help. Not after what they asked me to do.”

I make a mental note to ask Kenton what it would take to get Aubrey and the baby added to my policy. We’re covered for just about anything with almost no deductible, which is a smart move on his part considering some of the risks we take for the job.

“Marni’s behavior today was unacceptable and is the last bit of evidence I need for Human Resources so they can finally fire her. Please trust me when I tell you that you won’t be hearing anything like that from anyone else.”

“Let me know if you need me to file a complaint,” I offer as I help Aubrey out of the wheelchair and onto the bed.

“It would be helpful,” she says as Aubrey has another contraction. Once it passes, we help her change into a hospital gown and lie back against the pillow.

“I’m so thirsty.” Aubrey’s face contorts in pain with another contraction and I eye the clock. I haven’t been keeping track, but they seem to be coming even closer together.

“Can you get her some water?” I ask the nurse.

She shakes her head while picking up the pink plastic pitcher on the table next to the bed.

“She can’t have water, but you can feed her some ice chips. They’ll help with the dry mouth.”

Aubrey lets out a little whimper, and I press a kiss against her sweaty forehead. “Sorry, baby. I promise once the baby’s here and you’ve got the all-clear from your doctor, I’ll get you whatever you want to drink.”

“Even a milkshake from Lulu’s?”

Lulu’s is an old-fashioned diner about an hour north of us, but that doesn’t change my answer.

“If a milkshake from Lulu’s is what you want, then that’s exactly what you’ll get. As often as you want them.”

“Awww, I wish all the daddies were as sweet as you,” the nurse says, handing off the pitcher of ice chips and a spoon to me.

“He’s not the father,” Aubrey admits softly with tears in her eyes. I have to swallow down a lump in my throat, and it’s not just because I know she’s remembering how she got pregnant. It’s also because there’s a big part of me that wants to lay claim to her daughter and her.

Aubrey squeezes my hand, and I focus on her beautiful face. “You’re the only person in the world I want to have with me when she comes into this world.”

“Just try and get rid of me.”

The nurse laughs. “I’m not volunteering for that job. I can only imagine how many security guards it would take to rip you from her side.”

“All of them,” I mutter, knowing damn well I’d fight to my last breath to stay at her side now that she’s let me in.

Aubrey’s hold on my hand tightens to the point of pain, and I breathe a sigh of relief when the doctor finally arrives.

Things move quickly from there, and a sense of pride fills me with how well Aubrey holds up through it all.

“Sorry, it’s too late for an epidural,” the doctor says, lowering the sheet back into place after checking her.

“She’s in pain,” I point out.

He looks at me. “I know, but unfortunately she’s progressing too fast for her to get one now.”

He pats my arm after he stands and says, “She’ll be okay.”

I want to punch him in the face and ask if he’ll be okay, but I don’t. Instead, I focus on Aubrey for the next hour and a half, whispering words of encouragement and feeding her ice chips. When the time comes, I hold one of her legs back until the beautiful sound of a baby crying fills the room.

“It’s a girl!” the doctor confirms.

I look up and lock eyes on Aubrey’s daughter for the first time, feeling my heart pounds hard in my chest. One look and I’m done for.

She already owns my soul, just like her mom does.

I divide my attention between both my girls as the doctor finishes up with Aubrey and the nurses check over the baby before cleaning her up. When all the excitement is over, the nurse places the baby in Aubrey’s arms.

“She’s beautiful,” she whispers, tracing a shaking finger over the baby’s cheek.

“Just like her mommy,” I agree.

“Have you picked out a name yet?” the nurse asks.

“No.”

“Yes.”

Aubrey and I answer at the same time, and I’m surprised, because the last time we talked, she told me she hadn’t decided for sure yet.

“What did you decide on, baby?”

“I’d like to name her Jenna Ann.”

“A beautiful name for a beautiful girl.” The nurse writes the baby’s name down onto a notecard and places it in the bassinet in the corner of the room.

Aubrey smiles at me, but there’s a hint of worry in her tired blue eyes.

Wanting to wipe that look away, I brush a kiss against the top of her head and whisper, “You did good. Jenna Ann is the perfect name for her.”

“It’s more perfect than you know.” She looks down at Jenna’s sweet sleeping face and touches her cheek.

“There’s a tradition in my family when it comes to naming babies,” she admits softly as she takes my hand and holds on tight.

She doesn’t talk about her family much, which I get, considering everything she’s been through. I figure that bringing them up now is a big deal for her, and I hook my foot around the chair leg at the end of the bed and pull it toward me so I can drop down into it without letting go of her hand.

“Did the tradition help you pick Jenna’s name?”

“Yeah.” She shifts her gaze to me and her cheeks fill with a pretty pink color. “But you helped more.”

Even tired from giving birth to Jenna, with her hair a tangle of curls and dark circles under her eyes, she’s so fucking beautiful that I have to lean over and brush a kiss over her lips before I ask, “How’d I help?”

“The baby’s middle name always has the same initial as their mom, so Ann is for Aubrey, since I’m her mama.”

It’s like the whole world stops for a moment when it hits me what she’s about to say next. The nurse is still in the room with us, but the only people who matter to me right now are Aubrey and Jenna. I want this to be just ours for now, so I get up and bend over the bed, caging Aubrey in by pressing my hands into the mattress on either side of her head. Then I drop my forehead against hers and ask in the barest of whispers, “And her first name?”

“It’s supposed to be the same initial as her father, but I couldn’t do it. He doesn’t get to touch any part of my precious girl, not her name. Nothing.”

“Of course he doesn’t, sweetheart. He’d have to go through me to get to either of you, and that’s never gonna happen,” I swear.

Her eyes fill with tears and she nods. “When the nurse asked about her name, you popped into my head, the way you’ve taken care of me, the way you looked at her. It felt... right. I know I probably should’ve asked first, but... I—”

“Don’t ever try to apologize to me for this again.” I cup her cheeks with my palms and swipe the tears on her cheeks away with my thumbs. “Naming her Jenna after me? I’m so fucking honored and proud.” I have to swallow down a lump in my throat before I can continue. “I promise I’ll do right by both of you and earn that gift you just gave me.”

“Justin,” she whispers.

“Promise, Aubrey.” I squeeze her hand and touch my fingers to Jenna’s cheek, knowing that she and her mommy were always meant to be mine.

AUBREY

I SMILE AT the nurse when she quietly enters the room then watch her get a soft look on her face when she searches for Jenna and finds her cuddled in Justin's arms, both of them asleep in a chair next to my bed.

"You doing okay, honey?" She comes toward me, pulling the cart with a blood pressure cuff and thermometer attached.

"Yeah." I look over at the man in the chair next to my bed, holding my beautiful girl, thinking good doesn't even express half of what I am right now as she takes my vitals.

"Are you in the mood for company?"

"Company?"

She turns to look at me as she writes down the information from the machine on the whiteboard on the wall at the end of my bed.

"There's a whole bunch of people out in the waiting room who are looking forward to meeting your little beauty."

"Are you sure they aren't here for someone else?"

"I'm sure." She smiles then says, "If you're okay with them coming in, just press your call button and let the desk know."

"Okay," I reply, wondering who could be here.

"Do you need anything else right now?"

“I think I’m okay for now.” I watch her nod, and when she leaves,

I look at Justin and see his eyes are open and on me. “The nurse said people are here.”

“I heard. Do you feel up to having people around?”

“I don’t know,” I admit quietly. There’s a very short list of people I’d be comfortable having in the room with Jenna so soon. She was only born a few hours ago, but that doesn’t mean that my maternal instincts aren’t already in full swing. “Would you mind going out there to see who it is?”

“I don’t even need to leave the room to figure that out.” He offers me a reassuring smile as he shifts his hold on Jenna so he can pull his phone out of his pocket. “Kenton sent me a text when the lactation consultant was here to help you get Jenna to latch on the first time. He and Autumn were getting ready to come to the hospital to check on us. They should be here by now. I can ask him who else is out there with them.”

“Your friends came to check on us?” My voice wavers at the end, and Justin’s head jerks up. After he scans my face, he drops his phone in his lap and reaches out to take my hand. I give him a weak smile and explain, “It’s just been awhile since I’ve had people in my life who care enough to go out of their way. I... I thought I left that behind in Vegas with my family.”

“Baby,” he whispers, and my gaze drops to Jenna as my eyes fill with tears. It hurts to think she might never get the chance to know her grandparents or uncles.

“Hey, now.” He rises from the chair, with my sweet little girl nestled in his strong arms. Once he settles on the edge of my bed, he places his hand on my cheek. “You’re not alone anymore. You’ve got me, and I’m not going anywhere.”

I wipe the tears off my cheeks and reach for my baby girl, needing to hold her. Once I have her cuddled against my chest, he places his forehead against mine then drops a kiss to my lips and pulls away. I tilt my head back and smile at him. “I never thought I’d say this, but I’m actually grateful for my piece of crap car.”

His brow wrinkles in confusion. “What?”

“If it wasn’t for that hunk of junk, who knows if we would have ever gotten together.”

His blue eyes lock on mine as he shakes his head. “Your fucked up car might’ve given me a push to make my move, but I noticed you long before that.”

What he just said registers, and I tip my head to the side. “You noticed me before you gave me a ride to work the first time?”

“Babe.” He strokes Jenna’s palm with a finger, and her tiny hand clamps around it. “You’re hard to miss.”

I look down at my belly, which I thought would’ve gone down more now that I gave birth. “Yeah, I guess I was.”

“It wasn’t your belly that caught my attention.” He loops a lock of my hair around one of his fingers. “I didn’t even notice you were pregnant until after I saw your long blonde hair and perfect ass.”

“Really?” I narrow my eyes on him.

“What can I say? I’m a man.” He brushes his lips against my cheek before shrugging his broad shoulders. “Still, it wasn’t your looks that kept my attention. It was your sweet disposition and courage.”

“Courage?” My nose wrinkles. “I hate to be the one to break it to you, but I’m the least courageous person I know.”

“Only because you don’t see yourself the way I do.” He glances at his phone when it beeps. “And I must not be the only one.”

“What?”

“Kenton says there’s a whole group in the waiting room. Shelly, Johnny, and a few girls from Dolly’s.”

My eyes go wide in surprise. “Really?”

“Yeah.” He pulls his eyes off his phone to look at me. “How do you feel about having a few visitors?”

“I don’t know.” I look down at Jenna, who is nestled in the crook of my arm, and then lift my other hand to tuck my hair behind my ears. “She’s just so new, and I’m sure I look like crap.”

He bends his head, sliding his nose against mine, whispering against my lips, “It’s your call, sweetheart, but you should know you look more beautiful than I’ve ever seen you.”

I sigh. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt to have company, but can I have my bag, so I can brush my hair?”

He brings it to me then lifts Jenna off my chest. “Do whatever shit you *think* you need to do to make yourself prettier than you already are, even though you don’t need to.”

“You’re good for my ego.” I give him a tired smile when he chuckles then dig through my bag for my brush and makeup kit. I tie my hair up into a ponytail and swipe on some mascara then give up, too tired to do more. I drop my bag on the floor by my bed and settle back against the pillow, in as much of a sitting position as the hospital bed will allow.

“Maybe if I’m holding her, no one will notice me,” I say, reaching out my hands for Jenna.

He shakes his head and laughs before crossing the floor to give Jenna to me. After I get her settled in my arms, he tilts my head back with a finger under my chin and brushes his lips across mine.

“You’re fucking gorgeous.”

“Thank you.” I rub my hand against the five o’clock shadow on his cheek, enjoying the feel of it against my skin. “You’re not too shabby yourself, especially when you’re all scruffy like this. But you’re going to have to clean up your language around the baby. I don’t think it would be a good thing if her first word was an F-bomb.”

“Our girl’s not even a day old yet.” He grins. “I think I have time to work on how often I swear before it’s going to be a problem.”

Our girl. I love that, and I really love how he talks about the future like he fully expects to be in Jenna's life and mine. Honestly, I'm not sure what I would've done without him today or the past few weeks. Meeting him changed everything, and for the first time in a long time, I don't feel alone.

Looking down at my precious baby girl, it hits me how much I miss my family and just how much they're going to miss out on. They won't hear Jenna's first words or see her first steps. They won't be around to watch her unwrap presents for the holidays. My brother Aedan, who taught me how to ride a bike, won't get the chance to do the same with her, and all because he and the rest of my family refused to listen to me when I told them I wanted to keep her. I know Aedan worked hard to build his empire, but I'm hurt his business was more important than my happiness and my beautiful girl.

"Hey," Justin whispers, wiping the tears I didn't even notice from my cheeks with his thumbs. "What's wrong, baby?"

"Just thinking about my family." I breathe deep, trying to get ahold of my runaway emotions. "I wish things were different so they could be in her life." I stroke a finger down her soft cheek, still amazed I created her.

"I bet if they met her, they'd see how special she is and understand why you fought to keep her."

I wish the situation was that simple, but between Aedan's position in the Las Vegas criminal world and his connection to Jenna's sperm donor, it's much more complicated.

"Maybe," I agree, not wanting to get into the reasons that will never happen.

"No more tears, okay? No matter what, I'll be by your side," he assures, and I try to smile, but instead more tears fall, and his expression fills with worry. "You sure you're up for visitors?"

I swipe away the last few tears on my cheeks and nod. "Yeah, go ahead and let them know they can come in. I hate that they've been waiting."

“Fuck all of them,” he rasps, cupping the back of Jenna’s tiny head and my cheek in each of his large hands. “You two are what’s important.” The gesture and his words are so sweet I almost start to cry again. Instead, I pull in a few deep breaths.

“I think I’m okay now.”

“You sure?” *No*, I want to say, but I don’t. Instead, I give him a nod. He studies me for a moment then sends a text to his friend. A few minutes later, my hospital room is full of visitors. Kenton and Autumn bring in a huge teddy bear and a bouquet of pink mylar balloons. Johnny has a bag full of takeout from my favorite deli. Shelly, Maria, Lana, and Stella have a new outfit for Jenna with a matching cap and booties and a few other odds and ends I know I will need.

“You guys didn’t need to bring anything.” I hand the outfit to Justin as he gives me the sandwich he unwrapped. I’m hesitant to eat it in front of everyone, because it feels rude, but it’s hard since I’m starving.

“Eat up, girl. I know you’ve got to be hungry,” Johnny says softly, touching my hair, and I smile up at him before taking a bite of roast beef and melted cheese on soft, doughy bread.

“I know every time I gave birth I felt like I just finished a triathlon,” Stella says, and Maria nods in agreement.

“When have you ever ran in your life?” Shelly asks, rolling her eyes.

“I chase after my kids every day. They don’t have an off switch; they just keep going and going and going.” Stella shrugs.

“The upside is they keep you in shape.” Lana smiles.

“I guess that’s something to look forward to when Jenna gets big enough to run wild around our apartment,” Shelly says, not appearing like she’s looking forward to that at all, which makes me wonder how long she’s going to be okay with us living with her. Worry fills my stomach. I’m not sure how I’m going to afford a place of my own, but I might have to figure it out sooner rather than later.

Justin's eyes lock on mine, and he must misinterpret my expression, because he turns to Autumn who's holding Jenna.

"Sorry, Sweetcheeks. Visiting time is over."

"Aww, but I'm not ready to give up baby cuddles yet," she complains as she transfers Jenna over to him.

"Then you need to get your own," he mutters, kissing the top of my girl's head and making Autumn laugh. But I notice Kenton looking at her with an intensity in his eyes that tells me it won't be long before they have a little one of their own if he has his way.

"He definitely has my approval. You landed yourself a good one, girl," Stella whispers in my ear, giving me a hug, which is followed by quick hugs from the rest of the girls and Johnny. Each of them give Justin much the same approval before they leave. Their admiration doesn't really surprise me, since Justin is the best man I've ever known. I just hope I can be what he needs and that my daughter and I won't be too much for him to handle.

JUSTIN

“I’LL BE BACK in a few minutes,” I tell Aubrey while I gently place Jenna in the bassinet next to her bed.

“Sure.” She gives me a tired smile, and I lean over to kiss her then touch Jenna’s head and order, “Try to sleep.”

She nods, and I kiss the top of her head then follow Kenton and Autumn out of the room.

“Babe, you mind giving me and Justin a minute?” Kenton asks Autumn when the door closes.

She glances between the two of us and sighs. “You’ve got something you need to talk to Justin about that you don’t want me to hear?”

“Babe.” He shakes his head, knowing she’s never been the kind of woman to not ask questions.

“Fine, I’ll go down and check out the gift shop.” She holds out her hand and wiggles her fingers. He grins, pulling out his wallet and giving her a twenty, and she takes it then tugs out a hundred-dollar bill, winking at me. “I’ll find something for Jenna.”

“Hold up,” he orders as she turns to walk away, and she twirls back around.

“What?”

“You’re forgetting something.”

I shake my head as he takes her hand and pulls her close. A lot of other guys would give her a hard time for digging into

their wallet, but I know he's more concerned with letting her leave without a kiss.

A light blush creeps across her cheeks as she rises up on her toes, and he slides his hand into her hair to claim her mouth, not bothered at all by the employees at the nurses' station who stop and stare at them. When he ends the kiss, she blinks a few times before giving me a crooked smile and turning to head down the hallway.

We watch her until she rounds the corner, out of sight, and then he nudges my shoulder, gaining my attention.

"Looks like you've fallen hard." He jerks his chin toward Aubrey's room.

I scrub my hands down my face, the tired gesture hiding my smile. I never thought I'd fall this hard or this fast for someone before Aubrey came into my life.

"Yeah." I shake my head.

He pats my back. "I'm happy as fuck for you, man."

"Thanks."

"She's sweet, but she doesn't seem the type to work in a strip club."

I narrow my eyes, ready to blast him if any negative shit comes out of his mouth, knowing he royally fucked up when he first met Autumn, because he judged her for being a stripper.

He takes a step back and holds his hands up with his palms facing me.

"You know I don't mean it like that. All I'm trying to say is that I feel like there's a story behind how she ended up there, and I can't help but wonder if it's why I'm only now just meeting her. You need my help? Because you've got to know I'm here for you and her, no matter what it is."

I run my fingers through my hair, not allowing my feelings to show on my face. "What happened to Aubrey is hers to share. It's not my place to tell you that shit."

“Is it bad?”

I squeeze my eyes shut, refusing to think about what she went through, especially so soon after the miracle of Jenna’s birth. The bastard who hurt her doesn’t deserve any part in today.

“All I’m going to say right now is if I need your help, I’ll let you know.”

He quirks a brow at me and crosses his arms over his chest. “You’re the nosiest fucker I know, and you have access to a world of information at your fingertips. Are you really going to stand there and tell me you haven’t run a background check on her?”

I cross my arms over my chest, copying his stance, and a muscle in his jaw twitches.

“Don’t make the same mistakes I did,” he adds.

I give him a jerk of my chin to let him know I hear him but don’t say anything.

Before Aubrey opened up to me last night, I resisted the urge to dig into her past. But now that I know about her being raped and beaten, all bets are off. The only reason I haven’t looked into things is because I haven’t had time. Last night, I couldn’t bear to leave her in bed by herself after everything she shared with me. And I didn’t want to run the risk of her waking up alone and thinking it was because I looked at her differently now that I know her story.

I never want her to wonder about that, not even for a second. So I fell asleep with her in my arms and woke up this morning to her needing to be rushed to the hospital. Now that Jenna’s here, digging into her past is on the top of my list of shit I need to do—second only to making sure she has everything she needs while she’s in the hospital.

I twine my fingers with Aubrey’s and smile.

“Relax, sweetheart. I stopped by the fire station and had them check the car seat base to make sure it’s installed the right way, and while I was there, they showed me how to strap her in. I won’t let anything happen to her,” I say, and she twists back around to face forward in her seat. For the last two days, I’ve barely left her and Jenna’s sides except to run home a few times to make sure everything was being set up correctly.

“I’m just so nervous. Is it normal to be this nervous?”

“I think so.” I glance at the speedometer to make sure I’m not going over the limit, something I usually don’t pay much attention to.

She squeezes my hand. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Everything. We’re so lucky to have you in our lives. I don’t know what I would have done without you. It’s going to be weird not waking up and seeing you next to my bed,” she says, giving me the perfect opening.

“There’s something I want to talk to you about.” I stop at a red light and turn to look at her. “I was hoping you and Jenna would move in with me instead of staying with Shelly. My place is quieter than hers, and it’ll make it easier for me to help. Plus, you shouldn’t be on your own so soon after having a baby.”

She tilts her head to the side, causing a lock of blonde hair to slide over her shoulder. “Those all sound like good reasons for me to want to move in with you, but it doesn’t explain why you’d want that. Having Jenna at your place will probably mess up your schedule. She’s going to be up all hours of the night and crying during the day. You probably won’t be able to get much sleep or concentrate on work.”

“You’re leaving out the fact that I’ll have you both with me, which is what I want.”

She leans back against the headrest and sighs. “How is it you always know the perfect thing to say?”

“Because I’m perfect.” I wink, and her lips tilt up in a smile, while her blue eyes light up.

I pull into the parking lot in front of our apartment building and snag the spot right in front of the doors, cutting off the engine. I turn to face her, wanting her to see how serious I am about this.

“The only thing I want to hear you say right now is that you’ll move in with me.”

She looks back at Jenna. “I’m tempted to say yes, because I’m already worried about how things will go with Shelly. She gave me a place to stay, and I’ll always owe her for that, but I’m not sure how she’ll feel when I have to ask her and her friends to keep it down because the baby is sleeping.” She looks at me and nibbles her bottom lip. “I just don’t want us to be an inconvenience to you.”

“Neither of you could ever be an inconvenience.” I take her hand in mine. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” She surprises me by answering immediately.

“Then come inside with me.” I lift her hand to my lips and kiss her fingertips.

“Okay,” she agrees.

I climb out and round the hood to help her out of the passenger side then grab her bag. I swing it over my shoulder before removing Jenna’s carrier from the base. I close the door with my hip and follow Aubrey into the building. When she stops at my door, I yank my keys out of my pocket to unlock it and wave her inside. Heading down the hall straight for the bedroom, where most of the stuff is set up, I nudge the door open.

“Oh my God.” She gasps, seeing the bassinet from her room at Shelly’s inside, along with the stuff I asked my mom to pick up for her and Jenna. “So Shelly knew about this?”

“She did.” Honestly, she didn’t seem surprised when I asked her to help me bring all the baby stuff to my place. Something I was glad I did before they were discharged from the hospital, since she only had the bare necessities. A long

phone call to my mom, in which I explained about Aubrey and Jenna, fixed that.

“This is beautiful.” She runs her hand over the soft pink blanket hanging over the side of the bassinet.

“My mom picked that,” I tell her as she picks it up, rubbing it against her cheek.

“Your mom?” Her eyes widen slightly. “You told your mom about me?”

“Baby, I plan on you and Jenna being a part of my life. Of course, I told my mom about you. She was mad I hadn’t mentioned you sooner, but she’s excited to meet you and Jenna, and is planning on coming to visit when you’re ready for company.”

“I... I’d love to meet her.”

“I want you to be happy here.” I drop the bag on the end of my bed and set the baby carrier in the middle of the mattress. Then I go to Aubrey and cup her cheeks with my palms, brushing my lips against hers. “I tried to make sure you have everything else you need. There’s a stroller in the back of the Rover that goes with her car seat, a changing table and diaper disposal thing in the bathroom, a state-of-the-art monitoring system we can use when she’s sleeping, and a fuck-ton of outfits for her stacked on the shelves in my closet. Oh, and a whole mess of stuff in the kitchen in case you decide to bottle feed her.”

“I... I... I don’t even know what to say,” she stammers.

“Say that you’ll stay.”

“Okay,” she whispers with tears filling her eyes. “But promise you’ll tell me if we become too much.”

I ignore her statement and lead her over to the bed.

“Why don’t you lie down for a little bit while Jenna’s sleeping? And I’ll make something for us to eat later.”

“You’re going to cook?”

I turn to look at her as I unhook Jenna from her car seat.

“Okay, I’ll order us something later,” I amend, catching her smile as I place Jenna in her bassinet while Aubrey gets comfortable in my bed.

“Thank you.”

“Anything.” I walk to where she’s laying and kiss the top of her head. Before I even leave the room, she’s fast asleep, so I grab the screen for the monitor and bring it into the living room, leaving the door open a crack behind me. I’m not sure how long they’ll sleep, but my guess is it won’t be long before Jenna will need to eat again.

I hurry over to my laptop and fire it up then take it with me to the couch. The last couple days have been too busy for me to worry about anything but Aubrey and the baby. But now that I have them home with me where they belong, I start my search for the man I plan on killing.

AUBREY

“I HAVE BAD news,” Justin says, coming into the bedroom, and my heart drops into my stomach.

“Bad news?” I repeat, studying him as he takes Jenna who is asleep in my arms and moves her to the bassinet.

“It’s going to be okay.”

“Okay.” I wait for him to say more, but he doesn’t. “Are you going to tell me what the bad news that’s going to be okay is?”

“My parents will be here in half an hour.”

My head jerks back and I stare at him in shock. I really hope my foggy brain imagined what he just said. Even with all of the help he’s giving me, I feel exhausted. Jenna barely cries, but she only catnaps on and off between feedings every hour and a half, so I’m not getting much sleep.

“I’m sorry, but did you just say your parents are coming over?”

“Yeah, I couldn’t put my mom off any longer. She’s been calling me at least twice a day, asking if we’re ready for visitors yet. This morning, I guess she decided to skip the call, because my dad just sent me a text to let me know they’re on their way.”

I get up, taking the baby monitor with me, and leave the room, knowing he’ll follow. I hear him shut the door softly behind us and go to the kitchen, setting the monitor on the counter before I turn to face him.

“I’m not ready for visitors.”

“Stella stopped by yesterday afternoon,” he points out, grabbing my hand and leading me to the couch, taking a seat before pulling me down onto his lap.

“Yeah, but that was just Stella. I don’t need to impress her, because she already knows me. She doesn’t care what I look like. Your parents are a different story.” I blow out a breath. “The last time I remember brushing my hair was a few days ago when I was still in the hospital. I’ve taken a couple quick showers, but I haven’t had time to shave my legs. I’m in no way prepared to meet your parents.”

“Baby, relax. I’m sure my mom and dad remember what it’s like to have a newborn. They’re not going to judge you for being a new mom.” I snort, and he tugs me closer and rests his chin on my shoulder. “Trust me. You couldn’t look bad if you tried.”

I melt against him. “There’s no way I’d feel comfortable meeting your parents without at least taking a shower, washing my hair, and changing into my own clothes. So if they’re really on their way over here, I better get moving.”

He loosens his hold on me, and I slide off his lap.

“Go on,” he urges. “I’ve got Jenna covered if she wakes up.”

I pause in the doorway when I see the time out the corner of my eye. “It’s almost time for lunch. Do we have anything besides sandwiches that we can make for your parents?”

He waves off my concern. “Don’t worry about it. I’m sure my mom will have it covered. No matter how many times I tell her not to, she stocks my fridge whenever she comes over, and I highly doubt today will be any different. If anything, she’ll probably go even more overboard than usual, because she’ll be nervous about meeting you and excited about finally getting to hold Jenna.”

It’s hard for me to believe she might be as nervous as me, but for all I know, it’s normal. I’ve never had a boyfriend

before, so I haven't experienced the whole meeting the parents thing.

"You really think so?"

He nods. "After a week of waiting, she's probably a mess of nerves by now."

"A week, huh?" I shake my head. "It feels like it was just yesterday that I gave birth."

"Yeah, time seems to be flying by," he agrees then tips his head to the side. "Go shower, baby."

"Right." I turn and head down the hall then check on Jenna before I get into the shower. Dressed and waiting in the living room forty minutes later, I jump slightly when there's a knock on the door.

"It's going to be okay," Justin reassures me with a quick kiss before he opens the door.

"There's my baby boy!" His mom tackles him with a hug before she even makes it all the way into his apartment, and I smile at how tiny she is in comparison to him.

"Mom." He bends to kiss her cheek, and her eyes lock on mine.

"And you must be Aubrey!" She leaves his side and rushes toward me, wrapping me in a tight hug. "Look at how gorgeous you are." She leans back to study me then shakes her head. "No wonder my boy is so smitten."

"Jesus, Mom," he grumbles, and his dad claps him on his back and chuckles.

"Don't act so surprised. You know how she is."

"Maybe, but I wasn't expecting her to practically attack her." He shuts the door and moves close, wrapping his arm around me. "She's still recovering from having Jenna."

"Stop. I'm fine." I look up at him, leaning into his side, and I swear I hear his mom sigh.

"I can't wait to meet your baby girl," his mom says, gaining my attention. "But first, since my son seems to have

forgotten his manners, I'll introduce myself. I'm Cora, and this is my husband Jasper."

"Sorry, Mom."

I smile at how quickly he apologizes and wonder if he's had a lot of practice doing that.

"Cut the boy some slack, Cora. I'm sure he isn't getting much sleep, and he's probably wondering if we'll be on our best behavior around his girl or if we'll do our best to embarrass him," Jasper says, setting two large tote bags on the kitchen counter before turning our way.

"Oh!" Cora grins at her husband. "You should've reminded me to tuck one of his baby albums into the bag. Then Aubrey could've seen how adorable he was when he played pirate in the bath—"

"Jenna is in the bedroom, Mom," Justin cuts her off. "She should be waking up any minute now to eat, if you want to go check on her."

"Ooh, can I?" She turns to me, and I nod. I follow her into the bedroom and smile as she lifts Jenna, who's blinking her eyes open, out of the bassinet. "It looks like I have perfect timing."

"She's on a pretty set schedule now. I swear she wants to eat every hour and a half. She'd probably eat more if I fed her."

"I remember those days. They lasted a long time with Justin, since he was such a greedy little boy." She heads toward the recliner in the corner of the room that Justin had delivered yesterday. "Do you mind if I sit with her for a minute?"

"Not at all. I'll be back in a minute to change her diaper and feed her. I'm just going to grab the stuff from the living room."

"Take your time." She doesn't even bother looking at me and I smile. I head into the kitchen to grab a glass of water, since I always get thirsty when I breastfeed, but Justin's already poured one for me.

“You doing okay, sweetheart?” he asks, wrapping his arms around my waist from behind.

“Yeah,” I whisper back. “It’s not as bad as I thought.” I blush when I hear his dad’s deep chuckle behind me. “Sorry.” I turn to face him. “That sounded worse than I meant it.”

“No apology needed, Aubrey. I’m not offended at all—more the opposite, actually. I wouldn’t have liked you half as much for our boy if you weren’t at least a little worried about meeting his parents.”

“Well then, you should like me a ton, because the only reason I’m not a nervous wreck is because I didn’t have enough time to get all worked up about your visit,” I say, and he smiles right as Jenna’s hungry cry rings through the air. “Duty calls.”

I hurry back to the bedroom and hear Jasper say, “You did good, son.

Pretty and sweet is a hard combination to find.”

It feels good to get the stamp of approval from Justin’s dad, and judging by the smile on Cora’s face when she hands Jenna over to me before she leaves the room, I figure I have it from her too. I feel like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders, and I’m much more relaxed when Jenna and I join everyone in the living room, where I discover Justin was right about his mom bringing over a ton of food.

I settle on a roast beef sandwich and chips, and while I eat, Jenna falls asleep in Cora’s arms.

Twenty minutes later, she stands and hands Jenna over to Justin, announcing, “We’re going to go so Aubrey can take a nap. The best advice I can give you, honey, is to sleep whenever Jenna does. It’s the only way you won’t feel exhausted all the time.”

“I’ll try to remember to do that,” I say, and she smiles, walking toward me, and I stand to give her a hug.

“I’m just a phone call away if you have questions or if you just need me to come over so you can have a break.”

“Thank you.” My arms tighten around her and my eyes fill with tears. I pull in a deep breath to get myself under control, more thankful than she could ever know for her offer. I always expected to have my mom at my side to offer advice or just to lean on when I had my first child, and it’s difficult when I remember she’s not around.

Once they leave, I head into the bedroom for a much-needed nap, and it doesn’t take me long at all to fall asleep. A half an hour later, I hear Justin’s deep rumble in the other room, and since Jenna is still asleep, I start to roll over to try to go back to sleep, but stop and jerk upright when I hear Jenna’s father’s name come out of Justin’s mouth.

JUSTIN

“THIS ISN’T GOING to be good. Paulie Sr. isn’t stupid. He’s going to figure out that Kai coming back to life is connected to his son dying,” I tell Kenton, knowing something is going to have to be done about Paulie Sr. sooner rather than later.

“Paulie Jr. is dead?”

I’m so focused on delivering my warning to Kenton that I don’t realize Aubrey is awake, let alone in the room. My head jerks around at her question, just in time to spot her fall to the floor like her legs gave out. I disconnect the call without a word and drop my phone as I rush to her side. I pick her up and place her on the couch then kneel on the ground next to her.

“Shit, Aubrey. Are you okay? Should I take you to the hospital?”

Her skin is so pale it’s almost see-through, but her hold is strong when she grabs my hand and squeezes hard enough to cause pain.

“Who were you on the phone with? Why were you talking about Paulie Jr.? How do you know him? Did you tell anyone in Vegas we’re here?”

“Paulie Jr.?”

“Yes!” she shrieks, stunning me by grabbing my shoulders. “Did you tell anyone I’m here?”

“Baby, Jesus.” The pieces click together and it hits me.

I've already killed the motherfucker who raped her.

I'm not sure I'll ever be able to tell her. I never want her to look at me with the same fear she has in her pretty blue eyes right now, but knowing he's dead and can't hurt her or anyone else fills me with relief.

"Breathe for me," I say quietly, knowing I need to be extra careful explaining the situation to her. "I was on the phone with Kenton. We were talking about Paulie Jr., because one of our friends has been having some trouble with his dad, and he needed our help."

"You helped Paulie Jr.? Was he a friend of yours?" She jerks away from me, sounding horrified.

"Of course not, sweetheart." I get up and take a seat on the couch with her then resituate her on my lap so I can see and hold her while we talk. "Paulie Jr. was going after the wife of one of my friends. She inherited some property in Vegas, and he wanted it for himself. He thought if he had control over it, it would give him the power he needed to get out from under his father's thumb and take his dad's seat."

"Were you guys able to help her before he"—she pauses and shivers before continuing on—"did anything to hurt her?"

She doesn't use the actual word, but I get what she's trying to ask. I rush to reassure her.

"His goal was to marry her, but he never got close enough to try anything with her. Kai, her husband, and his team were set to confront him in a club in Vegas, but a sniper took him out before they got the chance." I skip the part about me being the one who pulled the trigger. Maybe I'll tell her about it someday, when we're happily married and I don't need to worry about the possibility of it sending her running in the opposite direction.

"He's really dead?" Her voice is just above a whisper.

"I saw his body myself," I assure her, and she melts against me. "Is his dad the reason you can't go back? Does Paulie Sr. know about Jenna? Is he the one looking for you?"

Her head jerks back and her blue eyes scan mine. “I don’t think anyone knows about Jenna besides my family.”

“Fuck.”

“Why? Did you hear something? Is he looking for me?”

“Don’t get pissed, but I started digging into your past when I brought you and Jenna home from the hospital. A couple nights ago, I came across a chat where someone mentioned your name and said they were looking for you.”

“Who was it?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t been able to find out.”

“Did they say where to call if I was found?”

“Baby, the dark web doesn’t work like that. It’s all codes and shit. I’m still working on figuring out who it is,” I explain, and her body stiffens like she’s preparing to jump off my lap, so my arms tighten around her. “I will never let anyone hurt you or get to Jenna. You have to trust me.”

“You went behind my back and dug into my past.”

“Yeah, to protect you. I didn’t know who hurt you, baby, and I wanted to make sure I was prepared in case he ever came after you or Jenna.” Had I known I already killed him, I wouldn’t have started the search... but then again, I wouldn’t have discovered someone’s been actively looking for her.

“The reason my brother pushed so hard for me to get an abortion was because he didn’t want word to get out about who the father was. The only people who knew were him and my parents. I didn’t tell any of my friends. I didn’t go to the doctor to confirm the over-the-counter test I took was accurate.”

“Your brother wanted to protect you and didn’t see Jenna as a person.” Her only response is a nod. “He figured the easiest way to reduce the risk of Paulie Sr. or his son coming after you was for you to get an abortion.”

“Yeah,” she whispers. “But I couldn’t do it. She’s been a person to me from the moment I saw the plus sign on the test, and I’ve loved her every minute since then.”

“That’s part of what makes you so fucking special, Aubrey. You were in an impossible situation. Nobody would’ve blamed you for doing what your brother asked, but you took the hard route to protect the innocent life growing inside you.” It’s also a big part of why I fell in love with her so quickly, but now isn’t the right time to tell her. Not with what we’re talking about. I also don’t think she’s ready to hear me confess my feelings yet. It’ll have to wait for another day. Soon though. I’m not sure I can hold out much longer.

She rests her head against my shoulder and I kiss her forehead.

“Do you think you can find out who’s been looking for me?”

“Of course I can. I’ve already got a trace running. It’s just a matter of time before it picks something up.”

“If it’s that easy for you, will it be that easy for someone else to find me?”

“No, they should hit a dead end if they search the hospital records. I switched your address and mangled your information in their records so nobody can use it to track you down.”

“What about my doctor? Can they track me through him?”

I shake my head. “I changed everything, so don’t freak out when it’s wrong at your next visit.”

“What about my bills? I won’t get them if they go to the wrong place.”

“I’ve already paid them off.” I tighten my hold on her again, but it turns out not to be necessary, because she doesn’t get pissed.

“You moved all of Jenna’s stuff in here before asking me if I wanted to move in with you, bought her everything she could possibly need, and covered my bills before talking to me about it.” She shakes her head. “You’re almost as high-handed as Aedan, but in a good way.”

“Aedan?”

Her smile disappears. “My brother.”

Her bossy big brother who’s probably worried about his little sister.

“Do you think Aedan could be the one looking for you?”

She tilts her head to the side and considers the possibility for a moment before nodding.

“I guess it could be him. I didn’t tell anyone I was leaving or where I was going, which I’m sure drove him nuts when they discovered I was gone. I wouldn’t put it past him to still be searching for me after all this time. Aedan can be pretty relentless. It’s part of what helped him move up so quickly in the drug business.”

“The drug business?”

Her eyes leave mine and I can see she’s uncomfortable.

“Yeah, he was only twenty-three when he killed his boss and made a name for himself. But not just because he wanted his job,” she assures me like it makes it better. “The guy was a total creep when it came to women, kidnapping them and getting them hooked on drugs before pimping them out. Aedan might be a drug dealer, but what his boss was doing was unacceptable to him. Since nobody else would do anything to stop the guy and he was in a position to take care of it, he killed him.”

“You got a phone number I can use to get ahold of him?”

“Yeah, but...” She looks away. “I don’t want him to be able to trace me.”

“That’s where my super-secret spy skills come in handy,” I say and she laughs. I give her a quick kiss then shift her off my lap and go to my desk, grabbing one of my burner phones from the bottom drawer. “This has no GPS, and the number isn’t connected to me. We can call him on this without any risk of him finding you.”

She eyes the phone warily. “I’m not sure I’m ready to talk to him yet. It’s too soon after Jenna’s birth, and all I can think about is how she wouldn’t be here if I listened to him.”

“You don’t need to talk to him.” I sit down next to her and take her hand. “I’ll call him; all I need to know is if he’s the one looking for you.”

“Okay.” She takes the phone from me, flips it open, and punches in a number before handing it back. I squeeze her hand then press the green button and put the phone to my ear, listening to it ring.

“O’Sullivan.”

“Aedan O’Sullivan?”

“Yeah, you got him. Who the fuck is this?”

I get up and pace back and forth in front of the couch. “Who I am doesn’t matter as much as who’s sitting in front of me.”

“Aubrey. You have my sister? I swear to fucking God, if you lay a single finger on her, I’ll hunt you down and make you wish I’d kill you, motherfucker.”

He’s loud enough that Aubrey flinches. “Keep it down, asshole. You’re scaring your sister.”

“Scaring her?” His tone ratchets down to a whisper. “Who the fuck are you?”

“I’m the man she and her daughter are living with.” It’s as much as I’m willing to tell him until I can figure out for myself if he can be trusted with Aubrey and Jenna’s whereabouts.

“She had a girl?”

The pain in his voice is enough to make me stop pacing, and I sit down on the edge of the couch. “Yeah. They’re both doing really good too.”

“Then you need to keep who she is to yourself so they stay that way. There are people here who would kill to get their hands on that baby.”

“That’s why I’m calling. I picked up a trace on her online, and I’m working to track down the source.”

“As far as I know, I’m the only one who’s been looking for her. But if word gets out that she had a baby, questions will be asked.” There’s a loud crashing noise in the background, and it sounds an awful lot like he’s just thrown something against the wall. “I don’t like the idea of my baby sister living with some guy I’ve never met, but it’s a fuck of a lot better than visiting her grave while some depraved asshole raises my niece. It’s better if she stays out of the picture so people don’t start to ask questions.”

“I’m not going to let Paulie Sr. find out about her or the baby,”

“How are you connected to the Amidio family?” he asks, his tone deadly.

He sure as fuck doesn’t need to know I’m the one who killed Paulie Jr., so I toss out two names that’ll let him know I’m playing for the opposite side without giving too much away.

“Kai and Sven.”

“Well, fuck,” he groans. “Seems we all have the same problem then.”

“Yeah,” I agree, “and I think we might be able to help each other out with it.”

“As long as you understand Aubrey is never coming back and doesn’t exist as far as anybody in Vegas is concerned, I’ll be more than willing to work with you.”

I’m irritated the bastard still seems to think he has a say in what Aubrey does.

“Considering I have no intention of letting her leave my side and I want her safe, that works for me.”

“I’m gonna need to hear that from my sister before we talk any further,” he growls.

“You want to talk to your sister.” Aubrey’s eyes go wide, and she shakes her head. “You’re gonna have to give me a second to talk to her. She’s not exactly a fan of yours right now, and I can’t say I blame her.”

“Let me talk to my sister,” he barks.

My hand tightens around the phone.

“Let me make one thing clear. She and her daughter are mine to take care of and protect, so if she doesn’t want to speak to you, I’m not going to force her.”

“Motherfucker, put—”

I don’t hear more, because she grabs the phone out of my hand and hisses, “I’m fine. Your niece is fine. And if you fuck over Justin, I’ll track you down and castrate you.” She shoves the phone back at me then disappears down the hall.

“I need to make a few phone calls, but I’ll be in touch,” I say when I put the phone back to my ear.

“Is she really okay? Is my niece all right?”

“They are both fine. We’ll talk soon.” I hang up when Aubrey comes back down the hall carrying Jenna.

“It sounds like you plan on helping my brother with something.”

“Yeah,” I agree, not wanting her to know too much.

She chews the inside of her cheek, looking away as she takes a seat on the couch. “Can you make me a promise?”

“It depends.” I won’t promise her that I’m not going to do whatever I need to do to make sure she and Jenna are protected, and unfortunately, some of the things I might need to do probably won’t make her happy.

“Just promise me that no matter what my brother pulls you into, you’ll always be the kind of man Jenna can look up to. That you won’t stop being the man I’m falling in love with.”

“The only thing that will change is my ability to sleep without worrying something could harm either of my girls,” I tell her, and she studies me for a long moment before nodding.

AUBREY

“YOUR TURN,” I urge, rolling over in the bed with the phone in my hand and Justin’s face on the screen.

“You’re going to make me give up all my secrets, aren’t you?”

“You’re the one who wanted to play this game,” I remind him.

“You’re a heartless little thing.” He flashes me a sexy grin.

“I like it.”

“When it comes to you being a man of mystery? Yup!” I grin back at him.

“But it’s only fair, since I lost any chance at being a woman of mystery when you came into the labor and delivery room with me after we’d only known each other a couple of weeks.”

“When you put it that way, you have an excellent point,” he grumbles. “You already know what I do for Kenton, but I have a group of online hackers and activists I lead separate from the work I do with him.”

“You mean like Anonymous?” I don’t know much—or anything really—about hacking, but pretty much everyone has heard about the infamous hacktivist group on the news.

“Generally speaking? Sure,” he admits reluctantly. “But our goals are very different. We help shut down terrorists and extremists by hacking their websites.”

My eyes widen in surprise, because it sounds like his group is into some serious stuff.

“So do I need to worry about the FBI breaking down your door in the middle of the night because of whatever it is that you do with your hacker friends?”

“You don’t have anything to worry about. I’m more likely to work with the authorities than have them hunt me down.” He runs a hand over the beard he’s been growing out since I gave birth to Jenna. “Under the table, of course. The shit I do is in no way legal, but there are some people high up in the legal system who see the value in having someone who can go where they can’t.”

“Do you guys have a cool name? Because I’ll be even more impressed if you do.”

His grin turns sheepish. “Yeah, we’re called the Winds of the North.”

“I love it.”

“All right, baby, time for you to go to sleep.” He smiles, and I touch the screen of my phone with one finger.

“I miss you.”

“I miss you too, but I’ll be home tomorrow morning.”

“Good.” I sigh then sit up when Jenna starts to cry. “I need to feed her.”

“I miss being there for that,” he says, and my cheeks warm thinking about the times I breastfed with him holding me. “Kiss my girl, tell her I love her, and I’ll see you soon.”

“Okay, night.”

“Night, baby.” He hangs up, and I click off my phone then gather my girl and feed her one more time before putting us both to bed for the night.

“How is it that you always manage to find the coolest toys for her?” I ask Justin, watching him the next afternoon as he sets up an infant-to-toddler rocker seat in the middle of the living room while Jenna sleeps in the next room.

“It’s amazing what you can find on the Internet when you look.” He glances up at me, and his crystal-blue eyes twinkle with humor. God, I love his eyes. Really, I love *him*. Over the last six weeks, that’s become glaringly clear. Even when he’s away doing whatever it is he’s doing in Vegas with my brother, he’s made sure to stay connected to me and Jenna with video calls. He says he doesn’t want to miss out on one second of our girl growing up—something that is definitely possible. Jenna is still eating all the time, and I’m still exhausted, but it’s all worth it. She’s already gained three pounds, is holding up her head, and smiles all the time. She’s also just as in love as I am with the man a few feet from me.

“Won’t you get teased by all your hacker friends if they check your browser history and see you’re searching for baby toys all the time?” I joke.

“Nah.” He shakes his head, getting up on his knees and moving to where I’m sitting to loom over me. “I’m smart enough to wipe those searches so nobody can find ‘em.”

He kisses me, and I slide my fingers into his hair, getting lost in his kiss. When he pulls away, I feel disappointed like I always do.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.” He smiles, touching his lips to mine softly.

“What’re you doing with me?” I wave my hand in the air between us. “You’re hot, smart, and sweet. You could have any girl you want.”

He rests his forehead against mine and stares into my eyes. “I don’t want any girl but you. Don’t you get it? You and Jenna are everything to me.”

I shake my head and stand up, forcing him back, then walk to the window and stare out at the parking lot. “You’ve spent the past two months proving that to me.”

“You’re saying that, but I’m getting the feeling it’s not a compliment.” He wraps his arms around me from behind and rests his chin on my shoulder. “Where is all this coming from?”

“The doctor cleared me at my appointment today.”

“Cleared you?”

“You know, *cleared me*.” I turn in his arms and look into his blue eyes that don’t hold even the tiniest speck of understanding. My cheeks fill with heat as I murmur, “She told me it was okay for me to resume normal sexual activity.”

He takes a small step back and slides his palms down my arms to grip my hands.

“It doesn’t matter what your doctor says. We’re never going to do anything you’re not one hundred percent ready for. I’m in no rush, Aubrey.”

“Don’t you want to have sex with me?”

“Baby.”

“You always stop when things between us heat up,” I point out on a whisper.

“You just had Jenna, and your past...” He stops to shake his head. “I want things to happen when you’re ready for them to happen.”

“I’m ready. I’ve been ready. I just... I just want to know that you want to be with me like that.”

“Jesus, you’re crazy,” he says, and I blink at him.

“What?”

“Have you honestly doubted that I want to be with you, that I want to fuck you?”

“I—”

“Aubrey, all I have to do is see you to get hard. I want you; never doubt that. I just never want to push you into something you’re not ready for.” He shakes his head. “I can’t believe we’re having this fucking conversation. I’m obsessed with you, infatuated with you, in love with you. I want to fuck you, make love to you, eat you, take you in every position possible. You’re everything I ever wanted and more, and if you tell me you’re ready to go there, I’m ready for it too.”

JUSTIN

“YOU LOVE ME?” Her pretty blue eyes fill with tears and I pull her against my chest.

“Yes, I love you. The moment I saw you the first time, I was infatuated, and then I met you and knew you were the one I’d been waiting for. The only question is... do you love me too?” I brace for her answer, unsure if she’s ready to admit to either of us how she feels about me.

“Of course I do. How could I not? You’ve made it impossible not to fall head-over-heels.”

“I want to hear you actually say it.”

“Say what?” she asks with a small smile.

“You know what.” I lift her off her feet and carry her to the couch, laying her down.

“I love your beard.”

“Keep going.” I kiss down her neck.

“I love your body.”

“More.” I slide my hands up her shirt and pull it up over her head, finding her without a bra—something she hasn’t put on yet today.

“I love your mouth.” She hisses as I pull one of her nipples into my mouth, “Justin.”

“I’m here,” I groan, my need to claim her for my own almost unbearable. Knowing she’s medically cleared to have

sex doesn't help my control. The urge to have her has been growing from the moment I first set eyes on her.

"I love *you*," she says as I kiss down her stomach, and I look up at her, meeting her gaze.

"I want this to be your choice. I want you to want this." I scoot up and settle between her legs.

"The only thing I've been able to think about since I walked out of the doctor's office is having sex with you. Then Jenna went down for her nap and you were doing something to make her life better like you always do, which just made you even sexier than usual. And I—"

I press my index finger against her lips to stem the flow of her nervous chatter. "Are you telling me that all the drama earlier was because you want to have sex?"

Her eyes narrow. "There wasn't drama."

"Baby." My cock hardens and presses against the zipper of my jeans at the thought of finally being able to sink inside her wet heat.

"I changed my mind." She tries to get up, but I hold her down.

"Oh no." I slide my hand under her chin so I don't lose sight of her eyes. "I always want you to have everything you need. So tell me, baby, do you want my cock?"

She licks her lips, her eyes dropping to my mouth, and I groan.

"Yes." Her plump lips form a perfect circle, and it makes me think about how they'd look wrapped around my hard length.

I grind my hips against her and say, "I'm ready, willing, and able whenever and wherever you want me."

Her gaze darts to the bedroom door, which is fully shut, and then over to the monitor screen on the coffee table in front of the couch. Jenna is sleeping soundly in her bassinet, where I laid her down about half an hour ago. Aubrey's cheeks are a deep pink color when she turns back to me and blurts out, "We

have anywhere from another minute to three hours before she wakes up. Is that enough time?”

My control slips another notch at her boldness. I slide my hands under her ass to lift her up and against me, and her legs circle my hips. The couch is not the ideal location for her first time, but we have to work with what we've got since we have Jenna. “It isn't very manly of me to admit it, but one minute will probably be plenty of time for me, since my cock feels like it's gonna explode just from hearing you talk about us having sex.”

“Really?” Her smile is one of feminine satisfaction as I lower my head.

“Yeah,” I breathe into her ear, enjoying her little shiver in reaction.

“But let's hope for at least five minutes, so I can get you off first.”

Her hands slip beneath the back of my shirt, her nails scraping along my skin as she moans, “Uh-huh.”

I suck the lobe of her ear into my mouth and bite it gently. She moans and squirms restlessly beneath me as I start to kiss my way down her body. Her back arcs off the cushions, and I cup her perfect tits, listening to her sigh. I nibble and suck my way around them and tweak the hard, pink little peaks at the tips with my teeth. She writhes when I slide down her body and tug her soft, black cotton pants and panties down her legs.

The scent of her desire hits me and I groan.

“I've missed your pussy so fucking much, sweetheart.” I use two fingers to spread her lips wide then lick up the center and circle my tongue around her clit before pulling it into my mouth with a little tug. Her hips jerk up and her fingers dig into my scalp. “I could spend those three hours right here and still not get my fill of you.”

Her body starts shaking, and I pull away to look up at her. With my eyes locked on hers, I breathe against her core and scrape my beard along the sensitive skin of her inner thighs. Her eyes grow wide while her body goes taut, and her hips

buck up against my mouth. I suck at her, plunging my tongue as deep as it can go until she screams out my name and shudders from her orgasm. Then I lick her through it until her body relaxes again. I press my cock into the cushions, and a deep growl rumbles up my chest.

Her long eyelashes flutter and her eyes open. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, sweetheart, you did everything right letting yourself go like that for me,” I reassure her.

“But you sound like you’re in pain.”

“I wouldn’t call it pain.” I rise up on my knees and unbutton my jeans. “Just at the end of my control.”

“Oh.” Her gaze drops to my zipper, and her eyes go half-mast.

My cock feels like it’s ready to bust through my jeans to get to her, so I shove my pants down to my knees and kick them off. My hard cock bounces free and I settle over her, my crown almost touching her heat when I realize I’m forgetting something important.

“Shit, I need to grab a condom.”

“Um... you don’t have to use one if you don’t want to.” She grabs my biceps to stop me from moving away. “The doctor said the chances of me getting pregnant are almost zero during the next month or so while I’m breastfeeding.”

“You okay with me taking you bare?” I hold myself still, waiting for her answer when my body is urging me to thrust inside her until I’m balls-deep.

“I want to feel you moving inside me without anything between us.”

“Fuck.” I claim her mouth in a deep kiss. “You keep talking like that and we’ll be lucky if I last a second, let alone a minute.”

Her plump lips curve up at the edges, and she twines her arms around my neck. “Then how about we stop talking?”

I can see a hint of fear in her eyes. I press a gentle kiss against her lips, because the last thing I want to do is scare her. I pour all my love for her into it as my tongue duels with hers while we both drown in sensual need. My cock nudges her entrance, and she shudders.

“Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

“That depends. Does it bother you that I don’t have a clue what I’m doing?” she asks.

“It doesn’t bother me at all. It’s the opposite actually.”

“What do you mean?”

“Men can be territorial over their women. I’ve never experienced it before, but everything is different with you.” I slide the head of my cock through her wetness then slowly sink inside her, watching her eyes drift shut.

“Keep your eyes on mine, sweetheart.” When I’m finally anchored deep inside her, I don’t see anything but pleasure in her gaze.

“Fuck. It’s wetter, hotter, and even better than I dreamed,” I grunt. “Your pussy is wrapped so tight around me.”

“Justin.” Her nails dig into my back. I’ve waited so long for this moment. I know I won’t be able to hold back the release I already feel building inside me for long, but I’m determined to make this good for her. To get her to fly apart for me before I let go. I pump in and out of her, slowly at first, waiting to make sure she can handle me before picking up the pace. Burying my face in her neck, I try to control the urge to come.

My hips continue to thrust back and forth as I slide my hand between our bodies to circle her clit with my thumb. Her pretty blue eyes stay locked on mine, and I watch as it builds for her until she falls over the edge. Her full breasts thrust forward when her back arches, and her nails dig into my back.

“I’ve never seen anything as beautiful as you are like this.”

Her legs grip my waist and I brace my feet against the arm of the couch to give myself the added leverage I need as my

thrusts speed up. Her pussy convulses around me, milking my orgasm from me and her walls clamp down around my cock as we both come.

After the shudders subside and we both catch our breath, I roll us over so she's sprawled on top of me and hold her close, feeling like I'm holding the entire world in my arms.

AUBREY

“MARRY ME.”

I look up from Jenna, who just finished feeding, and is now asleep, shaking my head at Justin leaning with his shoulder against the doorjamb and watching us. “What?”

“Marry me,” he repeats, and I laugh thinking he’s joking. He walks across the room toward me and gets down on his knees at the side of the bed.

“I’m serious, Aubrey.” He takes my hand as he pulls a ring box from the pocket of his sweats, flipping it open.

“You’re serious?” My breath catches as he lifts a gorgeous princess-cut diamond ring from its velvet bed. “You want to marry me?”

“I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and if you’re okay with it, I’d like to adopt Jenna, so you’ll both have my last name.”

Tears fill my eyes and begin to drip down my cheeks.

“Yes,” I whisper, unable to get out any more than that one word. When I left Vegas, my family, and everything I ever knew, I didn’t dare to dream of having a family again. I never once thought I’d find the perfect man for me or an amazing father for Jenna.

“I don’t want to put this off, baby,” he says, sliding the ring on my finger. “I want you to be my wife sooner rather than later. We can get married now and plan a big party when things settle down.”

“How soon?”

“Today, tomorrow.” He shrugs. “All it’ll take is a quick trip to the county clerk’s office to get our marriage license. There’s no waiting period, so we can get married as soon as we have it. And my dad knows a judge who’ll do it for us.”

“That is really soon,” I say, a niggle of worry in the back of my mind. “Why?”

He looks at Jenna then at the ring on my finger, and even though I can’t see his eyes, I can tell he’s tense.

“I have to go back to Vegas.” My heart sinks thinking about him being away from us again.

“When?”

“Sven will send a plane when I tell him I’m ready to go.”

I haven’t met any of Justin’s friends other than Kenton and Autumn, but I know Sven is involved in everything that’s going down in Vegas. Well, him and another guy named Kai.

I look at the beautiful ring on my finger and my throat gets tight. Even when I’ve asked, he hasn’t talked to me about what’s been happening. All he’s said is things are being taken care of. Still, I have a feeling it’s worse than he’s been letting on. It could also be why he’s pushing so hard for me to marry him now.

“Are you worried about what might happen while you’re away? Is it why you want to marry me?”

“I want to marry you because I’m in love with you and want to spend the rest of my life as your husband and Jenna’s father.” He cups my cheeks. “Do you trust me?”

I don’t even have to think about that answer. “With my life and Jenna’s.”

“Do you love me?” His fingers skim down my cheek.

“You know I do.”

He places his lips against mine. “Do you want to spend the rest of your life with me?”

“Yes.”

He takes my hand and his thumb caresses the skin on my finger just under his ring. “Then just trust me.”

I close my eyes and remind myself that he’s always done everything within his power to take care of Jenna and me and that he would never do anything to hurt us.

“Okay.” I open my eyes back up.

“Thank you.” He kisses me swiftly then stands and takes Jenna from my arms and places her in her bassinet. When he comes back to me, he pulls out his phone, dialing before putting it on speaker. “She said yes!”

“Of course she did,” I hear who I think is Jasper say, and my eyes widen. “Congratulations, son.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Yep, hold on. Your mom’s been waiting for you to call.”

“I’m so excited,” Cora says, and Justin grins at me, making me wonder when he spoke to his parents about his plan and exactly how much they know.

“Good, because I need your help.”

“Whatever you need.”

“I’m gonna take care of Jenna while you take Aubrey out to look for a dress.”

“I’m on my way,” she says then adds, “I should be there in the next thirty minutes.”

He laughs while I just stare at him. “Thanks, Mom.”

“You’re welcome, honey.” The line goes dead.

“How long have you been planning this exactly?” I ask as he lifts me up then settles me on his lap.

“I’ve had your ring for the last three weeks. I wanted to ask you when you were comfortable being away from Jenna for a night or two, but this afternoon, I...” He shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter. Things changed, and I don’t want to leave again without you being my wife.”

“Will things ever be normal between us?” I ask, resting my head on his shoulder.

“Normal?”

I tip my head back to catch his eye.

“You met me when I was pregnant. We haven’t even had a real date, because I gave birth not long after we met. Jenna and I moved in with you just days after she was born—something you knew would happen, because you moved us in without even asking me beforehand,” I remind him, and he smiles at the memory.

“Now we’re getting married, but doing it within a few hours of you asking me.” My nose wrinkles. “We’re totally not normal.”

“I like how things are between us. We skipped all the bullshit and got right to the good stuff.”

“Still, we’re not normal.”

“I’m okay with that.” He kisses me then lifts me off his lap to stand.

“Now go get ready, so you can pick out your wedding dress.”

“Do I even need a dress if we’re just going to the courthouse?”

“Yes,” he says firmly with a twinkle in his eye that makes me wonder if he’s up to something.

“I’m trusting you.”

“I know, baby, and I’m so fucking lucky.” He kisses me swiftly and then spins me toward the bathroom. I hurry to get ready, but even so, by the time I’m done, Cora is waiting for me.

I love you, Justin mouths, and I hold back tears as he takes Jenna from my arms and rests her on his chest.

Justin once again proved he's capable of making miracles happen. In the twenty four hours since he asked me to marry him, he's somehow given me a little bit of normal. Under an arch of flowers, holding a bouquet of cream roses in his parents' backyard, I'm marrying the man of my dreams with his parents and mine as our witnesses.

I was shocked last night when Justin told me we were going to dinner and I walked into the restaurant to find my parents waiting for us. Not surprisingly, Justin won over both my mom and dad without trying, but I have to admit I was a little astonished with the way they fawned over Jenna. It feels right to have them here today, but even with them, the judge marrying us, Jasper, and Cora here, I still feel like it's just me, my soon-to-be husband, and our girl.

He looks gorgeous in his black suit, white dress shirt, and baby pink tie that matches Jenna's frilly dress, the silk ribbon around my waist and stem of my flowers, and I feel prettier than I have in a long time. Cora and my mom helped me get ready. His mom curled my hair and mine did my makeup, and each of them gave me my something borrowed and something blue. Luckily, even with short notice, I found the perfect dress—a simple white lace gown with an empire waist and small pearls sewn into the material around the neckline.

I can't tear my gaze off his when the judge starts to speak, and tears I can't hold back stream down my cheeks as we exchange our vows. When it's time for us to exchange rings, he hands Jenna over to his dad and pulls two platinum bands from his jacket pocket. A perfect match for each other, his is a wider version of the one that goes with the engagement ring already on my finger.

“These rings are a symbol of your commitment to your marriage, a reminder of who you are, where you've been, and where you're going,” the judge says as we take each other's hand. “In giving and receiving these rings, you acknowledge that wherever you go, you will always return to your shared life together.” Tears fill my eyes once more as we slide them onto each other's finger. “May your rings remind you that marriage is a journey, with no beginning and no end, just a

moment-to-moment opportunity to love and be loved to the best of your ability.”

He speaks some more; I know he does, but until he says “you may kiss the bride” and Justin takes my mouth, my mind is so overwhelmed with everything that’s happened and I don’t hear anything. When he finally pulls his lips from mine, we’re married, but we still have drama to face before we start our life together.

“I don’t like this,” I tell Justin, watching him pull my suitcase out the back of his Rover and set it on the ground after hugging his parents and Jenna goodbye. It’s only been a few days since we got married, and time that should have been spent with us enjoying being man and wife has been spent with my parents who left yesterday and Justin getting ready to go back to Vegas—something I wish he wasn’t doing.

“I know, baby.” He looks at his dad, who takes my bag while Cora carries Jenna into their house, where we will be staying while he’s gone. He hasn’t shared why he wants me with his mom and dad except to say this will be his longest trip and he wants me to have the help with Jenna. I don’t believe him; I know there is more going on, but I don’t want to stress him out by asking too many questions. Especially when I know us being with his parents has something to do with them protecting me and my girl. “This is my last trip. After I get back from Vegas, I’m never going back.”

“I hate that you’re leaving, especially now. This should be our honeymoon.”

“Baby.” He steps into my space, cupping my cheek with his palm. “When I get home, we’ll go away, just you, me, and Jenna. I’ll get us a place on a beach somewhere and we’ll stay as long as you want.”

I shiver a little at the sensual promise in his gaze, and he smiles before touching his lips to mine. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” My throat gets tight. “Promise me you’ll be safe while you’re gone.”

“I promise.” He kisses me once more then glances at his watch. “I need to go. I’ll call you.”

I don’t say a word. I watch him climb behind the wheel and start up the engine. I wrap my arms around my stomach as he pulls out of the driveway and stand there long after he disappears out of sight.

“Come inside, sweetie. It’ll all be okay,” Cora says, wrapping her arm around my waist. I let her lead me into the house and stop just inside when I catch sight of Jasper walking into the living room, carrying a rifle and a cleaning kit.

“If anyone tries to come for you, they’re going to be in for one hell of a surprise.” He sets both items on the coffee table and heads back into his office. When he comes out again, he has two more rifles.

My jaw drops, and I whisper, “How many guns does he have?”

Cora’s voice is serious when she answers, “More than enough.”

Lord, Justin better get home soon.

JUSTIN

“I CAN’T BELIEVE my sister married your ass and my parent actually like you,” Aedan mutters as he pulls his car into the departure line at the airport.

“Get over it.” I send a text to Aubrey to let her know I’m catching a flight home in the next hour and will be at my parents’ to pick her up tonight. I did what I needed to do to make sure she’s safe, and no one will ever know what happened to her. And after the paperwork I pushed through clears, Jenna will be officially mine, leaving no trace of her real father.

“I’d like to reconnect with my sister.”

Fuck.

“I don’t know if I’m okay with that. I don’t want my girls mixed up in your shit,” I tell him, shoving my cell into the front pocket of my jeans.

Not only is Aedan a drug dealer, but he’s now one of the biggest in the US after what happened.

“I want the chance to know my niece.”

Anger curls up in my belly. If he would’ve had his way, there would be no Jenna, and I can’t imagine a world without her in it.

“I know I fucked up. I know I did. I should have listened to Aubrey about keeping her. I know I should’ve figured something out, but I love my sister, and I know what could’ve

happened to her if the truth came out about who Jenna's father was."

"I'm her father." I turn in my seat to face him. "If you ever get back into your sister's good graces, you need to understand that."

"Fuck, man." He jerks his fingers through his hair. "You're right."

I blow out a breath and attempt to get my temper under control before I say something I might regret.

"Your sister loves you. Just give her time. Right now, all she's thinking about is Jenna not being here and why that would've been."

"I'll give her time. Just... fuck, please just talk to her. I miss her."

"I'll talk to her," I tell him, opening the door and getting out, unwilling to say more. Whatever happens between him and Aubrey will happen when she's ready, and not before then. I walk to the trunk, pound it with the back of my fist, and it pops open. I swing my duffle up over my shoulder then, without another look in his direction, I head into the airport to catch my flight home to both my girls.

"Is that how you greet visitors now?" I grin at my dad as he steps out onto the porch with a shotgun in his hand.

"All I saw were headlights. I didn't know who was here." He opens the door wide to let me through as he returns the gun to the case on the wall. "Glad you're home."

"Me too. Thanks for looking after my girls while I was away."

"You know I'm here anytime you need me." He pats my back as my eyes meet Aubrey's across the room.

"Hey." She smiles at me from the doorway of the kitchen.

I close the distance between us and wrap my arms around her, holding her close.

“I missed you.” I breathe in her scent, letting it wash away everything I saw and did.

“I missed you too.”

It’s been too long since I’ve held her, and I don’t want to let her go, hating it when she releases me so my mom can hug me.

“As much as I’ve loved having Aubrey and Jenna here with us, I’m so glad to have you home safe.” My mom gives me a look that asks a million questions, questions I’ll never answer. I’ve told my dad some of what I’ve been doing the last few months, but even he doesn’t know all the details.

“I’m happy to be home. I missed my girls.” I look at Aubrey. “Where’s Jenna?”

“Sleeping,” she says then shakes her head when the baby cries. “She must know you’re home.”

“I’ll get her and give you two a minute alone,” Mom says, taking Dad’s hand and pulling him out of the room.

I lead Aubrey over to the couch and sit down, pulling her onto my lap.

“Are you okay?” she asks, sliding her fingers through my hair as I wrap my arms around her waist and rest the side of my head on her chest.

“Oh yeah.” I’ve kept my promise to her each and every trip, and this time isn’t any different. “It’s over.”

“It’s over?” she repeats on a whisper, and I tip my head back to look at her.

“Paulie’s dead. His wife found out about his mistress and killed him. We didn’t even have to get our hands dirty.”

“So it’s really over?”

“It is.”

“My brother?”

“Still isn’t my favorite person, but I don’t dislike him as much as I did at first.” She looks surprised by that. “He wants

to reconnect with you and asked me to talk to you.”

“I...” She shakes her head. “I don’t know if I’m ready for that, if I’ll ever be ready for that.”

“You running marked him. He knows he messed up.” I cup her cheek.

“He hurt me.”

My jaw clenches. It kills me thinking of her in any kind of pain. Even her parents being in town for our wedding was hard on her, and I was tempted to send them back to Vegas sooner than planned. It was a catch twenty-two; she was happy they were here but still hurt by all that happened.

“I’ve got your back for whatever you decide, but I think it’d be good if you two spoke. He just wants you to be happy, even if it means he’ll never be a part of your life again.”

She leans into me and rests her head on my shoulder. “I don’t know if I could ever trust him after what he did, after everything that’s happened.”

“This isn’t something you need to decide on today, tomorrow, a year or however fucking long from now. The ball is in your court, baby.”

“Thank you,” she whispers, cupping my jaw. “Thank you for always putting me and Jenna first.”

“No matter what, baby, you and Jenna will always be my priority,” I say, knowing I’ll work my ass off so she never regrets putting all her trust in me. She touches her lips to mine then smiles when Jenna cries. I turn my head and my chest warms when I see my baby girl’s eyes on me.

“Hey, pretty girl,” I coo as Aubrey scoots off my lap, and I take Jenna from my mom. The minute she’s in my arms, she latches onto the beard on my face, tugging hard enough I lean forward.

“You’re probably going to need to shave that,” Dad says, and I grin.

“Maybe I should shave my hair off too,” Aubrey states, and I look at her, narrowing my eyes. “I’m kidding.”

“You better be.” I give her a swift kiss then lift my girl so we’re eye-to-eye. “I missed you. Are you ready to go home?”

Her answer is to reach for my beard again, making me laugh.

“I’m gonna miss having the girls here,” Mom says, eyeing the luggage and baby items packed up by the front door.

“Mom, we’re less than thirty minutes away. You can come over whenever you want.”

“I know.” She waves me off. “It’s just that Jenna has already gotten so big, and it feels like each day she grows more and more.”

“I think that’s how it works,” I tell her, and she shakes her head. “You and Aubrey should have another baby, so I don’t run out of baby time.”

“Why don’t you let Aubrey and Justin decide when they are going to have more kids?” Dad suggests, rolling his eyes.

“It’s their choice. I’m just saying I wouldn’t be upset if they wanted to start now.”

“I think you two should go.” Dad grins at me. “If you don’t, your mom might lock you in a room until she gets her way.”

“Right.” I stand with Jenna while chuckling at my mom, who’s glaring at my dad. “We’ll see you two in a few days.”

“Don’t worry, Cora. I’ll try to convince your son,” Aubrey says, surprising me, and I look at her.

“What?” She shrugs. “I wouldn’t mind having another sooner rather than later.”

“Baby.” Fuck, I want that. I want lots of babies with her.

“Yay!” Mom whispers loudly. “More babies.”

I keep my eyes locked on Aubrey’s then close them, wondering how the fuck I got so goddamn lucky.

AUBREY

“I CAN’T BELIEVE we have a whole night to ourselves.” I should probably be nervous about leaving Jenna, since it’s my first time away from her, but I know she couldn’t be in better hands. And I’m excited about spending the night alone with my husband.

“Mom and Dad will take good care of our girl,” he assures me.

“I know they will.” I lean into his side as we walk through the lobby. “This place is so cool.”

“It used to be a train station.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he says as we stop at the elevator that will take us up to our suite.

“It’s also haunted,” a woman says, and I turn, meeting the eyes of an older lady with graying hair.

“Marsha, don’t start,” the man at her side, who’s probably her husband, says, sounding exasperated.

“Well, it is.”

“Really?” I ask her.

She nods, stepping closer to me, and Justin’s body stiffens. I pat his abs to let him know it’s okay.

“They say a young girl named Abigail died here, throwing herself in front of a train after the love of her life didn’t return from war. Now, she haunts the hotel and room 711.”

“Oh my God,” I whisper.

“I know.” She takes my hand.

“Isn’t that so beautiful?”

I blink, not sure we have the same outlook on a woman dying because the man she loved didn’t return from a horrible war. “Ummm....”

“Marsha.” Her husband sighs.

“What?” She looks at him. “It’s beautiful.”

“Sorry, you two,” her husband says, grabbing her arm and leading her away.

When the doors to the elevator open, I stand just outside the car as Justin steps in with our bag.

“Babe.”

“This place is haunted.” I look around, expecting to see a ghost swoop down out of thin air to attack me. “We can’t stay here.”

“Jesus.” He shakes his head, tugging my hand, and I stumble into the elevator car as he wraps his arm around my waist and holds me against him.

“Did you know this place is haunted?” I ask as the doors close and the elevator starts to rise.

“It’s not haunted.”

“That lady just said it was haunted.”

“Sweetheart, it’s not haunted.”

“Are you sure?” I ask, and he looks away from me, not answering.

“You knew it was haunted.”

“It’s just lore, baby, and it doesn’t matter. We’re not staying in room 711, and I don’t expect you to see more than our room,” he says as the doors open and he takes my hand. When we reach our room, he taps the key against the knob to unlock it then pushes the door in, gesturing for me to go inside.

As soon as the door shuts behind us, he drops our overnight bag on the floor and sweeps me off my feet. I barely get to see anything as he strides to the bedroom and tosses me on the king-sized bed. I laugh as he starts to strip off his clothes then moan as he makes quick work of mine. Once we're both completely naked, he comes down on top of me and presses me into the mattress.

His gorgeous blue eyes stay locked on mine as his hand slides down my neck and chest to toy with my nipples. As I writhe beneath him, he moves lower, his hand sliding down over my ribcage and belly to between my legs. When he reaches my pussy, he presses his palm against my clit, and my hips buck in response.

"Easy, sweetheart." He dips his head and drags his tongue over my clit. I whimper as he buries his face between my legs, his fingers entering me as he works me with his mouth. He doesn't relent; he licks and sucks until an orgasm rips through me, making me see stars. "I swear I'll never get enough of you."

"Then I guess it's a good thing I'm not going anywhere," I breathe, lifting up on my elbows to watch him wrap his hand around his cock and stroke his hard length.

"Spread your legs, baby. I want inside you."

I don't hesitate. I give him what he wants. I spread my legs as he slides the head of his cock through my wetness, and I glide my hands down his chest and trace the grooves of his abs. A deep groan rumbles from his chest, and I keep my eyes locked on his as he slowly enters me.

"Perfect. You're so fucking perfect for me."

I move my hand up his chest and wrap one around the back of his neck, pulling his head down so I can brush my lips against his.

"I love you."

"I know." He thrusts into me hard and fast, going deeper and deeper with each powerful movement. Every time we make love is amazing, but this time feels different, like we're

more connected than ever, heightening my senses, driving me closer to the edge faster than normal.

“I’m so close,” I pant, my walls beginning to pulse around his hard length. My nails dig into his skin, my toes curling. When he releases his grip on my hips and glides his hands up to cup my breasts to pinch my nipple, it feels like there’s a direct link to my core.

“Come for me, baby. I want to feel you come for me.” His cock and his words send me over the edge, and my pussy clamps down on him while I scream his name. I hold onto him tighter as his hips ride me through my climax, and my nails dig into his back as he plants himself deep and finds his own release. When his weight rests against me, I close my eyes and soak in the feeling of us reconnecting, and I smile when I remember we have all night to just be Justin and Aubrey, a newlywed couple in love and starting a life together.

“I want a baby,” he says, and I open my eyes as he pulls his head back to look me in the eye.

“Really?”

“I didn’t have siblings. I want Jenna to have that. I want her to have brothers and sisters. I want a house full of kids driving us crazy.”

Tears fill my eyes.

“I want that too,” I whisper right before he drops his mouth to mine to kiss me. Then, for the rest of the night, we work on making our dream a reality.

“Morning, baby.” I open my eyes and see the man I love looming over me with a satisfied smile on his face.

“Morning.” I stretch as he touches his lips to mine.

“Hungry?”

“Yes.” I sit up, wondering how long he’s been awake. Really, I expected us to sleep until noon, something neither of

us has done since Jenna was born.

“I ordered room service. It should be here soon.” He ogles my bare chest, and I roll my eyes as there is a knock on the door.

“Food’s here.” He stands up then asks, “Are you disappointed you didn’t see a ghost last night?”

“Shut up.” I toss a pillow at him as he walks across the room, listening to him laugh.

“It was just a question, baby.” He grins at me as he comes back into view pushing a cart.

“Whatever.” I eye the plates as he pulls off the lids, my mouth watering when I see a fluffy-looking omelet and fresh fruit.

“Can you check that for me?” he asks when his phone chimes on the table next to me.

“Sure.” I frown when I see the name on the screen. “Why is Aedan sending you a message? I thought you were done with Vegas.”

“Relax, baby.” He takes the phone from my hand. “Just because your brother sent me a text doesn’t mean shit’s happening.”

I narrow my eyes on him. “Why are you acting like it’s no big deal Aedan’s contacting you?”

“We talk at least once a week.”

“You talk to him once a week?” I hiss, unsure how I feel about that.

“Yeah.” He takes his phone and moves away from the bed, setting it down to pour a cup of coffee from the carafe on the tray.

“What do you talk about?”

“We don’t talk. He normally just asks for photos or updates.”

“Photos?”

“I send him pictures of Jenna,” he says, bringing me a cup of coffee. I’m not sure how to react to the news that my husband and brother have been talking for the past few months without me knowing about it. A part of me is happy they’re getting along, but another is pissed I didn’t know.

“Why am I only hearing about this now?”

He shrugs his broad shoulders.

“Because the last time we talked about your brother, you weren’t ready to have anything to do with him.”

“And you are?”

“I’m not saying I want to see him all the fucking time, but I feel for him, and he’s not stepping on my toes. All he wants is to know you and Jenna are doing okay, so that’s what I’m giving to him.”

“Oh,” I mutter.

“When you’re ready, sweetheart, not before,” he says, reading my mind.

I take a sip of coffee, wondering when that will be. I’m happier than I’ve ever been, and the only black cloud hanging over me is the pain of missing him.

“Is it safe for him to be texting your regular phone and not a burner?”

“I wouldn’t let him do it if it wasn’t,” he says quietly.

“So it’s also safe to call him on it?”

“Yeah.” He pushes the cart of food next to the bed and takes a seat next to me.

“Can I see your cell?” I ask, and his eyes search mine before he hands me the phone. I take it, and my hands tremble as I hold it.

“I’m right here.” He touches his lips to my cheek, and I pull in the strength I need from him before I dial Aedan’s number.

“What’s going on? Are Aubrey and Jenna okay?” Aedan asks, and I close my eyes.

“We’re fine,” I whisper.

“Aubrey?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Fuck, it’s good to hear your voice,” he rasps. “For a minute there, I thought something must’ve happened to you, because Justin never calls. He sticks to texts.”

“Sorry for scaring you. Justin said it’s safe to call, and I guess I figured I’d better do it now before I lose my nerve,” I say as my husband takes my hand.

“You don’t have to apologize. Not for anything. I’m the one who owes you an apology. I wish things were different. If I’d never gone down this path in the first place, things could have been—”

“Stop,” I cut him off. “What happened to me isn’t your fault. I wasn’t targeted because of who you are. It was a case of me being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and the only person who’s to blame is already dead. Let’s leave it in the past where it belongs.”

“Fine, I’ll give you that.” I listen to him let out a deep breath. “But I’m still so fucking sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you, sorry that you ran, and sorry I’m missing out on knowing my niece.”

This version of Aedan is very different from the one I left behind. And as much as I wish he’d been as open and understanding before, I’m glad he wasn’t, because then I might never have met Justin.

“I accept your apology,” I say, unsure what role I want him to play in our lives.

“Are you happy?” he asks, sounding curious.

“I have an amazing husband and a beautiful daughter,” I whisper, closing my eyes. “Right now, I’m focusing on what I’ve gained instead of what I left behind.”

“I’m happy for you, little sis.”

“Thank you.” I look at my husband, the man who changed everything for me, and know without a doubt my path led me exactly to where I needed to be.

EPILOGUE

“IT’S SO BEAUTIFUL here,” Aubrey says, leaning back into me as Jenna plays in the sand a few feet away. The sunset casts a pink glow on the ocean and sky.

“It is.” I kiss her temple, and she links her hand with mine and rests it on her stomach.

“I have a feeling I can make it even better,” I say, spotting the group of people coming down the beach toward us. I’m not surprised Aedan is wearing jeans and black motorcycle boots on a beach in Hawaii, since I’ve never seen him in anything else. Aaron and Alexander, Aubrey’s other brothers, are dressed similarly, but her mom and dad look like they’re ready for a luau, with colorful-printed clothes on and leis around their necks.

“Better than a Christmas Eve sunset on a private Hawaiian beach with you and Jenna? Not to mention your parents and friends in the house behind us, which looks like something from a magazine and is decorated for a television show.” She looks at me over her shoulder. “I know you can pull off miracles, but I doubt you can do better than this.”

I grin at her then take her chin between my fingers, kissing her before turning her head.

I don’t see her face but still hear the tears in her voice as she whispers, “Aedan.” She pushes up off the ground and races across the beach to throw herself into her brother’s arms.

“Mama!” Jenna screeches, unsure what’s happening.

“It’s okay, baby.” I pick her up and kiss her cheek then follow after Aubrey across the sand.

“My baby.” Aubrey’s mom stretches her hands out to Jenna, and I hand her over then look at Aubrey’s dad when he pats me on the back.

“Thanks for making this happen.”

“You don’t need to thank me.” I watch Aubrey hug Aedan then let him go to hug Aaron and Alexander. I couldn’t think of a better way for us to spend Christmas than with friends and family in Hawaii, and it just happened to work out that Aedan was able to get away from Vegas for a few days.

“I can’t believe you did this.” Aubrey turns to face me with tears in her eyes. “Just when I think you can’t get any better, you do something that proves I’ll forever be trying to find ways to give you back even a little of what you give me.”

“Baby, you give me everything.”

She shakes her head. “I was going to wait to tell you tomorrow, but now seems like as good a time as any.”

“Tell me what?”

“I’m pregnant.”

“Fuck,” Aedan mutters.

“You’re pregnant?” I breathe.

“I took the test a couple days ago.” She places her hands on her stomach. “I wanted to tell you tomorrow morning.”

“You flew today.” I shake my head, wondering if the long flight could harm the baby.

“It was a private plane, and your mom assured me when she helped me pack that it would be okay.”

“My mom knew?”

“Yeah, she was going to watch Jenna tomorrow morning while I told you.” She walks toward me and rests her hands on my chest. “This isn’t exactly the reaction I expected.”

“Bean, you just told the man you’re having a baby. He’s in shock like the rest of us are,” Aedan says.

I don’t take my eyes off Aubrey’s, even when hers flash with mock annoyance in her brother’s direction.

“We’re having another baby?” I wrap my hands around her hips.

“We’re having another baby.” She moves her hands up my chest to my shoulders, and I slide my hands down over her ass and lift her off the ground, watching her eyes light up as she smiles down at me.

“You say I’m capable of making miracles happen, baby, but pretty sure it’s you who has that ability. Just when I think you’ve given me everything I want, you give me more,” I say, and she leans her head down and presses her lips to mine.

With the Christmas dinner consumed, I walk into Kai and Myla’s living room where Kenton, Kai, and Sven are watching the women play with the kids. Jenna and Maxim taking turns hammering away on a toy construction bench, while Aubrey hovers nearby. Myla rocking her baby girl in her arms while talking to Maggie, whose hand is covering her rounded belly.

We lucked out on the timing of this trip, because Maggie is due to have Sven’s son, Maddox, in about six weeks. If it’d been even a couple weeks later, she wouldn’t have been able to travel. The swell of Aubrey’s belly isn’t visible, but I love knowing she’s carrying our son or daughter. With Christmas music playing in the background, mixing with the sound of toddler chatter and the soft voices of our wives, I shake my head. It’s hard to believe we all ended up here, considering what we all had to go through. But we fought hard for our slice of happiness, and now the only thing left to do is enjoy it.

ABOUT AURORA ROSE REYNOLDS



Aurora Rose Reynolds is a New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal bestselling author whose wildly popular series include *Until, Until Him, Until Her*, *Underground King*, *Shooting Stars*, *Fluke My Life* and *How to Catch an Alpha* series.

Her writing career started in an attempt to get the outrageously alpha men who resided in her head to leave her alone and has blossomed into an opportunity to share her stories with readers all over the world.

To learn more about her and her books, visit her [website](#) or join her [reader group](#) on Facebook! Subscribe to her [newsletter](#), so you won't miss any book news and releases!



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