

LAYLA

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HAGEN



WHEN YOU'RE MINE

THE GALLAGHERS SERIES

When You're Mine

Layla Hagen

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When You're Mine

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Chapter One

Dylan

“I’ll see you later. I need to find my trainer,” my sister Isabelle said. We were in one of Manhattan’s most exclusive gyms. They offered their clientele complete privacy, not that I needed it. Although I was successful in software, no one outside the industry knew me. But my sister’s fiancé, Brayden, did need the privacy. He was a famous rock star, and both wanted a place where they could train without the paps hounding them. I signed up today, mostly because it allowed me to hang out with my sister. Since Isabelle started dating Brayden, her life was turned upside down, and I knew she needed family time as often as possible. It was Isabelle’s way to cope, and honestly, it was also mine. Our family was very tight.

“Sure. I’ll grab something to drink before hopping on the treadmill,” I replied.

I headed toward the break room, glad the place wasn’t too crowded. It was three o’clock in the afternoon, and I made a mental note to train in the off-peak hours. The other reason why I’d signed up at this gym was that it was very close to my office and my apartment. Efficiency was essential for me.

In the break room, I made a beeline for the drinks table. As I poured myself a glass of lemonade, I noticed a bombshell brunette on the other side of the room. She was wearing tight workout pants and a cutoff top, and I could tell something was wrong, even though she had her back to me. She was swaying wildly on her feet as if she were about to lose her balance. She grabbed the back of an armchair, and I set my glass back down, quickly moving over to her.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yes.” Her voice was so weak that I barely heard it. She closed her eyes. I’d been right. She was about to faint.

I secured an arm around her waist, pulling her tight against my chest. She went all soft in my arms. I looked around, ready to call for help, when she blinked her eyes open, whispering,

“Okay. I’m a bit better now.” She blinked a few more times, clearing her vision, I assumed, as she looked up at me. She was fucking gorgeous, with full pink lips and deep green eyes.

“You should sit down,” I said.

She nodded slightly, and I was happy she could support her own weight. Even though I still had a firm grip on her waist, I didn’t want to risk her getting limp again. I lowered her on a comfortable armchair, sitting in the one right next to her.

“Do you need water, sugar? Should I call someone?”

“No, thanks. I’ll be okay in a minute.” Her voice was shaky. Although she smiled, it wasn’t reassuring at all.

“I could still call someone.”

She waved her hand, shaking her head and sinking a bit lower into the leather chair. Sweat dotted her forehead. Her hair was damp at the temples. “It’s all my fault. I tried a juice diet. I wanted to see if it was something I could recommend to my clients. Clearly it’s not.”

“What’s your name?”

“Melanie Dawson.”

“You work here, Melanie?” I asked.

“Yeah. Yes, I do. I’m a personal trainer and a very good one. Especially when I don’t feel faint.” She sat up straighter, looking at me intently. A small smile played on her lips. “Can you keep my secret? I’ll feel much better once I eat something, and it won’t do my reputation any good if word gets around that I’m a fainter.”

“Your secret is safe with me,” I assured her. “I’ll bring you some snacks from the table. What do you want? I think I saw some fruit and nuts and something that resembled bread.”

She adorably scrunched her nose. “No, it’s gluten-free bread. I tried it once accidentally and threw up in my mouth a little. I mean, it’s a great option for those who can’t eat gluten, but I avoid it at all costs. It doesn’t even taste like bread to me.”

I chuckled. “Never tried it, and now I never will. So, what would you like?”

“I’ll have some nuts and fruits, then, and I’ll also eat one of those protein bars from the reception desk.”

She began to rise from the armchair, but I shook my head. “Sit down. I’ll get everything for you.”

“There’s no need. I can get it.”

“You nearly fainted. You need to sit down.”

Her smile widened, and I couldn’t look away from her lips. They were driving me crazy.

“Okay, then. I’ll wait here for you.” She looked at me questioningly.

“Dylan.”

She nodded. “Thanks, Dylan. Are you new to the gym? I don’t remember seeing you around.”

“It’s my first day.”

Getting up, I went to the snack bar, filling the plate with fruits and nuts. After handing it to Melanie, I went to the reception desk, asking for a protein bar. I didn’t tell the guy she’d fainted, but only because she’d asked me not to. She was an adult, so she knew what she was doing, but I kept an eye on her while I paid for the bar. Not that she could hurt herself sitting down, but I didn’t want to let her out of my sight after she’d been so weak. I returned with the protein bar, noticing she’d already cleared the plate.

“Someone was hungry,” I teased, unable to keep myself from checking her out. Her dark brown hair was up in a ponytail, revealing her neck. She was tall, with a lean figure—small shoulders and narrow waist. Her muscles were toned, just as you’d expect a personal trainer to be, but even though she was strong, everything about her made my protective instincts spring to life.

“Oh, you have no idea. I don’t know who comes up with these juice diets. It’s like they’re made to torture you. They go on and on about how they have all the nutrients you need even

though you feel hungry. Well, the truth of the matter is they don't, or I wouldn't have almost passed out. Lesson learned. May I please have my protein bar? I'm starting my next session in ten minutes, and I need to be in top shape by then."

I handed it to her, enjoying the way she inhaled sharply when our fingers touched.

"Let me get my purse so I can pay you for the bar."

"That's not necessary. Can you take some time off?"

"No, my client is already waiting. She's used to seeing me by now, so she'll probably wonder what's up." She unwrapped the bar and devoured it. "Thank you for the bar."

I leaned in closer. "You said you still have ten minutes. Spend them here with me. I'll keep your secret as long as you take a few more minutes to recover."

"Oh, so you're a secret keeper only under specific conditions?"

"Very specific." My protective instincts were on high alert.

"Okay, Mr. Savior, since I almost fainted on you, I guess I owe you peace of mind."

"Exactly." She was a stubborn one.

"Thank you, by the way, for looking after me."

"No problem." I wanted to insist that she take time off, but I didn't get the chance because my sister Isabelle entered the break room just then.

"Hey, Mel. Here you are. I see you've met my brother Dylan."

Mel got up very fast, and so did I, standing close, in case she felt woozy again. Damn, the woman was gorgeous. Her body was toned, but she also had curves, and they were insanely tempting.

"Hey, Isabelle. I didn't know he was your brother."

"Mel is my personal trainer," Isabelle said to me. "She's helping me get in shape for the wedding. What are you guys

doing in here?”

Mel gave me a warning look. The corners of her mouth tilted up in a smile. I knew what she was thinking. I shouldn't spill her secret, even if the client was my sister.

“Mel was giving me some information about the gym.”

My sister narrowed her eyes. Mel didn't catch it because she'd bent to throw away the protein bar wrapper in the trash can, but I didn't miss it. I could practically read the warning in my sister's eyes: *don't you dare flirt with her*.

Wordless communication was standard in our family. Growing up with two sisters and one brother had made that an essential skill. It made everything easier and faster.

I wiggled my eyebrows at my sister because I liked riling her up. Was I that obvious? I guess I was. I'd like to say I was only keeping an eye on Melanie because of her fainting spell, but that couldn't be further from the truth. The woman was smoking hot. However, my sister's reaction was surprising.

Until recently, she kept bugging me to date seriously again, and now she was warning me off? That was an interesting change, and I was going to question her about it later. If I was honest, I preferred it this way. Ever since my breakup with Lina, my sister had been on a mission to convince me that I didn't have to give up on relationships. Getting burned once was enough for me. I wasn't walking down that path again.

Straightening up, Mel focused on Isabelle. “Okay, ready to go?”

“Sure.”

Mel nodded, glancing at me. “Dylan, if you need anything, just ask at reception.”

“I will. See you around. Take care.” I emphasized the last two words.

Her eyes widened, and she nodded almost imperceptibly before leaving with my sister.

I looked after her until they left the room. Her ass looked delicious in those tight pants. The curve of her neck was

beckoning me. Damn. I was determined to push today's incident to the back of my mind, no matter how hot Mel looked in her workout outfit and how much my protective instincts were demanding I check on her later.

Chapter Two

Mel

Isabelle's program consisted of a Pilates routine that started with quick exercises designed to replace a cardio workout before moving on to standard floor-mat exercises. I led her from the reception and break area down a narrow corridor to a small studio where we held private sessions.

It was a small room with mirrors on three sides and a hardwood floor. The fourth wall was a floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the Hudson River. Genesis was hands down the fanciest gym I'd ever worked at. It was all hardwood floors and elegant spotlights. The entrance area and the break room had leather seats, and there was a generous employee-only spa area in the locker room. I loved it. It was very spacious, so even though we had a record number of new sign-ups in June, it never felt crowded. The season of the bikini body had officially started, and everyone wanted to get in shape.

"Should you be working so soon after the car accident?" Isabelle asked as we placed two mats on the floor.

Three weeks ago, I had the scare of my life. I took a cab because I was late to work, and we were hit sideways by a driver who went through a red light. Thankfully I wasn't gravely injured, but the cabbie did spend a week in the hospital.

"Yes, I'm excellent. Don't worry. My doctor said I could go back to work and do my usual schedule."

"I was worried about you," she said, making my heart happy. In the two months since I'd begun training with Isabelle, she had become more like a friend.

"Sometimes I still wake up at night reliving those two seconds before the impact." I shuddered at the memory. I'd been in shock for the first two days, and after that, I was grateful I hadn't been hurt. If I was honest, the accident helped me see certain things differently and perhaps not take anything for granted, like the fact that I was alive and healthy. That I

was living in a beautiful city. And that I had my dad close, and his condition was stable. For these things and many others, I was thankful. I did wish a day would come when I wouldn't worry about his health all the time, but we were blessed as it was.

I was determined to enjoy life more and also not to repeat some of my past mistakes. At twenty-seven, I'd made quite a few, especially in the dating department. My ex, Elliot, turned out to be nothing like he seemed. We were together for three years, and during that time, I helped him with his business. But when I ran out of money and needed his support, he showed his true colors. I broke up with him more than a year ago, and since then I've dated casually. But none of the guys I'd gone out with wanted anything resembling a relationship. So I was done dating any guy who was just looking for sexy fun and no strings.

After the warmup, I said, "Okay, we're starting with core now—abs and back muscles too, as they all support one another. As usual, I'll guide you through the movements, even though you know them, so you don't accidentally forget to tuck in your tummy or not curve your back and you hurt yourself. Okay?"

"Sure. You know, I always appreciate it that you also do the exercises with me and don't just give me instructions."

"Yeah. That's the only way I can work, because if I'm doing the exercises, I know what the intensity level is, and I can adjust that. But don't worry, I'll keep an eye on you, and I'll make sure you do everything correctly." I only did mat exercises, though. When I was with clients who only did weight training, I only watched and corrected their posture.

"You've been my trainer for two months, and I've never left here injured. I trust you."

"Oh, that's good to know. Does that mean you won't give me a hard time when I make you do some extra exercises?" I said with a grin.

"You're mean," Isabelle said, grinning right back.

I took great pride in my job. I loved being a fitness trainer, and I considered myself lucky to be working at Genesis. It was one of the most sought-after gyms to work at in New York because it offered complete privacy, attracting high-paying prestigious clients—and the salary was excellent. I was very fortunate when they hired me two years ago. I recruited a full client list, and all were happy with me and their results, so management was delighted. They also were very thoughtful after my accident, giving me two weeks off with full pay! It was a family-run business with two locations in the city and took really good care of their employees and customers.

Many of my clients recommended me to their friends and family, so I'd brought in lots of new customers. After training with me for a while, Brayden brought Isabelle too, who in turn brought her friend Tess Winchester, and her brother as well.

“So, what did you and Dylan talk about?” she asked while we did a third set of crunches.

I stopped my exercises and pointed at her.

“I know what you're doing. You're trying to distract me.”

“No I'm not,” she said. When I laughed, she added, “Yes I am. I always do that during my third rep set, don't I?”

“Yes you do. Like clockwork.”

“So maybe we should cut the crunches to two rep sets.”

I laughed. It was always such a blast to work with Isabelle. She was like all of us, though, wanting to look good but not wanting to suffer for it.

“You said you want a trim waist for your wedding day. Unfortunately, that does require three rep sets to tighten your muscles.” Her big day was in November, which was in five months. That was plenty of time to get into shape.

“Well, my abs do look amazing ever since I began following your instructions. So there you go. Torture me away. But I still want to know what you talked about with my brother.”

Oh, her gorgeous, sexy-as-hell brother! He couldn't look more different from Isabelle, who was petite with red hair and green eyes. Dylan was tall with broad shoulders, his eyes were brown, and his hair was a mix of dark blond and brown. I didn't want to tell her what we talked about. Not only because I didn't want her to know I still felt victim to fads such as juice diets, but I was also afraid she might be able to tell how attractive I found him.

"If you insist on talking, why don't you tell me about your brother?" I asked. "But you can tell me later, after you finish your workout."

"Why not now? I can do it now. You know, then it'll take my mind off the third set."

"Isabelle, if you can talk like this while you're doing the exercises, then it's not difficult enough. Come on, raise your legs to forty-five degrees. That's going to increase the intensity."

She did as I said, and just like that, she was having a hard time breathing, let alone talking. I wasn't quite sure I wanted to know more about her brother anyway. I could still feel his arms around me. They were so strong and determined not to let me fall, and that was a comforting feeling, one I hadn't felt in quite some time.

Once we were both done with the abs workout, we switched positions, preparing for outer thigh exercises.

We were both on our sides, watching each other, head propped on one hand, raising the upper leg.

"Okay. Now we can talk, right?" Isabelle said, smiling from ear to ear.

"I guess we can." The only exercises that were impossible to do while talking were core exercises. "So, you were saying about your brother," I prompted, not wanting to be the one to speak.

"My brother is amazing. Well, both my brothers are. I'm very close to them, and I'm so happy they live in New York now. They dote on me, and I dote on them. They pretend

they're annoyed with me when I get too much into their business, but I know they're not."

"How do you know that?" Since I was an only child, this was fascinating for me.

"Well, that's what I tell myself so I don't feel guilty. I was hoping both of them would have dates for my wedding, but I've kind of given up, even though it's still months away."

"Why?" I asked innocently, telling myself I did not want to know why Dylan wasn't dating anyone.

"Well, Ian is a bit of a player. And unfortunately, I can see Dylan is following in his tracks as well. He used to be a bit of a romantic, but he had a long-term relationship that ended badly, and that soured him on romance."

"Yes, a bad relationship does tend to do that," I agreed, thinking how Elliot made me question myself and the world around me. But I knew the *one* was still out there. I would meet him, eventually. But one of my post-accident resolutions after the car crash was to stop dating guys who didn't want the same things I did, which seemed to be the case with Dylan too. So, even though he was sexy as hell and swoon-worthy, especially as he looked after me earlier, I wasn't going to give him any more thought.

Isabelle was quiet when we moved on to the second leg exercise, and then as we proceeded to inner thigh exercises, the conversation turned to her wedding. I loved hearing about their progress with the arrangements. I was a true romantic at heart, so I was soaking it all up.

When our session ended, Isabelle headed to the changing rooms, but I went back to the reception area for another protein bar. Propped against the reception desk, I glanced inside the main training room, where we had the cardio equipment and the weight stations. I immediately noticed Dylan doing crunches. Holy crap. The man seemed even sexier than before. Was it all the sweat dotting his skin, or had I been groggy from my fainting spell before? His arms were bent at the elbows, palms at the back of his head. His biceps were on display, and his strong arms were my kryptonite.

I immediately glanced away, looking at the floor while I munched on my protein bar. Once I finished it, I headed to the staff bathroom to refresh for my next session.

Dylan, Dylan, Dylan. Why had he made such an impression on me?

By the time I finished all my sessions later in the evening, I still didn't have an answer. I was pretty tired. The juice diet had been a terrible idea. Oh well, lesson learned, but I still wanted to check on Dad tonight and do some shopping for him, so it would be a long evening no matter what.

"Bye, Shauna," I told the receptionist on my way out, slinging my backpack over my shoulder.

"Bye. Oh wait, before I forget. A client left you a note."

I blinked. "What?"

She took a folded piece of paper from the shelves where clients could leave valuables, handing it to me. I frowned, unfolding it.

Mel,

In case you're wondering why the old-fashioned note, I don't have your number. Below is mine. I'd be happy if you sent me a short text to let me know how you feel.

Best, Dylan

I reread the note twice more, smiling from ear to ear. I had a suspicion that forgetting about my sexy and chivalrous savior wasn't going to be that easy after all.

Chapter Three

Dylan

After we finished with the gym, we headed to Isabelle and Brayden's apartment. They were moving into a massive house outside the city in a couple weeks, and I'd offered to help them pack up their apartment. They could easily afford a moving company, but I knew neither of them wanted to let strangers into their home. As was usually the case with Isabelle, it had turned into a family get-together. Our brother Ian was already here, and our sister Josie and three of her husband's cousins, Ryker, Cole, and Tess Winchester, were on their way. We were so close to the Winchesters that I considered them family.

"When is everyone else arriving?" Ian asked as the three of us sat on the couch in the living room. The whole place was a mess. Empty boxes were lying around everywhere between stacks of books and clothes.

I checked my phone a couple times, but I didn't have any message from Mel. She was probably still doing her training sessions. I chuckled, remembering her mischievous smile when she asked me to keep her secret.

"Not sure. Everyone said they're on the way," Isabelle answered. "Oh, before they all get here, I want your opinion on something for the wedding."

Ian and I exchanged a glance. Our sister loved involving us in every decision regarding the big day. The only one I wanted to be involved in was security since paparazzi gave my sister headaches after a few incidents, and I didn't want anything ruining her wedding.

But security had been discussed over and over again, and I was happy with all the final details. Now I just participated in wedding conversations to appease my sister. It wasn't my favorite topic, but I wanted her to be happy. I wanted her to feel that we were in her corner and supporting her. Brayden's world was still new to her, and although she had accompanied him on parts of the tour, much of it had been overwhelming.

Ian and I moved to New York last year. Prior to that we were in Washington D.C. and only saw our sisters a couple times a year. Now that we all lived in the same city, we wanted to take advantage of getting together as often as we could.

Usually Isabelle included Mom and Dad on the phone when she had to make big decisions, but this time she didn't. Isabelle sat on the couch between Ian and me, putting her laptop on the coffee table in front of us.

"Do you think she just wants to torture us?" my brother asked in a mocking whisper, even though Isabelle could easily hear him.

"Unfortunately, I think it's her way of expressing love, by asking for our help in anything," I said.

"Exactly," my sister replied, winking at me. "And this isn't hard. I'm trying to compile a group of pictures. I want to surprise Mom and Dad with a slideshow."

"That explains why they're not on the phone," Ian said.

"I want to thank them for everything they did for us. A friend had a slideshow at her wedding, and I thought it was a nice thing to do."

"Okay. We can do this," I said.

She clicked on the laptop, and a picture of us as kids came up. "All you have to do is tell me if you like the picture or not."

Ian nodded.

"Why do you even have these?" I wondered after she showed us a dozen pictures. She had everything from when we were kids up until this year. We were as close as ever. Josie was the oldest and Ian the youngest. At thirty-one, I was in the middle.

"Oh, I've asked almost everyone I know to send me pictures, and well, you know, Facebook is also a good source."

I was relieved that my sister hadn't included any pictures of me with Lina. We'd been together for many years, so finding pictures of me without her was not easy.

“Okay, so this wasn’t too terrible,” Ian said once we finished. “Please don’t ask my opinion again on who should sit at what table.”

Isabelle rolled her eyes. “No, you made your opinion clear on the topic last time. Don’t worry. I’ve asked Mom and Dad to take care of everyone back home. They’ll know who wants to sit with whom. And they know all our mutual friends. So I’m taking care of them. You successfully managed to weasel your way out of that task.”

“We didn’t weasel our way out. It’s just not the best use of our time,” I said with a grin.

Isabelle got up from the couch, placing her hands on her hips. “Why are you so grumpy lately?”

She looked at our brother. “Ian, fess up. Is he having any fun or spending all his time focusing on project Z?”

Ian and I were running a software company together, Gallagher Solutions. We employed forty people and specialized in cloud solutions for midsize companies. Currently, we were working on one of our most ambitious projects. We’d nicknamed it project Z. It was software for an insurance model for people working in weather-dependent industries. My parents operated a ski lift back in Montana, and the few years when it didn’t snow enough, we barely made ends meet. We only managed to get through the season out of the kindness of some friends. I had no idea what would have happened if they hadn’t helped. I was determined to help people in similar situations so they’d have some recourse.

The insurance model wasn’t meant for big natural disasters—those were already sufficiently covered. We were aiming to find a solution for small niches that were currently not covered by insurance models. I got the idea when I researched the organization running the Innovator of the Year competition. Ian and I knew how to build the software, but winning the competition would bring us the right partners to implement the software nationwide. Project Z wasn’t just about money. It was personal.

“Oh, he’s having plenty of fun,” he answered. “I don’t think you want to know all the details, sister dearest.”

Isabelle mimicked plugging her fingers in her ears and shaking her head. “No, no, you’re right. I don’t need to know the details. I’m happy to know he’s not spending all his time cooped up in the office.”

I got up from the couch and headed to the kitchen island to pour myself a glass of water. “I want to win the competition, that’s all. That requires some extra work for a few months. I don’t mind.”

“He’s not cooped up in his office all the time. He has plenty of fun,” Ian repeated.

“I’m glad to hear that.” Isabelle fixed her gaze on me. After a few seconds, she said, “By the way, I wanted to talk to you about something—”

The doorbell rang, interrupting her.

“Saved by the bell,” Ian exclaimed. “You looked like you were about to lecture him, sis.”

“I was,” Isabelle confirmed. “And don’t think I’ll forget about it just because we have company.”

I grinned at my sister. “That didn’t even cross my mind.”

Ryker, Cole, and Tess arrived together. Tess’s eyes bulged when she looked around the apartment.

“We haven’t started yet,” Isabelle said, sounding a bit embarrassed.

“She was too busy torturing us with wedding stuff.” Ian filled in everyone. Tess immediately lit up. She was helping Isabelle with the organization of it all too.

“Hey, don’t start with the wedding planning again,” Ryker warned, “or we’ll never start packing. I know how this goes.”

Tess grinned. “I’d get mad at you, brother, but you’re right.”

All the Winchesters were married or engaged, and Tess loved helping with planning. Out of the whole group, Ian and I

were the only bachelors left, something she kept teasing us about.

“Okay, well, I tried to bring as much stuff in the living room as possible. I say we start by putting what’s on the floor in boxes and labeling them accordingly,” Isabelle said.

Ryker looked around. “Okay, I’m overwhelmed by the sheer amount of stuff in this room, so I’m going to need detailed instructions.”

“You can start by actually putting together the boxes. I only had time to build two,” Isabelle said.

“I’m on it,” Ryker said.

“Thanks so much for coming. I know you’re all busy,” Isabelle added, and it was true. Ryker worked on Wall Street, Cole ran a real estate company with Josie’s husband, and Tess owned two lingerie stores with her sister Skye.

“Hey, family comes first,” Tess said. “By the way, is Josie coming too?”

“Yes. She texted that she’ll be here in half an hour,” Isabelle said.

Isabelle divided tasks among each of us. Ryker gave everyone a box, and we started shoving the stuff lying around in it.

Josie arrived a while later.

“Hey, why didn’t you bring my niece?” Isabelle said with a pout.

“She’s spending some quality time with her dad. And I’m much faster when she’s not with me.” Josie looked around, grimacing. She was a brilliant lawyer and an organizational genius.

Isabelle pointed at her. “Hey! It’s a process. Don’t judge.”

Josie laughed, holding her hands up in defense. “I didn’t say anything. I’m going to grab a box and see how far I can get tonight.”

Two hours later, the living room looked livable again.

“Are you taking the furniture too?” I asked, looking up and down at a huge bookshelf, already mentally disassembling it. Ian and I had helped Isabelle with the furniture when she moved from Montana to Philly for college and later to New York.

“No, everything stays here. We’re renting it out fully furnished. By the way, can everyone stay for dinner?”

There was a chorus of yeses, and then Isabelle ordered pizza for everyone. I went to her kitchen to uncork a bottle of wine and smiled when I heard someone trail after me. I was betting it was Isabelle.

“Dylan, can we talk?” Isabelle asked.

“Is this the lecture?”

“How did you know?” she replied, sounding perplexed.

I turned around, grinning. “You walk the way you used to when you were trying to sneak out of the house without our parents hearing you.”

“Ah, the guilty walk,” Josie said from the living room. She’d clearly eavesdropped on us.

I nodded. “Exactly.”

Isabelle laughed. “Well, you’ve got it all wrong. I’m not feeling guilty at all. I was just coming to....”

“Lecture me for checking out Melanie at the gym?” I asked point-blank.

Isabelle’s jaw dropped. “Yes. How did you know?”

I pointed at my eyes, then at hers. “You looked at me like you wanted to skewer me today.”

Isabelle put her hands on her hips, tilting her head. “Okay, you caught me.”

“Wait a second,” Ian said, “you’re warning him off? You usually try to sell him on relationships.”

“Yes, but I failed, so I’m switching tactics. Mel wants a relationship and everything that comes with it. And you don’t.

You keep saying you've sworn off all that. Or has that changed?"

"No, it hasn't," I said dryly.

"See? That's exactly my point."

Ian whistled loudly. "I think he got it, sis."

"I'm not so sure. He didn't say anything," Ryker pointed out.

"Oh yeah. Look at his smile. There's a bit of guilt right there," Josie said. "He's planning to ignore the warning."

I shot Josie a look.

"Aha!" she said. "See. Isabelle, I think you're going about this the wrong way. Telling him someone's off-limits is like waving a red flag in front of a bull."

"Can we change the subject?" I said, laughing at the insane turn this conversation was taking.

Cole shrugged. "Just saying, Ryker and I were singing a similar tune not too long ago about liking our bachelor status. Things can change fast. Keep an open mind."

"Not the subject change I was hoping for," I confessed with a groan.

"He's right, though," Ryker said.

And didn't I know it? These two used to have a completely different outlook on life before they were married. Their perspective was much like my current one, only I wasn't planning to change it. After a long-term relationship, I proposed to Lina, who turned me down, saying she wasn't sure I was the one. I later found out she'd been seeing other guys behind my back. I'd been burned once, and it was enough for me to learn my lesson.

I finally got around to choosing two wine bottles from the fridge and uncorking them. Isabelle took out seven glasses, and I poured white wine in all of them. As I picked up my drink, I felt my smartphone vibrate in my back pocket.

I took it out, reading the new text.

Unknown: Hey, Mr. Savior. I got your note. I'm feeling great. Thanks for checking on me.

Dylan: Glad you're doing okay. Are you home?

Melanie: Yes. Thank you again for everything today. You're a white knight, truly.

Dylan: And an excellent secret keeper, right?

Melanie: That depends. I'll wait until next time I see Isabelle to pass judgment on that.

Dylan: Think I'm going to rat you out? That's how little you think of me?

Melanie: Not at all. It's just that Isabelle's told me you're close.

Dylan: Really? What else did she say? It seems you know more about me than I do about you. How about you level that playing field?

She didn't answer right away, but I saw the dots indicating she was typing on the screen. When she finally answered, my face instantly cracked in a smile. It was completely unexpected.

Melanie: I only spill secrets face-to-face, Mr. White Knight.

Dylan: I'll remind you about this next time I see you.

There was another pause before the next message.

Melanie: OH THAT SOUNDED FLIRTY. I'm sorry. I'm enjoying a glass of wine.

I burst out laughing, typing back quickly.

Dylan: You're still not off the hook.

"Is it just me, or does Dylan look like he's up to no good? And maybe even a bit guilty?" Tess asked in a fake whisper we could all hear.

I looked up from my phone to find everyone staring at me. I wiggled my eyebrows. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Yes, we would," Isabelle said.

Laughing, I shook my head. “Why don’t you take a guess?”

“Ha! Game on,” Isabelle said.

“Man, why did you do this? Now she’s like a dog with a bone,” Ian said. “But hey, you dug your own grave.”

“I always do,” I admitted, but I lived for the small pleasures in life, like teasing my sisters.

Tess was half right: I *was* up to no good. But I wasn’t feeling guilty about it at all.

Chapter Four

Dylan

“My brain is fried,” Ian declared.

“Mine too.” We’d been brainstorming ways to improve the code on project Z for the past two hours.

“I’m going back to my cave to try some of the things we discussed, see if I can get it right.”

I nodded as he rose to his feet. “I’ll try the same.”

“By the way, should we check on Isabelle? She’s been radio silent for the past three days. I thought she’d ask us over to pack the rest of their things.”

I chuckled. True, our sister usually liked to text us at least twice a day, but she had a lot on her plate.

“Nah, don’t butt in. They’ll ask for help if they need it.”

Brayden was home for a break between legs of the tour, and they just wanted time for themselves.

“Butting in? No one in this family appreciates me,” he muttered before leaving the office.

I spun in my chair, looking outside. Our office was in a building overlooking the Hudson River. It wasn’t far from my apartment, so I lost zero time commuting. I loved efficiency—it allowed me to focus on the essential things, like project Z. We had other projects going on too, but those were running like a well-oiled machine, bringing in a lot of revenue. Project Z was something Ian and I *needed* to do.

It was challenging and pushing my limits, but I loved every second of it. I’d always been looking for ways to prove myself. I always wanted challenges that made me see beyond the narrow scope of software programming. I’d gotten into it by mistake in high school when I became a hacker and roped my brother into it too. We lurked around without breaking the law... most of the time. Now we put our skills to better use. And after an intense day of programming, I needed to blow off

steam. It was necessary, or I'd go insane. My favorite way of blowing off steam was working out. Before joining Genesis, I mostly jogged, but I wanted a more intensive workout.

I'd planned to go later this evening, but I was already on edge. I couldn't stand being at work anymore. I went to my brother's office. He was at the keyboard typing furiously, and I knew he was programming. Both of us were still very skilled at writing code and enjoyed doing it because we were good at it. Being businesspeople came second, and we always described ourselves as software programmers first, then as business owners. I didn't want to interrupt him, so I sent him a message, letting him know I was heading for the gym. He'd signed up yesterday too, so I was likely to see him there later.

I walked to Genesis since it was a few blocks away. I was proud of my "triangle of efficiency." My office, my condo, and the gym were all in walking distance from each other, near Battery Park.

The gym was relatively full when I arrived, but it didn't feel crowded. While I changed, Ian texted me that he was going to drop by the gym too. I went straight to the treadmill, setting the timer for forty minutes. Running gave me a sense of freedom. Growing up in Montana, I was outdoors a lot. Running while overlooking the Hudson River reminded me a bit of home.

Twenty minutes into the workout, a sinful distraction named Mel appeared.

Finally.

I'd come here every day since I'd signed up three days ago, but I hadn't seen her again since that first time. I ended my workout early and stepped down as she approached with a huge smile. Her eyes were strikingly beautiful, not just because they were vivid green, but their round shape was simply gorgeous. She'd pulled her dark brown hair on top of her head. I wanted to run my hands through it to feel its silkiness. Even though she was tall, I still towered over her by several inches. Up close, I now noticed a dimple at the right corner of her mouth, something I'd not seen before.

“Hey. Where have you been the last few days?” Mel asked.

Nice to know she missed me.

“You’ve been keeping an eye out for me?” I teased.

She blushed. “I figured maybe you decided not to join after all.”

“I was already signed up. And if I weren’t, meeting you definitely sold me on the gym.”

“How did I manage that? By fainting on you?” she asked with a giggle.

“By promising to spill some secrets next time we meet.”

Her blush intensified. I enjoyed it immensely.

“Oh, that? You remember, huh?”

“Told you that you’re not off the hook.”

“I thought you might say that.”

“Is this why I haven’t seen you around these past few days? Were you hiding?”

Her lips curled in a half smile. They were so fucking tempting that I was itching to touch and taste them.

“So you’ve been keeping an eye out for me too, huh?”

“Both eyes.” I did my two-finger-me-to-you eye point.

She licked her lower lip, glancing away. “Okay... so how many times a week do you train?”

The change of subject surprised me, but I went for it. “I come in daily. But it’s more than a workout for me. It’s a way to blow off steam. Otherwise, I have far too much adrenaline to sleep, so I need to work it off.”

“Hmm.” She tilted her head to one side, surveying me.

“Yes, I can tell by the rigidness of your shoulders that you’re stressed. That means the workout didn’t really help you all that much.”

“I’m not done yet,” I clarified. “I’m hitting the weight area next.”

“Well, I have free time on my hands. If you want, I can watch you work out and see if I can give you any tips.”

Isabelle’s warning rang in my mind, but I wanted to spend time with Mel too much to pay it any attention. I couldn’t explain what drew me to her. Last time, I’d put it all down to the protective instincts of mine kicking in. I’d wanted to make sure she was all right; that was why I hung around, as any gentleman would have done. But today was different, and I couldn’t use that excuse anymore. She’d been on my mind ever since her unintentional flirty text.

“Sure, why not? I have a weight training program that one of the trainers here designed for me when I joined.”

“Why don’t you have a personal trainer?” she asked.

“Honestly, it didn’t seem like it was necessary, and I didn’t want to have to make appointments. I like coming and going whenever I please.”

She looked at me with a wry smile. “Okay. Do the exercises, and I’ll correct your posture and give you tips.”

I started with weights for my back. She looked at me carefully, her eyes wandering up and down my body in more than a professional assessment. I was filing that in my memory; I was sure I’d have the opportunity to tease her later on.

“Why don’t you tell me about yourself while you watch me?” I suggested.

She laughed. “You and Isabelle are the same. She always wants to keep me talking when she works out. She says it distracts her.”

“Really?” I had completely different intentions when it came to Melanie. I didn’t want her to distract me. I just wanted to know more about her.

“Well, unfortunately, I cannot multitask,” she said. “With Isabelle, I do the mat exercises as well. But weight training is a different beast, so I’ll watch you and pay attention to your posture. Oh, look, see? The moment you don’t focus, you make a mistake. If you’re going to keep your shoulders

hunched like this, it won't help you relax. If anything, you're going to get a muscle strain." She went behind me, flattening her palm between my shoulder blades. "I'll apply some pressure here, so you remember to keep your back straight, okay? Now do another set."

I could see her in the mirror. I was watching her instead of myself. Feeling that small palm on my back was messing with my mind. I imagined her hand elsewhere already. Her hair was tied up on top of her head, leaving her neck completely free. Like last time, she was wearing tight pants, and the short top left nothing to the imagination. Her body was delicious. I'd do anything to explore her curves.

After I finished the set, she said, "Okay, good. Well, you should take a three-minute break now to give your muscles a chance to relax."

"Will you spend that break with me?"

She grinned. "Do you want me to?"

"Fuck yes."

Her eyes widened a little at my response. Then she asked, "So what else do you do for relaxation besides working out?"

I didn't have to think about it too long. "Absolutely nothing."

"Come on, that's not healthy."

"What do you do to relax, Melanie? Come on, help a guy out here."

To my astonishment, she blushed. "Right, I don't think my tips will help you very much. They're particular to me."

"Tell me."

"You're that curious, are you?"

"Very." Only when it came to her. I didn't say that out loud, though.

"Well, I go for a walk, watch a movie. Sometimes I meditate. I also listen to audiobooks."

Something in the way she quickly glanced away when she said “audiobooks” clued me in that there was more to that.

“What kind of audiobooks?”

She narrowed her eyes. “You won’t get all my secrets today, Dylan.”

“That’s a secret, then? Good to know. Okay, you’re off the hook for now. What else do you do to relax?”

“I visit my dad.”

“He also lives in the city?” I asked.

“Just outside the city. I visit him a few times a week. He’s housebound.” Her eyes clouded, and those protective instincts from last time we met kicked in.

“I bet he’s happy when he sees you,” I said.

“Yes. Even when I don’t visit, I call and keep him informed of everything in my life. Thank god for FaceTime and all this modern technology.”

The affection in her tone stirred something inside me. I hadn’t been expecting that at all. I thought I was hollow inside when it came to anyone but my family. I didn’t know I could feel anything anymore, but here Mel was proving me wrong. I wanted to learn more about her life and what drove her, what inspired her.

“I see Shauna from reception waving at me. She needs me. I’ll catch you around later, okay?”

“Sure.”

She smiled before leaving the weights area. I continued my exercise. A dangerous plan was already forming in my mind. I was so focused on it that I didn’t realize Ian was here until he walked right up next to me.

“Hey,” he said. “Couldn’t focus anymore. Thank fuck the gym is so close.”

“Yeah.”

“Man, she’s hot,” he said.

I glanced in the direction he was looking. Mel was at the reception desk, talking to a guy. “She’s off-limits.”

“What do you mean off-limits? No one’s off-limits.”

“Mel is Isabelle’s personal trainer.”

Ian turned around slowly, staring at me for a few seconds before bursting out laughing. “Man, you’re giving me the evil eye because I said she was hot. You’ve got it bad.”

“Ian,” I said in a warning tone.

“Very bad. I’m getting on the treadmill before you can give me more shit.”

“Shut up.”

After he hopped on a treadmill, I headed to the locker room. I changed and showered, and the idea from earlier wouldn’t let go. I knew it was ridiculous, but I wanted to spend more time with Mel. I gave my brother shit, but he was right. I was feeling possessive because he’d *looked* at her.

Leaving the men’s changing room, I walked around the main floor, spotted Melanie in the break room again, and joined her. There was another guy in there, but he left shortly after drinking a glass of orange juice.

“Hey. Done for the day?” she asked.

“Yes.” The corners of my mouth twitched. “By the way, I changed my mind about having a personal trainer. I want one.” I gave it a minute so I could look her straight in the eyes. “And I want you.”

Lowering her glass on the table, she looked at me intently. “My pitch about the training won you over, huh?”

“Your pitch did. Just not the part about training. The way you checked me out might have something to do with it. Might,” I teased purposefully to see if what I thought was real or not. When she gasped lightly, covering her mouth before looking around wildly, I had my answer. Her shoulders slumped with relief when she realized we were alone.

“You thought I hadn’t noticed?” I asked playfully.

She groaned, lowering her hand. “You didn’t want to let a flirty text slide even though I was tipsy when I sent it. I have no chance of you letting this go, huh?”

“Zero,” I confirmed. “And just so you know, I’ll bring it up every chance I get during our private sessions.”

“I have no doubt you will.” She grinned, and I couldn’t help but tilt closer. She drew in a sharp breath, licking her lower lip.

I barely staved off the urge to kiss her, but I wasn’t going to resist the next time I saw her. I just knew it.

Ian was right. I had it bad.

Chapter Five

Mel

“Earth to Mel. Where are you?” Shauna asked.

I smiled sheepishly. “Just thinking about my next session.”

It wasn’t exactly a lie, but it also wasn’t the whole truth. I wasn’t thinking about the session itself but the man: Dylan Gallagher. I almost couldn’t believe I’d agreed to this. Our session was starting in ten minutes, and I was on pins and needles. He was already on a treadmill, completing the warm-up.

“You’re so cute, always so stressed out when you have a new client. You’ve been doing this for years,” Shauna said. “Everyone likes you.” Thank God she thought my nervousness was due to taking on a new client, because that wasn’t it at all—it was most definitely because of the man.

Oh, Dylan liked me, there was no doubt about that. He wasn’t *trying* to make my panties melt; it came naturally to him.

What had I been thinking, agreeing to train him one-on-one?

What had I been thinking, flirting with him in my messages?

Eh, the last one was easier to explain. I’d had a glass of wine while listening to a steamy audiobook, and one thing led to another.

As to the private session? Apparently I didn’t seem to be able to think straight around him, not when he pinned me with that sinfully hot gaze.

“Well, I’m off. Wish me luck,” I said, quickly going to the ladies’ room before the session started. I inspected my appearance in the mirror. My dark shoulder-length tresses were firmly up in a ponytail, as usual. I typically wore no makeup at the gym. Even in my free time, I usually sported a

natural look, only using black eyeliner on special occasions when I wanted to highlight my green eyes.

After rinsing my hands, I noticed a message on my phone. I unlocked the screen and gasped.

Elliot: I need to talk to you.

What the hell?

Mel: Forget it. I don't want to see you. Ever.

Elliot: You think I do? I just need something.

Mel: FUCK YOU.

I leaned my forehead against the cold tiles, drawing in a few breaths, trying to relax. He *needed* something. I couldn't believe the nerve of him. My ex was truly a shitty person. I didn't want to change my number because it was a hassle. With trembling hands, I deleted the messages and his number.

I stayed in the ladies' room for a few minutes longer before heading to the weight section. Dylan still had a few minutes on the treadmill, and I snatched the opportunity to drink him in, hoping the view would erase my thoughts of Elliot. Isabelle's brother was wearing Nike shorts and a sleeveless tank top—those arms, yum. He was definitely all man with a build that rivaled any professional athlete.

When he turned around and locked his gaze with mine, I licked my lower lip. Just like that, all the anger those texts provoked slid to the back of my mind. Drawing in a sharp breath, I smiled widely, hoping he couldn't tell how much he affected me. I clasped my hands together, standing next to the weight station as he walked toward me, and I was determined to keep my eyes on his face.

Do not look down, Melanie. Don't be obvious. You'll have plenty of opportunities to check him out later when he's not looking.

There was a thin sheen of sweat on those delicious muscles.

“Hi. I see you've already done the warm-up. Are you ready for me?”

“I’m ready, Mel.”

Just the sound of my name coming from his mouth was doing things to me. I had goose bumps on my arms. Sweet Lord, I was in trouble if I reacted to him this way already. I hadn’t spent even five minutes with him and I was ready for a different kind of workout. Sheesh, I was usually not this responsive to the opposite sex.

Men in T-shirts and shorts surrounded me daily. I didn’t even really register them anymore. But I sure as hell memorized every single inch of Dylan. I was blaming it on his gentlemanly actions that first day. He’d gotten under my skin, and now there was no shaking him off.

“So,” he said, “should I bring up the audiobooks already?”

I tilted my head, smiling. It would seem I had to sort out this flirty situation before I could do my job.

“You can, but it doesn’t mean I’ll answer your questions.”

“That wasn’t our deal.”

“We had no deal. You said you’d bring them up, and I agreed you would.”

He trapped my gaze with his and didn’t reply, but the sheer intensity in his eyes made me squirm.

Oh dear God, it was too easy to get caught up in his seductive smile. I looked around, searching for a distraction before remembering I had the perfect one.

“Do you have the card with your exercises?”

“Yes.”

He handed it to me, and I reviewed everything. It was all pretty standard. I was going to tweak a few things here and there. Everyone’s body was different; even though we liked to talk a lot about body types in fitness, each one responded differently to exercises. You could only be sure they were the right ones by observing your client as they performed them. And I planned to watch Dylan very, very close; I had no problem with that.

“By the way, thank you again for helping me out the other day. Isabelle always said you have a gentlemanly streak, but I have to say, I never believed it until I saw it.” Truth be told, I thought chivalry was long gone.

“You’re welcome, Mel. So, what else did Isabelle say about me?”

“Lots of things. Such as how she was hoping you and your brother would bring someone to the wedding. But I think she’s given up all hope now.”

“Good. I was worried that she still had her hopes up, and I’d have to do something about it.”

Sadness passed over his eyes. He looked away, but I’d caught it, and my heart hurt for him. He deserved to be happy. Every instinct in me wanted to fix whatever was wrong, and although I couldn’t do that, I *could* make him smile.

“Do you always tease your sister?” I had to crane my neck to look up at him; I was tall, but my five feet seven to his over six feet made me crane my neck a bit.

“Yes. But she teases us right back, so don’t feel too sorry for her.”

“Oh, I don’t. I find it all very funny.”

He grinned. “She decided she wanted to be a counselor back when we were kids, so she played everything from the family’s peacemaker to the bad cop.”

“That sounds like so much fun,” I said wistfully. I was an only child, and my mom left Daddy and me when I was one year old. I didn’t even remember her.

Back then we lived in Harrisburg, and Daddy always said Mom longed for a bigger life than he could give her. We only moved to New York City when I was in college. Dad found a job in construction here shortly after I came to town. He said he didn’t want to be far away from me. Thank heavens he was close by. It made it easier to help him through the recovery after his stroke.

Dylan kept entertaining me with antics from their childhood once we started the weight training. I was doing my best to keep my eyes off him and only slipped a couple times. Thankfully, he didn't notice. Fortunately, I kept my professionalism throughout the entire circuit. Dylan did three sets of everything. I offered him some additional mat work to incorporate, and he managed it all with ease.

"Okay, that's it. We're wrapping up this session," I said an hour later. Glancing at the giant clock at the back of the room, I grimaced.

"Damn. I'll be late," I muttered.

"For your next session?"

"No, I'm done for the day. I'm heading out to help a friend with her shelter, and I'm supposed to be there in forty minutes." *Crap, I'll really have to hustle.*

"Where is it?" he asked.

"Queens. I'll never make it in time. And it's raining too. I hope the gym has a spare umbrella." We kept a few for clients, but they were typically gone as soon as it started raining.

"I have a company car that's going to take me to my next meeting. You can ride with me, drop me off, and then he can drive you there."

"There's no need."

"It's raining, Mel."

"Ah, there you go, being chivalrous again."

The corners of his mouth tilted up. He took one step closer. "Besides, it will give us more time to talk. I still haven't heard about all those secrets. Not even one."

I laughed. "I'll add cunning and tenacious to your list of attributes."

"Always," he confirmed. He trapped my gaze in his. Holy shit, the man was intense and so hot that I felt my body temperature rise just because I was around him. He smelled

like a spicy-scented deodorant and even a bit salty, but not sweaty. Perfect.

“Okay, thank you. I’ll change quickly. Thank you so much. I don’t want to be late, and my friend is counting on me. Otherwise I wouldn’t bother you.”

“You’re not bothering me, Mel. Quite the opposite.”

That was the only reason I was saying yes, I told myself. I didn’t want to be late, *and* it was raining.

I was lying to myself, and by the way he was looking at me—with a mix of smoldering heat and amusement—he was thinking the same thing.

Dylan

I showered and changed in fifteen minutes, and to my astonishment, Melanie was already waiting for me at reception. I was wearing a suit, and by the surprised look on her face, I could tell she liked what she saw. Her round green eyes perused me from my shoulders down and then back up. I cocked a brow when our eyes met. She looked away quickly, biting her lip. She was wearing a white dress that reached her knees, and the neckline showed a lot of cleavage. She was so damn sexy that I could barely keep my thoughts straight.

“I asked about umbrellas, but we don’t have any left,” she said.

“No problem. I asked my driver to wait for us in the underground garage. Shall we?”

She nodded. I put a hand to the small of her back as I guided her into the elevator. The gym was on the second floor of a skyscraper. We only needed to go two floors down into the underground garage.

In the small confines of the elevator, I couldn’t miss her reactions to me. She drew in a sharp breath when I touched her lower back. Her cheeks flushed. Fuck, her response made me want to feel more of her, but the door opened.

I pointed to the car waiting for us.

“This is us,” I said.

“You know, I’m used to all the celebrities coming to the gym being picked up by cars incognito in the garage, but I didn’t think noncelebrities did that too.”

“I picked this up by watching Brayden. He needs private transportation for security reasons. I just find it practical. I don’t have to bother with parking, and it’s quicker than ordering an Uber every time.”

I did whatever was necessary to bring more efficiency to my life.

As we got in the car, I introduced her to Jeffrey, my driver. He was a great guy and an asset to the company.

“Jeffrey, you know where to drop me off. Then take Melanie wherever she needs to go.”

“It’s a shelter in Queens. This is the address.” She tapped the screen on her phone, showing it to Jeffrey.

“Got it,” he said.

Melanie leaned back in the seat, securing her seat belt. Our hands touched when she plugged the clasp in the socket, and she drew in a breath. Fuck me. It was a good thing we weren’t alone because I wouldn’t resist kissing her. Those full lips were taunting me. I hadn’t seen her with her hair down until now. She looked gorgeous. I wanted to thread my fingers through it and pull her closer.

“Thank you again for taking me with you,” she said.

“There’s no way I was letting you walk to the subway in this storm.”

“You’re such a gentleman.” She sounded pleased and surprised.

“Well, you’re welcome, anytime.” I noticed the tilt of her head and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing at all. Just trying to piece you together, Mr. Gallagher.”

“What do you have so far? Besides unbelievably handsome, cunning, and tenacious,” I teased.

“Hmmm, let’s see.... You have a soft spot for your siblings and are very protective of women in predicaments. Even if that plight is rain.”

“Not every woman, Mel, just you.”

Her eyes widened. “Now, see, I don’t know what to do with that piece of information.”

I didn’t either. But it was true, and I wanted her to know it.

The tension between us was even more intense now. I could barely hold back from acting on it. Despite what I told my sister, despite knowing Mel and I wanted different things in life.

“So, what kind of shelter is this?”

“It’s for abandoned pets. My friend Charlotte opened it. She’s very good at finding homes for them. I met her at NYU, and we’ve been best friends ever since. She always loved animals. When Dad needed a companion, she helped him find the perfect one for him.”

Her voice always changed when she spoke about her father—it became even warmer.

“How are you helping?” I asked.

“It depends on what she needs. Mostly admin stuff like buying supplies or feeding the dogs. Sometimes I spend time with the dogs and the visitors, and I try to pair them or convince them to take one. Sometimes I go to soak in all the puppy love.”

“Her shelter has puppies? I would’ve thought she’d have mostly abandoned older dogs.”

“We have those too, but a lot of people also abandon puppies. Their dog accidentally gets pregnant, and they don’t want to deal with the puppies, so they’ll drop all of them at the shelter.”

“That’s harsh.”

“Yes, it is. Some are young and should have stayed with the mother to wean a while longer because they can’t even eat solid foods properly. But we nurse them back to health and then eventually find them a home.”

Her eyes lit up. The more she shared with me, the more I wanted to know about her. There was no way my curiosity would be satisfied in the few minutes it would take to reach the intersection of Madison and Montgomery Street, where my meeting was. She was a puzzle for me. One I couldn’t wait to piece together.

“How long are you staying at the shelter?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Two or three hours, I guess. It depends how long it takes me to do everything I have on my list.”

“My meeting will be over by then. I’ll pick you up.”

“What? Why?”

“You made me curious about this place. Besides, it’ll probably still be raining.”

“I’m sure I’ll find an umbrella at the shelter.”

“Don’t make me pull the *secrets* card again,” I said with a grin.

She laughed, running a hand through her thick hair. “Oh no, I wouldn’t want that.”

“So? What do you say?”

“If you insist.”

“I do.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“My pleasure entirely.”

She swallowed hard, fiddling in her seat.

We arrived in front of the building a few seconds later. I walked quickly from the car to the entrance but still got my suit jacket wet.

The meeting was on the fourth floor. It was with a smaller firm that we’d recently acquired. The team consisted of five

people, and they'd developed a kick-ass airdrop software. We were in the process of integrating it into one of the core products we offered to our longtime customers.

We met three times a week so they could update me on their work. Usually I couldn't wait to meet with these guys. I liked their energy and the way their minds worked.

But for the first time since we'd acquired them, I couldn't wait for a meeting to be over. My mind was on Melanie. I could imagine her with that cute smile and positive attitude, convincing people to take dogs home with them. She could convince anyone of anything.

All these details we were debating today were important, but we could discuss them another time. The team had enough to do anyway.

Nearly two hours later, I was itching to get out of here. I was looking at the clock more often than was polite. My host, Dean, took the hint—he was also the boss of the team.

“Dylan, I think we have enough details pinned down. I'll discuss it with the team, and we'll come back to you with more ideas another time,” he said.

Perfect. I got up, shaking their hands before leaving. I loved working with people who could take a hint and interpret nonverbal cues and act on them. Not having to explain myself saved time. I'd asked Jeffrey to leave the car in the nearest parking space and share the location on Google Maps. He'd left the key with the doorman of the building.

While I searched for the car, Isabelle's warning rang in my ears.

“She wants a relationship and everything that comes with it.”

I ignored it, just as I had all the other times it popped in my mind. The desire to see Melanie won over logic and reason.

There was a lot of traffic, but even so, I arrived at the shelter in forty minutes. There was a small parking lot with only one other vehicle, a minibus. I parked in the spot nearest to the shelter and went to look around. The shelter was small

and required a thorough renovation. The white paint was chipped off, and a window was cracked.

I immediately noticed Mel in front of a pen at the side of the house, taking some kids into it. A dozen or so puppies were running around. A kid left the door of the pen open, and one of the puppies ran out. He was black and plump and made a beeline for me, jumping right on my leg. His tiny paws were full of mud, and no matter how much he jumped, he could only reach up to my knee, but that didn't seem to discourage him. It was obvious he wanted me to hold him, so I bent at the waist and picked him up, not just to stop him from ruining my suit but because he wasn't going to stop until he got what he wanted.

Mel came over to us with a huge smile. Her dress was full of mud.

"I'm not dressed for this, I know, but Charlotte texted me when I was at Genesis, and I didn't have anything else to change into. When did you arrive?"

"Just now."

"Someone likes you," she said softly. "And let me tell you, he's shy. He usually hides when we have visitors."

"I think that's what he was trying to do. He wanted to escape the crowd of kids."

"Exactly. And he picked you. See? Even the puppy knows you're a savior."

Chapter Six

Dylan

“He does look happier with you than with the crowd,” Mel said. “I should get back to them.”

“Are they here to adopt dogs?”

“No, it’s a visit from a nearby kindergarten. The kids learn not to abandon animals, and the dogs are happy they have company.” She came closer, petting the puppy I was holding. “You made someone happy. The kids are leaving in a few minutes, but I still have to feed the dogs and close this place up for the evening. Are you okay with that?”

“Sure. I’ll look around.”

“You didn’t have to come at all, and it’s not even raining anymore.”

“I told you I was curious about this place. And about you.”

She smiled playfully, holding her hands at her sides. “I don’t have any secrets. Despite what I said in my drunk, flirty text. I’m an open book.”

“We’ll see about that,” I teased.

She cleared her throat, glancing at the pen. “Okay, well, I’m going to wrap up everything with the kids, and then I’ll show you around. And I’ll take him.”

She pointed to the puppy, who didn’t protest at all when she scooped him under her arm.

“I’ll wait here.”

“Okay. I’ll be quick.”

She went back to the pen and brought all the dogs inside the house along with the kids. A few minutes later, the kids and the kindergarten teacher were all in the minivan. It was just Mel and me now.

“All yours now,” she declared. “Come on. I’ll give you a tour.”

I walked right next to her as she led me inside the house. I couldn't stop looking at her. Her hair covered the curve of her neck, but it tempted the hell out of me.

The second we walked inside, the dog that attacked my suit earlier appeared in the hall. Mel laughed.

"It's like he has radar for you," she said as he ran toward me again.

This time I scooped him up before he could do any more damage to my pants. He seemed like a mix of black Labrador and cocker spaniel.

"I think so too. Little guy, don't get used to this."

"You don't like animals?" Mel asked.

"I do like them. I grew up in Montana in a small town. We were around the animals a lot. We had a dog and two cats growing up. Isabelle loves them too, and I know she wants a dog once they get settled. She and Brayden are moving into a huge house with a yard."

Mel's eyes softened. "Well, if you want to get her a dog, you're in the right place. Come on, let's show you around. It won't take long. It's tiny."

On the inside, it seemed even smaller than from the outside. There were just a few rooms, with bowls of water and food, and many toys on the floor. "There are no cages?" I asked, watching the dogs move around freely.

"No, that's a bit of an antiquated concept as well as a bit cruel, to be honest. It's worked out so far. There are no fights."

She bent down to pick up the bowls on the floor and filled them with water and food.

Where did she find the motivation to do all this in her spare time? She fascinated me. I liked that she didn't mind getting her hands dirty. Her dress was smeared with mud from outside. She even had a bit of dirt on her face, but she still looked fucking gorgeous.

"I'm surprised you're so comfortable getting your hands dirty," I teased her.

She looked over her shoulder as she bent down to tend to the rest of the bowls.

“I can say the same thing about you, Mr. Suit. I won’t lie, I thought you would rant when this little guy got his dirty paws all over you.”

I chuckled. “As I said, I grew up in a small town. We had a yard with animals. I’m used to it. Honestly, I’m more comfortable out of a suit than wearing one.”

“So, then, why do you wear it?”

“It’s good for business. As a software programmer, I’m used to casual clothing, but there’s a shift in a room’s dynamics when I enter it wearing a suit. I can’t explain it, but it seems to make an impression.”

“Oh, please. You’re impressive anyway.”

“Am I? Good to know.”

She sighed, shaking her head. “What is it about you that makes me say things like this? I can’t even blame it on the wine this time.”

I threw my head back, laughing so damn hard that I startled the dog. “You’re something else, Mel.”

“It’s all because of you. And somehow, seeing you holding this little guy isn’t helping.”

We went from the first room to the second, where she again filled containers with water and food. The third room was bigger than the first two. It also had a small desk in one corner with two chairs next to a shelf full of documents. The little guy was getting restless. I put him on the floor, and he went straight to one of the food containers, eating his fill. Mel lowered herself on her knees and patted his head.

“Hey, little guy, that’s all the food for you. You’ll explode if you eat more.”

He ignored her and kept eating away before moving to the bowl with water. Afterward, he made a beeline straight to me. I lowered myself on my haunches, patting his head. He picked up some weird squeaky toy and brought it to me. I had no clue

what he wanted me to do with it, but it was fun to discover. I squeaked it twice, which seemed to scare him. I tossed the toy away, patting his head again. He lay down on one side, clearly wanting his belly patted.

“You know, you’re much more relaxed with him around,” Mel said.

I glanced up and found her looking at me.

“How do you know it’s not your influence?” I asked.

Her lips quirked up in a half smile. “I was with you at the gym too, and that didn’t help you relax.”

“This is different.”

“How?”

I stepped closer, tilting toward her. “It’s just you and me.”

She blushed, looking between us. “And the little guy.”

“I want him for Isabelle.”

Her eyes lit up. “Seriously? This is great.”

“Yes. But she doesn’t move for a few weeks, so I’ll pick him up then.”

“Okay. I’ll mark it in our system that he’s already adopted so someone else doesn’t take him home by accident.”

The dog rolled over on his belly, putting his head on his paws and looking at me with wide eyes.

“I think the little guy doesn’t want to say goodbye,” Mel said.

“He’ll have to.”

“Are you sure about that? You could take him tonight and keep him until Isabelle moves.”

“My lifestyle isn’t compatible with animals. I spend almost no time at home.”

“That’s what dog walkers are for, and dog sitters. A lot of pet owners work full-time, and they make it work.”

“I really can’t have a puppy in the apartment.” As if guessing we were talking about him, he started wailing, making a loud, pathetic sound. “Oh, for Christ’s sake, what’s he doing?”

“I think he’s hoping he’ll go home with you. When he realizes he won’t, he’ll be a bit heartbroken.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Are you trying to emotionally blackmail me?”

She grinned. “Is it working? I’ve been told I have a special talent.”

“No kidding.” I wasn’t heartless. I just really didn’t have time in my life for a pet. So why was I already calculating how I could coordinate everything with a dog sitter? I looked from the dog back at Mel, who was still grinning.

“You want to take him with you, don’t you? Oh my God, you’re *full* of surprises.”

“Yes, I’m taking him now,” I said, surprising the hell out of myself. “What’s the protocol?”

“I have some papers for you to sign. It might be a good idea to enroll him in dog school. I’ll give you some food so he has everything he needs for a couple days, but you should go to a pet shop and buy supplies.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“I’ll give you a list.” She pointed at a small table, and we walked over there. The puppy was trailing us. She picked up a file from the shelf and made crosses with a red pen where there was a blank space. “Fill in name, address, and sign here, and I’ll see about that list.”

While I filled the blanks, she took another sheet of paper from the shelf, handing it to me.

“Okay, so here is the list,” she said.

I stood up, pocketing the sheet of paper. Mel took a small plastic crate from the shelf, putting the dog inside. She also put a bag of dog food on the table.

“You’re all set,” she said, smiling from ear to ear. “I’m so happy you’re taking him.”

“Isabelle will be happy too. I know she’s wanted a dog ever since she left home. Do you need to do anything else here?”

“No, I’m done. I’ll lock up, and we can go.”

“I’ll carry the dog and the supplies to the car and wait for you there.”

“Perfect.”

I carried the crate in one hand and the food in the other. On my way out of the house, I heard her voice echo.

“Hey, Charlotte, we have a new adoption! He’s going to have an amazing home.”

Damn, this woman was too sweet and too good for me. But that didn’t stop me from wanting her.

She came out of the house soon after I secured the carrier on the back seat. She’d pulled her hair back up in a ponytail as she had it at the gym. Fucking hell, her neck was going to be my downfall. I wanted to taste her there—everywhere. The dress was tight enough to show off her curves, and even though she had more skin on display at the gym, she was far more tempting now. I couldn’t stop imagining my hands roaming her body, peeling off her dress.

I snapped my gaze up to her. She cocked a brow. I opened the car door for her, but she didn’t move.

“Wait, you’re driving?” she asked.

“Yeah. Jeffrey only drives me during the day. Otherwise, I’d waste too much time in between meetings with parking.”

“I can take the subway,” she said, shifting her weight from one leg to the other.

“Why? Are you afraid of being alone with me?” I teased as she came over to the car.

“Nope, I’m afraid of myself,” she said with sass, climbing in the passenger seat. “But I didn’t have any wine, so I’m

hoping for the best.”

“I’m hoping for the opposite,” I said before closing the door, enjoying the way her mouth formed a perfect, delicious O.

I went over to the driver side and, once I was inside, asked, “What’s your address?”

“Oh, drop me off at the train station. I’m going to see my dad.”

“I can drive you there.”

“No, it’s outside the city. Trust me, you don’t want to brace the traffic at this time of day. The train is faster.”

I nodded. “Okay, the train station it is.”

“Thank you.”

“You said your dad is housebound,” I said as I drove away. “Does he have a caregiver, or is it just him and your mom?”

She smiled sadly. “My mom left when I was a year old. It’s always been just my dad and me.”

Fucking hell! She seemed to shrink into herself as she spoke. I couldn’t even imagine it since I’d grown up with three siblings and parents who were devoted to each other. My protective instincts were on high alert again.

“I’m sorry.”

She shrugged, playing with a strand of hair. “It is what it is. Dad is awesome. The best parent I could wish for. We lived in Harrisburg. I came here to study at NYU, and he moved to New York when I was in my second year.”

“What did you study?”

“I majored in sports management, but I didn’t find a job. I worked as a receptionist in a dental office for a few years, but after Dad got sick, I needed something with a more flexible schedule. I’ve always been a fitness enthusiast. One thing led to another, and honestly, I love this way more than dental stuff. The pay is great, and I don’t work fixed hours. I can check on

my dad often. I'm happy he's nearby, especially with his condition."

"Why is he housebound?"

"He had a stroke a few years ago. He recovered well, but he still can't move his right leg. He *does* get out of the house, but not as much as before. His life's changed a lot, but he's handling it well. I'm trying to get him this new medicine, but it's so hard to find."

She mentioned the name, and I committed it to memory.

"Anyway, tonight I'm doing all his shopping and seeing if he needs anything else. I try to stop by a few times a week."

"You're amazing. You know that?"

She chuckled, but I realized it was humorless.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing. Not everyone sees things as you do," she muttered.

"What do you mean?"

"My ex dumped me because he figured I wasn't giving him enough attention, that I was spending too much time with Dad, and too much of my paycheck went to his medical needs."

I saw red. Gripping the steering wheel tighter, I said, "Then it's a good thing he's an ex."

She turned to look at me, a smile inching on her face. "That's right. Oh, we're here already." The smile turned into a grin as I pulled the car right in front of the train station's entrance.

"Hey, don't get out on my behalf," she said as I reached for the handle. "You can't park here."

"I know."

"Thanks for dropping me off. And I didn't say even one inappropriate thing. I'm so proud of myself."

She turned to look in the back, and I did the same. The dog must have fallen asleep a while ago because he'd been silent.

Getting out of the car, I went over to open the door for her. I was close enough that when she got out, I could smell her perfume, a mix of flowers and spices. I couldn't name a single one of them, but the result was delicious.

“Mel?”

“Hmm?”

“Are you going to have a glass of wine tonight?”

“Probably. Why?”

“Keep your phone nearby.”

“Why would I do that? It proved to be a dangerous combo last time. You have an interesting effect on me.”

“Do I? You convinced me to take home a dog. I haven't talked you into anything outrageous. Yet.”

“I like that ‘yet.’ So confident.”

“Text me when you get home,” I said.

She threw her head back, laughing hard as she turned around, heading to the station. But I didn't miss her blush.

Chapter Seven

Mel

I arrived home very late that evening. I spent a few hours with Dad, watching *America's Got Talent* and hearing about the newest gossip in his online book club. I had mad respect for my daddy. He'd practically had to start from zero after his stroke. He was the strongest person I knew.

I'd eaten steamed vegetables and fish with him, but by the time I got home, I was still a bit hungry. I always had cheese in the fridge—and, of course, wine. I blushed, remembering Dylan's request to keep my phone nearby. The man was cocky, but I liked it. I ate two slices of cheese, then went outside onto my balcony with a wineglass and my AirPods. I had a date with a steamy audiobook. This was the same dangerous combination that had led to sending Dylan a flirty text last time.

I shouldn't do it again, but I couldn't wait for his reaction. He'd surprised me in so many ways today, from the fact that he'd thought about gifting Isabelle a dog to taking the puppy home with him.

I relaxed in my armchair, looking out at the sky. It was dark, but I'd lit a lot of citronella-scented candles around me. I sent him a picture of my glass of wine and a grinning emoji. He replied in less than a minute.

Dylan: I was waiting for your text.

Mel: Were you now? Why?

Dylan: Last time was unexpected.

Mel: How is the puppy behaving? Did you name him?

Dylan: I want Isabelle to do it. Don't want him to get used to a name. He's asleep. How is your dad?

Mel: Great. We watched a talent show together. He loves them.

Dylan: I've said it before, but you really are amazing.

Mel: I haven't had enough wine to be flirty.

Dylan: I can wait. I'm patient.

I laughed, pondering what to text him back. My pulse was insanely fast because every instinct told me not to do this, yet I couldn't help myself. Isabelle had practically warned me that Dylan wasn't looking for anything serious, but somehow things didn't add up. He was so caring with his family and even that puppy! He asked how Dad was doing. But then again, I wasn't an expert on guys or I wouldn't have fallen for Elliot, my shitty ex. And the few guys I dated before him were equally as disappointing in one way or another.

Mel: Hmm. I think tonight I'll turn in early. Wine flirtiness only happens under specific circumstances.

Dylan: Such as? I have to know so I can replicate them.

I laughed again, pondering his question. He made me laugh so easily. It was surreal. I yawned, getting up from my chair, and headed inside. I poured the rest of my wine down the drain before replying.

Mel: I'm not sure, honestly.

Dylan: Come shopping with me tomorrow. The list reads like hieroglyphics.

Holy shit, he was creative, and I wanted to give him all the points for this, but first I needed to tease him a little.

Mel: Your case isn't compelling. I think any pet shop sales assistant will know what to give you.

He didn't text back but called me instead.

"You thought your case would be more convincing if we talk?"

"Much more."

I grinned just because I heard his voice.

"Let's hear it."

"You don't want me to buy the wrong things, do you? The puppy's going to be the one suffering if I do." His voice was

taunting and lighthearted, but it lit my whole body on fire.
Holy shit.

“Hey, no emotional blackmail. It doesn’t count if you’re stealing my technique.”

“But is it effective?” I could hear the smile in his voice.

“Yes, yes it is,” I admitted. Leaning against the counter, I pondered what to do. It was only shopping; what harm could it do? Besides, what if he stumbled upon a good salesman who’d try to make him buy more things than necessary? I didn’t want anyone to take advantage of him.

Oh wow. The things I tell myself to justify giving in.

“Okay. There’s a pet shop not too far away from the gym. I’ll text you the address.”

“Thanks. See you tomorrow, Mel.” His tone was different. He sounded almost *smug*.

“Why do you sound so triumphant?”

He laughed throatily, and I swear the sound woke every cell in my body. I was hyperaware of my breath and the tingling sensation in my belly.

“I’ve yet to talk you into something outrageous, remember? And I do my best work in person.”

The next day, I met Dylan at the pet shop in the morning, right before our session. I arrived early, so I texted to let him know I was already inside. I handed the sales associate the list. Since I was already here, I could get on with it.

The starter kit, as I like to call it, was quite sizable and expensive, but it was better to be prepared from the beginning rather than keep coming to the store as you discovered that you still needed things. I honestly still couldn’t believe Dylan had taken the puppy with him. He was all swagger and suits, but underneath that rugged exterior was a man full of surprises.

“Okay, this is everything,” the sales associate said.

“Thanks. I’m waiting for my friend to come and pick this up. He’ll be right here.” I texted Dylan to ask him where he was, but he walked in the next second. *Oh God, is he sexy or what?* He wasn’t wearing a suit today, just jeans and a polo shirt. He looked mouthwatering. The shirt showed his perfectly formed biceps, and I had to make a great effort to look him straight in the eyes.

One corner of his mouth lifted in a smile. He flashed me a knowing look before his gaze traveled slowly down my body. Oh, heavens. He couldn’t make me blush this early in the morning. Wasn’t there a rule against that?

Clearing my throat, I pointed at the counter.

“Okay, so I took the liberty of ordering everything. If you want to kick anything off the list, you can. You don’t need all these toys, but he’ll have to keep himself occupied with something when you’re not at home. Where is he anyway?”

“In my apartment with a dog sitter. You said it wasn’t good for a puppy to be alone, and I found an app specifically pairing people with pet sitters.”

“No, a dog sitter is good. Trust me. Otherwise, you can go home and find the legs of your furniture chewed on. I’ve seen it happen. By the way, I have a session with Isabelle tonight. Did you tell her about the puppy?”

“No. It’s a surprise.”

“Good to know. I won’t tell her anything, then.”

He glanced at the counter, cocking a brow at the mountain of supplies waiting for him. “That list looked long, but somehow this seems like even more than I expected.”

“It looks a lot because it’s all piled up on top of each other.”

“Okay, let’s get this over with so we can head to the gym.” He took out his wallet, then pulled his card out.

“Are you taking all this with you to the gym?” I asked while he paid. “Because then we can ask him to keep it here

until you're done. That's possible, right?" I asked the sales associate, who nodded.

"It's fine. My driver is here, and he'll take everything to my apartment. He can also take us to the gym."

"I won't say no to that," I declared. Even though it was still early June, the humidity this morning was insane.

The sales associate frowned after he packed everything but one bowl. "Wait, this food bowl is chipped on one end. I'll bring you another one."

"Okay. I'll get these to the car in the meantime," Dylan said. He took four bags by himself. I carried the dog bed. We put everything in the trunk before slipping into the back seat.

"Wait, we forgot the bowl," I said.

The driver looked at us. "I can go inside. It's only going to take a second."

"Okay, thanks," Dylan said.

The second we were alone, the air in the car crackled with tension. I licked my lips, looking away. A few moments of total silence passed, but the driver didn't return. I couldn't believe I was up in knots just because I was alone with him.

"Thanks for coming with me, Mel," Dylan said.

"You're welcome. I honestly still can't believe you took that puppy home."

"Why not?"

I shrugged one shoulder. "I don't know. I wouldn't have pegged you as a pet lover. You surprised me."

"Surprised me too. You have that effect on me." He caught my eye, bringing his fingers to my jaw, caressing it lightly. Goose bumps broke out on my skin. "And I can't shake off this incessant need...."

"What need?" I whispered.

"To make you do something *outrageous*."

His lips were on mine the next second, warm and sinfully sexy and determined. He wrapped his hand in my hair, cupping my head as he explored me. He overwhelmed my senses and my body. I was lost to the world, needing him to continue kissing me more than anything else. My lips were on fire, and when he cupped my thigh over the fabric of my dress, he lit up the rest of my body too. I was shaking lightly.

He groaned against my mouth, pulling back slowly. I came to my senses, realizing he'd kissed me here in full view of Manhattan. I mean, we were in a car, but still, I was sure the waves of heat radiating from us could be felt everywhere. This man was something else. Wow. I was tempted to check if my underwear had melted away. It felt like that, anyway.

Glancing up, I found him looking at me with those gorgeous, piercing eyes.

“Mel,” he murmured, touching my lip with his thumb.

I shook my head, drawing in a deep breath.

“Dylan, I... I like you a lot, but Isabelle told me some things.”

He frowned. “What things?”

I shimmied in my seat, avoiding his gaze. I was afraid I'd end up kissing him again if I looked at him for too long.

“That you just want to have fun. You're in that phase of your life, and I'm different. I want other things.”

He smiled, still touching my cheek. “I know. She told me, right after warning me not to ask you out.”

I jerked my head back in surprise. “What? When did that happen?”

“That evening after your fainting spell. She couldn't figure out why I didn't take my eyes off you. And since you swore me to secrecy, I didn't tell her about the fainting spell.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Really? That's the only reason you were looking at me?”

He smiled seductively, taking his hand away from my face. I immediately missed his touch, but this was for the better. I couldn't want this man. He was a great guy, but we wanted different things from our lives right now.

"We can be friends," I blurted, realizing I sounded awkward. But I didn't know how to fill the silence. "Like I am with Isabelle and Brayden and Tess."

"Friends," he said slowly, as if he was testing the word and wasn't sure if he liked it. There was a little twinkle in his eyes. "Okay."

My pulse was speeding up just because he was looking at me. Yeah, I had a feeling this friendship thing wasn't going to be very easy.

Thankfully, the driver came back, putting the new bowl in the seat next to him. The gym was only a few blocks away, but it was much faster by car than on foot. Even so, the few minutes' drive was enough for me to feel on pins and needles.

I couldn't ignore this tension between us, and somehow I didn't think it would get more manageable at the gym. When we got out of the car, he put his hand at the small of my back, making me simmer.

Oh, Christ. Dylan Gallagher was dangerous for me.

"See you in a bit," I said once we were inside. "I'm going to check on another client while you do your warming up on a treadmill, okay?"

"Sure, Mel, see you in a bit." His mouth curved in a half smile as if he were laughing at a private joke.

I was hoping these twenty minutes would help us cool off.

No such luck.

I came back exactly twenty minutes later and immediately spotted Dylan running. It was not easy to ignore how sexy he was when he wore a tight tee and pants. Was this guy gorgeous or what?

Since he had his back to me, I felt safe to drink him in. I started at his ankles, because even those were sexy enough to

be admired, and worked my way up slowly.

When I reached his upper back, I realized he was looking over his shoulder—at me. *Oh, wow.* What was the protocol for checking out a friend after you'd had a hot-as-hell kiss? I had no clue how to navigate these murky waters.

He jumped off the treadmill, walking over to me. I sucked in a breath.

“Careful, *friend*, I think you're sending me mixed signals,” he said.

I sighed, holding up my palms in defense. “I admit, caught in the act.”

He laughed, but then his eyes were serious as he turned his gaze on me. “Mel, if this is uncomfortable for you, say the word and I'll get another trainer.”

“No, no, it's fine. I have to get used to all this testosterone and sexy muscles.”

He laughed. “You're surrounded by guys working out every day.”

I shrugged. “I know, okay? But I don't kiss all of them, just you.” Lowering my voice to a whisper, I added, “Besides, you're hotter than everyone here. Can you please stop being so hot? It messes with my concentration.”

“I'll do my best.”

Chapter Eight

Dylan

I got home late that evening, realizing that was not the best scenario for my new temporary roommate. I named the puppy Cody in my mind but didn't want to call him by any name. Isabelle and Brayden should do it. I bent down and scratched his ears before I analyzed the scene in front of me.

“What did you do, break into my shoebox and chew everything?” And by everything, I meant five pairs of shoes. “You managed to do all this damage in the thirty minutes since the sitter left?” She'd messaged earlier, giving me the rundown of the day, and also said he was determined not to sleep in the brand-new crate I got him today.

I took a picture of my chewed shoes and sent it to Mel. I didn't know why, but I wanted to share this hilarious moment with her. She'd completely thrown me for a loop today when she'd said she wanted to be friends, especially after giving in to the kiss like that. She'd completely surrendered to me. Just remembering it was enough to make me hard. *Fuck.*

I wanted Mel in my life. I had no idea what to do about the crazy way I wanted her. During our session, it took all my self-restraint not to kiss her in the middle of the gym.

She called me right away, as I was putting the shoes up, out of the puppy's reach.

“I'm so sorry that he chewed your shoes. Did he also damage your furniture?”

“I haven't checked yet. He's been on his own for half an hour. How much damage can he do during that time?”

“Oh, you don't want to know the answer to that.”

“I guess I'll find out soon enough.”

“So he and the sitter aren't getting along, then?”

“No, they are. The sitter had to leave earlier than anticipated, and I was a bit late, but she did say he's not

sleeping in his dog bed.”

“Oh, well, he does have to get accustomed to that. Where did he sleep last night?”

“On the couch, I think. That’s where I found him in the morning next to a huge mess. I forgot to take him out at night.”

“Hmm... well, some puppies do prefer a couch. Oh, Dylan. I can’t believe he chewed your shoes.”

“My brother’s got a puppy?” I heard Isabelle’s voice in the background.

“Oh no,” Mel exclaimed. “I didn’t know you were back, Isabelle.”

“Put me on speakerphone,” I said.

A second later, Isabelle’s voice was loud and clear. “Do my ears deceive me?”

“Not at all, sis.” Since the cat was out of the bag, I had to fess up. “It’s my present for you. I know you want one.”

“Holy shit! Really? You’re the best brother in the world. But wait, why is he at your place?”

“Because I didn’t want to leave him at the shelter for another two weeks until you move,” I explained.

“Awww... I knew you were a softie somewhere deep down under that armor. Very deep,” my sister taunted.

I laughed. I would never hear the end of it. I was sure of it.

“What does he look like?” Isabelle inquired.

“He’s black. I’d say a mix of Labrador and cocker spaniel,” I explained.

“When can I see him?”

“After you move.”

“Ha! The joke’s on you, brother. I have a puppy, and I want him right now.”

“You’re not getting him. Not until you move, anyway.”

“It’s not good for a young pup to change places too often,” Mel cut in. “Wait a second. I’ll take you off speakerphone.” A few seconds later, the background noise faded as Mel said, “Listen, my session with Isabelle is going to be over in twenty minutes. If you want, afterward I can drop by your apartment and see if there’s anything I can do to help him settle in.”

“Sounds perfect.” I didn’t even have to come up with an excuse to lure her here. This was my lucky night. “Make sure Isabelle doesn’t tag along.”

Mel laughed. “No, I’m with you on that, don’t worry. She’s giving me the evil eye, but I can handle it.”

“I have no doubt.”

“I can give you some pointers. I do that sometimes for people who adopt a dog. When it doesn’t adapt, sometimes they bring it back.”

“I wouldn’t bring a dog back, Mel. I’m not heartless.”

“I know, but I think this will be easier for the two of you.”

“Okay. I don’t live far away from the gym. I’m near Battery Park. I’ll text you the exact address.”

I could still hear my sister laughing in the background.

“Okay, I’ll see you later,” Mel said.

After she hung up, I took stock of the living room. The furniture didn’t seem harmed, but then I had metal legs for most of it. I lived in a three-bedroom apartment in a high-rise overlooking the Hudson River and Battery Park. I’d chosen this space for two reasons: it was close to the office, and it had come fully furnished. Everything was new and modern, with a lot of metal and wood. The real estate agent had called it industrial style. I was clueless at this sort of thing, but it looked decent.

While waiting for Mel, I played fetch with a small rubber ball with the puppy. The sitter told me this morning that it was an excellent exercise to help him get rid of excess energy in the evening. He didn’t quite seem to get the hang of the game, though. He came to me instead of following the rubber ball. I

went with him outside for potty training, thinking about the evening ahead. I had a great plan for tonight. I was going to take Mel out to dinner, where we could revisit the idea of us being friends. I couldn't fool myself—friendship with Mel wasn't going to be enough. The woman stirred too many things inside me. And they all crossed the boundary of friendship.

After Cody and I returned inside, he began running around the living room in circles. A few minutes later, the doorman rang, announcing that I had a visitor. I told him to send Mel up. At the same time, my phone lit up with a message from Isabelle. I grinned without reading it. I had a hunch I knew what it was about. I'd deal with it later.

When I heard the elevator ping, I opened the door. Mel was wearing the same dress from this morning. Her hair was up in a ponytail. I usually didn't notice details about women, but when she had her hair like that, her shoulders were so inviting, begging to be kissed and explored. I wanted to discover all her sweet spots.

“Hey, I hope I'm not too late.” She stepped inside, looking around. “This is a great place and so central.”

“Where is yours?”

“It's in Bay Ridge. I love it. It has an amazing small-town feeling. I live on the second floor of a renovated townhouse that someone split into apartments. It's not close to the gym, but it's not too bad a commute. So our guy here is giving you headaches, huh? In his defense, most puppies do. Did he ruin any furniture?”

“No, the furniture is okay.” I looked into the living room and found him in the corner of the couch. “He's in his favorite spot on the couch again.”

Mel glanced from the sofa to the dog bed next to the door.

“Why don't we put the bed next to the couch? I think he might take to it more easily.”

“Sure, let's try it. Why not?” I took the dog bed and placed it where Mel indicated. The pup came to the edge of the

couch, quickly looking down at the dog bed before heading back in his corner.

I laughed. “He’s not very impressed, is he? I don’t think that’s going to work out tonight.”

“No, not tonight, but from time to time, put him there, and I think he might grow to like it.” She sat on the floor, patting his belly. He was wiggling his tail, stretching to flash her more of his stomach.

“How did you manage to get rid of Isabelle? I half expected both of you to show up on my doorstep.”

“Have a little faith in me,” she said with a wink but then averted her gaze.

“Did Isabelle warn you again about me?” I joked, crouching to sit on the floor next to her.

The tips of her ears turned red. “Umm, no. But she was super interested in how you ended up at the shelter in the first place.”

“What did you tell her?”

“That’s between your sister and me.” Her tone was teasing. Her eyes sparkled. I leaned forward a few inches, barely able to keep from kissing her. She sucked in a breath, turning abruptly to look at the puppy. One hand was next to her thigh, clenched in a fist, as if she were barely holding back from touching me.

Fucking hell, this woman!

It wasn’t just that I wanted more than friendship.

I needed it.

“Mel, I would like to take you out to dinner tonight if you don’t have plans. As a thank-you for stopping by and for helping me out at the store. And if you have plans tonight, I’d like us to make plans for another night,” I added before she could shut me down.

To my surprise, she smiled, looking at the pup, who was now chewing the freaking armrest.

“Oh, fucking hell. The couch?” I scooped him up, placing him on his bed.

“Yeah. I don’t think leaving him alone is such a good idea. I don’t think you can find a dog sitter on such short notice. We can order in,” she said.

Bingo! What I wanted was to spend time with her. It didn’t matter where or how. It was much better if we stayed here in my apartment. That way, I had her all to myself.

Chapter Nine

Dylan

We ordered pizza from a nearby Italian restaurant that boasted quick delivery. They kept their word, bringing us the food in fifteen minutes. In the meantime, the pup fell asleep.

“We could have just gone out,” I said as we sat on the floor. She’d ordered a pizza with vegetables. Mine was with pepperoni and cheese.

I’d put the pizza on plates, but somehow we ended up sitting on the floor again, in front of the couch. Mel was leaning with her back against the sofa right next to the pup.

“No, I think he probably fell asleep because he hears us talking. He feels safe. I bet if we went out now, he’d wake up right away and start causing trouble.”

“Good to know.” I couldn’t take my eyes off her. I wanted nothing else but to touch her lips, everywhere I could.

“Hey, don’t look at me like that,” she said playfully.

I held up a hand in defense.

“Sorry. I can’t always behave, even though I try.”

She cocked a brow as if she wasn’t buying it before glancing at the pup again.

“How is your dad taking care of a dog?” I asked. “Isn’t it difficult?”

“Not really. He ties the leash to the wheelchair when they go for a walk, and in the house, he has his routine. He works as a transcriptionist, so his hours are flexible. After he got sick, I seriously couldn’t believe how determined he was to keep going, you know? And after he adopted Buddy, he became his best friend.”

Her eyes were slightly glassy. She shook her head as if trying to shake away the sadness.

I wanted to contribute. I wanted to take it all away.

“Hey, you’re giving me with that intense look again.”

I set down my slice of pizza, clearing my throat. “What was it you asked me at the gym? To stop being so hot, right? Well, I can try to do that, but that’s about it.”

“Yeah, but you haven’t tried very hard. I mean, look at you in that polo shirt. You could have put on something loose.” She tilted her head as if considering her next words. “Maybe a paper bag over your head. Yeah, that would do it.”

I winked. “I’ll keep that in mind for our next encounter. But I can’t promise I won’t give you any intense looks.”

“The problem with intense is that it’s bordering on hot.”

I winked at her again.

She sighed. “You’re making it hard for me to keep my resolutions.”

I frowned. “Your New Year’s resolutions?”

She looked up from her slice of pizza. “No, I had an accident recently. I thought Isabelle might have mentioned it to you.”

“No, she didn’t.”

“I was in a car crash three weeks ago. Nothing bad happened to me, but the poor driver got the brunt of it. A car smashed into us sideways after running a red light. It was a scare. It made me rethink a few things. Now I’m more determined to enjoy my life and every good thing I have in it.”

“That’s a great resolution. What are the others?” I asked.

She took a bite of her pizza as if she needed even more time to gather her thoughts.

“Mel?” I pressed.

“I don’t want to date guys who aren’t on the same page as me,” she said finally. “I learned the hard way that if you don’t want the same thing from the beginning, it makes it difficult.”

That emotional look in her eyes slayed me. I wasn’t the only one with scars here.

“Even if you think you’re on the same page with someone from the beginning, things can always change later,” I said. “I was together with my ex for seven years. When I proposed, she suddenly didn’t know if I was the one. If she wanted to spend her life with me.”

Melanie winced. “I’m sorry. That’s terrible. Seven years. That’s a long time. When did you break up?”

“A little over two years ago.”

“I’ve never been in a relationship that long. My longest one was three years.”

“Was he the douchebag who was annoyed you were taking care of your dad?”

“Yes. My head is still spinning when I think about it.”

Straightening up, she put her plate on the floor. She hadn’t eaten the crust at all. She’d also picked off the onions and artichokes.

I pointed to the plate. “Aren’t you going to eat the crust?”

“No, too many carbs for me.”

“You’re joking, right? You look fantastic.”

She actually blushed. She must get that compliment a thousand times a day, but hearing it from me made her blush. I liked where this was going.

“Thank you, but I’m a fitness trainer, and the studio very often asks me to share pictures on social media. I do have to look my very best. That’s kind of a job hazard, but I don’t mind. I don’t like the crust. I mostly like the pizza for the cheese, which, yes, I know, is also a calorie bomb. Don’t remind me.”

“I wasn’t going to. I was just going to ask if I can have your crust.”

She pushed her plate to me, and I brushed her fingers with my hand when I took it. She licked her lower lip, looking right at my mouth, and I instantly knew she wasn’t going to leave

my apartment tonight before I claimed at least another kiss. We both wanted it too much.

“You eat carbs, and you look this amazing. I didn’t think it was possible to have a six-pack unless we gave carbs up completely.”

I cocked a brow, “How do you know I have a six-pack?” I’d never taken off my shirt in front of her.

She blushed again. “It was an educated guess.”

I threw my head back, laughing. “You gave this a lot of thought, didn’t you?”

“More than I should, yes,” she admitted.

“Then it’s not my fault if you break your resolutions.”

She pointed at me. “Yes it is. You’re not supposed to encourage me.”

“I *want* you to break them, so why shouldn’t I?”

“Oh, Dylan, what am I going to do with you?”

“The question is what am *I* going to do with *you*?” I kept my gaze on her until she turned to the pup, stroking his head. Even in his sleep, he seemed to like it.

“How come you moved to New York?” she asked all of a sudden, clearly trying to change the subject. “That only happened last year, right?”

I nodded. “Yes, Ian and I were in Washington before with our software company. We then started working with companies based in New York too and decided to expand our reach. Right now, we’re programming software that will change how people working in weather-dependent jobs can get insurance. We’re going to submit it to the Innovator of the Year competition. If we win, it’s going to be rolled out to the whole country very fast. It’s not for catastrophic events like hurricanes or floods. Those are covered by existing programs.”

“That sounds like an interesting project. That means farmers who have crops will be better off if one year there’s not enough rain?”

“Yes. That’s the example that came first in most people’s minds, though farmers are already better than others in their insurance deals. There are also other industries where this is necessary. For example, my parents operated the ski lift back in Montana, and it usually snows. In the few years when it didn’t, that was a tough time for us. We barely made ends meet. We had some neighbors who pitched in to help us, but we wouldn’t have made it without that help. I don’t want anyone to have to go through that trouble. It was a hard time.”

She looked at me with soft eyes. “You’re a great person, Dylan.”

“Thank you. Does that change your resolution in any way?”

She laughed, tilting her head and biting her lower lip. I captured her mouth, moving closer to her. She opened up to me right away, surrendering even faster than this morning. She tugged at my hair and my shirt, and I nipped her tongue lightly. I pulled her in my lap, groaning when she suddenly collided with my cock. I kept kissing her, tasting her, exploring her. I couldn’t get enough.

“You’re bad for my resolution,” she murmured when we paused. “But you kiss *so well*.” She touched my lips, looking at me intently. “Just kissing, okay? Nothing else.”

I took that as an invitation to kiss her some more. I needed it. It was like I was possessed with the need to taste her again. I captured her mouth, slipping my tongue between her lips, coaxing her tongue until she moaned against me. I felt it reverberate through my throat and go straight to my cock. I was already hard. I pressed my fingers into her ass cheeks, bringing her center even closer to my erection. She moaned again, then paused the kiss, laughing as she climbed off me.

“Okay, I changed my mind. Your kisses are so good that they’ll mess with my mind. They already mess with my hormones. I think I should go.”

“Mmm, no. Bad idea.” I touched her lower lip with my fingers, kissing the corner of her mouth. “But if that’s what you want, I respect that.”

“Well, the pup is sleeping, and we’ve established you’re a danger to me. I think it’s the smartest thing to do.”

We both rose to our feet, and she started walking to the door. I waited for a beat, trying to rein in my hard-on and clear my mind before going after her.

“I’ll drive you home,” I said.

“No, no, no. We need to work on your gentleman streak. It’s going to be my kryptonite.”

“Tell me more.”

“You wanted to make me do something outrageous, and you did. I think it’s enough for one evening, don’t you think?” she asked in a teasing tone.

I opened the door, leaning in a few inches as she slipped out. “When it comes to you, I’m not sure there is enough at all.”

Chapter Ten

Dylan

The next morning, Ian came into my office with a shit-eating grin that told me his mind was not on business. He sat on my couch instead of taking the seat in front of me.

“So, I heard you’ve got a dog.”

I grinned. “Isabelle already told you?”

He confirmed with a nod. “Obviously. She told Mom and Dad too.”

I leaned back in my chair, lacing my fingers on top of my head. That was bad. They might reach all sorts of conclusions. Our parents liked to read into everything.

“She did tell you it’s a present for her, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t explain what it’s doing in your apartment.”

“I didn’t want to leave him at the shelter until Isabelle moves.”

Ian cocked a brow. “I see. You wanted to impress Mel. Did it work out?”

“That’s not why I took him home.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

“So, you’re dating her now?” he asked.

“No.”

He rose from the couch, slowly approaching my desk, pointing at me.

“Holy shit! But you want to, don’t you? Finally. I was afraid you were turning into me after the breakup. It really did a number on you.”

I stared him down. “Really? You want to talk about that?”

He held his hands up in defense, finally sitting in the damn chair. “No, no. We buried that hatchet.”

My brother and I were close. I’d always looked out for him. I’d never seriously gotten pissed off at him until I found out he knew Lina was cheating and didn’t tell me anything. It was the first time we had a falling-out. He claimed he’d only found out after we’d broken up, so telling me would have only been rubbing salt in the wound, which was true. But I always liked to know all the facts, especially if they concerned me. Isabelle talked me out of being pissed at him. She told me Ian had tried to protect me, which I wasn’t used to, considering I was the older one.

“Okay, so let’s talk about this, then,” I said, pointing to the stack of documents in front of me.

“Just so you know, the fact that you’re evasive about it proves my point,” Ian said. His shit-eating grin was back.

“Ian. Work. Now. We only have forty minutes before our phone call with the first client.”

“That’s enough time to get the scoop from you *and* discuss the agenda.”

I shook my head. “There’s no scoop. There’s nothing.”

“Yeah, I don’t buy it. But whatever works for you, man.”

We started talking about the documentation for project Z, and maybe because we’d just been talking about her or maybe because I hadn’t stopped thinking about her since she left my apartment, an image of Mel popped up in my mind. I hadn’t gotten to kiss her neck last evening, and I was still beating myself up over it. I’d fantasized about it the whole night.

“No, no. You’re not allowed to space out if I can’t tease you about Mel,” Ian exclaimed. “Holy shit, you were thinking about her, weren’t you? You don’t have it bad. You have it very, very bad.”

My family was getting a bit too good at reading me.

“Just wait until our parents get wind of this,” he went on.

“They won’t,” I said. “Unless you blab.”

He held up a finger. “You forget we have two sisters.”

I laughed, sinking lower on the leather seat, glancing at the stack of papers in front of me.

“I can’t believe I have to review these today,” I said.

“Don’t remind me. I’ve got a stack too, and I didn’t even start.”

“You think we’re crazy for taking on project Z?” I asked him. We were very well off just by offering our programming services to our existing clients, as well as licensing a virus protection software we’d developed.

“Probably, but we’ve never backed down from a challenge. And it’ll be worth it if it helps people not go through the same thing our parents did.”

The same thing motivated both of us. Josie had already been in New York, so she didn’t get wind of our parents’ troubles, but Isabelle, Ian, and I grew even closer during those hard years.

My phone started buzzing on my desk.

“It’s Mom,” I said, checking the screen. “That’s weird. She never calls in the morning.”

Ian chuckled. “Unless she got news from a certain sister last evening. And that’s my cue to go to my own office.”

I answered the phone as he left the room. I checked in with my parents a couple times a week, but maybe this was an emergency. As a rule of thumb, I always picked up the phone.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Darling, how are you?”

“Busy,” I replied.

“You always are. Well, I won’t keep you for long. Isabelle told us you got her a puppy.”

Right. So it wasn’t an emergency. Ian was right. I had to laugh. At least they didn’t know about Mel. I should consider myself lucky.

I picked up a pen, intending to leave notes at the edge of the document whenever something stood out.

“I did.”

“And this woman you went to the shelter with is a *friend*?”

I stopped in the act of marking the document, laughing. I wasn't sure if this was Isabelle's work—asking Mom to dig for info—or if Mom was curious.

“What are you asking, Mother?”

“Well, what I did.”

“Why would she be anything other than a friend?” I was interested in her answer.

“Just a mother's intuition.”

That was clear as mud.

“Mel is a friend, Mother.”

“Hmm....” She didn't sound at all convinced.

“Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?” I asked.

“No, no. I'll let you get on with your work. Have a great day, darling.”

“You too.”

After the call disconnected, I remembered my conversation with Mel about her dad. She and I were so similar in this regard—always looking out for our family and trying to give them the best. I remembered her telling me about this medicine she wanted to get for her dad, and I knew just the person to call to make it happen. Ian and I had contacts in the pharma industry, and while I typically wasn't one to ask for favors, this was important to Mel, and she was a friend.

For now.

Chapter Eleven

Mel

“Thanks for helping me,” Charlotte exclaimed. My best friend and I were in my apartment, sorting out the accounting for the shelter. It had been a short day at the gym. My last session would have been with Dylan, but he canceled at the last moment because he had a meeting. It had been three days since I went to his apartment, and he hadn’t shown up at the gym at all. I couldn’t help wondering if he was avoiding me.

“No problem. Now, since we’re done with accounting, want to join me for a glass of wine on the balcony?”

Charlotte nodded excitedly, running a hand through her platinum blond hair. Unlike me, she was a born and bred New Yorker. When we met at NYU, she made it her mission to make me fall in love with the city. We navigated our student days side by side, waitressing every spare minute to make ends meet.

“You know, I think I should adopt some of your resolutions. I like the idea of enjoying the sunset when possible.”

“I know, right? It’s such a relaxing way to wind down after a long day.”

We’d been working from the couch in my living room, and I got up, stretching my neck. I was about to head to the kitchen when my phone buzzed in my pocket. Taking it out, I glanced at the screen.

Unknown: We need to talk.

I blinked, checking the number, and I instantly saw red. It was Elliot’s. I considered myself a calm person, but my ex was the crappiest person I’d ever met.

Mel: No, we don’t. We have nothing to say to each other.

Unknown: Don’t be like this. It’s important.

“What’s wrong?” Charlotte asked. “You look like you want to throw your phone out the window.”

“Elliot messaged me.”

“Hell no. Why didn’t you block his number?”

“Umm... I’m not sure how to do that. I deleted it.”

“It’s not the same thing as blocking. Come on. Give me your phone, and I’ll do it.”

I handed her the phone, and she tapped the screen a few times.

“Ready. Oh. Wait, you have another message. From Dylan. That’s the guy who took the puppy for his sister, right?”

“Yes.” I stretched out my hand, grabbing the phone.

“Oooh, someone’s excited.”

Dylan: Hey, I found someone who can get the medicine for your dad, but I need a copy of the prescription. And if you text me your address, I’ll have it sent to you.

My eyes bulged, and I immediately called him. He answered right away. Charlotte was watching me with curiosity.

“Oh my God. How did you find that?” I asked instead of saying hello, but I was far too excited.

“I pulled some strings. It was important to you.”

I brought my hand to my chest. This meant more than he could know.

“Thank you. It’s amazing actually. I have a copy of the prescription scanned on my phone. I’ll just forward it to you. Is that okay?”

“Yeah. I’ll forward it to my contact, and then I’ll have someone pick it up and deliver it to you tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to do that. You can leave it with your doorman, and I’ll pick it up tomorrow on my way home from the gym.”

“Okay. I’ll do it like that, then. What are you doing now?”

“I’m about to watch the sunset.” I made a split-second decision before I could talk myself out of it. Taking the phone away from my mouth, I whispered the next words to Charlotte. “Do you mind if I take a rain check tonight?”

She grinned. “Only if you tell me why you’re blushing while you’re talking to him.”

Laughing, I put the phone back to my ear. “Do you want to grab dinner? My treat for getting Dad’s medicine.” My heart was in my throat as I waited for his answer. Charlotte started laughing.

“Sure, I’ll tell the dog sitter to stay longer. Where are we going?”

“There’s a great sushi place next to me. It’s next to the gingerbread house. Do you know it?”

“No. I’ve heard about it, I think, but I’ve never been there.”

“Okay. I’ll text you the address. Wait a second and I’ll do it right now.”

After I sent him the text, he said, “Okay, I’m plugging it in the GPS. It says I’m going to be there in half an hour.”

“Perfect,” I said. “I’ll meet you in front of the restaurant. I don’t think we need a reservation. It’s the middle of the week.”

“I can’t wait, Mel.” His tone sounded conspiratorial, and that made my pulse spike even more. Oh, sweet Lord. Judging by the hot-as-sin kisses he gave me last time, I was playing with fire. But at least this time we were going to be in public.

As soon as the phone call disconnected, Charlotte sprang to her feet.

“Spill it. Are you dating him?”

I smiled, putting my hands on my cheeks. They felt warm. “No. We kissed a couple times.”

Her jaw dropped. “And you didn’t say anything? I’d make you tell me everything right now, but I don’t want to make you late for your date with hot stuff.” She headed to the entrance

door, slipping on her ballerina shoes, stuffing her laptop in her backpack, and throwing it over her shoulder.

“It’s not a date. I’m taking him to dinner as a thank-you.”

“Liar, liar, pants on fire,” she whispered right before leaving the apartment.

I’d argue the point, but she *was* right.

As soon as I was alone, I went into a frenzy—time to get ready. I plugged in earbuds, playing a super-steamy romance book. It was what the doctor ordered. Heading to my bathroom, I let it play while I put on makeup, mascara and some eyeshadow. I also used the eyelash curler because I liked that curling my lashes seemed to make my eyes appear more prominent.

I only needed to comb my hair, not style it. I washed it before leaving Genesis. I didn’t blow-dry it, so it fell in wild curls around my shoulders. *What to wear, what to wear?* This was a casual dinner between friends who’d kissed.

Twice. Well, technically three times.

Oh my God.

Did I accidentally ask him out on a date?

I bit my lip, looking at my phone. I couldn’t ask. It was going to sound silly. I sounded childish even in my mind. It was dinner. That was all.

The mid-June weather was pretty hot, so I put on a red dress that looked great on my body and molded to my shape. It had short sleeves and a V-neckline. It wasn’t deep, but enough to be enticing, which was not the point for dinner between friends, but hey, I liked the dress, so I was going to wear it.

I paired it with black heels that made my legs look longer and were pretty comfortable to walk in. Unfortunately, I couldn’t walk in sky-high heels without getting blisters or losing my balance. A two-inch heel was all I could do, but I rocked it.

Once I was done, I calmed down somewhat. I still had fifteen minutes until I had to be at the restaurant, and it was

five minutes away. I couldn't believe Dylan had gotten Dad's medicine. Who did that? He was unbelievable. *And not for me*, I reminded myself. I couldn't want him. There was no possible way this could end well. But I did want Dylan in my life as a friend. He was a great guy, which wasn't such a stretch considering he was related to Isabelle. But I knew some people made great friends, just not great boyfriends. So I had to make sure that the lines weren't blurring.

I shoved my phone and wallet in a tiny black purse before stepping out. There was no elevator since I lived in a converted townhouse and I guess they never thought to put one in. I practically jumped down the flight of stairs. Smiling, I went outside. I loved Bay Ridge. I did feel like I was living in a small town, and the community feeling was strong around here. There were plenty of parks and beautiful architecture. My favorite street was Doctor's Row that boasted homes in the renaissance revival style.

I strolled to the restaurant, knowing I was going to be there before Dylan. To my astonishment, he was already pacing out front.

"Hey, you're here early." I walked right up to him. He leaned in to kiss my cheek. The skin-on-skin contact singed me. He smelled delicious, like soap and nothing else, and his five-o'clock shadow gently grazed my skin. I felt his hand on my waist as his lips touched my cheek, and I was already on fire.

Holy shit!

When he pulled back, I sighed deeply. I resigned myself to the fact that I wasn't going to be able to keep from checking him out. But as long as I kept my hands and lips off him, I was okay.

We went inside and quickly found a small table by the window. Dylan held out a chair for me as I sat down.

"Here you go with that gentleman streak again."

"I do what I can." He winked, sitting down across from me. The menu was already on the table. It was a simple sheet

of paper with a plastic cover.

“This is all they have,” I said, pointing to it. “They don’t have many options, but they have incredible dishes. I recommend tuna sushi and even sashimi. They fly it in from Japan, and it’s exquisite. It’s the best I’ve eaten. I don’t even know why this place isn’t more famous.”

Dylan scrutinized the menu, then looked up at me. “You know this place, so order whatever you think is best. I eat anything.”

“Okay.”

We called the waiter, and I ordered the large platter to share. It had something from everything. We also ordered wine.

Once the waiter left, I felt a bit nervous. This felt more and more like a date. *It’s not a date. It’s not a date*, I repeated in my mind, but it wasn’t helping. The way he was looking at me wasn’t either. He was drinking me up and making no secret of it. And I didn’t have it in me to chastise him again about it. It wasn’t like it helped when I did it last time. If anything, it seemed to make us even more aware of the tension between us.

“Before I forget, here is the medicine.” He took it from his suit jacket pocket, sliding it to me over the table.

I tucked it carefully in my bag.

“Thank you so much. How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing.”

“Dylan—”

“I mean it. It’s nothing I wouldn’t do for my parents.”

I simply melted. “Do you see them often?”

“They come to the city a few times a year, especially since Josie had Sophie.”

“Oh, I met Josie. She’s so lovely.”

“Josie isn’t training at the gym, though, right? I would have known.”

“No. no. She came once after Isabelle finished her practice, but I think she might join us soon. She said she likes the idea of a personal trainer. She says it increases the odds of her showing up if she knows she has an appointment. I think that’s why most people want a personal trainer.”

Dylan chuckled. “Well, I didn’t. I have no problem showing up. I just want a perfect excuse to spend time with you.”

I blushed, looking at the table. Yeah, if I thought I was tongue-tied before, after that my mind was completely blank, but my pulse sped up. I felt it in my chest and my neck.

“So you were saying about your parents?” I said, trying to steer us back to a safe topic of discussion.

He smiled knowingly, clearly seeing through my ruse. “Yes. I wish they came more often, but I honestly think if they weren’t so set in their ways, they’d move here. Especially since all their children live in New York. They’ve always wanted grandchildren to spoil. And now they have Sophie. She is going to be one spoiled little girl,” he said. “Josie keeps telling us all to stop buying stuff or they’re going to need a bigger house.”

Well, well. For someone who had sworn off love, he adored children.

I’m telling myself what I want to hear, and that never leads anywhere good.

Luckily, before I could fantasize about what a little boy would look like with Dylan’s eyes and my hair, the waiter came with our platter of sushi.

“This is why I like sushi so much. It’s so fast.”

He looked at the platter, nodding appreciatively. “This looks great. I haven’t eaten sushi in a while. Last time, I got food poisoning. I’ve been avoiding it since.”

“Why didn’t you say any of that when I told you to come to a sushi place?” I asked, mystified.

“Again, because I wanted to spend time with you.”

I didn’t say anything, just took a bite of the sushi. “How did you get the medicine?” I asked.

“I know a few people in the pharma industry and asked them for favors.”

“Hmm... I remember Isabelle told me once that you don’t like doing that.”

He looked at me in surprise. “It’s true. But you’re an exception. I can’t wait until Isabelle hears about it.”

“Why?”

“She’s already giving me so much shit about taking the puppy home.”

The corners of my mouth twitched. “Well, it *was* unexpected.”

“You make me do unexpected things.” His gaze was so intense that I couldn’t keep eye contact for too long, so I glanced at the sushi platter again. I asked him more about his family as we cleared the platter, and we ended up talking about Isabelle.

“When are they moving to the new place?” I asked.

“Next week or the one after that. They’re not sure.”

“Brayden’s still on tour now, right?”

“Yes. It’s a bit hard for Isabelle, coordinating everything by herself.” He sounded concerned.

“She’s got all of you, though.”

“True, but things will be easier for her once the tour is over. This past year has been very intense for her. We try to be there for her for anything she needs, but it’s not the same.”

I wondered what it must feel like to have such a big family that loved you unconditionally. I pouted at the empty plate. I

wanted to hear more about him, and Sophie, and his parents, and anything else he wanted to tell me.

“They don’t have a good dessert, but I do have some cheesecake at home.”

Holy shit, what did I just do? I was *not* myself around Dylan. Or rather, I was—a bolder, flirtier version of myself.

“The sun has already set, but if we go up on my balcony, we can still see the last rays,” I added quickly.

He laughed at me in surprise, as if he weren’t expecting this. To be honest, I wasn’t expecting it either. I was sure it wasn’t a good idea to spend more time with him, especially in my apartment. But I wasn’t ready for our evening to end.

“That sounds great,” he said. “Let me get the check.”

“No, no, I invited you, remember?”

“Mel, that’s not going to happen.” He burned me with his gaze. I crossed my legs under the table, accidentally touching his thigh. The look in his eyes turned almost feral.

“Hell yes it is. You bought Dad’s medicine, which you’re not even letting me pay for, so I’m paying for dinner.” You’d think I’d just told him something awful by the way his gaze studied mine, unflinching. He really liked doing things on his own terms—but so did I.

“Okay. Thank you for the invitation. The next dinner is on me.”

I tried to hide my smile as I flagged down the waiter. I paid quickly, noticing a few couples were waiting for a table.

“How far is your place?” Dylan asked as we stepped into the evening air. It hadn’t cooled at all. But then again, we’d only been inside for about forty minutes.

“It’s five minutes away.”

We walked side by side, and I pointed out the gingerbread house to him.

“They’ve been trying to sell it for a few years, but I guess the price is too high.”

“It looks exciting,” he admitted. “Why don’t they make it a museum?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I would love to see the inside.”

I pointed to a few more buildings as we walked by them, right until we arrived in front of my townhouse.

“We’re here,” I said. “Come on, let’s go up. I live on the second floor.”

I walked in front of him as we climbed the stairs. I could feel him right behind me. The heat of his body was turning my knees weak. I was starting to have doubts. Had this been a crazy idea? We could barely keep our hands off each other in public, and we’d failed inside his apartment. I wasn’t sure we were going to fare any better in mine.

Chapter Twelve

Mel

Unlocking the door, I stepped inside, closing it after him.

“It’s small. I only have one bedroom. And the balcony is just off the living room.” I pointed to the door next to the TV that led out onto the balcony. “Do you want wine? I have a great chardonnay.”

“Sure.”

“Okay. You can go outside, and I’ll be right there with the cheesecake, two glasses, and a bottle.”

“I’ll help you.”

We went into the kitchen, which was next to the living room. It was small with a few cabinets and a little stove, refrigerator, and sink, but it was enough for me. I gave him the wine bottle to open and also two glasses.

While he poured the wine, I took my phone out of my bag. I meant to check when the actual sunset time was, because I thought it was half an hour ago, and there was still a lot of light. I tapped the screen of my phone, and the last apps I used came up. I accidentally tapped the one for my audiobook, and it started playing.

Oh no!

I stopped it immediately. But not before the words “wrapped my hand around his cock” rang loud and clear in my kitchen. Thank God the windows were closed.

Dylan stopped in the act of pouring wine. He set the bottle on the counter, looking up at me. His eyes were fierce and full of steam.

“What was that?” he asked. The look on his face made me laugh.

“An audiobook,” I said casually. I licked my lips, feeling the tension between us thickening. “Yes, I like steamy books. I

like to read them, and I like to listen to them, okay? The steamier, the better. There, it's out there. Don't judge me."

"I'm not judging. It's sexy as fuck. I was barely able to keep my thoughts in line before now. It's just..." He took a deep breath, coming closer, tilting toward me. "I want you, Mel. Fuck, how I want you. Tell me to go, and I'll leave."

"I don't want you to leave," I whispered.

He grinned. "You're making it hard for me to help you keep your resolution."

"Now you've suddenly decided you want to help?" I teased. "After breaking through every defense?"

He brought a hand to my face, pressing his thumb on the bow of my upper lip. "I want you, Mel. So damn much."

Everything inside me tightened. "I want you too. I can't think about anything else."

He kissed me, dirty and wet, and desire spread through me like wildfire. I wasn't going to let this man go anywhere tonight. I wanted him for me. I wanted to explore every delicious inch and touch him too. I didn't want to leave any part of Dylan Gallagher unexplored. If I only had one night, I was going to make it count.

I pushed his suit jacket off, then tore at the buttons of his shirt desperately, managing to take them off, and then pushed his shirt down his muscular arms. Once it was on the floor, I ran my hands over his arms and his chest, placing a quick kiss right on his pecs, lowering myself in a straight line. Looking up, I grinned. "I was right about the six-pack."

He pulled me up, tugging my dress over my head. I was pleased that I put on super-sexy underwear. I liked wearing sensual lingerie after spending most of my day in workout clothes, but this was downright sinful. I was wearing red lace underwear. My bra had a clasp in the middle, and my panties had bows at the sides. If I tugged at them, they would drop.

"Fuck," he exclaimed, looking me up and down. Cupping one breast over the bra, he nudged my legs wide apart with his knee and brought his other hand between my thighs. When he

touched two fingers over the fabric of my panties, I gasped. The contact of the fabric against my sensitive skin was too much.

I buckled over, resting my forehead on his chest. He kissed my shoulder and brought one hand up my back. There was something tender about the gesture, and I yearned for more. I looked up at him, tugging at his belt. I needed to take it off. I needed to take all his clothes off. I wanted this man desperately; I'd never wanted anything else more.

Before I pushed down his pants, he grabbed his wallet and took a condom out of it, which turned me on even more. After I rid him of his pants and boxers, I was about to tease him about still leaving my lingerie on, but I didn't get the chance because he sealed his mouth over mine and lifted me in his arms by my ass cheeks. My center was rubbing against his erection. I gasped. I wanted the fabric out of the way, needing skin-on-skin contact. He walked with me through the apartment while I pointed the way to the bedroom. He was so strong, carrying me like this. I ran my palms over his arms, feeling how hard his muscles were contracting to keep me up.

Once we were in the bedroom, I thought he might set me down, but instead he pushed me against the wall. He was supporting me with his pelvis. His cock was trapped between us, driving me insane. He undid the clasp between my breasts, leaning in and kissing my nipple until I gasped. He continued to tease me before gently lowering my feet to the floor.

"You look gorgeous," he said, trailing his finger down one breast and lower still. He rested it on one bow of my panties before tugging at it slowly. He moved to the other one just as slow. Was he trying to drive me crazy? He pulled at it too, and my panties fell to the floor. He groaned, taking a step back to look at me. His gaze traveled up and down my body. There was too much heat in it. I wasn't sure what to do with myself.

"I want to taste you," he said. My knees weakened a little.

He pointed to the bed, and I lay down on it, legs bent at my knees, thighs wide apart, inviting him. He lowered himself on the bed right between my thighs. Looking up at me, he pressed

the flat of his tongue against my tender flesh, and I fisted the sheet, moaning loudly.

Oh, oh, oh! I was already so on edge. How was this even possible? With every lap of his tongue, he was bringing me closer and closer to a climax until I couldn't take it anymore. I pushed myself up on my heels and then reached for him, tugging at his shoulder.

“No, I want you to come. I'm going to make you come like this first,” he said.

I nearly climaxed just from hearing his dirty words. Goose bumps formed on my skin. He pressed his thumb on my clit and alternated the pressure with that of his tongue. I thrashed on the bed, calling his name. When I looked down at him and our gazes crossed, I exploded. My right leg shook violently. My breath hitched in my lungs. My entire body was burning.

He rolled on the condom.

As if in a dream, I felt him move up, kissing my shoulder while I still thrashed around. One hand was on my waist, the other next to my arm. He positioned himself at my entrance and pushed inside.

“Fuck, Mel.” He groaned, entering me slowly.

I was still overly sensitized, still pulsing around him, but even so, I pressed my heels in the mattress and followed his rhythm, wanting to bring him just as much pleasure as he was giving me. When he moved a hand between us, rubbing my clit, I shuddered.

I couldn't believe he was so attentive, so intent to focus on my pleasure. He kept me in a heightened state in-between orgasms while he thrust inside me harder and harder. I was still feeling the aftershocks of the last climax, and the next one was already forming deep inside me. It tugged at my insides. I was touching him everywhere I could. I wanted to explore his body with my mouth—his whole body—but I could do that later. Right now, I didn't want him to stop moving. It was as if my life depended on it, on feeling him inside me so rough and

dirty. He still wasn't taking his thumb off my clit, even though I could tell he was losing control of his own body.

I was lost in him, sensing his cock stiffening inside me. He was so, so close. Then I felt him explode, and I went over the edge the next second too. The pleasure took over every cell of my body, and I gave in to it.

Dylan

After cleaning up quickly, we went back to bed. We both were lying down on our sides, watching each other. I kept touching her shoulder and waist, and I wanted more. I wanted to explore all of her.

“You're so damn beautiful,” I said. “So damn gorgeous.”

“Why, thank you, Mr. Gallagher. Now that you already got in my pants, you don't have to keep up that charm.”

I chuckled. “I'm sorry for making you miss the sunset.”

“It was worth it. Though I'm conflicted. I still want to go out and enjoy the evening, but I also want to explore you.” She touched my chest, getting closer. “I want to make the most of this night.”

It took a second for me to understand what she was implying. I cupped her cheek, looking her straight in the eyes. My grip was possessive, but that was precisely how I felt about her. She was mine, and I was not nearly done exploring her.

“This is not a one-night thing, Melanie. You know it's not.”

She bit her lip. “I don't want this to be just one night either.” She sighed, touching my wrist. “Well, we've already established that we're not on the same page. As long as we keep that in mind, maybe we can enjoy our time together, however long that is.”

Something about that bothered me, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Usually I was all for no-strings fun, but now the idea grated on my nerves. I chose to focus on what I did like, namely that things between us weren't ending tonight.

"That sounds good to me," I said, adding, "for now."

Because I wasn't even sure what I wanted anymore. Mel was making me question everything.

Grinning, she scooted back, getting out of bed. She clapped her hands, looking around the room. "Since we established we've got more than one night, we could go out on the balcony for a bit and catch the afterglow."

I pushed myself up on an elbow, feeling as conflicted as she was earlier. I wanted her in bed all night—at my mercy. But I also wanted to see what the fuss was with the sunset. I wanted to know everything that brought her joy, to understand it. More than that, I wanted to join in on it.

I wanted to share with her more than pillow talk, which went against everything I thought I knew about myself.

I got out of bed too.

"Okay," I said. "But you're not wearing that underwear." I pointed to the pile of panties and bra. "It will drive me crazy knowing you're wearing it."

She cocked a brow. "Oh really? And why do you think I'm going to listen to you?"

I went closer to her, cupping her ass and pulling her straight against me. "How about I promise some more orgasms later?"

She narrowed her eyes, tapping her temple. "Bribing me with orgasms, I see. Okay, you win. I'm not going to wear that underwear." I let her go, and she winked. "I'm not going to wear underwear at all."

Fucking hell! She knew how to play me, and I liked that she kept me on my toes.

She put on a loose black dress while I looked for my clothes. After dressing quickly, I followed her to the kitchen.

The cheesecake was already on a plate with two teaspoons. I finished pouring wine in the two glasses, and we went outside together.

She had one cozy lounge and a small coffee table on which I deposited the glasses. I immediately lay down, pointing to my lap.

“Since you only have one of these, I think a great solution is we both lie on it.”

“I like this arrangement, Mr. Gallagher.” She climbed on top of me, shimmying. I groaned, watching her carefully set the plate on the coffee table.

Straightening up, she froze.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She stood up, looking down from the balcony. I followed her gaze to a guy standing in front of it.

“Going to ignore me now too?” he asked.

I glanced back at her, taking in her body language. Her fists were clenched, her eyes narrowed and furious. I instantly felt protective of her, wanting to remove whatever was bothering her. Case in point: the idiot in front of the building.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I told you I need to talk to you.”

She blew out a breath, clenching her fists even tighter. Turning to me, she whispered, “I’m going downstairs to deal with him.”

“I’m coming with you.”

Her eyes widened. She opened her mouth, then closed it again, nodding. “Okay. Thanks.”

I put a hand at the small of her back as we went inside, heading to the front door.

“Who is he?” I asked.

“My shitty ex. He messaged me earlier this afternoon, but I blocked him, and now I can’t believe he’s fucking *here*.”

I clasped her arm, turning her slightly toward me before cupping her face with both hands. “I can go downstairs and deal with him alone.”

“You’d do that?”

“He’s bothering you. I want to make him stop.”

She bit her lower lip, shaking her head. “No, I’m coming down too. He said he wants to talk to me, so I don’t think he’ll give up.”

“Mel—”

“Let’s go,” she said, opening the front door.

I followed her downstairs, and once we were outside, I took stock of the idiot, who jerked his head back.

“Who’s this?” he inquired.

“None of your business,” Mel answered.

“Not like I care. My business is with you.”

“Watch your tone,” I said.

He tilted his head, sizing me up as if weighing if he could take me on. He couldn’t, but I’d like to see him try.

He looked at Mel lazily. “I’m going to need all the presents I gave you back.”

“What?”

“The necklace and the dress, and that fucking bag. The business is bleeding money again, and I need every cent.”

What the hell?

She stared at him. “Gladly. But I don’t want to see your face ever again.”

Turning on her heels, she headed back upstairs. He made to follow her, but I stepped in front of him.

“You’re not going anywhere,” I said.

“Screw you.” He attempted to push me away, but I grabbed both his arms, overpowering him instantly. He jumped back, his eyes wide.

“You ever show up near her, and we’re going to have a problem,” I said calmly, even though all I wanted to do was punch him. I clenched my fists in my pockets.

“Here is all the stuff,” Mel shouted. It took me a few seconds to realize she was on the balcony. She dropped a bag over the railing. It hit the concrete with a thump.

The jackass swore as he picked it up.

“You’re a—” he was saying, but I interrupted him.

“Shut up or you’ll regret it,” I said.

He narrowed his eyes, looking from me up to the balcony.

“Whatever,” he mumbled before turning around and walking away quickly.

I watched him until he disappeared around the corner before hurrying to Mel, taking the stairs two at a time. The door was ajar. I went inside and closed it, heading to the balcony. Mel was sitting on the lounge, red in the face. I was so angry I could barely breathe, but I needed to calm down. This wasn’t what she needed.

“Mel, are you okay?” I asked, sitting next to her.

She fiddled with her thumbs, shaking her head. “I don’t know. Every time I think he can’t upset me anymore, he proves me wrong.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

She shrugged. “Not much to say. I had a small nest egg. After graduating high school, I started working full-time as a waitress while I completed my degree. When I quit my job as a receptionist, I took up waitressing again while also working as a fitness instructor. Anyway, most of the money went to making Dad’s house wheelchair friendly and getting him the treatment he needed, but the rest... Elliot asked me to invest it in his business.”

“Fuck.” I had a hunch I knew where this was going.

“Yeah... so, when he screwed up and was about to lose the business, he wanted even more money, but I didn’t have any

more, and he started saying shit like I'm spending too much on Dad."

"Damn. I should have punched him. Does this happen often?"

"No, I haven't seen him at all since we broke up, and that was more than a year ago. He did text me a couple weeks ago, but I ignored it then. Douchebag."

I kissed her forehead, rubbing her back. "I told him we're going to have a problem if he shows up here again."

She pulled back, looking up at me. "You did? Wow. I'm sorry this relaxing evening turned into a shit show."

I cupped her face, touching her lower lip. "Hey, the evening isn't over yet. Where were we?"

"You tricked me into straddling you."

"That's right."

I immediately lay back down, and she climbed on me like before. She was smiling again, and her body language was more relaxed. I wanted to do everything in my power to make her forget about that moron. I couldn't believe he had the guts to show up here. She was feeling raw—that much was evident—and I wanted to make it better, or at least take her mind off it. Placing my hands on her waist, I shifted her lower, aligning our hips. She laughed, bracing her hands on my chest.

"This is even better than sitting out here listening to steamy audiobooks," she said.

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"It was."

"By the way, I still can't believe you were listening to that."

She grinned, wiggling her eyebrows. "Am I *outrageous* enough for you, Mr. Gallagher?"

I kissed the side of her neck, enjoying the sound of her gasp mixed with laughter. "Hell yes. Now, let's see if I can turn this evening around."

“We have cheesecake and wine, so I’d say things are looking up.”

“Cheesecake and wine. So I’m not even a factor?”

She shimmied on top of me. “You still have to prove yourself.”

“It’ll be my pleasure.”

Chapter Thirteen

Mel

Dad was over the moon when I brought him the medicine the next day. I stopped by his place after my last session at the gym.

“Who is this Dylan again?” Dad asked.

I smiled, always feeling a bit awkward when I spoke to Dad about someone I was dating. Not that Dylan and I *were* dating. I wasn't exactly sure what to call what we were, but I didn't want to keep anything from Dad.

Growing up without my mom, one would think I got used to these awkward conversations. After all, Daddy was the one who gave me the talk about the birds and the bees in middle school, explained about getting my period, and everything else. But I still felt like a teenager on occasions like this one.

“We're spending some time together, but it's early days, so don't read too much into it.”

Dad held up the meds. “He went to the trouble of getting these, so he's not a douchebag like Elliot.”

I grimaced. “No, not one bit.”

Dad had had a front row seat to the pain Elliot caused me.

“He's got my approval.”

I smiled to myself as I took a yogurt from his fridge to prepare smoothies for both of us. I had Dylan on my mind, and it took me to a happy place. Last night had been unexpected in so many ways, from the alpha tone when he insisted this wasn't a one-night thing to the balls-to-the-wall threat to Elliot.

I couldn't *believe* Elliot. As if I wanted to keep the stupid presents anyway. They'd all been just for show. Later on, when he asked for a second “loan,” and I refused, he threw in my face that he'd spent a lot of money on me.

I saw red remembering his smug face. The nerve of him! I'd been on edge after he left, but Dylan had somehow made me forget all about it. He was a man of many talents for sure. I was still swooning a little.

I ate dinner with Dad, and on the train ride back home, I checked my phone and discovered a photo from Dylan. It was of Isabelle, cuddling the puppy.

Dylan: Couldn't keep her away any longer. They're moving into the house faster, in two days. She left with him. The place seems weirdly empty.

Mel: Want to adopt a pup for yourself? I stand by what I said. You're more relaxed around one.

Dylan: I'm relaxed around you too. I want you.

My stomach somersaulted. I brought a hand to it, smiling from ear to ear.

Mel: We have a session on Wednesday.

Dylan: That's in three days. I want you sooner.

Oh, wow. How could one little message turn me into a ball of anticipation and desire?

Mel: I'm now on my way back from Dad's. I'm honestly exhausted today. Tomorrow evening?

Would he get annoyed by my frequent trips to Dad's like Elliot? I knew it wasn't fair to compare them, but I couldn't help wondering. Even though what we had was casual, I instinctively knew Dylan didn't do anything in half measures. Everything about him was all-consuming.

Dylan: Some clients from Chicago are in town, and we're taking them to dinner.

Mel: Then Wednesday it is. By the way, Dad says thanks for the medicine.

Dylan: He's welcome. I enjoyed our time yesterday.

Mel: I did too.

Dylan: Can't wait until the next time. You're hijacking my thoughts, Mel. Ian is exasperated.

Mel: Then go back to work. I don't want to get on his bad side.

Dylan: Have a great evening, Mel.

We kept exchanging messages over the next couple days, sending each other little snippets throughout the day. On Wednesday, I was on pins and needles because I was about to see him.

I met with Isabelle and Josie at the gym after lunch. Josie decided she wanted to train there after all, so she came for an introductory session. To my surprise, the Gallagher siblings arrived together—all four of them, including my hot and handsome Dylan. My session with him was later this afternoon, so I hadn't expected to see him here this early.

Ian, Isabelle, and Josie were in the break room corner next to the orange juice container. I positioned myself, so I had a great view of the cardio equipment to keep an eye on Dylan. A girl had to indulge from time to time.

Damn, is he gorgeous or what?

I trained my focus on Josie. "So with Isabelle, we go into one of the smaller rooms and have a Pilates session for seventy-five minutes. We do warm-ups, and then we alternate cardio-type workouts with anaerobic exercises. But everyone is different. You can do your cardio before on a treadmill or a cross-trainer or anything you like from the cardio room. That's what Dylan does, and then I join him at the weight stations."

"Wait, you're training Dylan?" Isabelle asked.

Oh shit, he hadn't told his sisters. I blushed, looking from one sister to the other and then at Ian, who smiled knowingly.

"What's going on?" Isabelle asked. Ian's smile widened, which Isabelle noticed. She pointed at him. "You look like you're keeping secrets, brother."

Josie tilted her head. "No, he looks like he can't wait to spill them."

I had a feeling this was going to escalate. I knew from Isabelle that they were all very close, but being an only child, I wasn't sure how to navigate sibling dynamics. I looked at Dylan again, hoping he'd glance this way so I could gesture him to join us. As if he sensed that I was watching him, he cocked his head my way. I couldn't wave. But he knew how sibling dynamics worked because he immediately stopped the treadmill and came to us.

"Why are you all grouped here?" he asked. "Ian, I thought you were going to run next to me?"

Isabelle gave her brother a sweet smile. "He has some insider info he can't wait to share."

"But now that you're here, they can hear it directly from the source," Ian said.

Isabelle trained her gaze on Dylan.

"So, we found out Mel's training you one-on-one."

"Yes, she is," Dylan replied. "Anything against that? You kept saying she's an excellent trainer."

I was looking at all of them, unsure what to say or how to act. This was so much fun.

Isabelle glared at her brother, and I remembered what he said about her warning him not to hit on me. I still had no idea what to say to smooth things over.

I also wasn't sure if Dylan wanted his siblings to know about us. We never discussed it.

To my astonishment, he put an arm around my shoulders.

"Mel and I are seeing each other. And that's none of your business."

Ian, Josie, and Isabelle all started talking at the same time.

Ian laughed and then said, "Oh wait, he's serious."

"I think he's pretty serious," Josie confirmed.

"You left out a critical detail," Ian said, fighting to tone down a grin. Looking straight at me, he said, "He almost bit

my head off when I commented that you're hot. Just thought you should know."

I giggled before covering my mouth. Isabelle and Josie were laughing too. Dylan glared at Ian.

"You had to spill that, didn't you?"

Ian nodded, looking oddly proud. "I've been sitting on this piece of information for a while. I couldn't wait for an occasion to spill it. It's too good not to be shared. And you know me, brother. I don't like to keep the good things to myself."

I cleared my throat. "Okay. Well, I do think we should start the session. Otherwise, we're not going to have enough time. Josie, Isabelle is going to show you the room where we're training, and I'll be with you in a few minutes."

Isabelle looked at me with a glint of mischief in her eyes.

After their sisters left, Dylan looked at Ian pointedly.

"This is your cue to leave us alone," he said simply.

"Oh, right, right. I don't want to be a third wheel. However, I do want to test a theory. Will you bite my head off again if I mention how hot Mel is?"

I grinned, loving Ian's merciless teasing.

"I don't think we should push him too much," I replied.

Dylan stared at his brother. Ian winked before heading to the treadmill.

Dylan took my hand, bringing me into a more private nook of the break room.

"Your siblings are hilarious."

"And very nosy. I'm sorry."

"It was funny. How come you're here so early? Our session is later."

"About that. The private sessions won't work out today. My assistant scheduled a meeting at the last minute."

I pouted.

He cupped my cheek, pressing his thumb on my lower lip. “But since they were an excuse to spend time with you, it doesn’t matter. I don’t need an excuse anymore.”

My pulse sped up as his eyes smoldered. “Tonight, I have another dinner with clients, but I want us to go out soon.”

“Friday works,” I said.

He groaned, slipping the tip of his thumb in my mouth, tilting in slightly. “Fine. Friday it is.”

“So you almost bit off Ian’s head, huh?”

If possible, his gaze grew even more intense. I was warm all over just because he was looking at me with that strangely possessive glint.

“Yes I did. I don’t know what you’re doing to me, but even now, when a guy looks at you, I feel possessive. Even if it’s my brother and he wants to get a rise out of me.”

He touched my neck with his hand, pulling me closer. I glanced sideways quickly, but the nook was private enough that no one could see us unless they walked right to this corner. Dylan touched his lips to mine, gently at first, but then it transformed into one of those hot kisses that made me want to jump him. He was a little sweaty from the treadmill, and it somehow made him even sexier. The salty taste on his lips turned me on so much that I didn’t want him to stop.

I gasped when I was out of breath and pulled a few inches away.

“No, no, no. You can’t kiss me like this. It makes me want to jump you, and we’re at the gym.”

“So what’s the problem?” he asked.

“Because I can’t jump you, and then that’s what I’m going to think about for the rest of the day.”

He touched my lips with a finger, looking me straight in the eyes.

“Good. That’s *exactly* what I want you to think about for the rest of the day.”

“You’re a bad man.”

I took another step back before turning around and heading to the private room I’d booked for Josie and Isabelle. The two of them were chatting but stopped abruptly when I walked in, looking at me curiously.

“Am I about to be scolded?” I asked, closing the door behind me.

“Scolded?” Josie asked, elbowing Isabelle. “What did you do to the poor girl that she thinks we’re gonna scold her?”

“Nothing,” Isabelle replied, looking miffed. They were each sitting on a Pilates mat cross-legged.

“Dylan said you sort of warned him against asking me out,” I explained while rolling out a mat for myself.

“There was no ‘sort of’ about it. I straight up told him not to do it. I see it worked well,” Isabelle said with a laugh. “Dylan’s a good guy, I promise. He’s just been hurt.”

“And now he’s got a super thick defensive wall around him,” Josie added.

“But you did convince him to take a puppy home, so maybe he’s starting to mellow. I love him, by the way. We named him Loki.”

I looked between them, shaking my head. “I see this session is going to be even less productive than usual, huh?”

Isabelle stood ramrod straight. “No, no. Let’s show Josie that Pilates kicks ass.”

To my surprise, the girls *did* focus on the exercises. They didn’t talk at all, and I wondered if they could coordinate their schedules to train at the same time. Josie was a good influence on Isabelle.

While we did crunches, I mulled over Josie’s words. *Could* I get through Dylan’s defensive wall? I wanted to, but I was afraid to try. No, it was better to enjoy what we had. It was easier at any rate.

The three of us were pretty sweaty by the time we were done. Half my hair fell from my bun, so I pulled it back in a ponytail as we went to the front desk. Josie wanted to sign up for one-on-one trainings too, but she and Isabelle had vastly different schedules, so there was no way they could come together.

We headed straight to the reception desk. Shauna stepped aside from the computer so I could look at the schedule.

“Brother, what are you still doing here?” I heard Isabelle ask. I looked up to find Dylan between his sisters. He was clearly done with his workout, rocking a suit again, holding the jacket over his shoulder with two fingers. He was way too sexy.

“I just finished,” he replied.

Isabelle narrowed her eyes. “A likely tale. You were waiting for us, weren’t you?”

“Mel, I forgot to warn you earlier: don’t listen to them.”

“Why? They’re only saying good things,” I said with a wink.

He looked from Isabelle to Josie, then back to me. “Then, by all means, listen.”

Chapter Fourteen

Mel

On Friday evening, Dylan was picking me up at six from home. After my last session, I stopped by the shelter, and Charlotte and I had a bit too much fun playing around with the pups. As was typical, I arrived home too late, so I threw on a black tank top and a short skirt that fit me like a glove. I put on gladiator-style sandals with golden straps and didn't bother styling my hair. It was a humid evening, so it was pretty curly, and I knew better than to try to tame it. I called it my summer look. I glanced at myself in the huge mirror I'd glued to the bathroom door.

My phone pinged while I twirled once.

Charlotte: I want a picture.

Like a good friend, I took a selfie in the mirror and sent it to her. We'd done this since our NYU days: sending pics to one another before going out on a date. Charlotte had always been a rock in my life. When Dad got sick, she brought us home-cooked meals for months.

Charlotte: ROAR. Go knock that wall down.

I laughed, feeling a bit silly. I was looking forward to tonight *so* much. I'd told Charlotte about my conversation with Isabelle and Josie, and since then, she insisted on using the phrase "knock that wall down." But I didn't have such unrealistic expectations. I wanted to enjoy my time with Dylan while it lasted. And that was the key, to keep in mind that this was temporary, not forever—because Dylan didn't do forever.

I took one last glance at myself in the mirror. I was happy with the results. I looked ready for a date.

As I slung my purse on my shoulder, my phone rang. It was probably Dylan, telling me he'd arrived.

It was Dad. Smiling, I answered. "Hey, Dad, how are you?"

“Darling, sorry to spring this on you, but I made a mess in the kitchen.”

“Oh no! What happened?”

“I dropped a lot of the jars, and now I’m surrounded by pieces of glass. I’m even afraid to move because it might ruin the wheelchair tires.”

“Oh no, no, no. Is Buddy around too? Can you keep him away from the glass?”

Dad’s German shepherd liked to butt his nose into anything.

“He’s in the yard, so he’s safe.”

“Let me think.” I paused a moment. “Well, just stay put, and I’m going to drop by and clean it up, okay? But I’m at home now, so it’s going to take me about fifty minutes.”

“I’m sorry. But my neighbors are on vacation, and I don’t have the phone number of the couple who moved across the street.”

“Don’t worry, Dad. I’ll be there as soon as possible. Okay?”

“Sure. I can keep myself occupied on YouTube.” He sure could. Dad had embraced technology more and more over the past few years.

After hanging up, I called Dylan. I didn’t want to cancel on him. Maybe we could meet up later in the city. He answered on the fourth ring.

“Hey, did you leave your office yet?” I asked.

“Yes. The GPS says I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Can we meet later? Dad called me. I have to go over to his place. He’s dropped some jars, and he can’t move around until I clean it up.”

“Is he hurt?” Dylan asked. The concern in his voice warmed my insides.

“No, no, he’s not. But if he tries to maneuver the wheelchair out of the mess alone, he might make even more of a mess.”

“I’ll pick you up in a few minutes, and we can drive there.”

I blinked rapidly, stunned. “You don’t have to do that. I’ll take the train. It’s okay. We can catch up later.”

“Mel, I’ll pick you up. It sounds like you might need a hand there. I’ll help you.”

I had no idea what to say. I had not been expecting this at all. “Wow. Okay. If you’re sure.”

“Okay. I’ll be there in ten.”

“Thanks.”

I was still a bit in disbelief as I hung up. I couldn’t believe he wanted to come with me. Who did that?

I walked outside a few minutes later, smiling when he stopped his BMW in front of me. He was at the wheel.

“You really didn’t have to do this,” I said as I opened the door.

“Get in the car, Mel.”

Biting my lip, I slid into the passenger seat, fearing this was our last date. I was sure Dylan didn’t want to deal with these types of interruptions and complications.

“Thanks. What were your plans for tonight?” I asked. He said he wanted to surprise me, and I was still wondering what he had in mind.

“I’m not telling you. We’ll do it another time.”

“Later this evening?” I asked hopefully.

He shook his head, focusing on the street. “No, it has to be at a specific time. Can you punch your dad’s address into the GPS?”

“Sure.” While I did it, I mulled over his words. He must’ve had some restaurant reservations, even though it was a bit

early.

Then it hit me.

I pressed enter on the address, looking at Dylan out of the corner of my eye.

“Does this plan of yours have anything to do with a sunset?” I asked.

He grinned. “It’s difficult to surprise you. Anyone told you that before?”

Well, no one tried before, I thought.

I smiled, looking out the window.

“What’s that? I can see you smiling,” he said.

I shrugged. “Nothing. I’m feeling terrific about myself. That my sunset thingy is captivating.”

“*You* are captivating, Mel.”

“Is that so?” I looked at him out of the corner of my eye, seeing him in a different light. Dylan was focused and hardworking, and I felt like he could do with a time-out now and then. “I have a list of things I want to explore in New York.”

“Why? You’ve lived here since college, right?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t get to explore very much. I was broke in college, so I only did things that were free or super cheap. Once I started working, I was always like ‘Oh, I’ll see this another time. I live here, after all.’ And after my accident, I suddenly wanted to see and experience everything. Want me to share my list with you?”

“Sure. But only if you’re my guide.”

I grinned. “Hell yes.”

I took out my phone, pulling up the list. We discussed it all the way to my dad’s house, which was in a quiet suburb way out of the city.

“Did your dad move here after his stroke?” Dylan asked.

“No, it’s the house he bought when he moved to New York. It’s much smaller than the house I grew up in, with only one bedroom, but it has a small yard. I made it wheelchair accessible after his stroke. We were lucky it was all on one level, but there were still a few steps to replace with a ramp at the entrance, and we had to redo the bathroom completely.”

“That’s a lot of work.”

“It is. On the bright side, I know so much about renovations now that I could flip houses as a side hustle.”

“Wait, you did it yourself?”

“Most of it, yeah. It was too expensive to hire contractors for everything.”

Dylan looked at me intently without saying anything.

I fidgeted in my seat. *What is he thinking?*

A few minutes later, we arrived at Dad’s house. I loved his place. It was cozy, and the small yard in the back was shielded from the neighbors’ view by evergreen trees I planted myself.

Dad was in the kitchen, watching his phone. There was glass all around him.

“You’re up to shenanigans again, Dad,” I said, startling him a little. When he watched his videos, he was so absorbed he didn’t hear anything else around him.

“Mel, you’re here.” He glanced at Dylan. “With a friend?”

“Yes, Dad. This is Dylan. He helped me get you that medicine. I told you about him, remember?”

“Thank you, Dylan. That was very kind of you.”

“No problem, sir.” He was looking at the splintered glass.

“Call me Martin.” After a few seconds, he added, “Sorry about this, kids. I’m not even sure how it happened. I tried to set the jars on the counter. After I knocked down the first, the rest fell like dominos. I’m usually not this clumsy, right, Mel, honey? Tell him your dad is not an old fart.”

“Dad, don’t worry about anything. And no, you’re not a klutz.” Winking at him, I glanced at Dylan and continued. “I’m going to get some cleaning supplies. The most important part is to take the glass away.”

Dylan nodded.

I went into the small cupboard where Dad kept all the cleaning supplies and brought a broom. When I returned to the kitchen, I noticed Dylan had already picked up some of the bigger pieces of glass and thrown them in the trash. He’d rolled up his sleeves, revealing those mouthwatering forearms. He caught me checking him out and winked at me.

Grinning, I cleaned the rest of the shards and then brought the mop, washing the stickiness off the floor as well as the countertop. I also cleaned the wheelchair because the wheels smelled like pickles.

“Did you try to rearrange the cabinets again?” I asked Dad. He did that from time to time.

“Yes,” he replied guiltily. “I took them all out and put them on the counter, but I put them too close to the edge.”

The jars had been filled with pickles and jams, so it was all a bit stinky *and* sticky. I opened the door to the backyard to let in some fresh air. Dad’s dog, Buddy, came in.

“Oh, Dylan, can you keep him occupied so he doesn’t cut himself if there are any little pieces of glass left? I want to vacuum up the rest.”

“Sure. What’s his name?”

“Buddy,” Dad said.

I smiled, watching him stroke Buddy’s belly and pat him on the head. For someone who thought he wasn’t an animal person, he sure had a way with dogs.

Once I was done cleaning up, I told Dad, “Okay, I think you can move freely now.”

“Thanks. I was starving.”

“I can heat your dinner,” I offered. “What do you have?”

“Tuna steak.”

“We could order in and have dinner together,” Dylan said.

Oh, wow. I didn’t expect this in a million years.

“That would be great,” Dad said. “Honey, the Chinese restaurant is our best bet. They deliver very quickly. I want the chicken with vegetables, without soy sauce. The menu is on the fridge.”

“I already know what I want. Dylan, take a look and tell me what sounds good.”

Glancing at the fridge, Dylan studied the menu. “I’ll take shrimp with vegetables.”

“Okay.”

I had their number saved in my phone, so I called them right away. They promised to deliver in twenty minutes. After hanging up, I heard Dad ask Dylan, “What is going on between you and my daughter?”

Oh crap. Dad wasn’t used to me coming here with anyone. I couldn’t even remember the last time I came here with a friend—forget about bringing anyone I dated. The last guy who’d been here was Elliot, and he’d thought Dad was a burden. The guys I’d gone out with after the breakup weren’t any better. One made it clear he didn’t want to get involved with someone who had such a huge responsibility. *Whatever.* The other one just stopped calling. Good riddance. If they thought my dad was a burden, I didn’t need them in my life. He was a good man, and I liked taking care of him.

“Your daughter is my trainer at the gym. And I was going to take her out tonight.”

“Where, if I may ask?”

Dylan grinned. I looked over my shoulder, trying to overhear. He caught me in the act.

“I could tell you, Martin, but she’s listening, and it was meant to be a surprise.”

Dad burst out laughing. Right at that moment, I realized I might lose a piece of my heart to Dylan because he made my dad laugh so wholeheartedly. I hadn't heard that sound in a long time. Dad was always a positive person, not grumpy or anything, but lately, I hadn't heard him laugh as much as before. After his stroke, he pulled it together and stayed strong and determined, but as the years had gone by, I almost felt as though his limitations were weighing on him.

The restaurant delivered on time, and the three of us sat around the small kitchen table, eating directly from the carton.

"This stuff is good," Dylan said.

"It's some of the best Chinese takeout I've had in New York," Dad said.

"How long have you been living here?" Dylan asked.

"When my girl moved to New York for college, I wasn't sure what to do with myself, so I bought this house and moved here to be closer. I worked in construction, and it was easy to find a job. Now I've had to find something else, obviously."

"Mel told me. As a transcriptionist."

"Exactly. There are many companies that offer transcription services, and the pay is decent. The best part is I can do it from home and only need a computer to do it."

Dylan glanced at me with a smile. "So Mel got her kick-ass attitude from you."

"I'd say so," Dad replied proudly.

I couldn't really believe Dylan was here, with us, and he genuinely seemed interested in Dad's life.

"Was your recovery long?" Dylan asked.

Dad grimaced. "Yes. My Mel had her plate full with me for about a year. I couldn't move half my body at all in the beginning, but I had a lot of physical therapy, and Mel helped me with many exercises at home too. Now I can use both hands, but my left leg is still troubling me. I can move it enough to get up from the wheelchair and move into bed or take a few steps, but nothing more."

Dylan asked a bit more about Dad's recovery while we ate.

Once the cartons were empty, I asked, "Do you want me to steam some fish for you to eat tomorrow?"

"You don't have to do that," Dad called.

"It's only going to take me ten minutes, and then tomorrow all you have to do is heat it."

"Thanks, Mel."

I took the tuna out of the fridge, washing it a bit before putting it in the steamer. I thought Dad might throw the steamer out the window when I brought it home to him. His doctors had explained it would be good for him to add steamed vegetables and fish to his diet. I wasn't a fan of it. I felt it had zero taste, and even though it was a big fad in the fitness world to eat steamed everything, it wasn't my thing. And since I was Dad's daughter, he'd passed on his love of grilled ribs smeared with barbeque sauce to me, so I'd assumed he'd take one look at the steamer and toss it away or hide it in a cupboard. But, to my astonishment, Dad was using it regularly. I'd asked him about it one day, and he'd said he intended to be around for a long time, and if eating steamed fish was what it took, he would do it.

My gaze crossed Dylan's as he played with Buddy while talking to Dad about the most recent basketball game, and I knew that keeping this sexy man from slipping into my heart wasn't going to be easy.

Chapter Fifteen

Dylan

After cooking him dinner, she packed everything carefully in plastic containers, putting them in the fridge. Fucking hell, this woman was something else.

“You youngsters should go. I have an online meeting with my book club, where we’ll discuss the latest James Patterson,” Martin said.

Mel smiled. “Okay. When it’s about James Patterson, I’ve learned there’s no distracting my dad. Come on, let’s go. He takes his book club meetings very seriously.”

I put an arm around her shoulders as we said our goodbyes and walked out of the house. They were stiff. I massaged her neck while we walked to the car. She dipped her head back, humming lightly.

“Oh, this is good. This is so, so good.”

She pouted when I had to let go to open her door. “Hey, don’t stop.”

“I’ll carry on once we’re out of the car. That’s a promise.”

After she got inside, I moved to the other door, climbing in the driver seat.

“Your dad seems to have embraced technology a lot.”

“He had to. To be honest, this was a bit of a blessing for Dad since leaving the house is a bit complicated for him. And he has a pretty active social life online. He’s part of multiple clubs. He also plays cards and is even in a group that solves mysteries. Don’t ask.”

“He is a great guy.”

“He really is. He was the best dad I could wish for.”

“So, it was just the two of you since you were little?”

“Yes. Dad kept a few pictures of Mom, but I realized at some point that it was hurting him to see her, so I put them in boxes. And, anyway, it was also hurtful for me. You should

have seen him when I was in school. He helped me with all the plays. He's not a touchy-feely guy, but he got involved in all the activities at school. I never realized we were different from other families until I started having sleepovers and noticed all the things moms did. Dad and I divided tasks between the two of us at home once I was old enough to reach the sink. He worked two jobs while I was growing up because there weren't enough construction sites in our small town. Not like here. He worked in a bar in the evening after I went to bed. It was the only way we could make things work."

"That sounds intense."

She shrugged.

She'd had a lot on her shoulders since she was a kid. Her childhood was nothing like mine: laid-back and without any responsibilities. The only rough patches had been in those winters when there hadn't been enough snow and my parents had to take on second jobs. I wondered if she'd ever had an easy stretch in her life, if she ever had someone focus on *her*. I wanted to be the one to do that.

"Okay, so my plan didn't work today. It's too late for the sunset. But we can do something else," I said on the drive back home. "We can do something from your list."

"Hmm. Let me think." She lowered in the seat, tapping her fingers against her legs. "I've always wanted to go on a boat on the river."

I nodded. "Yeah, I've seen a few of those. There's one near my apartment. North Cove Yacht Harbor."

"I know. I always walk around there when my breaks between sessions are short."

"Can you look on your phone and see if there's any service still operating now, or are they only during the daytime?"

"Let me look." She took out her phone, tapping on it. "Hey, it says here that we can still rent one. They have several types, but for some of the big ones, you need a boating license."

"I have a license."

“Mr. Gallagher, I like you more with every passing day.” With a chuckle, she added, “We have to bring it back by midnight.”

I nodded. “Okay. That sounds great.”

“I’m so excited. And so are you. You’re grinning.”

“Told you that you’re captivating.”

She laughed, looking at me. “Thanks again for coming with me to Dad’s and helping out.”

“No problem. Happy I met him.”

“He likes you.”

“When did he tell you that?”

“After you got him the medicine. And I think after tonight, he likes you even more.”

“How about you?” I asked. “Do you like me more?”

She drummed her fingers on the cup holders between the seats. I covered her hand with mine, bringing it to my lips. She shuddered.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I whispered.

“Hmm, I don’t know. You came with me to my dad’s and now want to take me on a boat tour,” she teased. “What do you think?”

I laughed, letting go of her hand and focusing on the road. I asked her more about her childhood on the drive, and her years at NYU. Her dad’s suburb was an hour away from Manhattan and even farther away from Mel’s place in Bay Ridge. She went to his house at least twice a week. She also helped her friend Charlotte at the shelter at least once a week, which didn’t leave her much free time. I wanted to see Mel again soon, and it seemed like she didn’t have much time in her life for me. I didn’t like that one bit.

I parked in the underground garage of my apartment building because North Cove was a few minutes away on foot.

We arrived at the parking lot of the boat rental soon after. It was surprisingly full, which meant we'd have company on the water. We walked side by side up to the boathouse, a modern construction of metal and glass. The guy in charge of it, Joseph, explained that he only had small motorboats left. All the bigger ones were still out on the water.

"Okay, we're taking one," I said.

"For how long? Half an hour, an hour, more?" Joseph asked before looking over his shoulder at a yacht that was pulling in. "You can decide while I deal with them."

Mel looked at her smartphone after Joseph left. "I think we should only take it out for thirty minutes."

"Why? It's Saturday tomorrow," I said.

"Yes, but I have a client in the morning, so I'll have to wake up and take a shower. And then I need fifty minutes from Bay Ridge to Genesis. So I have to wake up at seven." She winced as she said it.

I flattened her against me with a hand on her waist, bringing my mouth to her ear.

"How about you sleep at my apartment tonight? You'll need five minutes in the morning. It's convenient for you."

This wasn't the only reason I was asking her. I wanted her with me all night.

She turned around slowly as her head tilted to one side. "Oh, I could sleep more."

"That's the only reason you're saying yes?"

"I might have a few others, but I have to keep my air of mystery. Besides, I'm still considering it," she said in a teasing tone.

I touched her cheek, pressing my thumb to the corner of her mouth. "So you're mine for at least one more hour?"

"One hour," she whispered.

We waited until Joseph was done with the couple that had just stepped out of the boat before paying for one hour. He

gave us the boat the couple had vacated. It was a Tiara that could seat up to six people. The cockpit area had glass in front of it, but it wasn't covered, so if it rained, we'd get drenched. There was a seat next to the driver and a bench in the back. It looked comfortable enough.

I walked onto it first, then held Mel's hand while she stepped on the edge and then on the bench in the center. She bounced precariously, and her bag nearly slid off her shoulder. She clutched it tightly with her free hand.

"Whoa."

"You're good. I've got you," I said as she sat down on the seat next to the driver. Joseph walked us through safety measures and insisted we put on life preservers. After that, he explained we had enough time to drive to the Statue of Liberty.

Mel clapped her hands. "That would be awesome."

"Then we have our course," I said, maneuvering the wheel to the right.

Mel looked around with a huge smile. She lit up when she was happy. "This is so cool. I've never seen the city lights from the water."

"Neither have I," I admitted.

"I kind of thought we wouldn't see anything in the dark. I wonder how it looks during the day."

"We can come back once during the day."

She looked at me with wide eyes and raised brows.

Why was she so surprised? I wanted to please her.

"You, sir, are a bit dangerous to me. You make my dad laugh. And now you want to give me boat tours through the city."

"Is that a problem?" I asked.

She lowered her gaze to the water, then looked back up at me. I knew what she was thinking—what she didn't want to say out loud. This wasn't what we agreed on, but I didn't

particularly care. It felt good, and I didn't want to throw it away.

She sat on the chair next to the driver seat while I steered the wheel. The city lights were beautiful, as was Ellis Island straight in front of us. The water was calm tonight.

Standing up, she held her phone for a selfie. We both smiled into it. The skyscrapers were huge behind us, with the flickering lights casting a glow in the picture. It contrasted starkly with the image in front—water surrounded us everywhere, with the lights around Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty piercing the darkness. The air smelled salty—even fishy.

“Is it more difficult steering a boat than a car?” she asked after a while.

“No, it's easier. I'm feeling very warm for some reason.”

“I suggest you roll up those sleeves.”

“Why? Won't make a difference.”

“Oh no. That's entirely for my benefit. Eye candy and all that.”

I rolled each of the sleeves.

“I love those forearms. They're my kryptonite.”

“Good to know.” After a while, as we passed by Ellis Island, I said, “This is the most relaxed I've been since moving to the city,” I said when we passed by Ellis Island.

“Happy to hear that. Project Z is taking a toll on you, isn't it?”

“We didn't need the additional workload.”

“I admire you for taking this on,” she said, surprising the hell out of me.

“Most of the people outside my family think Ian and I are insane.”

“Well, I don't. It's one of the things that made me *rethink* my resolution. Though your kissing skills played a role too.”

“I like what I’m hearing,” I said with a laugh, steering the wheel with one hand so I could half turn to look at her.

She crossed her legs, and those perfectly toned calves were driving me crazy. She slid lower on the seat, looking up at the sky.

“I’ve never learned the constellations, but it’s not like you see too many stars in New York.”

“Dad taught me a few constellations, but I don’t remember them. We used to go fishing and camp a lot when Ian and I were kids.”

“Are you younger or older than Ian?”

“Older. He used to drive me crazy when we were kids before he started hero-worshiping me and tried to copy everything I was doing. Then when I was at the end of high school, he decided to be completely different. It was hilarious.”

“And now?”

“Now he’s my best friend,” I replied.

“Seemed that way. I always wanted siblings, but Dad never got serious with a woman. He never even told me when he was dating someone. I wish he’d found someone, because he’s lonely, even with all his activities and Buddy. By the way, did you give any more thought to adopting a dog for yourself?”

I shook my head. “It really wouldn’t be fair to the animal. I wouldn’t even have time to take it out for a walk every day.”

“Hmm... but you seemed so happy with the puppy around.”

“That was all you, Mel. Trust me.”

We were close to the Statue of Liberty now, and I had to admit it was quite a sight at night.

“This is gorgeous,” she whispered. “It looks magical with all these lights around it.”

I circled it twice at a speed that was low enough for us to take in the sight but fast enough to cut through the waves.

She licked her lips, crossing and uncrossing her legs. Her short skirt had hiked up to mid-thigh, and all I wanted was to explore her body. But I planned to wait until we got home for that. I wasn't going to have her on this damn boat.

"Eyes up, mister," she said in a playful tone. "This is not the time to check me out."

"Every time is the right time to check you out," I said seriously.

She swallowed hard. I nearly let go of the steering wheel to lean over and claim her mouth.

"We don't want any accidents, do we?" she asked.

"No, we don't."

I sped back toward North Cove. We were silent on the way, taking in our surroundings. The salty air was making me thirsty, but I didn't have any water. We reached the docks a few minutes later, and Joseph wasn't in sight.

"Let's wait for Joseph to come and stabilize the boat before we get out."

"Sure." She rose to her feet, looking around. "Where did I put my bag? Oh, here it is."

She walked to the back of the boat, picking it up from the bench, but then it slid between her fingers, falling on the edge with a thud before slipping down in the water.

"Shit." She leaned overboard.

"Mel, careful. Don't bend too—"

Splash.

She fell into the water.

I dove in after her, instantly feeling the cold water engulf my skin. One second later, my lungs started protesting.

"Holy shit," Mel exclaimed.

"Mel, are you okay? Do you know how to swim?"

We both had life vests on, but seawater was tricky.

“Yeah, I know how to swim, but the water is cold.” Her teeth started to chatter.

“Are you two okay?” Joseph asked, sounding bored. I guess we weren’t the only idiots to fall into the water.

“We’re just cold,” I replied. “Help her out, okay, man?”

“There’s a staircase on this side of the dock.” He pointed to the right, and we both swam in that direction.

At the staircase, Joseph took Mel’s hand, pulling her out of the water while I pushed myself up on my own. I immediately got to my feet, inspecting Mel.

“I’ll go fish out your suit jacket,” Joseph said, heading back to the boat.

Mel laughed. “Well, this is unexpected.”

“Come on. We’ll feel better after a hot shower.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you did this on purpose to make sure I come with you.”

“You’re the one who lost her balance looking for your bag,” I reminded her.

She groaned. “Oh, my bag.” She looked out at the water. “I’m guessing it’s at the bottom. Or it’ll wash out of the city tomorrow.”

“Let’s see if Joseph fished it out of the water along with my suit jacket.”

She was shivering, so I put an arm around her shoulders. Not that it helped much since I was drenched too.

“Joseph, did you find a bag too?” she asked.

He shook his head, holding up my jacket. “Nah, this is all. Bags usually sink right away. They’re heavier.”

I took the jacket, checking the pockets. My phone was in there—probably dead. My wallet was also still inside—ruined too, I was sure of it.

“Did you have anything valuable in your bag?”

“Only my phone and my wallet with my ID. Oh, and the keys to my apartment, but I keep another set of keys at the gym in case I lock myself out. Nothing that can’t be replaced, I guess.”

“Looks like I’ll have to replace everything too,” I said.

She laughed again but was shivering even more now.

“Come on. Let’s go before you catch a cold. Can you break into a run?”

“In these shoes? Not really. But I’ll try.”

Chapter Sixteen

Dylan

We ran as fast as possible to my building. The doorman's eyes bulged when he saw us.

I led Mel to the elevator. Holding a hand to the small of her back, I ushered her in, where we met two neighbors. They stared at us with their mouths wide open. No wonder, since we were dripping with water. Mel was pressing her lips together, clearly trying to hold back a smile. I was trying too, because the whole situation was hilarious.

When we reached the seventh floor, I noticed the puddle we'd left in the elevator when we got out. Our shoes were squeaking as we approached my unit, where I unlocked my door.

"Come on, let's go straight to the bathroom," I said as we took off our shoes in the foyer.

"Yes, please." Even though the guest bathroom was closer, I wanted us to go to the one in the master bedroom. It was bigger.

Opening the door to the bathroom, I started undoing the buttons of my shirt. Mel began to disrobe as well. She took off her shirt, then pushed down her skirt. The teeth chattering was worse, so I started the hot water, and we stood under it without saying anything. It was scalding hot, but it still took us a few minutes to warm up. Only when the bathroom was full of steam did I turn it off.

"Now that's better," Mel said. Her lips had been blue before, but now they were back to that delicious tempting pink.

I couldn't help but drink her in. Fuck, she was beautiful, and I was the luckiest guy in the world that she was here with me. I pulled her flat against me, kissing her hard, pressing her against the tiles. She moaned against my mouth, lacing her

hands at the back of my neck, pulling me even closer. I was addicted to her. I had no idea how it had happened, but I was.

She smiled, pulling back. “Now, this is so much more efficient than the shower. We should have started with this,” she said in a sassy tone, making me laugh.

“We can continue with this.”

“Yeah, it’s warming me up much faster than the water did.”

We stepped out of the shower, and I handed her a towel before wrapping one around myself.

She looked at me, cocking a brow. “Do you have a bigger towel? This is just going to cover one boob.” She put the towel around her to demonstrate her point. It was true. It was too small to cover the whole of her; it covered either her upper body or her lower body. Since I only used a towel to dry off and never wrapped them around me, I only had small ones.

“I don’t have anything bigger, but I can give you two towels.”

“Okay,” she said reluctantly, wrapping the first towel around her lower body and the second one around her upper body.

“I feel like a mummy. This is ridiculous,” she said.

Glancing at the pile of wet clothes on the floor, she wrinkled her nose.

“Do you have a dryer?”

“Yeah, it’s in the guest bathroom.”

“Okay, I’m going to have to put them in right away. Otherwise, I won’t have anything to wear tomorrow.” She bent at the waist to pick up the clothes. The towel around her lower body fell to the floor, revealing that perfect ass. It drove me insane. I had no idea how I could want this woman all the time with such intensity.

I went closer to her, patting her ass cheeks. She startled, losing her balance and pressing her ass right against my cock.

I groaned. “Mel, fuck.”

She stood immediately, turning to face me. “I didn’t mean to do that.”

“It turned me on anyway.”

She grinned. “Everything turns you on.”

“No, not everything, Mel. Just you, only you, all the fucking time.”

Her eyes widened. “The dryer,” she reminded me, wrapping the towel around herself again.

“Yeah, come on.” I picked up my clothes and then led her to the guest bathroom.

“I hope checking off the rest of the items on my list will be just as adventurous,” she said with a laugh. “Though maybe without the freezing our asses off.”

“I’ve got that covered. I’m very good at keeping you warm.”

She laughed. “That you are.”

I couldn’t wait to check off whatever she wanted to do on that list. This was the first time since I found out about the software competition that I was interested in anything else except winning, and it was all thanks to her.

“You think we should wash them first?” she asked when we entered the bathroom. “They smell odd.”

“That’s a good idea. I have a quick wash cycle, and then we can tumble dry them.”

“How fast will they be ready?”

I wrapped an arm around her waist from behind, kissing her neck. “Not until tomorrow morning for sure.”

She tilted her head on my shoulder, looking up at me. “Is that a trick to keep me here?”

“You suggest I need tricks?”

“Hmm... not sure. But I was promised a massage, so that’s an incentive.”

Pushing her hair to one side, I kissed the back of her neck.

“You can’t keep your hands to yourself, can you?”

“Should I?” I asked.

She sighed. “No, not at all.”

Turning around, she caressed my arms. She smiled coyly, slipping past me, heading back to the master bedroom. I walked right behind her, tugging at both towels until they dropped to the floor. She wiggled her ass, and I palmed the right cheek, kneading it in my hand.

“This bed is decadent,” she said, touching one of the four posters with both hands, standing right in front of it.

I positioned myself behind her, pushing her wet hair to one side and kissing the back of her neck, then her shoulders. I moved my hands down her arms and then on her waist, trailing my mouth lower in a straight line down her back until I reached her ass cheeks. I kissed each one of them, gripping her hips even harder. She grabbed the post with both hands as if she needed to steady herself. I liked the way she reacted even to the slightest touch.

I turned her around abruptly. Her eyes widened, and she clasped the post again with her hands behind her back. I nudged her legs apart, kissing up her inner thighs but avoiding her pussy for now. I kissed her right thigh and then the left one, and I felt her shudder in my arms. Only then did I pull her clit between my lips.

“Oh, Dylan.”

She dropped her head back. Clenching her thighs, she trapped me between them. I pressed them wide again. I needed her open like this for me. I circled my thumb over her clit before pulling it between my lips again. I did it again and again right until I felt her shudder with her whole body. She had goose bumps on her legs. I kissed up to her navel before turning her around again.

I wanted to keep her on her toes, to keep guessing which part of her I would explore next. While I kissed her shoulder blades, I touched her nipples with my fingers, sliding my cock

between her thighs. She clenched them tight, pressing me between her legs. I gripped the side of her waist hard. I was trying to drive her crazy, but I couldn't do that if she pushed me over the edge first. I kept touching her breasts and kissing her back and moving my hips back and forth at a slow, lazy pace. The length of my cock kept rubbing her pussy but not sliding in. I knew I nudged her clit on almost every move because small shudders ran through her each time.

“Climb on the bed,” I said into her ear. I needed to be inside her. I couldn't postpone this any longer.

She climbed on all fours, looking over her shoulder seductively.

I took a condom from the nightstand and wasted no time putting it on. She was right at the edge of the bed, and I was standing. Positioning myself at her entrance, I slid inside, grabbing both her ankles and tilting them up a bit. She automatically leaned forward on her arms a bit more, shifting her center of gravity. The angle changed, and she moaned. I was touching a part of her I hadn't before, and she loved that.

I wasn't gentle for long. I couldn't help it, not with Mel. She demanded I give her everything I had, and I couldn't have her any other way. Watching her succumb to me was glorious. It made me want to give her so much pleasure that she'd never want to leave my bed. I moved in and out of her fast, watching her cry out and pull the sheets. She was tightening around me, pulsing already. My thighs were burning from the effort of standing and thrusting, but fuck, if I didn't like it. She tightened even more, and then her knees gave in. She fell on her belly. I pulled back out for a few seconds, but then I climbed on the bed, lying on top of her. I slid my cock back inside, and a groan tore from my chest.

“Fuuuuuuck.”

She felt even tighter than a few seconds ago. I pushed a hand between her and the mattress, working her clit. She was soaking wet and so fucking tight that I was going to lose my mind. She tore at the sheets, pressing her forehead against the mattress but not her mouth. I heard her unmuffled cry, and it

was fucking glorious. She came so hard that my climax took me by surprise. It had been barely forming a few seconds ago, but it slammed into me, and I exploded inside her. I was still working her clit, even though she hadn't finished coming, but I was relentless. I wanted to wring out every drop of pleasure. I felt her tighten again right before her cry filled the room as she came a second time.

Only then did I take my hand away and stop my movement, but I still lay on top of her. I kissed her shoulder blades, pushing myself up on my elbows. She shimmied her hips, and I caught the smile on her face as she looked at me sideways.

I pulled out of her, quickly removing the condom before lying back on the bed. I was half straddling her, resting on my side. I was sustaining my weight on an elbow, but the other hand was free.

"I still owe you that massage," I said, pressing three fingers in the crook of her neck.

She sighed, whispering, "How can you make me feel like this?"

"Like what, exactly?"

"Like I'm all you want. All that matters."

"Because you are."

Mel pressed the side of her face in the mattress, groaning. "I can't believe I said that out loud. Those orgasms messed with my filter."

I pushed a strand of hair behind her ear, looking her straight in the eyes. "You can always say what's on your mind, Mel."

"But we agreed on just having fun," she whispered.

"That doesn't mean we can't be honest with each other," I said truthfully, moving closer to her.

"And that won't scare you away?"

“Not one bit,” I promised. “Let’s make a deal to always tell each other everything. Okay?”

The truth was I wanted more than that. I wanted to get close to her, but I wasn’t ready to admit that yet, not even to myself.

She raised her head, smiling from ear to ear. “Okay.” Flexing her shoulders, she added, “By the way, I’d love a massage.”

I immediately pressed my fingers in the crook of her neck again, kissing her shoulder. “Your wish is my command.”

“Ohhh, that’s great because I have so many plans.”

“I’m all yours, Mel.”

Chapter Seventeen

Mel

The next morning, I woke up with a start, hearing an alarm clock. Glancing around, it took me a few minutes to realize I wasn't home. The annoying sound came from the nightstand—from a digital clock. I immediately silenced it and checked the time. It was seven forty-five. Glancing at the other side, I realized Dylan wasn't in bed. Had he set the alarm just for me? That was thoughtful.

Rising from the bed, I instinctively looked around for something to put on before remembering my clothes were in the dryer. And he only had those pesky little towels that covered nothing. Well, then, I was going to roam naked through his apartment. I was confident he'd enjoy a peep show first thing in the morning.

As I approached the living room, I heard Dylan's voice loud and clear. He was probably on the phone.

I yawned, rubbing my eyes before stepping inside the living room carefully, glancing around. He was on the couch, holding his laptop on his thighs.

Holy shit! There was a green dot lit right next to the camera. He had his camera on, and I was buck naked.

The next few seconds were a blur. Dylan immediately shifted his laptop to one side, looking over his shoulder. At the same time, I took a giant step to the left, hoping to get out of the radius of the camera. I slammed into a bookshelf with my forehead. It hurt as if I'd sliced it open. My teeth clattered painfully. My eyes watered. Dylan exited the online meeting and was next to me in a matter of seconds, putting an arm around my waist.

“Babe, fuck. Are you okay?”

“Um, yeah. Sorry for the peep show. I thought you were on the phone.”

“They didn’t see anything. I turned the laptop away out of reflex, but that part of the room wasn’t in the range of the camera. How are you feeling? Need some ice?”

I looked up at him, smiling. “I’m okay. I wanted to surprise you by stomping in here naked, and I guess I surprised your whole team.”

His jaw tightened. “Again, they didn’t see anything.”

“Uh-huh. Keep telling yourself that,” I teased.

“I have to or I’ll go insane.”

“Mr. Gallagher, are you feeling possessive again?”

“Fuck yes. I don’t want anyone to see how gorgeous you are. Then they’ll take you away from me.”

I started to wiggle my eyebrows but abruptly stopped because it was making my forehead hurt. “*Please*. I don’t think anyone can give me as many orgasms as you do. That’s an incentive right there for me to stay.”

“Good to know. I have a few other tricks up my sleeve.”

Taking a step back, I took a good look at him. He was wearing jeans and a white polo T-shirt and looked suspiciously perfect.

“How come you’re so fresh? We went to sleep at the same time.”

“I always wake up at this time. Got an hour of coding done before the management meeting.”

I blinked rapidly. “Wait, when do you wake up exactly?”

“At five.”

“Holy shit. Every day?”

“Yes.” He laughed, kissing my forehead.

“Wow. This is blowing my mind.” I cuddled against him, loving the feeling of his arms around me. I rolled my hips into him, and it took me a few seconds to realize he had a hard-on. Jerking my head back, I looked up at him. “Was this here before?”

His eyes were full of humor. “You need coffee.”

“Nah, I’m not a coffee drinker. But I always need about an hour after I get up from bed to feel awake. Possibly longer after a night like the one we had.”

“You complaining, Mel?” A sly grin spread on his handsome face.

“No, no. I was making an observation.” I scrunched my nose, trying to remember why I’d come in the living room buck naked. “Oh, my clothes. They’re in the dryer, right?” Just as I said that, it dawned on me, “Oh shit. We never got them out from the washing machine.”

“Relax, I did it this morning.”

My eyes widened. “Wow.”

“The perks of getting up early.”

“True. Besides, you’re very good at fondling me.”

“Are you implying that you don’t like what I do to you when I’m sleepy?”

“I always like your hands on me.” I lowered my voice to a teasing whisper. “But your technique is better when you’re fully awake.”

He gripped my ass cheeks with his hands, pulling me against him. “See? You’re proving my point.”

I covered his hands with mine, swatting them away before turning around. “Now, I need my clothes.”

I only got a few steps before I felt his hands on my shoulders, steering me to the left. “Wrong direction. The guest bathroom is this way.”

“Ah, what would I do without you?”

“Hurry up. We have time for a quick breakfast too.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I ordered it a while ago from a restaurant I really like. It’s already here.” He pointed with his head toward the kitchen island.

I followed his direction with my gaze. My eyes bulged. He'd woken up early, before his meeting, and ordered breakfast? Who was this guy, and could I keep him forever?

No, no, no. I couldn't think like that. We had agreed from the beginning that we were not on the same page, and I was okay with that. I didn't want to go in and change the rules of the game right now. That had never worked before.

"Okay. I'm going to get dressed, and I'll be right back."

I headed to the bathroom to get my clothes, and oh shit, Dylan must have selected the wrong program. While my skirt was okay, my shirt had shrunk a bit. My navel was on display. I looked like an extra in a '90s video. Walking to the mirror, I realized it was worse than I thought. I tried to tug at it, but it was no use. Oh well, it would have to do for the short trip to the gym. I was wearing short things there all the time. Maybe I could pass it off as a training shirt of some sort.

I combed my hair with my hands, and I noticed he had toothpaste in a glass between the two sinks. I quickly put some paste on my finger and used it to sort of brush my teeth. It wasn't great, but it was better than having stinky morning breath.

He'd brushed his teeth already because I'd gotten a hint of mint when he'd stopped me from toppling the bookshelf, and I did want to kiss him before I left. I wanted to kiss him thoroughly so it could last me for the whole weekend. Last night had been incredible. My body was still aching, which was proof that I hadn't imagined all the delicious things he'd done to me.

I found him at the kitchen island already, looking hot as sin as he arranged croissants on plates.

"Oh, yummm..." I said, practically eating it all up with my eyes. "These look delicious." Taking one, I immediately bit into it and moaned in delight. It had a mix of chocolate and apricot jam inside.

I felt Dylan at my back. Instead of devouring a croissant himself, he was kissing the side of my neck.

Hell yes. This was the way to start the day. Eating something delicious while this godlike man was covering me with kisses.

“What are you doing later today?” he whispered against my skin.

“I’m probably going to go shopping for a phone. I’ll buy the new model. I’ll email Dad from the gym’s computer to tell him about the phone so he doesn’t panic when he can’t reach me.”

“Shit, I forgot about that. I need a new one too. But I wanted to talk to you about something. I’m meeting my family and some friends at Isabelle’s new house. Want to join us?”

I blinked a few times, stopping mid-bite. My heart was beating faster. *He wants me to spend time with him and his siblings? Wow.* Last night with my dad was different. It had been unexpected, but this was an invitation. I couldn’t figure out what it meant, but perhaps I didn’t need to.

I wanted to have a fun Saturday with him and the rest of the Gallagher clan. I just had to make sure I didn’t lose my heart in the process too.

“Mm, that sounds tempting. What are we going to do?”

“I’m not sure yet, but if past meetings with my family are any indication, it will probably revolve around talking about the wedding. I think I already know everything by heart.”

I turned around, pointing at him. “Hey, don’t be such a grouch. It’ll be a very happy day for your sister.”

“I know. That’s why I’m putting up with it. You have no idea on how many things I had to give my opinion on.”

I found that extremely cute, especially knowing weddings were a sore spot for him.

“Ian always makes fun of her, that she goes into the zone when she talks about D-day, and he’s right,” he added.

“You two are so bad.” I ate the rest of the croissant, checking the time on his oven display. “I’ve got to go, or I’ll be late.”

“I can drive you.”

“No, it’s okay. The walk will wake me up.”

“When do you finish?” he asked.

“At ten.”

“Okay. I’ll pick you up in front of the gym.”

I made to go, but he pinned me back against the island, kissing me hard and deep. I tugged at his shirt, running my fingers through his hair. He tasted like coffee. He was relentless in his exploration.

“Dylan,” I whispered when we paused to breathe.

In response, he groaned, rocking his hips into me. “Go before I change my mind and keep you here.”

“Ha! As if you could convince me.”

“Don’t tempt me.” He feathered his thumb from one corner of my mouth to the other. The look in his eyes was feral. My knees weakened a little, and I realized he’d have *no* problem convincing me.

Clearing my throat, I stepped to one side. “Okay. I’m going now.”

I moved quickly to the corridor, putting on my gladiator sandals. They were still wet, and the shape had changed a bit, but I was hoping they’d recover. He opened the door for me, and I didn’t miss the glint of mischief in his eyes. I pointed two fingers at his eyes as I walked backward out of the apartment.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I warned, punching the elevator button with my free hand. It was already on this floor, so the doors opened.

“Why, afraid of my powers of persuasion?”

“Exactly,” I said, stepping inside.

I heard his laughter right until the doors of the elevator closed. I was laughing too, checking my lips in the mirror. My

outfit was just as tragic as before, but I couldn't deny there was a glow to my cheeks and eyes that was all due to Dylan.

Oh, Mel, what are you getting yourself into? And more importantly, how are you going to get back out?

Chapter Eighteen

Mel

At ten o'clock, I came out of Genesis with a pep in my step. Dylan was waiting for me in his BMW. He'd pulled the car into a parking space right in front of the gym. I hopped in quickly, smiling at him.

"Ready. I'm all yours for the rest of the day."

It was a gorgeous Saturday, already hitting eighty degrees, and it was going to be a warm one. According to the weather channel, it would be ninety at noon, which was a bit too warm for the end of June. At least the humidity was supposed to be fairly low.

"Then we're good to go," he said, and the car lurched forward.

Glancing between the seats, I noticed a box. It seemed to be a brand-new phone.

"Hey, someone was productive. You've already bought yourself a replacement."

"Mine's in my pocket. That one's yours."

"Oh, thanks. Just message me your PayPal account when you have a chance. And the amount I owe you."

"No. It's a gift."

I stopped in the act of opening the box, turning to look at him as the car lurched forward. "Um... thanks, but it's not necessary. I was going to buy one for myself. You don't need to give me gifts."

"Gifts are never necessary," he said with a smile.

"Dylan, I mean it. I don't want you to give me a phone."

"Why not?"

Because it was a brand-new smartphone and it cost about \$1,000. I didn't want to sound ungrateful, but this didn't seem right.

“Look, this is very kind of you, but it would make me feel better if I could pay you.”

He stared at the road, shaking his head. “I’m trying to do something nice for you, Mel. Don’t read too much into it.”

I looked down at the phone, trying to find the right words. “I’ve never liked taking gifts, and after how things went with Elliot, I’m even more gun-shy.”

“That guy is a moron. A gift is a gift, Mel. Most people don’t ask for them back, and don’t worry, I would never do that.”

“No, I know. Believe me, I realize you’re nothing like that ass.” I needed to explain more so I didn’t seem like a total weirdo. “He kept giving me these gifts in the beginning, you know? I think he wanted to convince me he had money or something. I’m not sure. It’s not like I ever cared. But he always liked to brag when we went out with his friends about how much he made and so on.”

“Wait a second. I thought his business was in trouble.”

“It was. It turned out he was maxing out credit cards. When I found out, I didn’t think much of it. A lot of people have issues managing their finances and credit cards. But when I didn’t want to give him that *second* loan, he said he’d wasted all this money on me, and I wasn’t worth it. It made me feel *so* small.”

“Fucking moron.” His voice was stern, and so were his eyes, though they softened when our gazes crossed. “Look, if it makes you feel better, you can transfer me the money for the phone. But I’d prefer if you accepted it for what it is, a gift.”

I bit my lip. “Can I think about it?”

“Sure.”

I did open it, though, installing all my personal information and shooting Dad a message to let him know I had a new phone but the same number. He texted back with a picture of his computer screen. He was playing one of his mystery games. That would keep him occupied all weekend.

Glancing out the window, I realized we were leaving the city. “Where are we going?”

“Tarrytown. The house is outside the city on the Hudson River.”

“Wow, that’s cool. So wait, this is their housewarming party?” My voice sounded more like a squeal.

“Exactly.”

“Dylan, why didn’t you say so?”

“I’d assumed it was obvious when I said we were gathering at the new house.”

“I didn’t put two and two together until now. I was still half asleep. I should have bought them a gift.” I had a panicky feeling inside me as I squirmed in my seat.

“No. They specifically asked everyone not to bring presents. And that if we insist on doing something for them, they gave us a list of charities we can donate to.”

“Really? That’s so thoughtful of them.” I’d always liked Isabelle and Brayden, but now my respect for them skyrocketed. “Okay. I’ll think about the charities I want to donate to. How many people will be there?”

“Not sure, honestly. My parents flew in for the occasion. They arrived last night,” he said casually as if this wasn’t a huge deal.

I gasped. I was meeting his parents. Why hadn’t he said that before? When he said he was hanging out with his siblings, it sounded like a casual brunch or something. I’d assumed it was going to be like an extension of our meetings at the gym.

“And the Winchester clan will be here too. The cousins of Josie’s husband.”

“I know Tess. And I’ve heard about the rest,” I said. My voice wasn’t just squeaky now but downright strangled.

He glanced at me. “Are you okay?”

“Why didn’t you tell me your parents were coming? You make it sound like this is no big deal.”

He grinned. “It is no big deal.”

“Um, you just told me your parents are going to be there. And I’m still wearing yesterday’s clothes, which, despite washing and tumble drying, still smell a bit like a swamp, and my shirt is way too short.”

“We can make a detour and go by your apartment first if you want to change,” he said.

I considered this and shook my head. “No, that will take us about an hour. I’ll ask Isabelle to lend me a T-shirt or something.” We could have stopped at a mall to buy something, but that would take time.

I lowered myself in my seat, wondering how today would go. I was startled when Dylan took my hand, bringing it to his lips and kissing it. I realized he always did this when I was on edge, and it calmed me instantly.

“You don’t smell like a swamp, Mel. Everything is going to be fine. I didn’t tell you it was a big deal because I don’t think it is. My family gets together all the time. Granted, my parents don’t come as often, but it’s still not going to be a big deal.”

“I think you and I have different opinions on what’s a big deal, mister.” I pointed at the box with the phone, wiggling my eyebrows.

He laughed. “If I want to pamper you, I damn well will.”

Okay, that got me big-time. I racked my mind, but I honestly didn’t think anyone had wanted to pamper me before, except my dad. I smiled, glancing out the window.

“I haven’t introduced my parents to anyone since breaking up with Lina, so they’re going to be excited.”

“Want to tell me any more about you and Lina?” I asked.

His jaw tightened. “Not much to say.”

“What was she like?”

“Nothing like you, Mel.”

“Do you miss her?”

“Not one fucking bit.”

“Are you still in contact with her?”

“No. I’m done with her. I have no interest in her whatsoever. Honestly, that door is closed and locked. I always think a clean break is best. Never understood people who want to stay friends after a breakup.”

Oh no. I sighed, twiddling my thumbs in my lap.

“And after Ian told me she was cheating on me, I was pissed.”

“Understandably. So ever since, you’ve avoided relationships?”

“I even avoided dating. You?” He looked at me intently.

“Oh, I didn’t avoid dating at all. They all sucked. Which brought me to you.”

He burst out laughing, making me laugh too. “I’m feeling very special right now.”

I nudged his elbow. “Eyes on the road. We want to get to Isabelle’s in one piece.”

I wanted us to be friends after this thing between us ended. I wondered what I could do to change his mind on that.

When we entered the village, I looked around curiously. I’d never been here before, even though it was about forty minutes outside of New York. It was gorgeous, with a distinctively old-world, small-town feeling. There were quite a few shops along the main road, with gray stone or redbrick facades, colorful shutters, or striped sunshades. There were a few grand mansions off the main road, and Dylan drove until we reached a fence of evergreen plants and the gate. There was no house in sight, but Dylan looked at the camera mounted right on top of the gate, which opened the next second.

My jaw dropped.

This was a vast property, with an alleyway snaking between rose beds, leading up to a huge house. It had the same old-world architecture as the mansions we'd passed. It seemed entirely made of red bricks. There were already a few cars parked in front of it.

"Isabelle and Brayden live here?" I asked after we got out of the car. He took my hand, leading me up to the house. "Just the two of them?"

Dylan chuckled. "Yes."

"It's huge."

"I know, right? But they did say they want a big family, and they like the neighborhood."

"It's beautiful. Now I feel even more uncomfortable in my possibly swamp-smelling clothes."

"Fuck, you're cute," he said, brushing my cheek.

"What? Why?"

"I don't know, because you're all nervous that you're about to meet my parents."

I elbowed him lightly. "And you find this amusing?"

He smiled, touching my lips as if he were enjoying a private joke. "It *is* funny. I'm glad you came today."

"You sort of tricked me into coming."

He kissed my forehead, putting a hand at the small of my back. "You don't need to be prepared for this. Trust me."

Ha! He brought me to a palace, and I was meeting his parents. He had no clue how much preparation I needed for this.

We went around the house, and I assumed there was another yard in the back. It turned out I was correct. And there were a lot of people in it, including kids.

The pup Dylan took from the shelter came running to us, and we both paused to pat his head.

"Who's a cutie pie?" I whispered. "You are."

He seemed more interested in Dylan, though. Clearly he missed him.

Isabelle immediately came to us. “Hey, Dylan, you made it. And you brought Mel too.” She kissed my cheeks, glancing down at the pup. “Loki is happy to see you.”

“I love the name,” I exclaimed.

Isabelle looked gorgeous in cutoff jeans and a white tank top. Her red hair reached to her waist. It was the first time I saw her with her hair flowing down her back.

“I think you don’t know too many people here, right? Let me introduce you to them.”

“Sure, but I need a favor first. Could I borrow a shirt from you? Mine shrank in the dryer.”

She cocked a brow, and I could practically guess her thoughts: Why would I go out in a shirt that shrank? I blushed.

“Long story,” I said.

She wiggled her eyebrows, looking between Dylan and me.

“Can’t wait to hear it,” she said.

“Isabelle,” Dylan said in a warning tone.

“Ha! Mom is here. I don’t think I’m the one you have to worry about today,” she replied.

“Worry? Why worry?” I asked, already a bit antsy.

“See what you’re doing?” Dylan asked. “She’s already on edge.”

Isabelle laced an arm with mine, patting my hand. “Oops. Not my intention. Come on. Let’s find you a top.”

Chapter Nineteen

Mel

Dylan winked at us before we turned around, going up marble steps into the house. It was hands down the most beautiful home I'd been in; it was decorated in a vintage style with chandeliers and classic furniture.

Isabelle led me to a stunning walk-in closet. It looked like a shop with glass fronts and an island in the middle with accessories.

“Wow. I've only seen stuff like this in the movies.”

“I love it. It's my favorite part of the house. I still can't get over how big the place is. We wanted something in the village because the band owns a house a few streets away and spends most of their time there. It's just more convenient to live here.”

“And you'll commute to your office?” I knew it was in Brooklyn, though I'd never been.

“Yes, but only three times a week. I'll do the rest of the sessions online. I'll see if it works out, and I'll play it by ear. The best part of going with him on some legs of the tour is that I discovered I could move part of my business online. A lot of clients now prefer it.”

“It's quite a long way to Genesis too,” I said.

“True, but I don't want to be stuck inside here all the time. Trips to Manhattan are right up my alley.”

She took out five tops, and I tried to imagine which one would fit me best without trying all of them on. Isabelle and I had a similar build, though my shoulders were wider and my arms more muscular. I ended up choosing a strapless one that had an elastic band on top and bottom.

“Do you mind if I change in front of you? I have a bra on.” Since I practically lived in locker rooms, I didn't have any qualms if others saw me naked, but I didn't want to make her uncomfortable.

“No problem.”

I discarded my useless top, putting on the new one, congratulating myself for wearing a strapless bra. Isabelle’s top was a bit snug over my breasts, but I loved it.

“So... how did you end up in this pinch?” she asked with a sly smile.

I laughed. “Dylan and I went on a boat tour last evening, and we fell into the water. He put the clothes in his dryer on super high, I guess. Anyway, it was too much heat for my top.”

Isabelle looked at me with her mouth slightly open. “My brother took you on a *boat*.”

“Yes. I have this list of things I want to see around the city, and he said we could check them off together.”

Isabelle was silent for a few seconds before letting out a high-pitched squeal and jumping up and down.

“Oh my God. This is *monumental*,” she exclaimed. “Holy shit, Mel. You’re such a good influence on him. Thank heavens he ignored my warning and asked you out.”

“Can you explain that? I don’t know what you mean,” I asked, now worried I might be in for something I didn’t expect.

She shook her head. “It only makes sense in my head, to be honest.”

Hmm... is she being vague on purpose? I wanted to know more but had no clue how to go about it. I made a mental note to question her later, preferably after eating a snack. I’d only eaten that one croissant this morning, and I wasn’t creative on an empty stomach.

She laced her arm with mine again, leading me out of the closet and back out to the party. The house was eerily quiet, especially in contrast to the outdoors, which was swarming with laughter and loud voices.

“Have you met Brayden’s bandmates?” she asked as we descended the marble steps.

Okay, so full disclosure. I was a massive fan of Green Fire and somehow managed to keep my fangirl in check when I first met Brayden at Genesis because I'd had plenty of preparation before his appointment, but I didn't know I would be meeting Lars, Harvey, and Thomas today. They were at the foot of the steps. *Holy shit!* My inner fangirl was on fire.

"Oh my God. I'm such a huge fan of you all," I told the three of them when we reached them, then pouted when I realized... "I don't have anything with me for an autograph."

"I think we can find something in the house," Isabelle said with a grin.

"Okay. Sure thing. Can I take a selfie?" I probably sounded ridiculous, but I couldn't stop myself.

Lars gave me a lazy smile. "Sure." He held out my new phone, and only after he took about a dozen more did I notice Dylan's glare.

Isabelle had noticed it too. And once the guys left, she pointed at her brother. "Oh, do I smell some jealousy here?" She patted his shoulder. "I approve."

Was he jealous? I couldn't believe it. Just because I was fangirling. I mean, okay, sure, the guys were hot, but I didn't flirt with them or anything.

"Come on. Let's introduce you to everyone else" was all he said.

Hmm. I'd have to do some digging later.

Over the next few minutes, I tried to memorize everyone's names. Dylan introduced me to Josie's husband first, Hunter. His cousins followed next. They were all here with a significant other, and a few of them had kids as well. By the time we approached a couple who looked to be in their sixties standing under a majestic maple tree, my mind was already spinning. My palms were sweaty too. They were his parents, after all!

"These are my parents, Jim and Dora," Dylan said.

His mom looked a lot like a mix between Dylan and Isabelle. I imagined Dylan would look just like his dad in a few decades. He was as tall as Dylan, with the same dark blond hair.

They both regarded me with surprise. I felt my face heat up. This was as big a deal to them as it was to me.

“Mom, Dad, this is Mel, my trainer, and the girl I told you about.”

His mom smiled widely. “You were the one who convinced Dylan to adopt a puppy.”

“Temporarily,” Dylan clarified.

I laughed. To my surprise, his dad gave me a half hug and a kiss on the cheek, and his mom did the same, catching me completely off guard. I didn’t remember how a mother’s touch felt. My mom had left when I was so young that I had no memory of her at all.

I blinked rapidly, clearing my vision before pulling back. Dylan was looking at me intently.

“I’m glad to meet you,” I said. “I’m a bit overwhelmed, to be honest.”

“I don’t blame you. Call me Dora,” his mom said. “This is such a lovely surprise. We didn’t know you were coming.”

“It was spontaneous,” I replied.

Isabelle called Dylan’s name just then, and we all looked in her direction.

“I’m going to see what Isabelle needs. You okay?” he asked, putting a hand at the small of my back.

I nodded because my nerves had indeed subsided a bit. Once Dylan was out of earshot, I focused on his parents.

“How was your flight?” I asked.

“Oh, lovely,” Dora said. “I slept the whole way. Jim watched movies.”

Dylan's dad nodded, looking around. "I can't believe this place is so big."

I grinned. "I'm thinking the same. It's so beautiful. You're staying here?"

"No, we're staying with Josie and Hunter," Dora replied. "I don't want to miss any time with Sophie. Especially since Josie is with clients all the time."

"All your children are very successful and hardworking," I said.

"Yes they are, and we're very proud of them," Jim replied. His eyes sparkled. "Though I think Ian and Dylan are stretching themselves a bit thin," he continued.

"Because of project Z?" I asked.

Dora looked at me in surprise. "Yes. It's a big undertaking."

"I think what they're doing is incredible," I said.

"It is," Dora replied. "They've always been so observant, especially Dylan since he's older. I think those rough winters we had impacted him more than the rest. One year he came to us and said he didn't want anything for Christmas because Ian and Isabelle wanted new toys, and we couldn't afford them."

Oh wow. I brought a hand to my chest, looking around instinctively. Dylan was still with Isabelle, near a table that wasn't there a few minutes ago. It was full of food.

He caught my eye and winked at me. I winked right back before focusing on his parents again.

Dylan joined us a few minutes later.

"The food is ready," he announced.

"Great. I'm starving," Jim said.

Dora smiled warmly at her husband. "So am I. Let's see what they've got."

They immediately headed to the table.

Dylan trained his eyes on me. “You’re not nervous anymore.”

“I like your parents. They’re great.”

“They are. I’m sorry if they made you uncomfortable in the beginning. They’re big on hugging.”

Oh, so that hadn’t gone unnoticed. I looked up at the majestic crown of the maple tree, trying to think of how best to explain it. He grew up in a big and loving family, so this would sound weird to him.

“I wasn’t uncomfortable. It’s just not something I’m used to. Dad is not a touchy-feely person, and I don’t remember Mom at all. I’m not used to hugging.”

I lowered my gaze to him, startling at the intensity in his eyes. He stepped closer, splaying his hand on my shoulder and neck.

“Well, brace yourself, because my family is not one to hold back.”

I laughed, wiggling my hips a bit. “Yeah, I got that.”

“Want to go check out the food?”

“Hell yes. That croissant was great but not nearly enough.”

He tapped his temple. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You will?”

“I can’t do a half-assed job at spoiling you, can I?”

I let out an exaggerated sigh. “I’m swooning just because you’re *thinking* about this.”

I was swooning more than he could know. And after what his mom had shared with me, I’d made up my mind about the phone.

He was a generous person, and I’d been difficult in the car. I realized my response was a gut reaction based on a previous situation and that was like comparing apples to oranges. Not fair to Dylan at all.

“Thanks again for the phone. I really do appreciate it—it was so thoughtful and unexpected, and... well, thank you.”

“Decided to keep it as a present?”

I nodded. “I did.”

“Good.” He kissed my forehead before linking an arm with mine. We went together to the buffet. His parents weren’t there anymore, but Ian and Isabelle were inspecting the dishes.

I immediately grabbed a steak, along with grilled tomatoes with cheese on top.

While we filled the plates, Isabelle asked Ian and Dylan, “How’s the business going, by the way? Mom keeps saying she thinks you’re stretched too thin on this project.”

“She’s not wrong,” Ian said. “I think we’re going to be a bit more needed in D.C. to finalize it all than we had foreseen.”

“I think I might have to go there soon and check out a situation,” Dylan added.

I felt a knot form in my stomach. Would things cool off between us while he was gone? I wasn’t even sure when he had to go or how long he had to stay, but I couldn’t help wondering what was going to happen with us.

As I put a grilled onion on my plate, I noticed Isabelle watching me closely. After we all put food on our plate, Dylan’s dad pulled him and Ian to one side.

Once alone, Isabelle asked, “What’s wrong?”

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

“You can tell me anything. You know that, right? And I will keep it a secret.”

“I’m not sure what’s happening between your brother and me. I mean, I do know. I’m just not sure if it’s going somewhere,” I blurted and pressed my lips together before I gave her even more details. Even though she said she’d keep a secret, she was Dylan’s sister. I didn’t want to put her in a position where she had to keep a secret from him.

Isabelle smiled at me. “If I know anything about my brother, you’re more important to him than he realizes. Probably than you both realize.”

“What makes you say that?” I asked.

“It’s a hunch.”

“And I agree with it,” Ian said, appearing out of nowhere.

Isabelle placed a hand on her hip, glancing at her brother. “And you’re judging that by the glare Dylan gave you at the gym that one time?”

“Hey, there are three types of glares, okay? I patented them. The playful one, the teasing one, and the glare-like-you-mean-it one, and the one he gave me was definitely of the last type.”

“Ian, stop bad-mouthing me,” Dylan exclaimed.

We all turned around at the same time to see him well within earshot.

“He wasn’t,” I said. “I want to hear more. I’m gaining perspective.”

Dylan looked from Ian to Isabelle with a glare that I’d categorize as a glare-like-you-mean-it one.

Ian wagged his eyebrows. “Excellent! I never mind sharing details. The more inappropriate, the better. And we have all day long.”

Chapter Twenty

Mel

I willingly admitted it. I had no idea what the rules were for casual dating, but Dylan seemed intent on breaking all of them, and I wasn't putting up a fight. I couldn't. The man was too charming for my own good—and Dad's. I didn't forget that we wanted different things, but I couldn't help throwing caution to the wind every time we were together.

Over the next three weeks, Dylan came with me a couple times to Charlotte's shelter, and even to Dad's place, like tonight.

I was cleaning Dad's kitchen after dinner when I felt Dylan come up behind me, kissing the side of my neck. I shuddered, almost dropping the glass I was rinsing in the sink.

Chuckling, he straightened up. "I'm bad for your focus."

"Clearly. But it all feels so delicious that I can't even put up a fight. Want to feel me up again?"

Dad was in the yard with Buddy, and if he came in, we'd hear him long before he saw us.

A twinkle of mischief played in his eyes. "Later."

"Why?"

"Later," he repeated.

Looking over my shoulder, I startled at the heat in his eyes. Okay, *later* was a better idea.

"Want to go out and check how Dad and Buddy are doing?"

"I wanted to help with the cleanup."

"Ha! But your being here is distracting me, so...."

The corners of his mouth twitched. He patted my ass before going outside. My lady bits were already on fire. I had no idea how Dylan could set me on edge so quickly, but I was thoroughly enjoying it.

I cleaned up superfast, then joined the boys outside with a plate of cookies. Opening the door, I first gave one to Buddy, who was lying down on one side. Dad and Dylan were at the other end of the terrace.

“Everything my medical bills didn’t eat up, she lent to that moron,” Dad said.

I stopped in my tracks, gulping. Crap, why was Dad telling all this to Dylan? I wasn’t ashamed of anything—I’d made a mistake loaning money to Elliot, and I owned up to it—but I didn’t want Dylan to know every detail.

“We’ve got cookies,” I said loudly. Dylan immediately looked at me.

Dad nodded, smiling. I placed the plate on the rattan table, and after we each ate a few, Dad looked at his phone. I knew he was checking the time.

“Yes, Dad, I know your book club meeting is starting. We’ll be out of your hair right away,” I teased.

“Perfect. Saves me the trouble of kicking you out.” He sounded good-natured, but I knew if we interfered between him and James Patterson, we’d get an earful.

After bidding Dad goodbye, Dylan put an arm around my waist, leading me outside. His car was in the repair shop today, so we’d Ubered here.

“Where are we going?” I asked while he tapped his phone to order an Uber. I fanned my face because the mid-July heat and humidity were sweltering.

“I don’t know. What do you feel like doing?”

“Hmmm... watch a movie, maybe? Though I’m not in the mood for a theater.”

“We can always watch it at my place.”

I smiled from ear to ear. I loved his huge flat-screen and the sound system. Besides, being alone meant I could touch him all I wanted.

“I like where this is going,” I said.

“It’s going to be even better than whatever you’re imagining.”

My body tingled all over.

“Uber’s gonna be here in ten minutes.”

Should I bring up his conversation with Dad? I bit the inside of my cheek, pondering this.

“What’s wrong? You’re nervous all of a sudden,” Dylan said.

Wow, was I an open book or what?

“Umm... I heard you and Dad earlier. I’m sorry for that.”

He frowned. “What exactly are you sorry for?”

“That he talked your ear off about all sorts of things.”

“I asked him about it.”

“Oh. Why?” I pushed a strand of hair behind my ear, looking at him nervously.

“Because I want to know.”

“You can ask me anything.”

He took one step closer, taking my cheeks in his hands. “Are you sure? You don’t seem talkative when I bring it up.”

I sighed, deciding to put all the cards on the table. “The more I talk, the more I feel like this thing between us goes beyond casual, and I know that’s not what we agreed on.”

His eyes darkened. His grip on my cheeks became firmer. “I want to know, Mel. I care.”

And just like that, butterflies roamed in my belly. His eyes were relentless and smoldering. *He cares.*

“What do you want to know?”

He feathered his lips on my forehead before kissing it. “Your dad gave me a good overview. Still regretting that I didn’t punch that idiot. If I ever see him again....”

“Don’t let him get to you.” I pulled back a few inches, looking up at him. “Although you look extra hot when you’re

mad and broody like this.”

He moved his hands down to my neck. “Isabelle calls it the Neanderthal gene. It usually only activates around family members.”

And me! Ha! I felt so special.

“I like it.”

“Good. Because I have a feeling you’ll see it again.” He moved his hands down, resting them on my waist. Wait, I spoke too soon. One hand slid dangerously low on my back, almost reaching a buttock. I pressed my thighs together on instinct.

“Mr. Gallagher, feeling me up on the street is not an improvement over doing it in my dad’s house.”

He grinned. “Not my fault you’re so responsive.”

“Oh yes it is.”

His eyes flashed as he looked at my mouth intently. “Lucky for you, our Uber is pulling up.”

“Or what?” I asked.

He tilted closer, whispering the next words. “You’ll see once we’re alone.”

Holy shit. I licked my lips, already fidgeting. He didn’t even need to touch me to make me squirm.

A car stopped next to us, and Dylan opened the door. I got in, sliding to the other side of the seat to make space for him. We didn’t speak much during the drive, but Dylan’s sheer presence was messing with my senses. And when he put a hand on my thigh, playfully running his finger on the hem of my dress, touching a bit of skin, I was on fire.

Glancing at him out of the corner of my eye, I couldn’t miss his smug smile. Oh, he was teasing me, was he? Two could play at this game. I moved closer to the door, out of his reach. There! He couldn’t do anything now except look at me with those delicious, smoldering eyes. I was simmering by the time we reached his building.

Dylan: 1

Mel: 0.

“You bad man,” I whispered as soon as we were in his condo.

He immediately touched my waist from behind, kissing the side of my neck.

“I was proving my point.”

I moaned, still wanting to tease him, but I forgot what his point was. I opened my mouth to ask him when his phone rang. Groaning, he pulled back, taking the phone out of his pocket.

“It’s Ian. Do you mind if I put him on speakerphone?”

“It’s fine by me.”

Nodding, he answered the phone. “Ian, you’re on speakerphone, and Mel is with me listening.”

“Does that mean I have to behave?”

I laughed at his tongue-in-cheek answer as both Dylan and I went to the couch. I sat down at one end, and he was straight in the middle, next to what looked like a huge stack of towels.

“I can’t make any promises, but I’ll try,” Ian said. “Listen, I think one of us needs to go to D.C. Horton is becoming impatient, thinks we’d do better at troubleshooting if we were in his office. He needs babysitting.”

“I get what you mean,” Dylan said. “I’ve been his main contact point since we started working together, so I should go.”

“I was going to suggest that too. I don’t think you’ll need to be there for more than two weeks. I think this will be better for you. While you’re there, focus on Horton and the submission for project Z, and I’ll handle the hassle in the office here.”

“Are you sure?” Dylan asked. “Because that would be awesome.”

“I know. I’m amazing, right? We have a plan, then. That’s all. I don’t want to keep you two from whatever it is couples do. And that was a rhetorical question. No need to answer.”

Dylan laughed. The corners of my mouth twitched. I loved the dynamic between these two—the way they seemed to know what to say or do intuitively. They complemented each other almost as if they were twins; they had that kind of brotherly connection.

My chest tightened realizing Dylan was going to be away for two weeks. What would happen to us? I wasn’t ready to let him go.

“When are you leaving?” I asked him as soon as the call disconnected.

“Not sure. Probably next week. I’ll decide after I talk to Horton.”

“Okay. Want me to give you some privacy with him?”

Dylan cocked a brow. “You seriously don’t think I’m gonna waste the evening talking to a client, do you?”

Pulling my ankle, he prompted me to move closer to him. I readily obliged, climbing in his lap.

I touched his lower lip with my fingers. “I think we have some unfinished business.”

“I can’t seem to remember.” A sly grin spread on his face. “Want to remind me?”

“Gladly.”

I shimmied in his lap, straight over his cock, groaning when I realized he was semihard already. His eyes flashed. He buried a hand in my hair at the back of my head, bringing me close enough that our foreheads were touching. I rolled my hips back and forth. A groan erupted from deep inside him, filling me with pride. Then he gripped one hip, keeping it in place. It was impossible to move.

“I remember where we were. I was telling you that I care. I meant it, Mel.” His eyes were serious all of a sudden.

I licked my lips, sighing. “Why do you have to say something so swoon-worthy? I have no idea what to say back.”

“You don’t have to say anything. I just wanted you to know.”

“Well, I—” I waved my left hand out, accidentally knocking the stack of towels to the floor. “Oh, crap.”

Scrambling down from Dylan’s lap, I picked them up from the floor.

“New towels?” I asked.

“Yes. I ordered you a robe and huge towels.”

I blinked, looking at the stack. “You ordered them for me? Really?”

“Yeah. Even though I like seeing you walk around half naked.”

“What are you talking about? I found a way to cover myself up.”

“Babe. Half your ass was always showing. Sometimes the crack. I thought you were doing it on purpose.”

I blushed. “Nope. I thought I was doing a great job.”

“I can always send the towels back.”

“No, no.” I pressed the stack to my chest, grinning like a kid on Christmas day.

He’d gotten me towels. I was sure that was breaking another unspoken rule, and I was over the moon even though I was also a bit scared. I wasn’t sure my poor heart could recover if I fell for Dylan.

I folded the towels carefully, unable to contain my smile. I made a mental note to still flash him my nakedness, to tease him. And this time, it would be on purpose.

“What’s that smile?” he asked.

I shrugged a shoulder. “I’m not telling you.”

The next thing I knew, he pulled me down in his lap, teasing my thigh with his fingers like in the cab before skimming his hand up my dress. His mouth was on my neck again, slowly descending to my chest.

“I thought we wanted to watch something,” I murmured.

“Fuck the movie,” he said on a growl.

“I agree.”

Chapter Twenty-one

Dylan

I went to work at the crack of dawn the day before leaving for D.C. for two weeks. I'd had back-to-back meetings, and I was already spaced out after lunch when Ian came to my office to discuss the agenda for the afternoon. We were supposed to have a meeting where we went through what would be done here while I was in D.C. Even though the client requested local support weeks ago, we decided to start only after the first of August.

"I want a rain check on the meeting," I said.

Ian jerked his head back, eyes wide. "Did hell freeze over? You want to skip a planning meeting?"

"I do. I need time off. Can you take care of it?"

"Only if you tell me why."

"I made plans for this evening with Mel, but I want to spend the afternoon with her too." I was already missing her, and I wasn't even in D.C.

My brother flashed me a shit-eating grin. "I'm happy for you, brother," he said.

My eyes bulged.

"Wait, you're congratulating me? What happened to giving me shit about not being a bachelor anymore? You always seemed to like that I was finally on your team."

"I am happy like this, not being tied down to a woman, being free to do whatever I want, but you've always been different. I'm glad you're embracing it." He fist-pumped in the air. "Don't worry. I'll hold the fort down here while you're in D.C, and you're not needed at the meeting tonight. It was more to please your OCD tendencies."

I cocked a brow at him. "I just like to know what's going on."

“Yeah, I know. We all do, but we’ll keep you informed. I also want a thorough report of D.C.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Who’s the one with OCD now?”

Ian shrugged. “We *are* related, after all. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree and all that.”

That was true. Our parents were like that too.

I stood up.

“Thanks. I’ll let you know how things go in D.C. Talk to you tomorrow.”

“Have a great trip.”

I left my office and headed straight to Mel’s apartment. I was supposed to pick her up later, but I couldn’t wait. She was on her balcony sipping what looked to be orange juice from a glass. She had her earbuds in. I was betting she was listening to one of her steamy audiobooks. I didn’t want to go up the stairs and ring the bell because she might not hear me.

Walking around, I found some cones from a fir tree and threw one on her balcony. She was startled, looking around, in the wrong direction, up in the air. I threw another one. It landed right next to her. She lowered her gaze and smiled brightly.

“Dylan, oh my God. Did I lose track of time?” she said, taking out one earbud.

“No, I’m here early. I want to spend more than just the evening with you.”

Her smile widened even more. “Come on up. I’m going inside to unlock the door.”

I headed up the stairs, taking two at a time. Her door was already open when I reached her floor, and I went inside.

“I was drinking pineapple and orange juice.”

“Too early for wine?” I asked.

She laughed. “Exactly.” She still had one earbud in.

“Want to finish listening to your chapter?” I asked.

She blushed. “How do you know I’m listening to an audiobook?”

“It was an educated guess, but judging by your blush, I’m right, huh?”

“Yes, you are.”

“Another steamy one?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then. I don’t want to get between you and your audiobooks.”

She grinned, taking out the second earbud as well. “I accept an interruption if you give me a steamy hot kiss.”

I sealed my mouth to hers the next second. She tasted like oranges and pineapple, and I couldn’t get enough. I pinned her against a wall with my hips, keeping my hands firmly on her waist, but skimmed my thumbs on the underside of her breasts. I wanted to memorize every second of the kiss. I wasn’t going to see her for two full weeks. Damn, I missed her already.

She stumbled back when we paused for air, eyes still closed.

“Hm. Now, that is what I call a steamy kiss.” She blinked her eyes open. “What do you want to do?”

“Well, we have reservations for a restaurant, but not until seven thirty. We can see another place on your list if you want to.”

“Oh, my list. You do like going through it, don’t you?”

“I like spending time with you, Mel, whatever we do.”

“You’re such a flirt.”

We went out on her balcony. I sat on the chair and lowered Mel on my lap. Good enough for me. I looked over her arm as she opened the note on her phone where she had the list of New York attractions she still wanted to see. “Hey, have you ever been to the One World Observatory?” she asked me.

“I haven’t. I haven’t been to 90 percent of the locations on your list. I’ve heard of it. The photos look great.”

“They even have a restaurant in the building.” She tapped her phone, scrolling quickly. “That would be awesome, but it’s probably all booked.”

I kissed her arm. “I can pull some strings and get us in tonight.”

She looked at me, eyes narrowed. “Really? Are you trying to impress me, Dylan? Not that I don’t appreciate your efforts, but I’m going to admit that I’m already impressed with you.”

“If you want to have dinner there, we’ll have dinner there. Simple as that. I’ll make it happen.”

She grinned, kissing one corner of my mouth. “Okay, then I’ll go get ready, and you try to get us in. If you manage, then that’s okay. If not, you have those other reservations anyway.”

“I will get us in,” I promised. She wiggled her eyebrows, plugging in one earbud. “Want to give me one of those earbuds? You make me curious about them.”

Her cheeks turned so red that I couldn’t help laughing.

“Ummm, no. My steamy audiobooks are for my ears alone.”

“Duly noted.”

The One World Observatory reminded me of the Empire State Building, only it was newer. It was all glass and steel, and we were on the viewing platform on the 27th floor. It had a 360-degree view through the enormous windows. There were many people, though I’d expected even more considering it was high season for tourists. I liked exploring the city with her. Spending time with Mel had become one of my favorite things, no matter what we were doing. She lit up something inside me.

I liked having her in my condo, finding her clothes and toiletries in random places. I’d never felt so close to anyone in

my life, not even Lina. Actually, it wasn't fair to compare the two in any way.

"The city looks so different from up here," Mel said. "I love that the viewing platform isn't open like at the Empire State Building. Those are so windy."

"Ready to go to the restaurant? Our reservation is in five minutes."

"Sure." Putting an arm around her shoulders, I kissed the side of her head, leading her up to ONE Dine.

A hostess greeted us, checking the ledger for my name.

"Your table will be ready right away. I'm going to check if everything's okay. I'll be right back."

Mel smiled. "I can't believe you pulled that off."

"I told you I'd get it." I bit her shoulder lightly.

She swatted me away, so I went for her neck, in a spot I'd discovered she was ticklish. Mel let out a burst of snort-like laughter before covering her mouth with one hand. I laughed, and she immediately snorted again.

"Oh my God. Stop laughing at me," she whispered between guffaws. "It's only making me laugh harder."

I buried my mouth in her neck, laughing against her skin.

The hostess came back, and I straightened up, trying to school my features. Mel was red in the face. The hostess glanced between us with a surprised look.

"Your table is ready. Are you?"

"Yes," I said, and Mel chuckled.

The tables were crowded, but she led us to the one in the very back where we were next to the window. There were no tables around us for two feet, which was a damn miracle.

"This is our best table," the waitress said proudly.

"Thank you," I replied.

We sat down, and I noticed Mel was still red in the cheeks.

“I love your blush.”

She nudged my leg under the table. “It’s all your doing.”

“Even better. I plan to do it a lot more later. I love seeing you blush. And not necessarily from laughing.”

“Oh my God. You cannot dirty talk in public.”

“I can, but then we’d have to leave right away and skip dinner.”

Her cheeks turned a deeper shade of red. “So confident.”

“Am I wrong?”

“No, but just saying, I’m dangerous on an empty stomach.”

“That’s why I’m saving the dirty talk for later.”

A waiter approached us with menus, and Mel immediately started reading it, as if afraid I might change my mind and not wait at all. She ordered a veggie burger, and I went for the braised short rib. The waiter recommended red wine. He brought it from the nearby rack.

“Oh, Dad messaged me. I’ll reply really quick,” Mel said while the waiter poured us each a glass.

Once we were alone, she slipped the phone back in her purse, smiling at me. Was it my imagination, or did she seem nervous? She kept her hands under the table, moving them as if she kept tugging at her white dress.

“What’s your schedule in D.C going to be like?” Mel asked, fiddling with her fingers on the stem of the glass.

“Honestly, I don’t know. I’m going to be at the client’s and see how they’re moving forward and where they’re having problems, primarily with implementation, so we’ll see how it goes.”

“But it’s software. Can’t you do it remotely or something?”

“I could. That’s how we work with all our clients that aren’t New York based. It works well, but when our clients run

into trouble, they appreciate the personal visit. They feel more looked after if we're there in person."

"Okay."

It wasn't my imagination. She *was* nervous.

"Mel? What's up? Is something wrong with your dad?"

"No. Why?"

"You seem nervous all of a sudden."

She took a sip from her drink, then said, "While there, will you be seeing people?"

I frowned. "You mean clients?"

"No. I mean friends and other women... *women friends*."

I jerked my head back. "You think I'm going to date someone else?"

She looked down at the table. "I don't know. I mean, we've never talked about this."

"Mel," I said sharply. "You're mine, and I'm yours. And I know we didn't plan it this way, but I wouldn't change one fucking thing. Unless you don't want it?" I asked. My spine stiffened at the mere possibility. Had she brought this up because she didn't want us to be exclusive?

"I do. I just didn't know what you wanted."

"You. I want you. That's all I know." I reached over the table, covering her hand with mine. "How do you feel when we're?" I asked her point-blank. Her eyes widened.

"I'm happy," she said simply. "I'm so, so happy, and I'm always looking forward to the next time we're together. I'm sorry. That was silly of me."

"No it wasn't. I'm glad we talked about it. Always tell me what's on your mind, okay?"

"You sure about that? Because I have some dangerous thoughts right now."

"Tell me."

She glanced around, then back at me, shaking her head. “No, no. Dinner first.”

I leaned across the table, dropping my voice a bit. “Time for dirty talk?”

She stroked my leg under the table. I had no idea how she could turn me on so fast, but suddenly all I wanted was to be alone with her. No matter how much time I spent with her, I always wanted more.

“No, no,” she said playfully, still stroking my leg.

“This was a bad idea. Should’ve ordered something in.”

“I thought you liked exploring the city with me.”

“I like exploring you even more.”

She sucked in a breath. “Dylan! Stop right there. That flirty tone is a one-way street to dirty talk.”

“Fine. I’ll wait until after dinner. But then we play by my rules, Mel.”

After dinner, we decided to spend the night at my place. My flight was early in the morning, and I wanted to enjoy as much time as possible with Mel.

“I believe you can start Operation Flirty, Dylan,” she said the second we were inside the apartment.

I kissed the side of her neck, biting her lightly as I did at the restaurant. I couldn’t wait to get her naked. I wanted to show her exactly how deep under my skin she’d gotten, how important she was to me. I wanted to touch her right now. I needed it.

When she bent at the waist to take off her shoes, her hair fell sideways, revealing the back of her neck. I pulled at the bow that was holding her dress together. She straightened up abruptly, and the dress fell under her chest. She turned around, wiggling her shoulders. She was wearing a strapless bra. Reaching to her side, she lowered the zipper slowly, torturing me. The dress fell to the floor. She was in lingerie only now.

Her panties were black lace. She turned, and I had a sideways view of her ass as she bent to undo the clasp around her ankles. Fuck, she was sexy.

“I want to do it.” I took my time, kissing her thighs, her lower belly, stroking my thumbs up to her ankles before undoing the clasp. Her back arched to push her pelvis slightly into me. After she took her shoes off, I kissed up her body, capturing her mouth. I wanted this woman in a way I never wanted anything else. She laced her arms around my neck. I walked her backward toward the living room. Everything was dark. She stumbled when we stepped on the carpet, and we both burst out laughing.

I put a hand on her waist, steadying her. “Come on. This way.” I led her to the bedroom. My cock was pulsing in my jeans almost painfully. I turned on the light on the bedside table. She smiled, touching one of the four posters again.

“This four-poster thing is beyond sexy,” she said. She sat on the mattress, making a come-hither motion with her finger. I stopped right in front of her and made to undo the buttons of my shirt, but she slapped my hand before swatting it away. “I’m running the show tonight,” she informed me.

I held up my hands in the air. “By all means, do whatever you want with me.”

She took off my belt slowly and then started unbuttoning my shirt. She started making her way up to my chest. As soon as all the buttons were open, I took it off, dropping it to the floor. She cocked an eyebrow.

“My show, remember?” she said.

“For now.”

She touched my cock over my jeans. I groaned, pushing my hips forward.

“Fuck. Touch me, Mel. Touch me.”

She undid the button of my jeans and the zipper, pushing them down at the same time as my boxers. Before I could even draw in a breath, she took me in her mouth.

“Fuck.” I touched her back. It took every ounce of self-restraint not to want to push myself even deeper. I wanted her to take me in at her own pace, as much as she wanted. The feeling was insanely good.

She moved her mouth up and down, wrapping one hand at the base, where she couldn't take me in any more. I dropped my head back, just giving in to the wave of pleasure.

“Babe, this is so good,” I said. I kept touching her shoulders, her back, unclasping her bra, and then cupping both her breasts with my hands. I needed to touch her. I was so fucking close to losing it.

Straightening, she looked up at me. A satisfied smile played on her lips.

“I need to be inside you, baby,” I said. I opened the drawer of the nightstand, taking out a condom and rolling it on.

“I soaked my panties through,” she informed me, taking those off too, slowly, seductively. She parted her legs wide, pushing herself back farther on the bed. I leaned on one knee, pressing two fingers on her clit before sliding them inside and curling them. She bucked her hips, crying out my name.

“Dylan!” she exclaimed sharply as her eyes pinched closed.

I wanted to bring her pleasure and see her on the edge, just as I was. I'd give her so much pleasure tonight that it would last her until I was back. I wanted her to spend every night thinking about me, feeling me inside her as if I'd never left, as if I was still by her side. I pushed her thighs wider apart, putting a pillow underneath her ass until she was at the right angle. I slid in fast, thrusting all the way in.

She cried out, pushing herself up on an elbow, bringing her hand to her clit.

“Fuck,” she murmured, touching herself, and the sight blew me away. I moved in and out, alternating between a slow pace and a fast one. When I felt her tighten so much that I knew she was close, I stilled. She kept moving her hand over her clit. I wanted to feel her come like this. She exploded

beautifully. There was no sight better than Mel claiming her pleasure. I held her in my arms, watching her thrash around and grow even tighter around me.

This was insanely good, and I wasn't even moving at all. But she was squeezing me so tight that I was nearing the edge myself. I stood stock-still until she calmed down, blinking her eyes open. I smiled, lying down and pulling her on top of me. She gasped, moving her hips.

I loved that she was so responsive to what I did to her. She was still tight and deliciously wet, and I couldn't get enough of her. I propped myself on my elbows, bending my legs so she tilted toward me. She put her palms on my chest for balance, moving up and down on my cock. We were both moving fast, desperate.

I pushed myself up enough that I could claim her mouth. I wanted to taste her lips, capture her pleasure, and make her come again. She didn't last long, and watching her fall apart on top of me was insanely sexy. She lost her balance and almost fell sideways. I steadied her, keeping her where I wanted her, until I gave in to my orgasm too. My entire body shook. My legs spasmed. I didn't know if I widened inside her or she grew even tighter or both, but I could barely breathe from the intensity of the climax.

I fell back on the bed, completely spent, eyes closed as the aftershocks claimed my body. A few minutes later, I opened my eyes, slowly coming back to my senses. She was still sitting on me, smiling. I pushed myself up on my hands, kissing her right breast and then the left one before claiming her mouth. I was holding her close. She covered my cheeks and ears with her hands as she tilted her head, kissing me.

"I'm going to miss you," she said.

"I'm going to miss you too, Mel. I want us to go somewhere after I get back, just the two of us. Maybe Martha's Vineyard."

I felt her smile against my lips. She pulled back a notch. Her eyes were wide and full of surprise.

“I’ll go wherever you want. Already looking forward to it.”

“You’ll love it.”

“Oh really? Why?”

“Can’t give it all away before we’re even there,” I replied.

She looked at me with narrowed eyes. “Mysterious, are we? Let’s see if I can *seduce* you into fessing up.”

“You’re welcome to try.” With a grin, I tackled her to one side before climbing on top. I had a *great* plan for our trip, and I wasn’t going to reveal any part of it.

Chapter Twenty-two

Mel

The next morning, I already had Dylan withdrawals, and he'd only been gone for two hours. It was ridiculous—I didn't see him every night, even when he was in the city—but knowing he was away made me feel this hollowness in my chest.

“Mel, these came for you,” Shauna said at noon. I had back-to-back training sessions all morning and only now made it to the reception desk. There was a huge bouquet of red roses on it.

“They also have a card,” she said with a dreamy smile. “Thought you might want to know.”

I smelled the roses, picking up the card. It was from Dylan.

“I will miss you, Mel. Have a great day.”

Oh, Dylan. I was in a great mood all morning, smiling at my clients and being more patient than usual. I was on cloud nine, and every time I passed reception, I smiled even bigger, looking at my beautiful flowers.

After work, I met Charlotte for a cocktail.

Ever since she opened the dog shelter, we met there, catching up while doing chores, but she insisted on going out for an actual cocktail today, and I was all for it. I loved girl time.

We met near the gym at a small bar that had just opened. They were known for their tapas more than their cocktails, but their margaritas were terrific.

Charlotte was wearing a beautiful white dress with a generous cleavage and huge hoop earrings. Her hair was styled in curls. She grinned when I arrived, eyeing my flowers.

“Are these from Dylan?” she asked as I sat down.

“Yes. He sent them today to the gym.”

“My God, this man is something else. I didn’t even think men in this century knew how to send flowers anymore.”

“You and me both.” We ordered a selection of tapas and margaritas and received our drinks in no time. I kept eyeing the roses while sipping my beverage. At lunch I’d sent Dylan a message thanking him, but he hadn’t replied. He hadn’t been exaggerating when he said he wouldn’t have free time at all. And he’d *still* sent me flowers.

“So you and Dylan are getting pretty serious, right?” Charlotte asked.

I grinned, sipping some more of my margarita. Oops, I was going a bit fast.

“Well, we talked about not seeing other people,” I informed her. “I wasn’t sure what was going to happen when he went to D.C.”

“He sent you flowers, so I think it’s safe to say he’s really into you.”

I clasped my fingers tighter around the stem of the glass, pouting. “And I’m *really* into him. I’m afraid of how much, honestly.”

“Why?”

“We made it pretty clear in the beginning that it’s a casual thing.”

Her eyes widened. I hadn’t shared this with her.

“You don’t do casual.”

“I know, but I like him a lot, and one thing led to another....”

Charlotte grinned, clinking her glass to mine. “You wouldn’t be the first ones to move from casual to serious.”

I grinned too but immediately toned it down because my right temple started to throb. Damn, why was I getting tipsy so fast? I only ate breakfast and a protein bar today, so that explained it.

When the waiter brought our tapas, I immediately devoured *patatas bravas*, *chorizo*, and olives stuffed with almonds.

We spoke a bit about the shelter while eating.

“It’s going better than I was hoping for,” Charlotte said. “I’m thinking about offering training courses too.”

“Do you have time?”

She was also working part-time as a dance teacher for young kids. She had enough on her plate.

“I’ll figure it out.”

Charlotte was such a kick-ass woman, and I was proud of her. We ordered a second round of margaritas, and by the time we downed them, I was drunk, and so was she.

She put both hands on the table, eyeing me intently. “Okay, now that you’re inebriated, it’s time to fess up. How exactly do you feel about Dylan?”

I sighed, tugging at my bottom lip with my teeth. “I’m falling for him, but I’m trying not to. I know it’s going to end eventually.”

“Hmm... or maybe not. Have you told him how you feel?”

I shook my head, which made me dizzy. I massaged my temples, but it wasn’t helping.

“This margarita is kicking my ass,” I said.

“Mine too.”

“Should we call it a night?”

“Ha! A convenient excuse not to talk about Mr. Hottie, huh?”

I laughed. “I love talking about him. I can do it all day long. But my head weighs a ton.”

“Mine too. Let’s go.”

We paid quickly and parted ways in front of the restaurant. I dozed off in my Uber, but I still had a headache when I

arrived home. There was a bit of the sunset left, so I went to the balcony with a glass of water, phone, and earbuds.

Just as I was about to start my audiobook, Dylan called.

I answered with a grin. “Hey.”

“Am I interrupting your audiobook already?”

“No, I didn’t start it yet. How did you know?”

“It’s almost sunset.”

“Thanks so much for the flowers. They’re gorgeous.”

“I forgot to reply to your message today. It was crazy busy.”

“I figured it might be.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes. Why?”

“You sound a bit different.”

I licked my lips, deciding to fess up. “I went with drinks for Charlotte.”

He burst out laughing. “You mean you went *for* drinks *with* Charlotte, right?”

“That’s what I said. I think. Anyway, I didn’t eat much before dinner, so I got pretty drunk. Charlotte got a kick out of it, kept asking how I feel about you.”

I relaxed on my lounge, smiling at the flowers.

“What did you tell her?”

Oh shit. My pulse sped up. “Oops. I didn’t mean to say that to you.”

“But now you did.”

I shifted in my seat, licking my lips. “Maybe we can talk about this when you’re back?” My voice sounded small, but I felt oddly vulnerable.

“You bet we will. I miss you.”

“I miss you too,” I said, meaning it with all my heart. “It’s a bit lonely, watching the sunset without you.”

“Your audiobook isn’t a good enough replacement?” he teased.

“Not even close.”

“Good to know. I keep thinking about all the things we could be doing right now.”

“Like what?” Even though it was a warm summer day, a shiver of anticipation ran through me.

“Having dinner, giving you a massage, or visiting your dad. You’ve been on my mind all day.”

The shiver turned into a shot of warmth, coiling through me. “You know how to get through my defenses,” I whispered. Damn. I spoke too much again.

“Good. That’s what I want.”

He did? Why? I sat up straighter, pressing a hand to my chest. My heart was beating fast. I gathered the courage to ask him more about it, but I heard someone call his name in the background.

“I have to go. I’m having dinner with the client. I just wanted to talk to you for a few minutes.”

“Have fun.”

“Thanks. You too.”

I lay back down on the lounge with a grin the size of Texas while I plugged in my earbuds and pressed Play in the audiobook app.

I was the luckiest woman on the planet.

The next morning, though, I was feeling everything but lucky. I barely got to the gym when I received a phone call from Dad. Elliot had gone to his house to take back the TV and a freaking coffee table he’d bought. Dad hadn’t wanted to let him in, so Elliot broke down the door. I couldn’t believe it.

Dad was in quite a state when I arrived at his house. He wasn't just scared. He'd also hurt himself, trying to prevent Elliot from coming into the house. He had a few wood fragments in his right hand from the broken door, and he'd hurt his left elbow when he accidentally wheeled his chair against a corner of the bookshelf. Buddy had been sleeping in the backyard when Elliot came and missed the whole thing. Not that him being awake would have made a difference. He was a huge teddy bear.

"Dad, everything is going to be fine," I said. My voice was shaky, even though I was trying to be strong for him. He was already scared and worried.

"He kept saying he was the one who bought them, so he had a right to take them back."

My blood was boiling. I had indeed been too permissive with Elliot. I always figured if I didn't pay him any mind, he'd eventually go away. I was wrong.

"Dad, I don't think your injuries are serious, but we'll go to Dr. Denver anyway, okay?"

Dr. Denver was his GP, and her practice was only a few streets away.

"We'll leave the door like this?" he asked.

I glanced behind my shoulder at the broken door. "I'm going to tie it so it's not hanging loose, and I'll also notify the police. Hopefully no one will notice it's open while we're at the doctor's. I want to get you to Dr Denver first, then deal with the police."

"Okay."

Dad was such a strong man, and now he was shaking.

Before propping the door, I wheeled his chair out of the house, feeling completely overwhelmed. I didn't want to leave the house unlocked, but I wasn't sure how to handle this any better.

Putting my earbuds in, I dialed 911. I kept my hands firmly on Dad's wheelchair.

“Hello. What is your emergency?” a friendly woman answered.

“I would like to report a break-in,” I said. A cold shudder ran through me. She asked for details, and I realized I didn’t have too many since I hadn’t witnessed it. I told her I was getting Dad checked out right now, so we weren’t home.

“We’ll have someone police the area to make sure the perp isn’t doing more damage. We can also send an officer by your house once you’re back,” she offered.

“Thank you. That’s the best, I think. I’ll call again once we’re out of the doctor’s office.”

After ending the call, I focused 100 percent on Dad, trying to distract and reassure him. The GP’s waiting room was empty when we arrived, so Dr. Denver took Dad in right away.

“I’ll take the splinters out quickly,” she said, first applying a numbing gel. Dr. Denver was around Dad’s age and divorced. I always thought they’d hit it off, especially after Dad’s stroke, when she came by the house a couple times a week to check on him. It hadn’t happened, though, but they had a beautiful friendship, and I was more grateful than ever for that today. She was putting Dad at ease.

While Dr. Denver removed the wood fragments, I messaged Shauna to let her know I couldn’t come today.

Shauna: Ok, I’ll call all your clients and ask if they’re okay working with other trainers today. By the way, these arrived.

She sent me a photo of yet another bouquet. Roses again, this time pink ones. I hugged the phone to my chest before messaging Dylan.

Mel: Thank you for the flowers. I’m not going to Genesis today because I’m looking after Dad. Elliot broke into his house. I’ll take them home tomorrow, though.

I barely put my phone back in my bag when it rang. Dylan was calling. I stepped into the waiting room to answer.

“Good morning,” I said.

“Are you okay? Is your dad okay? What happened?”

I told him everything in a few words. He swore loudly.

“That idiot. That fucking idiot.”

“I know,” I said.

“Are you sure your dad is okay?”

I warmed up all over at the concern in his voice. “He’s a bit scared, but he’s not physically hurt—just a few scratches and splinters. We’re going back to the house once the doctor’s done, and we’ll talk to the police. I’m going to have to move him into my place for a few days while I get the door fixed and install a top-notch alarm system. I can ask someone to help me carry him up the stairs, because there’s no elevator.”

I paced the room, trying to coordinate everything.

“But your place isn’t big enough, especially for his chair. It won’t work for Buddy either, will it?”

“I know. No, it’s not the best solution, but it’s temporary anyway.”

“Why don’t you both go to my place?”

I stopped pacing, pressing the phone tighter to my ear. My stomach somersaulted. “Your apartment? Do you mean it?”

“Yes. There are enough bedrooms, and it’s big enough for Buddy too. The elevator is handicap accessible, and Martin will have an easier time wheeling about, okay?”

Wow. I couldn’t believe this. I pressed a hand to my chest. My smile was wobbly.

“Are you sure you don’t mind? It would be more convenient for Dad at your place, but—”

“Take him there, Mel. I’ll talk to Isabelle or Ian about getting you a key.”

“Thank you, Dylan. This is great. You’re great. How are you?”

“I excused myself from a shitty meeting.”

“Oh no! Go back to it. I’m fine. Everything’s fine.”

“Anything you need, tell me, okay?”

“I will. Thanks.”

I was still stunned as I hung up. Dylan wanted me to take Dad to his place. Oh my God.

I poked my head inside the office. Dr. Denver had finished removing the splinters. Now she was disinfecting the elbow, which only had some scratches.

“Okay, that’s it,” she exclaimed, straightening up. “I’ll prescribe something for inflammation, and then you’re good to go.”

“Thank you, Dr. Denver,” I said, stroking Dad’s shoulder as she wrote the prescription. Once she handed it to me, I tucked it in my bag and wheeled Dad out on the street. There was a pharmacy right across from her office, so we stopped by to get the pills. Dad was unusually quiet. He was always a stoic man, so I knew he didn’t want to dissect everything.

I also knew he wasn’t a big hugger, but he needed it. Once we came out of the pharmacy, I wrapped both arms around him, holding him to me.

“Daddy, it’s all going to be okay.”

He patted my arms, drawing in a deep breath. I straightened up, arranging his hair. I’d messed it up a bit with the hug.

“I think you should move out of the house for a couple days until we fix the door. I spoke to Dylan, and he invited us both to stay at his apartment. He’s in D.C for two weeks. His place is much bigger than mine, and his building has an elevator that’s equipped for wheelchairs too.”

Dad beamed widely. “Dylan is a good man.”

“He is. So, what do you say?”

“Is he okay with Buddy coming with us?”

“Yes. He even asked if he was doing all right.” I smiled just thinking how thoughtful that man of mine was.

“Great.” Dad looked a tad forlorn, then said, “I think getting away is a good idea.”

On the way home, I texted Dylan.

Mel: Dad wants to stay at your place.

Dylan: I’ve talked to Ian and Isabelle. They’ll take care of everything.

My heart fluttered, and I smiled from ear to ear despite the shitty day. In fact, I was in a great mood even when we got home to the broken door. I called the police station, and they promised to send someone in an hour maximum. They had a unit patrolling the neighborhood, but those weren’t the officers in charge of taking statements. Dad said he wanted to lie down until the officer came, so he went to his bedroom.

I started packing his medical supplies and laptop. He’d tell me which clothes to add once he was up.

There was a knock at the door a while later. *The officer is early!*

I’d blocked the door by putting a chair in front of it, and it almost toppled over me when I opened it.

“I’ve got it,” Ian exclaimed, startling me. Isabelle was next to him with Tess.

“What are you all doing here?” I asked.

“Dylan told us to come help you move your dad,” Isabelle replied.

“Isabelle was at the store when Dylan called, so I decided to tag along for moral support,” Tess said, inspecting the door.

Their kindness and warmth took me entirely by surprise.

“Thank you, I appreciate it. It’s all a bit nerve-racking. Come on in. We’re still waiting for the police officer to come, so it’ll take a while. How much time do you have?”

“We’re flexible,” Ian said. He kept looking over his shoulder to the street. “I want to stick around in case that moron shows up again. He needs his face punched.”

I couldn't help but laugh. "Is that Dylan's initiative or yours?"

Ian trained his eyes on me. "Dylan just said to look out for the guy. But I'm more hotheaded."

"Yes you are," Isabelle said. "No one's punching anyone. Mel, tell us what you need."

"I was in the process of packing a few things for Dad. We also need to take Buddy's crate, his water and food bowls, and a bag of dried dog treats."

Ian and Isabelle exchanged a glance, then quickly looked away from each other, both trying to suppress smiles.

"What?" I asked.

Tess laughed. "These two were gossiping on the way here about how much Dylan's changed, because he told them about Buddy."

Ian pulled me in for a half hug. "You're a terrific influence on him."

Chapter Twenty-three

Mel

The next few hours were intensive. The police officer stopped by, taking Dad's statement. It was unclear if we could accuse Elliot of theft since he'd bought the TV and coffee table. It was also unclear if we could press charges for trespassing, breaking, and entering. The door was off the hinges, but Elliot could always counter that the door was old and it gave in when he opened it, falling on Dad's arm. Since Dad didn't have any security cameras, it would be his word against Elliot's.

I was fuming.

After the police officer left, we all went to Dylan's apartment. Ian, Tess, and Isabelle helped me carry Dad's and Buddy's things. I belatedly realized I didn't have any clothes at all, so I headed to my place to get a few things right after Dad lay down for another nap.

To my astonishment, all three of them were still at the apartment when I returned.

Tess was playing with Buddy, Isabelle was playing cards with Dad, and Ian was cooking. Dad smiled when he noticed me, and I could see the surprise in his eyes. He'd been shell-shocked when I'd introduced him to the group back at the house. We were used to relying on each other, and that was it. Now we were surrounded by these amazing people who went above and beyond.

"She's good at the game," Dad said, nodding to Isabelle.

"Excellent," I said. I was pretty much crap at cards, so at least he had a worthy opponent tonight. I went to the kitchen, peering into the pan, and did a double take.

"Is that risotto?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Wow. I thought Dylan was the chef in your family. At least, that's the story he tells."

“Ha! I’m the better cook.”

“Really?” Isabelle asked, straightening up in her chair and looking over at Ian. “Then why is it that you never offer to cook for us when we have a family get-together?”

Ian grinned. “Because Dylan always offers. I conserve my energy for when it’s needed.”

I worked side by side with him, not that I had much to do. He’d already chopped onions and grated parmesan. When he announced it was ready, I put everything on plates and brought them to the table.

Daddy was still overwhelmed by this loud and friendly gang. I could tell by how he kept watching them banter, eying me from time to time.

“Thank you, Ian. This was delicious,” Dad said after he emptied his plate. “Isabelle, Tess, thank you too for everything you did today. I’m going to go back to my fancy bedroom and sleep. I’ve napped more today than I do in a week, but I’m still exhausted.”

“It’s been a draining day. Good night, Dad.” I was so pissed at Elliot that I wasn’t even sure what to do.

He rolled his chair with ease through the living room. I was so grateful to Dylan for inviting us here. My living room was much smaller than this one, and I would’ve had to rearrange part of the furniture so Dad could move around. The hallways and doorframes here were all newer than at my townhouse and were built more generously.

“Thank you so much for being here,” I told the three of them once Dad left.

“No problem,” Ian said. “That’s what family is for.”

His words caught me off guard. Did they consider me and Dad family? I couldn’t even wrap my mind around that.

“Dylan’s going to be arriving later than he thought,” Isabelle said.

I looked at her abruptly. “He’s returning to New York? Tonight?”

“Of course. He didn’t tell you?” Ian asked.

“No, he didn’t. Why is he coming back?”

“For you, silly. He doesn’t want you to go through this all alone,” Isabelle said.

“Oh wow.” I had no idea what to say. I felt all warm inside, and my vision was blurring. I couldn’t believe he was doing it. Suddenly I wanted to feel his arms wrapped around me tightly and bury my nose in his neck and inhale the scent of his skin. “When is he arriving?”

“I’m not sure. The only plane available was late this evening, so now he’s coming by car.”

He was coming back to support me. It still didn’t feel real.

“You guys are something else,” I said finally.

“That we are. We take care of our own. Do you want to talk about what happened?” Isabelle asked.

“No, I just... I don’t think there’s anything to be gained by talking about it.”

She and Ian exchanged another one of those glances that told me they were having a silent conversation.

“We need a distraction technique,” Isabelle suggested in a conversational tone.

I looked between the siblings and then at Tess, who just smiled.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Well, there are several ways to get through a crisis,” Ian said. “I usually go for humor. It’s not always appreciated, but my family has kind of gotten used to it. What’s your take on it?”

“I have no idea what to say.” I laughed, but I was a bit bewildered.

“Okay, then. Distraction it is,” Ian declared.

While the four of us cleaned the table, Ian delighted us with all sorts of stories from their childhood. He even took out

Buddy for a potty break.

A short while later, we all heard the front door unlocking. I immediately rose from the couch and walked right into Dylan's arms. He wrapped them around me tightly, holding me close.

I buried my nose in the crook of his neck, and the smell of his cologne relaxed me. I felt like I was home. He was everything I'd ever need.

"You didn't tell me you were coming," I whispered in his neck.

"Must've slipped my mind. How are you feeling? How's your dad?"

"He's sleeping." I pulled back and inspected him. He was wearing jeans and a black shirt. His hair was in complete disarray as if he'd been tugging at it. His eyes searched me with worry.

"Well, I think our services are no longer needed," Ian said loudly. "We're going to be a fifth wheel soon or whatever fits the situation better."

I blushed, turning to them. "Thank you so much for staying with me. It made this much easier."

"No problem," Isabelle said. "You're family. We take care of our own."

That touched me in a way I couldn't possibly explain, but I think Dylan understood because he tightened his grasp on my waist.

"Let us know if you need anything else, okay?" Ian asked.

"Sure. Thanks, everyone." Dylan replied.

After the three of them left, he walked me to the couch, pressing his thumbs in the crooks at the side of my neck. It felt divine.

"Where did you learn to do this?" I asked him.

"I'm playing it by ear. Tell me what feels good and I'll keep doing it."

I laughed. “That sounds a bit dirty.”

“That’s because it is. Come on, sit down and I’ll take care of you, okay?”

That sounded like bliss. “I can’t believe you’re here,” I said. I sat on the couch. He was standing in front of it, one knee propped next to me.

“Of course I’m here. You need me. Where else would I be?”

“In D.C overseeing your project.”

He shook his head. “No, you’re more important, Mel. I’ll figure out everything else, okay?”

“But how about—”

He pressed his thumb on my lips. “No, you don’t get to worry about anything else tonight, okay? I’m forbidding it.”

“Oh, you’re forbidding it?” I shimmied against him, gasping when he pressed his hard body into me.

“Did you hear from Elliot?”

“No, and I don’t think I will. That moron. When he showed up at my apartment, he did say his business was in trouble again and he needed money. Why doesn’t he just ask for his stuff back? I’d gladly give it to him.”

“You need to relax,” he said, whispering every word against the back of my neck.

“Well, I feel more relaxed because you’re here,” I said honestly. “You have this effect on me. It’s like you’re exactly what I need, no matter what the situation is.”

He turned me around, pushing a strand of hair behind my ear. The corners of his lips lifted in a smile. “I’m glad to hear that. Now let’s make sure you’re completely relaxed tonight. How are you feeling?”

“Exhausted.”

“Did you eat today?”

“Oh, yeah. Ian cooked a delicious risotto.” I laced my arms around his neck. “And I have to say, you overstated your title of the best cook in the family.”

He pinched my ass. “Really?”

“Just being honest here. But you have plenty of other things going for you.”

“Such as?”

I swallowed hard, licking my lips. “Coming back to be here for me. Asking your family to spend the day with Dad and me.” My words were a whisper. “Thank you. This whole day was insane, but it was better with the gang.”

“I wish I was here.”

“But now you are. Oh, by the way, thank you for the flowers today.”

“You’re welcome. I wanted you to have something to look at while I’m away.” His comment stopped abruptly, which caught my attention.

“Wait, does that mean you have another delivery planned?”

He pressed his lips together, shaking his head. “I’m not saying one more word.”

I giggled, which I didn’t think I could do after the day I had, after everything that was weighing on me, but he had a way of making me feel lighthearted even when everything was closing in on me.

“Oh my God, you did. I can’t believe this.” I pressed my palms on his shoulders and planted my lips on his in a deep kiss. I felt him smile before we paused to breathe. Then he kissed me back, and it was even harder than before. He grabbed my ass, pushing me against him. Oh, I could do this all night long. When I felt him grow hard, I pressed my pelvis even more into him.

“Did you eat dinner? We have risotto left,” I murmured.

“I ate a burger on the way here. I’m good, just tired.”

“This day feels like it’s been a week, to be honest.”

“I know. It’s like that for me too. Ever since you told me, I’d been trying to find a way to get back.”

“Yeah, Isabelle told me.” I kissed his cheek all the way up to his ear. “Thank you for being here.”

“I always want to be here for you, Mel.” He took my hand, making me look at him, touching my lower lip. “I love you. I’ve never felt about anyone the way I feel about you.”

I blinked quickly, digging my hands in his shoulders. “You love me,” I whispered.

“You know I do. You’ve made me fall in love with you. And I know this isn’t what we’ve talked about, but you’re the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

I was a bit emotional tonight from everything that happened, so I buried my nose in his neck, inhaling deeply.

“Babe, aren’t you going to say anything back?” he said after a while, which was when I realized I didn’t reply at all.

“I’m so sorry. I had an entire conversation in my head,” I said.

“Does that conversation include ‘I love you too’?” His tone was playful, and he was smiling, but there was uncertainty in his eyes.

I tilted my head so our noses were almost touching.

“I love you,” I said. “I’ve loved you for a while. I just wasn’t sure if it was a good idea, because, well, you know. We started without any strings.”

He pulled me into a hard kiss, exploring my mouth, touching my ass. He widened his legs so I had enough space between them. His erection pressed against my clit, sending little aftershocks through my body.

“I want all the strings, Melanie. I want everything with you.”

“How long are you going to be here?” I asked. “When’s your plane back?”

He shook his head. "I'll talk to Ian tomorrow and ask him to fly to D.C in my stead."

I jerked my head back. "What do you mean? You said the project is very important."

"It is, but Ian can take over."

"But you always said this is your project."

"My brother and I work closely together on everything. While each of us has his set of responsibilities, that doesn't mean we can't replace one another when it's necessary."

"Are you sure?"

"I don't want to leave you to deal with this alone, Mel." He cupped both my cheeks in his hands, pressing his thumbs at the corner of my mouth. "I want to be here for you and your dad while you deal with the police and that moron and whatever you need to do at your dad's house."

I sighed, feeling my eyes get a bit misty. Claspng his wrists with my hands, I kissed the right corner of his mouth and then the left one before pulling back a few inches so I could look at him.

"I can't get used to this. You're in a league of your own, you know?" I murmured. "And now, I think you are in for some pampering too after driving for so long. You deserve a reward."

"I'll never say no to a reward." He wiggled his eyebrows, walking me backward in the direction of the couch.

Laughing, I leaned in, raining kisses on his neck. "I thought you'd say that."

Chapter Twenty-four

Dylan

The next morning, I asked Ian to meet me at the office at seven o'clock. To my astonishment, he was already inside—with two cups from Starbucks and sandwiches—when I arrived.

“Are you a mind reader?” I asked, biting into a sandwich right away. “I didn't have time to eat at all.”

He grinned, sipping from his coffee, leaning against a wall. “I thought so, considering it's seven in the fucking morning.”

“I want to ask you for a favor,” I said.

“Need me to go to D.C in your place?”

“Yes, how did you know?”

“Intuition.” His grin widened. “And your reactions yesterday. I'll go.”

I jerked my head back. “You don't even need convincing? I'm suspicious now.”

Ian's expression turned serious. “You never ask me for anything. I'm not a dick. I won't say no.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” We'd always been close and looked after each other, but I had to admit, this degree of loyalty took me by surprise.

“No problem. I'll book the first available flight. I draw the line at driving. I have my standards.”

“Of course you do.”

“But you have to take over my New York agenda.”

“I'll be on top of that and the submission. We still have to perfect that and win that damn competition.”

“Amen to that, brother.” Ian tapped his fingers on the cup, watching me intently. “You sure you can be on top of both? Considering everything?”

“I will be. I have to.”

He didn't reply, just took a long swig of coffee. He was tiptoeing around me, which wasn't his style.

"Ian, what aren't you saying?"

"That we can always pull back from the submission and apply next year."

"Hell no."

He held up one hand in defense. "It was only a suggestion. We're in the home stretch for the deadline. It would suck to mess it up."

"We won't. I won't." Since I was the project manager, I had an overview of every single detail. Pulling out of the competition and reapplying was out of the question. Besides, everyone knew you had one shot only. Repeat submissions weren't taken as seriously.

"Okay. Don't get all defensive." Taking out his phone, he started tapping the screen. "Flight booked. I'm leaving at lunch. It gives me time to wrap up a few things. By the way, Mom heard about your return."

I waited for him to explain, but when he didn't, I prompted him. "And?"

"I bet she and Dad are already thinking about names for grandkids. Just thought you should know."

I burst out laughing before downing the last bite of the sandwich. "Who told them, you or Isabelle?"

"Isabelle. She called them while the police officer spoke to Mel and her dad. What *are* we going to do about that Elliot guy?" My brother's jaw was ticking.

The corners of my mouth twitched. "We?"

"Fuck yes. He can't just pull this shit."

"For now, let's see what the police say," I replied.

Ian stared at me. "You're serious?"

"I said *for now*. It's not smart to do anything while there's an open investigation. He won't get away with it. The fucker

messed with the wrong people.”

“That’s my brother,” Ian exclaimed.

The next two weeks were intensive, and I had to admit I was more focused on Mel’s well-being and that of her father than the office affairs. The police investigation was moving slowly. They’d determined that the fucker had to return the items and pay for the new door or he’d have to serve a short time in jail.

As if that short time would do anyone any good.

Mel didn’t care about the damn TV and table. She wanted to know Elliot was out of her life, and so did I. We were going for a restraining order, which meant meetings with lawyers, the police, and a judge. Josie couldn’t take Mel’s case because this wasn’t her area of expertise. I would’ve preferred to keep it in the family because there was no one I trusted more than Josie, but I got the best of the best for Mel.

“I can’t believe tomorrow it will finally be over,” Ian exclaimed. We were talking through Zoom. Tomorrow was D-day for submitting project Z for the Innovator of the Year competition. He was still in D.C but returning tomorrow evening.

“We’re going to win this thing,” I said confidently. “But I’m going to log off for the day. I can’t even see straight anymore.” I’d spent the whole day preparing for tomorrow.

“Sure. As soon as I’m back, we’re going to celebrate.”

“I’m not going to be any good tomorrow evening.” Whenever we had a deadline, I operated on adrenaline but crashed as soon as it passed.

“Buzzkill.”

“We can go out and celebrate the day after.”

“Deal. Now, let’s log off before you change your mind about that too.”

Closing the app, I stretched in the chair, feeling on top of the world, at least until Earl, one of our junior project

managers, came into my office.

“Are we riding together to the Plaza?” he asked.

“What for?”

“The Solis networking event.”

I groaned. It was six o’clock, and I didn’t give a damn about an evening of cocktails and schmoozing.

“Tell me you didn’t forget about it,” he said.

I frowned, pacing the room. I wished I could tell him no, but it completely slipped my mind.

“Go without me. You’ll do fine. I’m not needed.” I was too exhausted to be of any good. The point of networking events was to show people your best side, convincing them you were someone they wanted to work with. But I had zero energy left for that today.

He nodded, looking at me warily. I knew what he was thinking about. This wasn’t like me. Typically I never lost oversight of anything like this, but my mind was elsewhere these days. I didn’t regret it. Mel was important to me. Her safety and that of her dad trumped everything else, but this did put my team in a weird position.

“I’m sorry, and thank you for filling in for me at the last minute.”

“No problem,” he said. He looked as if he wanted to add something else but didn’t; instead, he left my office.

I got out too, heading straight to Genesis. Mel and I were going to train together. I was surprised to find her in front of the gym’s building with her backpack over her shoulder. She was already dressed in her training gear, and her ass was too damn round and perfect in those damn pants. All I wanted was to take her somewhere private and sink inside her.

“Hey, sexy trainer, don’t we have an appointment?” I asked.

“We do, but I thought we could do it elsewhere.”

“Why?”

“Well, working out in the open air is a thing. Some people say it’s more beneficial than indoors because you’re out in the sun at the same time and breathing in fresh air.”

I laughed. “We’re in New York. I’m not so sure about the fresh air.”

She pinched me. “Hey, don’t knock the city, and besides, we have Central Park. You cannot get better fresh air than that.”

“You can if you’re in a small town in Montana,” I replied. “Trust me. I know the difference.”

“Always so direct,” she murmured. “Well, I wanted to surprise you with a romantic outing to help you relax before you submit everything. Montana isn’t exactly close by. Will Central Park do, mister?”

I smiled at her, pulling her closer to me. “Yeah, it will. Come on, let’s go.”

We Ubered to Central Park. She gave the driver precise instructions as to what entry we needed. When we got out of the car, she took my hand, leading me into the park. She was clasping her phone in her free hand, looking at it closely.

“What are you doing?” I asked her.

“I’m looking at the map of the park. The place I have in mind is somewhat secluded, but it’s so secluded that I’m not sure I’m going to find my way to it.”

“Where is it exactly?”

“Not sure, hence the map. Want to help me?” She held the phone in front of my face.

“Babe, your sense of direction sucks. It’s the other way.”

She looked over her shoulder, then back at me, grinning. “Oops. You’re right. I think I’d manage to get lost in my own apartment.”

I held her close as we walked, one arm around her back, my hand resting on her waist, sliding lower every few steps.

She tilted her head, looking straight at me with an amused smile. “You’re using this opportunity to feel me up, aren’t you?”

“Always. This is a big advantage over the gym, where there are so many prying eyes. I can touch you all I want here.”

“There are people around here too,” she said.

“Yeah, but we don’t know these people, so they don’t count.”

She laughed. “Dylan logic. I love it.”

We followed the map, and it took twenty minutes to get to the spot she’d marked on it. But I had to admit it was worth it, because it was empty and so deep inside the park, you could be fooled into thinking you were in a forest far from the city if it weren’t for the traffic noises.

“Wow, I guess not many people know about it,” she said.

“Or they get lost on the way.”

“That too. Anyway, look, it’s warm, and we can work out here.”

“Babe, there are no weights around here.”

“That doesn’t matter. We can improvise. I’m a trainer, and many of my clients don’t want to train with anything except their body weight. We can make this work.”

I stepped right in front of her, tilting her head up.

“Or we can *not* train at all,” I said. “I have a better idea about how we can use this time.”

“Oh really, and what’s that?” She was grinning. Next second, I tackled her to the ground, tickling her armpits. She shrieked with laughter, falling on top of me. “You have dangerous ideas, mister.”

“All the time. You were right about being out here. It’s relaxing.”

“I can see that. You’re already less tense than before,” she said, touching my chest, readjusting her body so she was lying on top of me. Our legs were intertwined on the grass. “You’ve been burning the candle on both ends over the past few weeks. I thought you might need a little pick-me-up.”

How could she tell? I didn’t say anything, but Mel was paying close attention to me, anticipating my wants and needs in a way that made me fall harder for her.

Gripping the back of her head, I pulled her to me, kissing her hard. Her mouth was addictive and delicious. She moaned against my lips, riling up my instincts. Rolling her over, I explored her neck and her chest, kissing along the neckline of her gym shirt. It was so thin and elastic that I only had to tug at it a few inches and I’d be rewarded with her delicious bare skin.

“Dylan...,” she whispered, pushing her hips into me. “We’re in a park.”

I groaned against her chest. “Think I don’t know that? You drive me crazy.”

She took my face between her hands, bringing it up so we were eye level. “That’s it. No more nipple flashing for you.”

“What?”

“I thought you’d appreciate the view if I wore my training bra since my nipples show easily when I’m turned on.”

I groaned again. “And you thought I’d behave?”

“Yup. Totally misread the situation. Sorry. My bad. Not such a good influence after all.”

“Yes you fucking are. You’ve changed me, Mel. I was so numb to everything before meeting you. I wanted to stay numb.”

“Why?”

“Because it was easier.”

“And now?”

“I like experiencing everything. With you.”

She kissed my neck and chin, wiggling under me. “I like what I’m hearing. Are you happy about the submission tomorrow? Or still stressed?”

“I’ll be relaxed once it’s over. But right now, I’m pissed that there’s a networking event tonight, and I completely forgot about it. But one of my junior project managers is going.”

Her eyes became wary instantly. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Kind of is, though. You’re bending over backward to make sure everything’s fine with Dad, and you’re neglecting your work.”

I could see her pull into her shell a bit, and I didn’t like it at all. “Mel, it’s not so bad. Someone else is taking care of it.”

I could tell she was still thinking about it as we lay back in the sun, and I decided not to tell her again. She wasn’t used to others thinking of her the way I did and taking care of her. When the going got rough, fucking Elliot ditched her.

“How’s your dad?” I asked.

“Glad to be home again.”

He’d decided a few days ago that he needed to return to his own space. We’d had the door repaired, and Brayden contacted the company that installed the security system for their new house. They did a great job on Martin’s place. He stayed with us longer than strictly necessary, and Mel took him home today. I was sorry to see Martin go because I honestly didn’t mind having him with us. It made Mel feel better.

“So, since we have the apartment all to ourselves, I thought we might take advantage of it,” Mel said.

“How? I have a few ideas.”

She pinched my arm, smiling from ear to ear. “We’ll get to those too, but I have more in mind. We have to be home in forty-five minutes.”

“So specific.”

“My plan is time sensitive. Trust me?”

“Do I have a choice?”

She pinched my arm again. “Hey!”

“Whatever you want, babe.” I skimmed one hand to her waist, gripping it. I cupped her cheek with my other hand possessively. When it came to Mel, I couldn’t be anything but possessive.

“I aim to please.”

Chapter Twenty-five

Mel

I loved pampering Dylan, especially since the previous two weeks had taken a toll on him. Whatever he said, I did feel guilty about him forgetting his cocktail event, but I planned to make it up to him in spades tonight. I was going to surprise him with a romantic late-night dinner. I'd prepared a lasagna this morning after I dropped off Dad. I put it in the crockpot, setting the timer to be ready by the time we were home.

Dylan's eyes bulged when he noticed the lasagna. He turned around slowly, and I watched with deep happiness as the corners of his mouth lifted in a smile. I'd put candles everywhere. They weren't lit yet, but it still looked very romantic. I'd also set the table.

Dylan took out the lasagna, bringing it to the table.

I felt his eyes on me as I filled both plates. His legs touched mine under the table.

"Babe, this is amazing. You are amazing," he said.

"I wanted to help you relax this evening so you're in shape for tomorrow. I know it's a big day."

His eyes widened in surprise, but he didn't add anything else.

My phone rang midway through our romantic dinner. It was Dad. I immediately answered, a feeling of foreboding already creeping down my spine. He didn't like late evening calls.

"Hi, Dad," I said, hoping I was paranoid after the last couple weeks.

"Mel, that good-for-nothing Elliot's here again."

"Oh my God. Are you hurt?"

"No, he's outside the door. Keeps ringing the damn bell."

I swallowed hard, running a hand through my hair. “I’ll be right there, Dad. Don’t open the door, okay? It’s a high-security door, so it’ll hold.” We hadn’t gotten that restraining order yet. Things were moving so slowly that I wanted to kick something.

“I’m not worried. That door’s more solid than a brick wall.”

“And call the police too, okay?”

“Already did.”

Dylan’s gaze was trained on me. As soon as I hung up, he said, “I heard everything. Come on. Let’s go.”

“I can go by myself. You should go to bed. You’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

“Mel, I’m coming with you. End of story.”

“Thank you. Let’s go.”

On the drive to Dad’s house, I couldn’t stop fretting. I kept twisting my hands in my lap, right until Dylan clasped one of them. His touch calmed me almost immediately. By the time we reached Dad’s house, I felt so much stronger than right after the phone call.

But all that strength seemed to go down the drain when I saw Elliot pacing in front of the house. There was no sign of the police. Dylan put an arm around my shoulders after we got out of the car, and we walked toward the front door together.

Elliot froze when he saw us. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

“This is my dad’s house,” I said calmly.

“I know. And I’m here to pick up some stuff I couldn’t carry last time.”

I drew in a deep breath, trying to keep my calm. It took me a few seconds to realize Dylan had already lost his. He’d grabbed Elliot by the collar.

“You fucking moron. She gave you all her savings, and you dare show your face?” Dylan bellowed.

“Fuck off, man. You’re not in my position. My business is bleeding money again. I need every dollar I can get for all the shit I gave her. If I hadn’t wasted three years with her, I would’ve made something of myself.”

My eyes instantly started to burn, but I was determined not to let him get to me. I was stronger now than when I broke up with him.

“If it makes you feel better to put your failures on me, I don’t care. But don’t you dare bother my dad. I’m getting a restraining order.”

“Like hell you will. No judge will give you that. You fucking—”

Dylan punched him the next second. Elliot stumbled backward, holding his cheek. “What the hell? Who do you think you are?”

Dylan stepped closer, and Elliot practically cowered into the wall. “The man who sees in her everything you were stupid enough not to appreciate. I’m only going to say this once. Restraining order or not, if you ever show your face around here, that black eye you’ll have tomorrow will be the least of your problems.”

“You think you’re hot shit because you’re wearing an expensive suit?” Elliot asked, but I could tell he was just trying to keep up the bravado.

“Don’t test me more than you already have.” Dylan leaned into him, and Elliot nearly fainted into a puddle. He was such a coward, and I was so damn pissed.

He looked over my shoulder. A police car parked behind Dylan’s BMW. *Finally*. It was the same police officer who took Dad’s testimony the first time around. I had to bite my tongue to keep from asking why it took him so long to show up when he came up to us.

He glanced at the scene, shaking his head. “Ms. Dawson, did this man attempt a forced entry again?”

“I didn’t touch that damn door,” Elliot said.

“But he’s been in front of Dad’s house for over an hour, consistently ringing the doorbell. Does that count toward anything for the restraining order?”

The police officer nodded. “I’m going to write that up, and based on my experience, it will help your lawyer build up a case.”

“What the fuck?” Elliot exclaimed.

“And you have to leave these premises at once, or you’re coming with me,” the officer said calmly.

“On what charge?”

“Disturbing the peace.”

Elliot swore, spitting on the ground before turning around and walking away briskly.

The officer went over to his car, filling out a report. I immediately took Dylan’s hand in mine, inspecting his knuckles. They were red.

“Is it hurting?” I whispered.

“If I say yes, will you take care of it? Thoroughly?” he teased. His smile was playful, but his gaze was still intense.

I kissed his jaw, shrugging.

“Very thoroughly. That’s a promise.”

He put his other hand around my waist, keeping me close. This man’s protective streak was going to be my kryptonite.

The officer left after handing me his report, and then Dylan and I went inside the house. Dad was in the living room with headphones, listening to one of his YouTube videos. He took the headphones off when he noticed us.

“Everything’s fine, Dad. Elliot left, and the officer gave me a report I can use for the restraining order.”

He looked down at Dylan’s hand. “Did Elliot accidentally walk into your fist?”

Dylan laughed. “He did.”

“I have ice in the freezer,” Dad said.

“I’ll do that at home,” Dylan replied.

Dad looked at the digital clock on his microwave with a frown. “It’s late. You two go home. I’m fine. I’m going to lie down too.”

“Are you sure?” Dylan asked him.

Dad waved his hands in a shooing motion. “Yes, yes.”

“Want me to do anything before I leave?” I asked. I wanted to dote on Dad a bit, but he vehemently shook his head. He was used to having his own space, so I knew better than to insist. Taking care of Dad was always a balancing act. He didn’t like being coddled.

Dylan led me out of the house with an arm around my waist. I loved that he couldn’t stop touching me.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked on the drive back.

“Honestly, I’m too overwhelmed by everything. I’m sorry about this,” I said, taking his right hand in mine and kissing his knuckles.

“I’ve wanted to do it since he showed up at your apartment that first time. Fucking moron.” To my astonishment, he chuckled.

“What?” I inquired.

“Ian’s going to have a field day with this. He kept saying we should take matters into our hands. Note the use of ‘we.’ And I kept saying it’s best to stay out of it. He’ll be really proud of my right hook.”

The way they all cared about each other—and about Dad and me—was surreal. I kept kissing and stroking the skin around the reddened knuckles as we approached Manhattan.

Once we were back inside his apartment, I took ice from the freezer.

“I’m sorry that our pre-celebration dinner was interrupted,” I said, running an ice cube gently over his knuckles as we both leaned against the kitchen counter.

He kissed the side of my head. “Doesn’t matter. Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it? You looked hurt.”

I winced. “Wouldn’t you be? I mean, the things he said... he made it sound like I was the worst choice he’d ever made. I felt so small.” My chest heaved up and down as I inhaled deeply.

He tilted my head backward, trapping my gaze with his. “Don’t. You’re fucking amazing, and being with you is a privilege, okay? Don’t doubt that.”

“I’m still reeling from everything. Especially this.” I skimmed my thumb on the back of his hand, below his knuckles. Bringing his hand to my mouth, I rained light kisses on the same spot. “I’ll take care of it.”

“You can take care of other parts too,” he said playfully.

I laughed. “You’re such a guy. Not even some bruised knuckles can take your mind out of the gutter, huh?”

“No way in hell.”

His easy smile turned slightly wolfish. I grinned right back, deciding on my seduction tactic. Should I tease him with foreplay or not?

He decided for me, capturing my mouth as he slid one hand under my shirt, dragging the ice cube up my belly. My skin instantly turned sensitive. I half laughed, half moaned as his hand found a way into my bra cup, moving the cube around my nipple. Pleasure shot through me, straight to my clit. I fisted his shirt, pressing my thighs together.

Holy shit!

“Hey, I thought I was supposed to run this show.” I tried to pretend I was protesting, but I was enjoying his ministrations too much.

“Changed my mind.”

“Of course you did.”

“Anything against that?” he murmured, moving the ice cube to my other breast.

“Nothing at all.”

“Good. Because you’re all mine, Mel, and I’m going to prove it to you tonight.”

Chapter Twenty-six

Dylan

The next day felt like a marathon. I worked from home, wanting to focus 100 percent on the submission. At the office, there was always someone coming in with questions or an update. Mel left for the gym early in the morning, and I locked myself in my home office. I communicated through Zoom with the two team members who'd worked on the code and submission process with me, but ultimately I was the one uploading everything. Ian made fun of me for being a control freak, but I didn't want to leave any room for errors. My right hand was still hurting from yesterday, so I kept flexing it often.

I spent the whole day glued to the laptop, double-checking every file before submitting it.

At seven o'clock, there was a light knock at the door. Mel poked her head in, then stepped inside with a plate with pizza.

"Don't want to distract you. I wanted to bring you dinner." She came to me, putting the plate on the desk next to the mouse. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes. For you." I pulled her onto my lap the next second, kissing her hard and deep until she moaned. She smiled against my lips when she pulled back.

"Someone's having naughty thoughts," she teased.

"All day long. I can't wait to finish this and sink inside you."

"Oh my. Very naughty."

"I'm taking tomorrow off, and I want you all for me."

Her jaw dropped. "And you didn't think about giving me a heads-up? I have sessions all day."

"Rebook them. My head wasn't in the game. But I bet I can convince you in record time." I pulled her hips against mine.

She licked her lips, wiggling her ass. “I believe you have a robust case.” On a laugh, she added, “I’d better go before you lose your head for me.”

“That’s very likely to happen.”

Climbing off my lap, she headed to the door.

“Did you talk to the lawyer?” I asked.

“Yes. I’m giving her the report tomorrow.” She pointed at the laptop. “I’ll tell you everything later. Now, focus.”

With a smile, I trained my eyes back on the screen. I liked having Mel here with me, even if we weren’t in the same room. She rarely slept at her place these past few weeks, and honestly, I would prefer it if she didn’t leave at all. Her stuff was all over the condo—her book on the nightstand, her toiletries totally taking over my bathroom—but I didn’t mind one bit.

At eleven o’clock in the evening, I’d finally submitted everything. I was feeling euphoric but also exhausted. My eyes were blurry, and my plan to spend the night exploring Mel failed. She was in the shower when I went to the bedroom, and I lay down, intending to wait for her, but instead fell asleep.

The next morning, I woke up before Mel and headed straight to the living room, opening my laptop. I’d woken up with this conviction that I’d forgotten something, and I didn’t like it one bit. I opened my email, checking for any unread emails from clients. There weren’t any, but something was still nagging at me. I started to double-check the documents I’d uploaded yesterday on the competition’s portal.

The doorman announced that my brother was here two hours later, and I knew I’d screwed up somehow. Something had happened. I hadn’t just imagined it. He’d flown in last evening, and it wasn’t like him to show up at my place at eight o’clock in the morning.

My mind was racing as I opened the front door at the same time that I heard the elevator ping. My brother stepped out of it, and if I hadn’t known before that something was off, now I had confirmation just by looking at him.

First, Ian never woke up so early, and second, he'd spent over thirty seconds in my presence and hadn't cracked one joke.

Stepping inside the apartment, he closed the door behind him.

"Spill it," I said. "I woke up thinking something's off, and I can't figure out what."

Ian leaned against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest. "I got a call from the jury. Our submission is missing the addendum explaining the KPIs for the first year after launch."

"Fuck," I exclaimed. "Fuck, fuck, I completely forgot about the addendum."

Ian didn't say anything. Yeah, it wasn't on any list either, so no one from the team could remind me about it. That was entirely my fault. I didn't always write down the things that were my responsibility because I remembered them from the top of my head.

"Fuck," I repeated. "They officially withdrew our application?" I asked. Ian nodded. I swore again. My brother wasn't saying it, but it was 100 percent my fault. This had been my responsibility. I was in charge of this.

"The question is how do we go about solving it?" Ian continued. I'd never seen my brother so beaten. I'd let him down, and I hated it.

"Honestly, I don't know," I admitted. Pacing my living room, I admitted something else. "I've been a bit distracted the past few weeks. Last night too."

"Mel told me."

I stopped pacing, staring at him. "She did?"

"Yeah. Me and Isabelle. She wanted to organize a celebratory dinner today. Shit. I wasn't supposed to say that. It was a surprise. Anyway, what with everything going on yesterday? It's understandable."

“No it’s not. We’ve been working on this for a year, and now because I screwed up, it’s all been for nothing. I’m going to fix this as soon as I can think about a strategy.”

Ian nodded. “We’ll think of something. I came to tell you because I assumed you didn’t know. I didn’t want you to go into the office and hear about it from the others. I’m going there now to tell them everything.”

“I’m coming with you. Give me five minutes to get ready.”

“I’ll wait downstairs and order an Uber here. Unless Jeffrey is here?”

“Nah, I told him I didn’t need him this morning. I was planning to take the day off.”

“Okay, Uber it is. See you in a bit,” he said before leaving.

I took in a deep breath, trying to gather my faculties. I was wearing jeans and a casual T-shirt, but I wasn’t in the mood to change into anything more formal. I put on shoes, doing every movement on autopilot. My mind was trying to come up with a solution for this clusterfuck.

A small noise caught my attention just as I was about to leave. Turning around, I saw Mel in the doorway of the living room.

“Hey, since when have you been up?” I asked.

“A while ago. I heard voices and didn’t know what happened. Then I came out, and I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“I’m going to head to the office today. I know I said I’d take today off, but I screwed up, so I have to find a way to fix it.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“What do you have to be sorry about?” I was thoroughly confused.

“You’ve been bending over backward for me over the past few weeks, and then Elliot showed up. It was the last thing you needed.”

“It wouldn’t have happened if I’d documented every fucking step of the way, the way everyone else does, so I can be reminded I’m screwing up when I am. Everyone’s worked on this for a year.” I wasn’t too proud to admit that I felt defeated. I was failing myself, and I also felt like I was failing my parents, even though that was ridiculous. “I need to go to the office now. Ian is waiting downstairs, but I’ll pick you up later, okay? So we can get together to see the lawyer.”

“No. I think you should focus on your submission and your team. I’ll deal with everything else these next couple days.” Biting her lip, she looked around. “I’m going to get out of your hair too.”

“What?”

“I don’t think my being here is helping your focus. I should go home for a while.”

I looked at her, stunned. My chest tightened. A vein was pulsing in my temple. Was she serious? I was going through a crisis, and the first thing she wanted to do was bolt? I *needed* her. Couldn’t she see that? Didn’t she care?

I had no idea what to say back. Anger coursed through me, overpowering confusion. But I didn’t have time for this now. Ian was waiting for me.

“We’ll talk about this later,” I said and then headed out of the apartment, taking the stairs. I had too much energy to wait for the elevator.

What the hell did that mean? As much as I thought and twisted her words in my mind, I didn’t reach a conclusion by the time I joined my brother. We both got into the car. The second I closed the door, my brother started talking about the submission, but he stopped as abruptly as he began. I glanced at him. He was staring at me.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

I grunted.

“That’s not an answer.”

I didn't say anything for a few seconds, then just prompted, "You were talking about the submission."

"Yes, but that was before I saw how you look."

"And how do I look?" I challenged.

"Like you're about to punch something."

"I screwed up. Of course I'm pissed."

"No, there's more to this than that. Did something happen with Mel?"

"Ian..."

"Holy shit, I'm right. Is Elliot being a jackass again? Just saying, he can meet my right hook too."

"No. I don't want to talk about it. Look, the competition is important here. Let's focus on that."

Ian looked at me for a few seconds, then shook his head.

"What are you doing?" I asked, watching him take out his phone.

"What I do every time I have no clue what's going on. I'm asking Isabelle to investigate."

Mel

For the first time, I wasn't in the mood to be at Genesis. I'd planned to call them this morning to tell them I needed the day off after Dylan told me last night that he wanted to spend the day with me. After our fight, though, I figured it was best to keep myself occupied.

Wrong decision.

Facing clients and putting on a cheerful smile was impossible, especially when one of those clients was Isabelle.

Her session started right after lunch. I waited for her in our small training room.

"Hey, Isabelle," I greeted when she came in.

"Hey."

“Do you want to do the usual routine today, or want me to add up some more abs exercises?”

“Your call.”

I looked at her very closely. Something was off. She seemed different, more subdued, and not as chatty as usual. And it dawned on me that maybe she knew something was wrong.

“Did you speak to Dylan?” I asked carefully while Isabelle rolled out her mat.

She immediately straightened up, pointing at me. “Aha. No, just with Ian. We’re trying to figure out what’s happening. I first thought that maybe Ian was way off the mark, but he clearly wasn’t. Something *did* happen.”

I felt miserable. I sat cross-legged on the mat, putting a hand on my chest. “I messed up. I wanted to help, but I think I made things worse.”

Isabelle sat on her mat, looking at me intently. “Tell me everything.”

I told her about the conversation with Dylan after Ian left. The more I spoke, the more skeptical she looked at me. Once I was done, I pressed my lips together, waiting for her answer.

“Wait a second. How did you think this was going to be helpful? In the middle of an emergency at work, you essentially told him that you’re leaving him to deal with it alone.”

I started closing my eyes. “That was not what I meant. Shit. That’s how it came across, didn’t it?” I opened my eyes again, feeling even more miserable than before.

Isabelle was frowning and tugging at her lower lip with her teeth. “Yes, I think it did. As I said, I haven’t spoken to Dylan yet, but I do know how my brother ticks.” She trained her gaze on me, and I swear to God I felt as if she could see right through me. “There’s something else on your mind, isn’t it?”

“How can you tell?” I asked a bit nervously.

“I’m a counselor. It’s my job to interpret nonverbal cues.”

“I feel guilty that he’s in this situation at all. That if it weren’t for me—”

“Hold it right there,” she said, holding her palm up. “If it weren’t for you, my brother would still be closed off and unhappy. Listen to me. He cares about you. I have never seen him so happy, you understand? That’s all that matters. Everything else can be fixed.”

“Can it, though?” I asked. “Ian said their submission was withdrawn, and I know how important the project is to him.”

“Not more important than you. Can I give you my professional opinion?”

“Sure.”

“I think the encounter with Elliot brought up some stuff for you.”

“It pissed me off.” I bit my lip, realizing Isabelle was right. There was more to it than being annoyed. His words had hit a nerve.

“Ha! I can see you’re having an aha moment.” She twirled a finger in front of my face. I got a bit dizzy. “You know what would help? A long walk with a friend where you can talk it all out.”

I shook my head. “I have back-to-back sessions today.”

I didn’t even have time to meet with the lawyer. Luckily, Charlotte stopped by the gym to pick up the police report, and she was getting the necessary documents to the lawyer for me. I loved my friend to pieces.

Isabelle grinned, holding up a finger. “I have a solution. We can go during my session. We still have over an hour left. I volunteer to be the friend, obviously.”

Her grin was contagious. I smiled, despite still feeling like I had a rock on top of my shoulders. “You’re really not in the mood for training, are you?”

Isabelle shrugged. “I never am, but today I have a legitimate reason to get out of it. So, what do you think?”

I laughed, getting up from the mat. “Let’s do it. If there was ever a good excuse to skip training, it’s this.”

“That’s my girl.”

Chapter Twenty-seven

Dylan

“I think a personal plea is going to work better,” I told Ian. We’d spent all day on the phone with various members of the committee in Seattle, and it had been pointless. We’d been among the finalists, and they all heavily hinted that we would have won this thing. But now I’d screwed it up.

We were both in my office, sitting on the couch. He took out his phone, probably to check our flights.

“I agree. I think they want us to win. Two planes are going out today. There are no seats available for the last one, but there are still seats for the one leaving in two hours.”

“Okay, that’s good to know,” I said, rolling my shoulders. They were stiff from holding a phone to my ear all day.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on with Mel?”

“No.”

He rolled his eyes. “I know anyway.”

“You talked to Mel?”

“No. Isabelle had a session with her today.”

“What did she say?” I straightened up, looking at him intently.

He flashed me a shit-eating grin, lying back on the couch, crossing one leg on top of the other as if he had no care in the world.

“Oh, you think this is how it works, right? You reply with a grunt, or if I’m lucky, you give me a one-word answer, but I’m supposed to tell you everything?”

“Ian,” I cautioned.

He cocked a brow, clearly not impressed.

“You know what? Talk to Isabelle. She went on and on, and I kind of tuned out.”

I froze. “She went on and on?” What exactly did she have to go on and on about? What did Mel tell her? “You’re no help.”

“Hell yes I am. I got Isabelle on the case, didn’t I?”

Ian rose from the couch, straightening the collar of his shirt. “I’ll be next door in my office. Let me know about the plane tickets. We don’t have much time. We have to go out ASAP if we want to make it.”

“I know,” I said, rubbing my jaw. As soon as I was alone, I called Isabelle. She answered before the first ring was even over.

“I’m impressed. It took you less than a minute to call me after Ian left your office.”

I shook my head, even though she couldn’t see me. “You two are still on my case.”

“Obviously. What are siblings for?”

I laughed. “Right now, I don’t know the answer to that.”

“I know it, brother dearest! We dote on you, and you love it. You just don’t always admit it. How is it going with the appeal?”

“Let me get this straight. You and Ian gossiped all day, but you didn’t ask him about it?”

“Hey, we had other priorities. Besides, you don’t have to answer. I was using it as a warm-up to get you in in the mood for talking.”

I laughed. My siblings were something else. “Isabelle, what did you and Mel talk about today?”

“Well, she told me about your fight.”

“I have no idea what happened this morning,” I admitted. “She just said those things, and I was too stunned to reply.”

“And let me guess, then you got angry.”

“How do you know that?” I stopped pacing, listening intently, not wanting to miss one word.

“Because you’re my brother. And you’ve got your issues too. Look, both of you do. Her last relationship broke up because the guy considered her a burden. Your last relationship broke up because she wasn’t ready for the next step with you.”

“This morning, her reaction didn’t make sense, but now it does.”

“So... do you have a plan? Need my help?”

“I’m working on one, but I have to fly out to Seattle to sort out this mess.”

“I know. Ian told me. The plane leaves in two hours.”

I laughed, clasping the phone tighter. These two were taking gossiping to a whole new level.

“I can help.” Her tone was conspiratorial like when we were kids and she offered to play peacemaker between Ian, me, and our parents when we got in trouble. She was terrible at it then, but she’d sharpened her skills over the years.

“Good. I was hoping you’d say that.”

“Yes! Fire away, brother. I’m up for anything.”

Mel

“This was delicious,” I said as I threw the empty food containers in the bin. I’d stopped by Dad’s with curry. “It’s super late. I think I’m going to go.”

“Is there something on your mind, Mel?” Dad asked.

I wasn’t surprised that he picked up on my worries. After the walk with Isabelle, I didn’t even have time to breathe for the rest of the day. I had back-to-back sessions, but my thoughts turned into a dark cloud as soon as I left Genesis. I didn’t want to worry him, but I didn’t want to keep everything inside either, not just because I felt I might explode but because I wanted to hear Dad’s opinion.

I sat down at the table, telling him everything. It poured out of me.

“I screwed up, Dad, and I want to make it up to him.”

“Good girl. You do that. Don’t stay upset with each other too long. It’s not good. Be honest. Tell him everything.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Now, come on, off you go. You’ve coddled me enough.”

I laughed, taking that as a sign that he was okay since he was shooing me away. Dad wasn’t a man of many words.

I kissed his forehead before grabbing my bag and leaving the house. I wasn’t sure what to say or do. Should I go to Dylan’s office? Was he even at the office, or was he at home? It was late, but then again, he was dealing with a crisis.

I played with the phone in my hand all the way back into the city. I didn’t want to call him when I was riding the train because what I had to tell him was intimate, and I didn’t like everyone overhearing. But by the time I arrived at the station, I lost my nerve, so instead of calling Dylan, I called Isabelle.

“Hey, Isabelle,” I greeted when she picked up.

“Hey, I was just going to call you.”

“Oh? Why?”

“First, you tell me why you’re calling.”

I laughed nervously. “Well, I’ve been wondering if you’ve been talking to Dylan.”

“I have,” Isabelle said without giving any other detail.

“You’re going to make me pull the words out of you, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I will. I’m enjoying that everyone calls me for advice.”

“Everyone? That includes Dylan?”

“Obviously.”

“How is he?” I asked.

“Well, he and Ian are going to Seattle for a few days. I think he just boarded the last plane available today.”

I stopped walking, bringing a hand to my chest. Oh my God. He had to be very hurt and upset with me if he left without even talking to me first. I teared up.

“Was he that mad?” I whispered.

“No, silly. That’s not why I’m playing intermediary. I think you might not be the only one who doesn’t know exactly what to say.”

I sat on a bench outside the station, listening intently. “So, about those tips?” I prompted.

Isabelle chuckled. “First, I need some answers from you.”

“O-okay.” I hadn’t expected this.

“Do you miss him?”

“A lot.”

“And you do know he cares so much about you that he has been bending over backward for you the past few weeks?”

I closed my eyes, drawing in a deep breath. “Yes.”

“So you understand that pushing him away is never, ever an option, okay? Don’t. It crushes his spirit.”

“I know.”

She let out a loud yelp that made my ear ring. “Okay. You’ve passed the test.”

I laughed despite feeling down. “What?”

“I wanted to make sure you’re head over heels.”

“Okay, so you had to rake me over the coals first for that?”

“That was not raking you over the coals. That was me asking a few questions.”

“Right.” I fiddled with my thumbs, wondering how it felt when she *really* raked someone over coals. “You were much more understanding earlier today.”

“That’s because I wanted to be the shoulder you cried on. Now I’m the devil’s advocate. So about that advice. I suggest you pick up the phone, tell him everything you told me.”

I frowned, waiting for her to continue. When she didn't, I asked, "That simple?"

"Yes. People always think feelings are complicated, but they are not. Just saying them out loud is enough most of the time, and it's the most important thing."

I knew she was right, but gathering the courage to make the call was another thing.

"When is he landing in Seattle?" I asked.

"Umm, not sure, but I'll message you the flight details."

"Thanks."

Isabelle messaged me almost immediately after finishing the call. He was landing about now. My heart somersaulted. I was *not* ready for this. I decided to wait until I was in my apartment. By then, he'd probably also be settled at his hotel.

On the way home, I worked up the courage. Not wanting to risk losing it, I called Dylan's number as soon as I was out on my balcony. My hands were a little shaky. I had to tell him how I felt, that was all. And I was hoping he wouldn't shut me down. *He couldn't*. He'd asked Isabelle to be here for me today, for God's sake. That had to mean something.

Biting my lip, I brought the phone to my ear. The call connected after two rings.

"Hey, I hope everything's working out in Seattle. Listen, I've been talking to Isabelle, and she said some smart things. I love you, Dylan. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, and I want to make this right, but I don't know how. Isabelle said that telling you how I feel is enough, but I don't know." I bit my lip again, then decided to add some humor because I didn't know what else to do. "So I'm thinking of buying this nightgown that—"

"Hold it," *Ian* said.

Oh my God, I'd been talking to Ian. I was so mortified. I didn't know what to say.

"Why didn't you tell me before it was you?" I sputtered after a few seconds.

“You didn’t even pause to breathe, woman, but my brother will not forgive me if I hear more about your *nightgown*.” He emphasized the last word, so I was sure Dylan was next to him. “He’s already giving me the evil eye. I thought you should know.”

“How is it my fault?” I asked.

“It’s not, but I wanted to share it.”

“Give me the phone,” Dylan said from the background. Even though he sounded a bit far away, his voice was still commanding.

I put a hand on my stomach. It twisted with nerves, but I was also feeling some butterflies.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Dylan

A vein popped in my temple. Ian was flashing me a stupid grin, wiggling his eyebrows as he handed me the phone.

“You and I will talk later,” I told him through gritted teeth.

“I can’t wait,” he said before leaving my hotel room. We’d scheduled a meeting with the committee tomorrow morning, and we wanted to go through our plan tonight. I brought the phone to my ear as soon as I was alone. “Hey, it’s me.”

“Hi.” It was more of a squeak. She sounded nervous.

“Sorry about Ian. He was in my room, and he was just being Ian.”

“I’m mortified,” she whispered.

“Why? What did you tell him?”

“How I feel about you.” She groaned. “Took me so much courage to call, and now I lost it all.”

I laughed at how adorable she sounded. I was on edge, but I didn’t want that to come through. She was nervous enough as it was.

“I heard something about Isabelle and a nightgown.” I paced the room, listening.

She laughed nervously. “Well, basically I told him—I mean *you*—that I love you and.... Yesterday morning I got a bit into panic mode, and I don’t know where all that stuff came from. But you’re the best thing that’s happened to me, Dylan. I love you, and I don’t want to push you away. I don’t want to be away from you. I want to make things right, but I’m not sure how. Isabelle said that getting my feelings out there by talking is the best thing to do, but I...” Her words faded.

I felt like I could breathe again. I wasn’t sure why she’d called at the start. Part of me feared that she wanted to say more of the same. I was not too proud to admit when I was afraid.

“I’m not Elliot, Mel. You’re the most important person in my life. And I want us to go through everything together.”

“So do I,” she whispered.

“Where does the nightgown come in?” I asked playfully.

“Oh. Well, I was trying to lighten up the mood.”

“I want to see you, Mel. I need to stay here for at least two days, maybe more, but I want you with me. I don’t like that I left without seeing you. And I want you.”

“Shucks, you ruined my surprise.”

“You were planning to fly to Seattle?” I asked.

“I literally just thought about it while we were talking.”

“When are you landing?”

“Like I’ll tell you. I need to have one element of surprise at least.”

I groaned. “You’re spending too much time with my sister.”

“Hey, she has great ideas. Oh, and by the way, I do have one request.”

“I’m listening.”

“Keep Ian out of your room.”

“Done.”

The next day, Ian and I met with the committee’s head in an office along Puget Sound. He didn’t have any good news for us.

“I spoke to the entire committee yesterday, and I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do. I’m sorry you wasted your time flying here,” Gary said. “And it’s a pity because your software would revolutionize the industry.”

Ian and I exchanged a glance—a silent understanding not to press this issue anymore. We knew when to push and when to conserve our energy and put our efforts elsewhere.

Standing up, I said, “Gary, thanks for meeting with us. We understand, of course. We’re going to move forward on our own and strike distribution contracts for the software. It would be faster with all the resources that the competition partners have, but we’re going to pursue it anyway.”

Ian and I talked until late into the night about this, and we concluded that there was no reason not to strike out on our own.

“That’s excellent news,” Gary said, shaking Ian’s hand and then mine. “I’m sure you’ll do well.”

We exchanged a few more pleasantries before leaving.

“That could’ve gone better,” Ian said once we were out of the building. “But I have a great feeling about doing this anyway.”

“So do I.”

The advantage of winning the competition would’ve been having access to all distribution partners right away, which would’ve meant a nationwide rollout from the get-go. Finding partners on our own just meant it would take longer, not that it wasn’t doable. I thought I was failing everyone, but my brother reminded me of the crucial fact that we’d already developed the product. We had the hardest part behind us. We’d find the right partners for the rollout eventually.

“Thanks for bringing that up last night. I didn’t even think about pursuing this independent of the competition,” I said honestly.

He clapped my shoulder. “That’s why I’m here. Our brains balance each other out. Yin and yang and all that shit. But I’ve got to be honest. It didn’t occur to me until last night either.”

Ian and I were different in that regard. I typically decided on a goal, set on a path, and wouldn’t stop until I reached the end. Ian was more flexible. He always kept the end goal in mind but was open to changing the path it took to get there.

We walked to the hotel, discussing our next steps. His phone kept vibrating with messages.

“Who’s texting you?” I asked.

“Henry. His sister Ellie is moving to New York. He asked me to look after her.”

Henry was Ian’s best friend back in D.C. I didn’t really know Ellie, since she was younger than us.

“When is she moving?” I asked.

“In a couple weeks.”

We talked about Ellie until we entered the hotel. Once we reached the floor where our rooms were, we walked to mine, intending to drop off our laptops before going out for celebratory drinks.

I swiped the card to unlock the door to my room, cracking it open. I glimpsed long legs and a black nightgown. Fuck. Mel was here. I was expecting her in the evening. I abruptly closed the door, turning to my brother, who was fighting laughter.

“Mel in there?” he asked.

“Whatever you saw—”

“I didn’t see anything,” he interrupted. “But your reaction’s priceless.” Taking a few steps back, he said, “Okay, I’ll go to my room, and you can forget that I’m here. I’ll take myself out to celebrate alone.”

I waited for him to take a few steps away so he wouldn’t get an eyeful if I opened the door before going inside the room. I put the laptop on the floor, propped against the wall. Mel peeked from behind the wall before stepping out. I kept my hands wide apart, inviting her to jump in. Sprinting toward me, she put her hands on my shoulders and jumped in my arms. *Oh, fuck.* She wasn’t wearing anything under her nightgown. I had her bare ass in my hands while kissing her. *That mouth.* Damn, how I missed it.

I explored her while walking with her into the room, then sitting down on the bed with her in my lap, her legs bent at the sides.

“I thought you might come later this evening,” I said when we paused.

She shrugged one shoulder playfully, “I figured you did. So I took an earlier flight to surprise you.”

Her nightgown was downright sinful, all black with thin straps. I could still see that her nipples had turned to pebbles. I grabbed the hem, intending to pull it over her head, but I realized the fabric was stretchy, so instead of taking it off, I just freed her breast. I tugged down at the part of the fabric covering the peak, twirling my tongue around the nipple. She gasped.

I liked exploring her like this while she still had her nightgown on. I traced the sides of her neck with my fingers and moved to her shoulders, pushing her hair out of the way. I trailed my mouth along her neck next.

“I’m so happy you’re here,” I said against her skin. I’d only freed one nipple, so I teased the other over the nightgown. She shivered, gripping my shirt. “You’re important to me, Mel,” I said while she took off my shirt and belt. Her fingers moved fast. She was desperate.

“And you to me. I’m here to show you just how important,” she said.

I laid her back on my thighs, kissing down her neck. Reaching her chest, I took one hand away to free her breasts again, and she nearly fell from my lap. I caught her quickly, pulling her on top of me again. She laughed throatily.

“Why don’t we move farther up on the bed?” she suggested. “To avoid any accidents.”

“Best thing I’ve heard all day.”

After repositioning us, I took off all my remaining clothes. She trailed her hand on my chest, moving to my abs and then even lower to my cock. I groaned when she teased her fingers around it. She wasn’t gripping me, just moving them slowly, driving me insane. I needed more.

“Mel,” I gritted out.

She smiled wickedly before lowering herself on me and wrapping her mouth around my cock, taking me in deeper and deeper. The feeling of her mouth on me was exquisite, but before long, I was insatiable, and I needed even more. I rolled my hips back and forth, enjoying the friction. When I heard her groan, I opened my eyes and saw she was touching her clit. Holy fuck. I nearly exploded right then and there at the sight.

“Mel,” I groaned.

She looked up at me. She was driving me crazy. She kissed back up my body, still touching herself. I flipped her on her back, wanting to be in control, *needing* it. I kissed her shoulder and moved down to her breasts, tasting them first before moving even lower. I slowed my descent as I approached her pussy. She winced slightly, moving her hips slowly, determined to guide me down. I smiled against her navel before trailing my mouth back up.

“Dylan,” she said, her voice full of urgency. I knew what she needed, but I wanted to draw it out a little more.

Reaching her breasts again, I lowered the part of her gown covering her nipples, taking one in my mouth, twirling my tongue around it while bringing my fingers to her pussy, rubbing down her clit. She was already so wet and ready. She shuddered at the contact, gritting out my name. And then she rolled her hips back and forth, taking her pleasure the way she wanted it.

I wanted to oblige her in everything and make her come like that, but I couldn't wait anymore. I needed to own her completely and utterly. I was lucky that the hotel kit had a condom. I slid one on and positioned myself at her entrance. She widened her legs, lifting her feet off the bed, changing the angle. I slid inside her and nearly blacked out at how intense this was. She was so damn tight. I held her legs bent at the knees over my elbows and moved in and out, watching her roll her hips too. I lowered one of her legs, wanting a free hand to work her clit, but she beat me to it, watching me with her wicked smile while she touched herself. This woman! She was

so glorious, indulging in her pleasure, showing me exactly what she wanted.

I took off the nightgown, finally wanting her completely naked, and then sealed my mouth over her nipple, teasing it in circles with my tongue as I would do with her clit. Her reaction was instantaneous. She pulsed around me faster and faster, then suddenly grew so damn tight that I lost all control. She thrashed around, crying out my name.

“Fuuuuuck!” I exclaimed, and I thrust in and out through her orgasm, pounding and pounding until I was only aware of her and the pleasure. I couldn’t even feel my own body anymore.

I moved over, lying down on one side, holding a palm on her stomach.

“You have no idea about all the things I’d like to do to you,” I said.

“Oh, I have a pretty good idea. That seductive look in your eyes said it all.” She smiled saucily, tracing my lips with her finger.

“Thank you for coming to me.”

She turned on one side too, looking straight at me. “I’m sorry I made you think I wasn’t in your corner. I’m here for you, no matter what you need.”

I pulled her closer, kissing her forehead. I trusted her completely. I didn’t think I had it in me, but she proved to me otherwise.

She shimmied back on the bed, looking up at me.

“How did your meeting go?” she asked.

“They aren’t budging on their decision, but that’s okay. Ian and I decided we’re going to pursue it anyway, on our own.”

“Wow! That’s amazing.”

“It was Ian’s idea. He’s still congratulating himself on it.”

Her cheeks turned pink, and she hid half her face in the pillow. “Did he see anything when you opened the door?”

“No.”

“I’m already so mortified from the phone call.”

“Don’t be. There are no secrets in my family. And that’s more literal than I want it to be.”

She laughed nervously, still hiding her face. “So what does this mean? Are we going back to New York today? I took off a few days from work anyway, so I’m flexible.”

“We could go back, but Ian’s hell-bent on getting drunk.”

“It’s a good thing the two of us are here. We can look after him.”

“I owe him a ton of drinks. I think he’s already got a head start on us.”

She was looking at me with a huge smile, and I knew I wasn’t feeling this inner balance because Ian and I had figured out a solution. It was because of her. She was my better half. She was everything—and all mine.

“Let’s find him. We can’t let Ian get drunk all on his own,” she exclaimed, getting out of bed. She looked at me over her shoulder with a wicked smile, and I chased right after her.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Mel

One month later

“This is gorgeous,” I said. Dylan had surprised me today by showing up at the gym to take me out on another boat tour. We didn’t take it from North Cove, though, but from a harbor near Tarrytown because we were heading to Isabelle’s for a party. The yacht was even more luxurious and comfortable than the last boat, but way too big for the two of us. “The yacht is huge.”

“Don’t go near the edge again.”

I laughed, comfortably sitting on the leather seat next to Dylan. “Good thinking. You’re sure we’re going to make it to Isabelle’s in time?”

She and Brayden were throwing an end-of-summer garden party. She’d confided in me that because they had the big house, she was looking for an excuse to have a party as often as possible because she loved having everyone over. I thought she might have an actual reason for this party, though, because the whole Gallagher and Winchester clans were coming, as well as their parents. She’d even invited Dad, which made my heart happy.

“What are you thinking about?” Dylan asked, looking at me over his shoulder.

“That I’m happy. And you look sexy as hell driving this boat.” He was wearing a polo shirt, which showed off his muscles nicely while he steered the wheel. We also had an umbrella because the heat was insane, and it was humid as well, but still, the day was gorgeous. I couldn’t believe how peaceful it all was. I loved feeling the wind in my hair and seeing everything bathed in sunlight.

I felt happier than ever. The excellent lawyer Dylan hired managed to get a restraining order against Elliot. I hadn’t heard from him since, but Charlotte said she dug into things a

bit, and he'd filed for bankruptcy. I was happy that Elliot was out of our lives. Dylan and Ian were making partnerships to help with the rollout of project Z. It was going slower than if they'd won the competition, but they were working hard.

We'd been on the boat for about twenty minutes when Dylan stopped it and sat down on my seat. The yacht still moved along with the water flow, but it felt as if we were staying in one place compared to the speed before.

"Tired?" I teased before moving right next to him, touching his biceps. "I need to take care of these again."

Not that he'd strained them too much, but I was always looking for an excuse to spoil him.

"Later," he murmured, pulling me in his lap. I yelped, putting one arm around his neck.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I had a plan," he answered, kissing my neck. "But I realize it's not a good idea, so I'm readjusting."

"What are you talking about?"

"Close your eyes."

"Okay." I did as he said, anticipation coursing through me. I tried to pay extra attention to any sounds, but there weren't any.

A few seconds later, he said, "You can open them now."

I did and gasped. He was holding an engagement ring in his palm: a beautiful round diamond on a white gold band.

"Dylan," I whispered.

"I thought about getting down on one knee, but I don't want to risk you falling overboard again, so I'm keeping you here."

"Good plan." I tried to sound playful, but my voice was uneven. It was full of emotion.

"Mel, thank you for turning my life upside down. For showing me the beauty in admiring a quiet sunset. For making

me adopt a puppy—”

“*Temporarily*,” I reminded him, and we both chuckled.

“I promise to cherish you my whole life, to make you happy. I solemnly promise not to get between you and an audiobook.”

I laughed, pressing my forehead to his.

“I promise to always find ways to surprise you,” he said. “And to see everything you have on your list together.”

“Thank you for sharing your life with me and showing me that two people can grow together, even if they’re not on the same page in the beginning. I’d love to have you with me forever and be your wife,” I whispered. I put the ring on, beaming at the thought of how Dad would smile when he saw it. I imagined Isabelle’s reaction and Ian’s too. Then I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him passionately, shifting into his lap so I was straddling him and my knees were at his sides. In the process I pushed my backpack from the edge, only realizing what happened when we heard a splash.

“Fuck,” Dylan exclaimed.

My gym backpack had fallen into the water.

I grinned. “Think we can fish that out without falling in the water again?”

“I’ll do it.” Standing up, he leaned over the edge, grabbing the backpack as it started to sink.

“There. Saved it,” he exclaimed.

I went to him, giving him a quick smooch, patting those strong arms. I thought I was happy before he gave me the ring, but it was nothing compared to now. My whole body was light as a feather.

“We should get going,” he said, pulling back a notch, “or we’ll be late.”

I nodded, sitting back on the bench as he gripped the steering wheel.

“Wait a second, is this the reason why Isabelle’s throwing the party?” I pointed to the ring when he looked at me over his shoulder. “Is this why she invited Dad too?”

Dylan gave me a very smug smile. “Isabelle and I plotted on the best way to celebrate this. My parents don’t know anything. No one knows except Isabelle and your dad. I asked for your hand, of course. Everyone else is going to be surprised.”

The corners of my mouth tilted up in a smile.

“What?” he asked.

“I’m imagining Ian’s reaction.”

He burst out laughing before revving the boat’s engine and lurching forward at the maximum speed allowed. It was the only way we wouldn’t be late.

I relaxed on the seat, admiring Dylan’s gorgeous ass more than the sunset. I couldn’t believe this man was all mine forever. How was this happening? I relaxed as we cruised down the river. Being out here was different than our first trip, when we’d been in the bay with open water surrounding us. The Hudson River was narrow here. Nature and low buildings flanked us on both sides, roads sloping in and out of the greenery. It was very peaceful.

Anticipation coursed through me as we pulled in front of Isabelle and Brayden’s house. I’d never been down to the property’s waterfront, so I had no idea they had a special place to dock boats. To the right was a small boathouse as well, but Dylan didn’t park inside it. I assumed Isabelle and Brayden’s boat was there.

After getting out onto the dock, Dylan took my hand, and we walked up to the house. The property sloped down to the river, and everyone was gathered outside the home. The air smelled like roses and freesias and delicious food. Loki ran up to us, and we both petted him until he ran off to someone else. There was a buffet laid out again. Holy shit, Brayden’s bandmates and parents were here too. Those two were definitely planning something.

Dad had already arrived. Isabelle insisted she'd pick him up. It seemed a bit strange when she said it, but now it all made sense, considering she knew about Dylan's idea with the boat. And Charlotte was here too!

"I didn't know you'd be here," I told her.

She smiled. "That would've made it all a bit obvious."

So she knew too.

The whole gang was walking around in front of the buffet, so I held up my hand, flashing the ring for everyone to see.

"Oh my God," Dylan's mom exclaimed, bringing a hand to her chest.

I looked straight at Daddy, who was sitting in his chair with a plate full of nachos in his lap. He was smiling wide, and his eyes were a bit glassy. He wheeled the motorized chair to me, and I immediately leaned to hug him.

"I'm so happy, Daddy," I whispered.

"It's not just the two of us now," he said but didn't add anything else, only hugged me back, and when I straightened up, he gave me a small nod.

Dad might be a man of a few words, but Dylan's mom was the opposite.

"Don't worry. I'm going to help you plan the wedding party every step of the way. You're going to make my son so happy," she exclaimed, wrapping her arms around me.

"Let the poor girl breathe, woman," his dad said but hugged me too.

I laughed, soaking up all their warmth and joy. Not only was I marrying the man of my dreams but inheriting a wonderful family of caring people, and their friends.

The Winchester clan congratulated us next. Tess was beside herself.

"Another wedding to plan," she exclaimed. "This is so much fun."

“When do you even find the time?” I asked.

“It’s honestly like a hobby for me.”

Once everyone congratulated us, Dylan turned to Isabelle. “Thanks for organizing this for us, sis.”

Brayden was looking closely at Isabelle and had an arm protectively around her shoulders. Something was going on.

“We have an announcement to make ourselves,” Brayden said. “We don’t want to steal your thunder. We were going to wait a bit longer, but since everyone is gathered here....”

“I’m pregnant,” Isabelle said, smiling from ear to ear.

The crowd erupted in another round of cheers. Josie was closest to her, and she immediately hugged her sister.

“Holy shit,” Ian exclaimed, immediately joining his family. Everyone started talking at the same time. There was so much joy in the air that it was almost palpable.

“Looks like you’re going to have another niece or nephew to spoil,” I told Dylan.

He put an arm around my waist, bringing his mouth to my ear.

“We can add a few kids to the mix too.” His tone was casual, as if he were speaking about the weather.

“I’m on board with that,” I replied with a grin, wondering exactly how many he meant by “a few.”

After hugging Josie, Dylan and Ian went inside the house, returning with champagne bottles. There were already glasses at the other end of the buffet table in the drinks section. Dylan popped open one bottle, Ian another one, and then they both started filling glasses.

I went up to them with a smile the size of Texas.

This was such a happy day. I didn’t have time to look at Ian closely until now. The poor guy looked a bit crestfallen.

“Too many happy couples around for you?” I teased, grabbing a glass for myself.

“I’m happy for you two. Don’t take this the wrong way, but I just realized I am literally the last single person here.”

“Does that scare you or excite you?” I asked, sipping champagne, assessing the situation.

“Definitely scared.”

Dylan clapped Ian’s shoulder just as Josie joined us. She looked between her brothers.

“What are you scared about, Ian?” she asked, making me laugh.

“Couples,” I informed her.

She chuckled. “I think we all went through that fear. It does eventually fade, you know.”

That only made Ian look more panicked. “I have no intention of letting it fade.”

“Aww, don’t worry, little brother. We’re all here for you if you need guidance or advice,” Josie said.

Ian downed a glass of champagne, shrugging. “Hey, I’m enjoying my bachelor life.”

A phone beeped, and Ian took it out of the back pocket of his jeans. He had a strange expression on his face. Josie zeroed in on her brother.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing. Ellie is texting me the details of her flight.”

“Who’s Ellie?” I asked.

“My best friend’s younger sister,” Ian explained. “She’s moving to New York. I’m picking her up from the airport.”

“Riiight, and why do you look like you’re keeping something from us?” Isabelle asked. “Something else going on with you two?”

“I’m doing my best friend a solid and helping his sister settle in. There’s nothing between us.”

Aha! He definitely looked a bit guilty.

Dylan put an arm around my shoulders, pulling me to him in a half hug and flashing Ian a grin. “I just have one thing to say: famous... last... words.”

Dear Reader,

This is the end of Dylan’s story. **Ian’s story will be available on August 3. You can pre-order it [HERE](#).**

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When You're Mine

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