

T H E A G E N T S

EX

Falling for her

PO

has left me exposed.

SEED

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BRYNNE ASHER

EXPOSED

THE AGENTS

BRYNNE ASHER



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EXPOSED

The Agents

Published by Brynne Asher

BrynneAsherBooks@gmail.com

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This is for the love of my life, a by-the-book retired DEA agent, who pointed out all the things my characters do that would get them fired in real life.

Thank you for suspending reality for your fiction-loving wife.

THE DEMISE OF TRIPPY

Goldie

Make it or break it.
I've been chanting that to myself way too often lately.

Miami was supposed to be life changing.

Sure, there's the occasional hurricane, but endless sunny beaches replace endless months of snow. This creates an endless number of opportunities for dreamy weddings and elaborate receptions.

Because Miami equals money.

At least that's what I thought when I took a chance and moved my little business from rural Virginia to the land of white sand beaches, vibrant nightlife, and diverse culture. I might be a nobody here, but if there's one thing I'm not afraid of, it's hard work.

I started Amāre a few years ago as a side gig. But when I got an offer I couldn't refuse, I packed up and headed south.

I'm proud of what I do and the little business I started. My logo is fire, and my website should entice every person looking for a wedding planner to hire my company.

Should is the operative word.

And I am the company.

Me.

It's just me.

The day I made Amāre a reality was the day I realized I could conquer the world. My first event might have been small with a humble budget, but it was gorgeous and filled with memories.

Planning weddings has always been my dream, but rural Virginia is ... well, rural. Where I'm from, there are more horses than engaged couples. What few engaged couples there are, only a small portion of them actually hire a wedding planner.

Amāre is a beautiful word. It means love in Latin.

Love is the basis of everything. It nurtures and heals and settles in your soul. Who doesn't need more love?

But when you give it to someone else—especially someone who needs and deserves it—that's the love that bursts and makes the world a more beautiful place.

I believe that with my whole heart, regardless of the fact I haven't found it for myself yet.

Nothing makes me happier than working around love. My work might seem shallow or trivial to the pessimists of the world, but I get to serve people who are in love and starting their lives together.

But to make my dream come true, I knew I needed to take a chance. So when the opportunity knocked on my door, I opened it wide and took the risk.

I didn't think twice.

That was my first mistake.

I should've thought twice.

Even so, I'm here and refuse to quit.

It's not like I haven't found work since I moved here. At first, I was so busy, I hardly had time to breathe.

Then everything changed. That was before my make-it-or-break-it era. But I'm determined to make a living from my passion.

Because I also have a passion to pay the rent and buy groceries.

Which means, I need this meeting to go well.

I push through the door of the café and smile at the hostess in a sleek black dress standing behind the podium. “Hello. I’m here for a lunch meeting. I believe the reservation is under Daniel Armstrong. I’m a few minutes early.”

A few minutes is an understatement. I’m always early. The fear of being late plagues me, and I do not need any more self-inflicted anxiety. There’s enough of that to go around these days.

The hostess scrolls through her tablet before returning my smile with a generic one. “You are early, but your table is ready. Follow me.”

With two menus and a perfect sway to her slim hips, I follow her through the moody dining room.

I’m willing to meet potential clients anywhere. Since my office is currently the left corner of my lumpy sofa, I’ll even drive to South Beach where I can’t afford a side salad, let alone a lunch entrée.

She stops at a table for two.

Two?

I guess the bride won’t be involved, which makes this even more unusual. What bride doesn’t want to interview prospective wedding planners?

I take a seat with my back to the wall so I can be on the lookout for Mr. Armstrong. I have no idea what he looks like. I did my normal stalking search on all the regular social sites, but my investigative skills came up empty. Even with a generic name like his, none of them made sense. I hate knowing so little. Meeting a prospective client always feels like a blind date from the dark ages. Most people can be found somewhere on the internet, making the true blind date nonexistent these days.

“Your server will be with you shortly. Enjoy.”

“Thank you.”

I glance at the menu where the prices are missing.

Not even one.

Well, then. I know what that means.

I officially cannot afford a side salad, much less the bill with my potential client, which I always pay. But that bill is usually at a coffee shop, not at a fancy seaside restaurant in South Beach.

I pull in a deep breath.

Make it or break it.

Positive thoughts, Goldie.

If Mr. Armstrong is setting up lunch meetings in South Beach, then his budget has to be a big one.

This is why I took a chance on Miami when the opportunity presented itself, despite my mom begging me to stay in Virginia. That was before my business went south—geographically and financially. But it has to get better.

This is what I chanted to myself over and over after I scheduled this meeting with an unknown man.

I normally only meet with the bride. Sometimes with her mother or best friend. In the years since I started Amāre, I’ve never once met solely with the groom for the initial meeting.

This is definitely unusual, but I’m desperate. And it’s South Beach. What can happen here?

“Good afternoon. May I get you something to drink—maybe something from the bar? We’re featuring a fresh sangria today.”

My mouth waters at the thought. I would wash dishes for a fresh sangria. “As delicious as that sounds, this is a working lunch for me. I’ll stick with water.”

My server gives me a slight bow as he backs away from my table, probably calculating how much he won’t make on a tip.

I look back to the menu and search for the smallest salad I can find.

He returns with two waters and a promise to check back in soon. I turn my attention to the ocean. But I don't have time to get lost in the rolling surf because my name hits me in a low, rumbly timbre.

“Marigold Carter?”

My eyes dart from the sea to the man standing over me. I don't confirm my identity or correct him that no one calls me Marigold, because my voice has taken a mini vacay to the Keys.

There are no words.

Actually, there are a lot of words.

Daniel Armstrong is an entire experience.

Not one thing on him reconciles with another. His dress shirt looks more expensive than my entire outfit—including my purse and shoes. His trousers are pressed to perfection, like he slipped them on right before he walked through the door. There's not a wrinkle on the man, and his shoes are shined to perfection. I doubt he's ever worn them before today. His shirt is unbuttoned at his neck and topped with a navy sport coat with the tiniest hint of herringbone sewn into the material.

Mr. Armstrong looks like he's bleeding money. Yay for me. Maybe there's a chance at a big budget wedding after all.

Other than his clothes that fit like a business-casual second skin, the man has missed his last two haircuts—maybe three. His overgrown locks curl around the lenses of a pair of aviators that are shoved back on his head. There's something about the man that screams *I've lived three dramatic lifetimes*, and it has nothing to do with the few grays that dot his temples. It's the smile lines framing his eyes that give him away. But on him, they're more like frown lines.

Why in the world is he so angry, and who would want to marry this man?

He repeats my name on a harsh clip. “Marigold?”

Dang it. My mom always says my worst fault is taking first impressions too seriously. I give my head a little shake and stand on my kitten heels to offer my hand. “Goldie. Everyone calls me Goldie. You must be Daniel.”

He hesitates before his hand engulfs mine in a warm, firm grip. “That’s me.”

I pull in a breath and wet my dry lips. “It’s nice to meet you. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss your big day.”

That wins me a hike of one brow and a chin lift.

I try not to frown.

He lets go of my hand. “Yes, let’s discuss that. Have a seat.”

I step back to claim my chair and pray I haven’t wasted my time, gas, and anxiety because of the parking situation. “I can’t wait to hear about your fiancée.”

He rips his aviators off his head and tosses them unceremoniously to the pressed white tablecloth as he sits. “I’m not engaged.”

“Oh.” I sit back in my chair. “Then whose wedding are we here to discuss?”

He pulls in a deep breath and hesitates. “My aunt.”

“I see.” I pick up my free water and take a sip. “Are you planning your aunt’s wedding?”

“Yep.”

“Yep,” I echo, and do my best to stay unaffected by the turn of events. “Well, this is unusual, but that’s where I thrive.”

His frown deepens. “You thrive in the land of unusual?”

I shrug, because that’s a lie. *Unusual* stresses me out unless we’re talking about a new venue or color scheme. “I love unusual. It really gets my juices going.”

I immediately cringe at my choice of words.

His head tips to the side, and both his brows touch the messy curl that has fallen to his forehead.

Damn the dirty-talking portion of society who ruined words like “juices” and “moist.” Don’t even get me started on pineapples.

Well, if I’m going to die from embarrassment, at least I’ll have a view of the ocean. “Creatively speaking, obviously.”

“Obviously.”

He picks up his water to take a drink. I wonder if it would be too much to ask for him to throw it in my face to cool me off.

I clear my throat. “Let’s get back to your aunt. Why are you planning her wedding?”

He sets his water down. “She’s dying.”

My red-hot expression falls as he throws me for another loop. “Oh my goodness. I’m so sorry.”

Daniel shrugs again.

He actually shrugs.

The man is devoid of compassion.

“It is what it is. We all have our time, right?”

“I ... I guess.”

He leans in and rests his forearms on the table. “I need a wedding, and I don’t know how to plan a wedding. I want to make sure all Trippy’s dreams come true before, you know...” Daniel proceeds to slash his hand across his neck. “She keels over.”

I sit back in my chair in awe—and not in a good way.

In the worst possible way.

My embarrassment from talking about juices of any kind flies out the window and disintegrates into the ocean breeze. It’s replaced by pure and complete mortification. “Trippy?”

Daniel doesn’t have a chance to explain because the waiter returns. “Good afternoon. May I offer you a drink or cocktail, sir?”

Shoot. It’s too late to run from this diabolical, callous man.

The scariest prospective client I've ever entertained sighs. "I'd kill for a whiskey, but I can't. A Coke and an iced tea—no sugar."

"Of course." Daniel and I have collectively killed all our waiter's dreams of a decent tip. "I'll be back to take your order."

Daniel wastes no time. "Trippy is my aunt. She wants to marry her long-time companion before her ailments do her in. I promised her I'd make it happen. I'm willing to pay a rush fee—whatever it takes."

A rush fee. No one has ever offered me a rush fee before. This gives *shotgun wedding* a whole new meaning.

My make it or break it era likes the idea of a rush fee.

That is, if I can put up with Mr. Armstrong. But if his aunt with a strange name won't be with us much longer, I can grin and bear it. And in the spirit of paying rent and eating, I'm willing to do almost anything.

"I can make this happen. I want to help you and your aunt create a memory. Tell me more about Trippy, her companion, and the details that are important to her."

He levels his intense stare on me. "She has one last wish in life, and I'm determined to make it happen."

Call it my bleeding heart or my undying belief in happily ever afters, but it doesn't take long for me to want to do everything I can to make all Aunt Trippy's wishes come true. I lean forward and lower my voice. "I'll do everything I can to make that happen, Mr. Armstrong."

He smacks the linen tablecloth, making me jump. "She wants to be married at The Pink."

My eyes widen. "The Pink?"

"Yep. You know of it?"

"Everyone knows The Pink." I feel the blood drain from my face. All of a sudden, my bleeding heart only aches for myself. "That's a tall order. It's booked solid for the next two years."

“You haven’t even checked. How do you know?” he bites.
“Do you do a lot of events there?”

“Mr. Armstrong, I don’t want to mislead you. I’m very good at what I do, and I’m willing to work with all budgets. Even though I’ve only been in Miami for a short time and am still building my business, I can promise you, I have no pull to get into The Pink at the last minute.”

“It’s all Trippy wants. How do you know without asking?”

It’s everything I can do to keep my sigh from expressing the loss I feel—and not for Aunt Trippy. I’ve lost this job before Daniel Armstrong has a chance to choose someone else or fire me. There’s no way The Pink will answer my call. “I know the owner, so I know for a fact there are no open weekends.”

He sits up straight and throws a hand out. “You know the owner? Even better. Trippy is retired. She doesn’t need to get married on a Saturday night. Surely you can swing a weekday afternoon. Hell, she’ll take midmorning. She’s old. Old people do everything two hours early. But it needs to happen at The Pink.”

I forget all about my carefully applied lipstick and pull the delicate skin between my teeth. “I don’t think I can swing that...”

Daniel reaches for his sunglasses and starts to push his chair away from the table. “I have a limited amount of time. I mean, Trippy has a limited amount of time because of her condition, and I’ll do anything for her. I guess I need to move on to another wedding planner.”

“No. No-no!” The tiny, desperate words fall from my lips before I have a chance to bite them back. “Let me make a call. I’ll see what I can do.”

He pauses where he’s still sitting on the edge of his seat. “You do understand the urgency of the situation? It needs to happen fast.”

My heart speeds as I break into a sweat that has nothing to do with the hot Florida weather. “Aunt Trippy’s on her deathbed.

Make all her dreams come true before it's too late. I get it, Mr. Armstrong."

The waiter returns with Daniel's drinks. "May I tell you about today's lunch specials?"

"No." Daniel reaches into his front pocket and pulls out a money clip with a wad of bills neatly folded within it. He peels off a crisp fifty and tosses it on the table. "We're done. This is for your trouble. I need these drinks to go."

I don't know who's more relieved, the server since he scored an easy tip, or me since the weirdest meeting I've ever taken is over, and I don't have to foot the bill.

"Of course." The server really is ready to get rid of us. He picks up Daniel's fresh drinks and disappears.

"There's one more thing," Daniel mutters as he reaches for his aviators.

Goodness. As if booking a mid-morning wedding at The Pink isn't impossible enough, what more could this man want from me? My manners have taken a hike. My mom would be so disappointed if she were here. "What now?"

"I want to make sure this is done right. I'd like to see the venue in action. I assume since you have an in, you can make that happen."

"You..." Just when I thought this horrible meeting was over, it gets worse. "You want to attend a stranger's wedding at The Pink?"

He shrugs like this is no big deal. "Doesn't have to be a wedding. Any event will do. Since they're booked solid, there will be plenty of opportunities. I'm free Saturday night. Let me know what time—I'll meet you there."

The waiter returns with Daniel's weird drink order in to-go cups and places two paper straws on the table next to them. He doesn't take a chance on losing his free tip and grabs the fifty. "Enjoy your afternoon."

I know for a fact I will not enjoy anything until I'm done dealing with Daniel Armstrong and dying Aunt Trippy.

Daniel pops the lid off the iced tea, lifts the cup, and proceeds to down ninety percent of its contents. He swipes his bottom lip with the back of his hand as he stands, grabs the soft drink, and slides on his shades. Standing before me, tall, broad, and menacing, I can only imagine his intimidating icy blue eyes glaring at me. “I’ll wait for your call to let me know what time on Saturday. This has to happen for Trippy.”

“For Trippy,” I echo, internally worrying about the demise of Trippy. “I’ll be in touch.”

And with that, he’s gone.

I slump into my chair and close my eyes, dreading the predicament I just got myself into. I have to make a call that I do not want to make and ask for a favor from the one person I swore I’d never ask anything from ever again.

“Excuse me, but are you staying?”

I open my eyes to find the waiter clearing the table that we didn’t dirty.

I gather the few things I was prepared to use to showcase my talents and toss them in my bag. “No, I’m sorry. And I’m sorry for taking the reservation. This meeting didn’t turn out as I expected.”

I pull my own shades from my bag and stalk toward the door.

At least I didn’t have to buy lunch.

But I’d rather add to my increasing debt any day than to have to call Dex.

It’s Thursday. I have to find a way into The Pink with a plus one for Saturday night.

And I thought paying next month’s rent was going to be the hardest thing to conquer on my ever-growing list of impossibilities.

*The
Pink*
EST. 1981

King

I BARELY MAKE it around the corner to my government car when my cell vibrates. I'm surprised the fuckers gave me enough time to get out of sight.

I reach into my breast pocket for my cell and press go. "What?"

"You might've been the shit trekking through the jungles as a Ranger, but what the fuck was that? You had no chill in there. Have I taught you nothing in the last three years?"

"Fuck off, Brax," I mutter.

I glance back as I cross the street to make sure there aren't ears or eyes that I do not need following me. She seemed to be in a haze of confusion when I left her, which is more puzzling to me than anything I've uncovered on the Carter case in the last year.

Goldie Carter is the organization's shiny new toy, and I intend to take full advantage of her.

"It's cool, King." Micah Emmett's sarcasm bleeds through the line. "We all have our strengths, but this one might jump to the top of the list of fucked-up stories about you. Kingston Jennings, rattled by the young, sweet wedding planner."

Fuck me, they're on speaker again, probably huddled up in their car beating the shit out of each other or talking about babies and football. "I was not rattled, asswipe. I have my shit under control. But I wasn't about to sit and make small talk about wedding mints and color schemes."

Micah laughs at my expense. "Yeah, I doubt camo is the trending color of the season."

"Nah," Brax argues. "King's wedding will be black from top to bottom."

These two.

I've been working with them for almost three years since I moved to Miami. Brax Cruz and Micah Emmett might be badass special agents who have made names for themselves around the country and hemisphere, but they're also tighter

than a couple of middle school girls who bond over their darkest secrets and wildest dreams.

I'm like the third wheel who doesn't want to roll with them to begin with, but they drag me along purely for their own amusement.

"Can you assholes at least let me get to my car before you pile it on? You have a job to do, if you haven't forgotten," I mutter as I walk the last block to my ride.

"He acts like we don't have his back," Micah clips. He must pick up the phone because the volume increases twenty decibels in my ear. "Did you forget who got you to Miami in the first place?"

I beep the locks on my car. "How can I forget when you remind me every other day? Look, are you going to do your job, or are you going to sit there and gab like Trippy?"

"Speaking of Trippy, she didn't look like she was on her deathbed last Sunday at dinner. I wonder what her doctor would have to say about that?" Micah pauses for dramatics. "I'll ask her tonight, since my wife is her doctor. Wait until Trippy hears you're trying to marry her off."

"It was the best I could do." I start the car and crank up the AC.

"If that's your best, then you need to stick to busting down doors and writing affidavits," Brax says.

I pull away from where I'm parallel parked on the street. "It's not my fault every drug dealer in this part of the country knows what you shitheads look like. I did just fine and will get into The Pink this weekend."

"I don't know," Brax says. "From the sounds of the audio, I'll be surprised if you hear from her again. Once you mentioned The Pink, she didn't want anything to do with you. She sure doesn't trust you."

Unfortunately, I agree, but I'm not about to tell them that. "Are you two going to do your job or not?"

“Goldie Carter is walking to her car. We’ve got her in our sights and will see where she goes.”

“Don’t lose her,” I warn. “Carter has his shit locked down so tight, I hadn’t found a way in until she ended up on the books. I want to know her every move.”

“He thinks we’re idiots,” Brax mutters.

“Oh, you’re idiots, just not the stupid kind,” I say. “I want to know every single thing about Marigold Carter.”

NITTY GRITTY

Goldie

“No, Marigold. He’s in an extremely urgent meeting with an impossibly important client. I’m terribly sorry. I will get him your message as quickly as I can.”

Dex’s administrative assistant sing-songing excuses to me through the phone claws at the part of me that I’m not proud of. I pull in a deep breath, because the urge to reach through the phone and slap the adverbs off her lips is strong.

Who speaks in that many adverbs?

I have no time to worry about her inarticulate and lazy use of the English language.

Dex is not taking my calls. I’ve made enough of them to test the stormy waters I left in my wake.

Not that I wanted him to take my call before yesterday. Six months ago, I told him I wanted nothing to do with him, but here I am, breaking through the same barriers I was so determined to build between us.

I swore I’d never allow him to take advantage of me again.

“Please,” I say on an exhale. It’s everything I can do to keep my tone as level as the horizon. “I know Dex and I haven’t spoken in months, but it’s important.”

“By the tone of your voice, it does sound timely. If you’d so kindly tell me what it is you need to speak to him about, I’ll happily pass it on to him,” she croons.

Croons!

I can just see her sitting behind her glass desk, her long, golden legs crossed with her high-heeled foot bouncing with glee as she studies her perfect cuticles while gatekeeping me.

“Thank you, but no,” I bite. “I need to speak to him myself.”

“It’s just an offer. I’m only trying to be helpful, Marigold. You sound exceptionally desperate.”

I shake my head and collapse onto my sofa. If I ever do get to speak to Dex again, I’m going to tell him that his assistant would be fifty percent more productive if she learned to get her point across with half the words.

“I won’t take up too much of his time. Just a few minutes.” I’ve reduced myself to begging, but it is what it is. She’s right. I am desperate. “Please, put me through.”

“Not now, dear. I’m sure he’ll return your call—you know, eventually.”

Another worthless L-Y word.

Kill me.

My head falls back, and I close my eyes.

“Thank you,” I lie.

More like thank you for the useless conversation and keeping me from making an honest living, you sour, dream-crushing, word-hogging, human mannequin.

“Have a lovely day, Marigold.”

“It’s Goldie,” I snap, but barely get out the G when she hangs up on me.

I toss my cell beside me and hope it doesn’t fall through the cracks, because as much elbow grease as I put into deep cleaning my Facebook Marketplace sofa, it’s still borderline grosses me out. There’s nothing left for me to do but stare at the ceiling and feel my positive outlook on life bleed from my pores.

I'm hemorrhaging optimism, and there's nothing I can do about it.

I'm left with ugly desperation.

Fitting.

It matches my sofa.

I live at Colony Park, an Art Deco building from the fifties. I did not mess around when I moved to Miami. I wanted the full experience, and at the time, money wasn't an issue.

My unit is on the top floor. I was trying to appease Mom who was chirping in my ear about safety in the big city. That was back when the universe was on my side. Someone had to break their lease on the day I called. I was so excited—I signed sight unseen and rented the place over the phone.

The charm shined through the internet, pulled me in, and made me not care about the ludicrous rent.

A price tag I can no longer afford.

If I don't land a contract soon, I'll age beyond my years from the stress and lack of sleep.

Colony Park might be old, but it's charming and has been refurbished.

When I moved in almost a year ago, I was glass-is-half-full Goldie. The first time I walked into my spacious apartment, its character spoke to my soul. Even the tiny gecko who made his way through the balcony doors lit a light inside me that glowed with new experiences.

The turquoise and peach stripes that frame the exterior of Colony Park are a reminder of Miami's culture that I was so excited to experience. When I parked my gently-used Honda and walked through the wrought iron gates for the first time, I saw evidence of the tropical climate that thrives year-round.

My internet-filtered outlook on life was new and sharp and sunny.

Those were the days. Colony Park might be old, but with that comes location, location, location. It sits on an epic street

that's reminiscent of Miami's glory days, where beauty, flare, and personality shine bright.

I'm sure the ghost of Colony Park dances around the building praising what once was and still is.

I love it here and don't want to leave.

And that's why I'm willing to bulldoze through the wall I built between Dex and me. Five calls and two voicemails. I even sent an email. I'm sure he's sitting smug in his crisp air-conditioned, spacious office with a satisfied smirk.

He said this would happen.

He said I'd never make it and would come crawling back for help.

I hate myself.

I might hate Daniel Armstrong more for demanding that beloved, dying Aunt Trippy tie the knot at The Pink.

Of all the types of luck in the world, mine could not be worse.

I jerk when my phone vibrates on the worn cushion next to me. My heart lurches until I see the name on the screen.

Not Dex.

I slide my thumb across the screen and try to hide the disappointment in my tone. "Hi, Mom."

"You didn't call, so I'm forced to be the one to pick up the phone and nose my way into your business. How did the meeting go with the prospective client yesterday?"

I sigh. "I'm still working on it. I don't have a signed contract yet, but they haven't turned me away either."

"Tell me all about it. The colors, the ceremony, the couple... I want to know what you have up that magical, creative sleeve of yours."

I drag myself to my feet and move to the kitchen to wash dishes. "The planning hasn't gotten that far. They want a specific venue, and their time frame is tight. I'm doing my best to make it happen."

“What’s wrong with people?” Mom has reached that point in her life that she says what she wants, and she doesn’t care what anyone thinks. She’d probably say that to Daniel Armstrong’s face. “You know what? I bet it’s a shotgun wedding. She’s knocked up—I’d bet my entire stock of canned tomatoes on it. Not that there’s anything wrong with that, but why do people feel the need to marry so fast? Just be, that’s what I say.”

I wedge the phone between my ear and shoulder and flip on the water. “It’s not a shotgun this time. I know that for a fact.”

“I’m not even there, and I know I’m right. You don’t see people for who they really are. It’s your downfall, Goldielocks.”

“Trust me, Mom. In this case, you’re wrong—*dead* wrong.” I emphasize the word for good measure, wondering what’s really wrong with poor, fading Trippy. “The gentleman I met with is arranging a wedding for his aunt who is on her deathbed. Her last wish is to marry her long-term companion. I’m doing everything I can to make it happen, but the venue is ... highly sought after.”

If I tell her it’s The Pink, and I’ve been calling Dex like my life depends on it, she will flip her lid and drive her old conversion van down here like a bat out of dark places.

Her tone goes from sharp to shocked. “Well, if that isn’t the saddest thing I’ve ever heard. What a wonderful man to do that for his aunt.”

“Yeah.” I roll my eyes and set a bowl upside down on a tea towel to dry. “He’s great.”

“If that poor woman is dying, you need to find a way to make it happen. Do everything you can.”

If she only knew. “I’m trying, Mom. I really am.”

“I’m sorry, baby. I know your heart. Of course you’re doing all you can. I hope that woman lives long enough for you to make her dreams come true.”

I finish the dishes and flip off the water. I don’t need Trippy’s dreams weighing on my conscience any more than they

already are. “How are you? What’s going on in the boondocks?”

“My poor garden is flooded. We’ve had more rain than my vegetables need. They need sun and heat. Dr. May is on vacation, so it’s slow in the office. I’m able to catch up on my beads. Oh, I’ve got some news for you! Remember Becca from high school? The one with the ugly soul? Well, she caught a bad case of the herpes—and I’m not talking a cold sore. I heard she got it when she cheated on her husband.” Mom pauses and whispers the second bit of news. “I expect a divorce announcement anytime.”

“Mom, you know that little thing called HIPAA? You’re going to lose your job and have to live off selling tomatoes on the corner. And you don’t know anything about her soul. I honestly haven’t thought about her in years.”

Mom runs the office for a family doctor in town.

Mom also likes to talk.

“You live in Miami. Who are you gonna tell, the sweet little lizards? And her soul is ugly. I can feel it every time she comes in. She spread that rumor about you in high school that you were bullying her little sister just so people wouldn’t vote for you for homecoming queen! She almost stole your crown. Thank goodness her little sister had enough of her and put an end to that. You wouldn’t bully a goat if it was trying to headbutt you. It’s the way I raised you. It’s also why I can violate HIPAA laws and know that you’ll keep the secret.”

I move to the bathroom and put her on speaker while I brush my hair into a high pony. “If you see her, tell her I said hi.”

Mom barks a ridiculous laugh. “I’ll do no such thing. I did tell her that you’re living your best life in Miami. I might have told her that you met Shakira at one of your events.”

I tie my hair up. “You need to quit lying. It’s becoming a problem.”

“Shakira lives in Miami,” she defends herself. “It could happen.”

I study my chin in the mirror. With all the stress of Daniel, Trippy, and Dex, I think I'm getting a pimple. "Why don't we let my dreams come to fruition before we make claims like that."

"I'm manifesting for you. No need to get into the nitty-gritty, Goldie."

"The truth is not nitty-gritty. The truth is the truth."

"I'm not sure how you came out so good. I can only claim so much of it. It sure as heck was not your father. I'd spit on his grave if I was bothered enough to visit it. It's a good thing he left us high and dry when he did. You're a better person because he was too much of a bonehead to be a part of your life. At least he remembered you in his will."

"I had you, Mom. You're all I ever needed."

"And you'll always have me."

"I've got to go. I'm going for a walk before I need to make some phone calls." Especially the call I've been putting off. If Dex doesn't get back to me before the end of the day, I'm going to have to tell Daniel Armstrong I'm not able to get us into The Pink.

"Get your steps in. You'll thank me when you're my age. And you better bet I'll still be around then to bug you about it. Who knows, you might just attract the man of your dreams with your nice legs."

"Walking is good for my heart and clears my mind. I walk for me, not a future man."

"For someone who loves love and weddings so much, you aren't trying very hard," Mom mutters.

What I don't say to her is trying is what got her involved with my sperm donor who left her high and dry with a baby. "I'm not trying to find a man. When it happens, it'll be kismet. Real love should never be forced."

"I agree. Kismet and good legs. You'll do far better than I did."

"I'll call you later. Love you."

“Love you, too, Goldielocks.”

My mother’s nickname for me is in spirit only since there’s nothing golden about me. My hair is so dark, it’s black without the light of day on it. Even my outlook on life isn’t at all golden anymore.

I slap on some sunscreen and throw on a hat and shades before I grab my key. I’m out the door and down the steps when I see Mr. Elrod, my downstairs neighbor.

He’s lived at Colony Park since it opened. He sold shoes at Nordstrom for years until he retired. At least, he was supposed to retire, but then the little corner grocery around the block offered him a job, so now he stocks produce for fun three mornings a week and gets paid for it. He knows everything about everyone and tells everyone else what he knows.

He and Mom would entertain each other for hours on end with gossip. I really need to get her down here to visit, but the last time she got on a plane was when she hooked up with my father. She said the thought of stepping on a plane gives her PTSD, and she might end up on the news.

I forgot my earbuds. I can’t even pretend not to hear him.

“Goldie!”

I stop and turn back to him. “How are you, Mr. Elrod?”

He swipes at his brow as he groans when he pushes to his feet from deadheading the flowers in the garden outside his door.

“You know, keeping on. How’s the wedding business?”

I force a smile and realize I’m lying a lot lately. “It’s great. You know, busy. It’s always wedding season.”

“Wouldn’t know. Never got married. Look at me now, thriving just like my flowers. You, on the other hand, don’t seem to be thriving. You’ve been pacing a lot. Pacing isn’t good.”

I frown. “Just getting my steps in while I work.”

He narrows his eyes. “Lot of phone calls too. And not many of them sound friendly. They sound desperate.”

It's my turn to narrow my eyes at my nosy neighbor. "I'm not making desperate phone calls. Maybe you should turn your TV up."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to bother you with the volume of my shows."

I place a hand on my hip. His passive aggressiveness is thicker than the Florida humidity. And since I'm already sweating, both are in excess today. "When is your birthday? I might get you some noise canceling headphones so I don't bother you while I work from home."

He smiles broadly and proves what I already knew—if the man thrives on anything, it's being a snoopy neighbor. "You're not bothering me. I need to be alert so I can be on the lookout for my neighbors. Did you know we used to have a neighborhood watch? I ran the program, but it got too hard to maintain with people moving in and out like a revolving door."

Any other day, I'd bite my tongue and walk away. But as I near the end of my rope with my nosy neighbor, my phone vibrates.

"Another phone call," he states as I whip my phone from my pocket.

I can't hide my anxiety when I see who it is.

I sidestep my elderly neighbor and mutter, "Excuse me. I'll take this while I walk so I don't bother you."

"Good luck with that one," he calls after me.

I let it ring as long as I can to give me enough time to exit the gate before sliding my thumb across the screen and pulling in a deep breath. "Mr. Armstrong. How are you?"

There's a pause over the line before he starts in. "I've been waiting to hear from you. I trust that you were able to get us into The Pink tomorrow?"

I quicken my pace and dread what I'm about to do. I'm going to lose this contract, and I cannot afford to lose anything these days.

I try to break the bad news to him, but the words just won't come out.

"Goldie? Did I lose you?"

"Sorry, I'm here."

"Great," he clips. "What time should I meet you?"

"I've been making calls, but I haven't heard back from the owner."

It's like he lets my non answer to his question marinate before he finally responds. "What are you saying? Do I need to look for another wedding planner who can get this done?"

"No, no!" The words fall from my lips in a rush. "I mean, don't look for anyone else."

"Perfect." His deep voice rumbles through the phone and hits me somewhere deep, because nothing is perfect at the moment. "I'm free at five."

I stop on the sidewalk and stare at a weed growing through the crack.

I've never done this in my life.

I'm a rule follower.

Crashing an event is not in my wheelhouse. It's rude and tasteless and after dealing with a few over the years, I'd never in my life consider such a thing.

But it seems desperation runs stronger than my manners at the moment.

"Five o'clock," I echo. "Yes, that should work."

"I can't wait." His tone is satisfied. Almost triumphant.

"Yes, at five you'll be able to experience everything." Five o'clock is my best bet. A wedding will be wrapped up and cocktail hour will be going strong, or guests will be arriving for an evening event.

"I can't wait," he adds.

I'd rather pull my eyelashes out one by one. "Me too. I'll see you tomorrow."

I hang up and wonder how I'm going to get myself out of this predicament. Even if I manage to get us into The Pink, the chances of Dex allowing me to book a wedding there—even one before noon—is nil.

I just need to talk Daniel into looking elsewhere for poor old Trippy.

That's what I'll do.

By the time we leave tomorrow night—assuming I can get us into The Pink to begin with—my newest client will hate everything about it.

Even though it is one of the most beautiful spots in Miami.

Screw Dex and The Pink.

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

King

I toss the burner phone to my desk and swivel in my chair. “She took the bait. Just like that, I’ll be at The Pink tomorrow for the big event.”

Brax turns to me. “I can’t lie, I had my doubts after your shit undercover work.”

I shrug and lean back in my chair. “You don’t know charm when you see it.”

He barks a laugh and shakes his head as Micah walks in. “What’s so funny?”

Brax turns to him. “Kingston Jennings thinks he’s charming.”

“By tomorrow at this time, I’ll be waltzing my ass into The Pink,” I announce. “I can finally zero in on my number one target. Carter is about to go down.”

“I can’t believe she fell for it,” Micah says, reaching next to his desk for his backpack. He continues to talk as he stuffs his shit inside for the weekend. “She seemed smarter.”

“Desperation trumps common sense every time,” Brax says. “Whatever it takes.”

“I sent the paperwork to the judge and should have access to her phone records by Monday. We’ll see who she’s been communicating with and how often. One little cross reference after tech triangulates the party tomorrow, and I’ll be up on a wire in no time.”

“Good luck with that,” Micah mutters. “It’s never that easy.”

“As long as you don’t blow my case out of the water again,” I throw back.

Brax looks at Micah and talks about me like I’m not in the same damn room. “He’s never going to get over that.”

Micah hikes a brow and glares at me, again, carrying on like I took a hike. “That’s because he knows it’s his fault.”

I shrug. “It’s not my fault I was given CIA clearance, while you were working the old-fashioned way.”

Micah slings his bag over a shoulder. “Welcome to the real world. You’re chasing the same target you were three years ago, but this time you have to play by the rules.”

Brax turns to me. “You don’t know what a rule looks like. If I could bet on it, I’d think you burned the rule book the moment you graduated from the academy.”

He’s not wrong.

I recline in my chair. “I do just fine, Cruz. Haven’t had any complaints since I moved to Miami.”

“I’ve complained,” Micah says. “Pretty sure I complain to Tim every other week.”

“I’m going to complain tomorrow when I’m working surveillance on a Saturday night,” Brax agrees as he levels his gaze on me. “You need a life outside of work. Maybe then you’ll find a way to do your job during regular business hours so we aren’t forced to work so many nights and weekends.”

“Like you’re one to talk. I worked two years straight on your case when you were under,” Micah drawls. “I’m out of here since we are working tomorrow. After that first meet with the Carter woman which took all of fifteen minutes, I can’t wait to see you in action for an entire evening.”

He’s not kidding. I rarely work undercover, but I couldn’t get anyone else in the group to step up. My name might be King, but Brax is the king of undercover work. Micah is only slightly more charming than me, which means he’d have trouble luring a moth if he were a flame. The fact he landed

his wife is a modern-day miracle. Not to mention, I knew if I wanted to get the information I needed, this gig wasn't going to be short term. Crockett and Tubbs are knee deep in diapers at home. Besides the people I work with, I don't keep up with anyone in Miami but Trippy.

One, I don't have time.

And two, it takes a lot of fucking effort, and I just don't care.

The last thing I need are the wives of the men I work with to be pissed at me because their husbands are working more than they already do. That would make their get togethers awkward, or they'd stop inviting me altogether.

I might not care about a lot of shit, but the food is good at Sunday dinners. That, I do care about. I don't plan to fuck it up anytime soon.

I'm the shit when it comes to operational plans, kicking in doors, and early-morning raids. What I'm not the shit at is pretending I care about venues, color schemes, cake, music, or anything that has to do with weddings, bright colors, or sappy professions of love.

Wait.

That's not right.

I like cake.

Only freaks don't like cake.

"I need to get home so the nanny can leave. Evie has to check on a patient at the hospital. Text me the details about tomorrow. I'll be there, even though I won't be happy about it," Micah says, but he does it with a chin lift and a smirk before he's out the door without another word or complaint.

I turn back to Brax. "You'd think I was torturing you guys."

Brax shuts his laptop and grabs his own bag. "If you haven't figured it out by now, the only time you need to worry about Micah is when he stops giving you shit. It's his form of affection."

“Let’s meet here two hours before I’m supposed to be at The Pink. We’ll go over the plan while I get mic’d.”

“I’ll be here.” He’s almost around the corner, headed for the stairs when he calls back, “Go home, Jennings. Have a beer and chill out for once.”

I’m not sure I’ve ever *chilled out*, so I turn back to my laptop to go over the op plan one more time even though it was already approved. I get to the second page when my phone dings with a notification.

I unlock the screen to see what set off the house alarm.

My notifications go crazy with my doorbell ringing relentlessly.

And I have no issue seeing who it is when she leans over and glares straight into the camera to yell at me. “This is no time for you to go incognito, King. I drove through five states to be here because I have nowhere else to go. The only reason I’m not breaking in is because you probably have entire battalions waiting in the wings. The last thing I need is the attention of the police. Where are you?”

Fuck.

I press the button and speak into the app. “What the hell are you doing in Miami?”

Laken stands straight and takes a step back. That’s when I see a sullen preteen standing behind her.

Lake’s arms fall to her sides in frustration. “You’d know what I was doing in Miami if you returned my calls. Let us in, dammit.”

Shit.

I ignore most people’s calls, but not Laken’s. At least not usually.

I hit the button and speak to her through the app again. “Give me a break. I’m working on a big case. I’ll unarm the system. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

She rolls her eyes and mumbles, “Big case ... you’re so full of yourself, King.”

The only kind of drama I had planned for my weekend is what I intend to inflict at The Pink. Not this, and certainly not a surprise visit from Laken.

I shut my laptop and pack it away so I can finish after I deal with my unexpected visitors.



I PULL past the Jag F-Type with Illinois tags parked in the driveway and kill the engine of my government-issued car once I’m in the garage. She must have gotten in since I didn’t get calls from the alarm company or the police. I don’t remember the last time we’ve been here together.

I shut the garage door and prepare for what’s about to hit me. When it comes to Laken, it could be anything.

I walk through the messy mudroom that’s littered with my raid gear and a long gun when I smell garlic mixed with tomatoes. I stop in the doorway to the kitchen to find Lake standing in front of the old stove.

I dump my stuff on the counter and go straight for Willa who’s slumped at the kitchen table scrolling mindlessly on her cell. I lean down and press my lips to the top of her head. “What’s up, Willa?”

She doesn’t look away from the small screen and shrugs. “Mom left Dad.”

Lake sighs before putting a lid on the pot with more force than necessary. “Looks like you’re preserving this place to go down in history with the Golden Girls. Seriously, King. Trippy said you could do anything you want with it. Unless you’re hooking up with senior citizens, do something with this house.”

I cross my arms and turn to my little sister. “It’s good to see you, too, Laken.”

She turns on a heel. “Don’t Laken me. I called you every time we hit a state line. It’s not like you’re buried deep in the jungle or some desert anymore. The least you can do is return a phone call.”

I pull in a deep breath, because I think I’m going to need to muster the patience that doesn’t come naturally for me. “You’re right. I’ve been buried in my case. That’s on me.”

Lake looks at Willa. “Go unpack and get settled in. I need to talk to Uncle King.”

Willa’s shoulders droop farther. “How long are we going to be here?”

“Long enough for you to unpack.” Lake drags her hands through her hair, and now I see it. The stress is set in her features with dark circles that are never there. My sister could have been a beauty queen back in the day.

But today she’s stressed and looks like shit.

“Go,” Lake pushes my niece out of the kitchen with only the tone of her voice. “Dinner will be ready soon—if you can call it dinner. I’ll go to the store tomorrow and get real food.”

It looks like it takes every ounce of energy, but Willa drags her twelve-year-old body to her feet and trudges out of the room.

“What the hell is so bad it made you drive halfway across the country?” I demand.

“I knew something was off. Even before Christmas. Silas has been edgy and shorter with us than normal. I thought he was cheating on me.”

I hike a brow, because nothing would surprise me less about my asshole brother-in-law. “I thought that was a requirement for a U.S. Congressman.”

“Don’t start, King. I’m not in the mood. The FBI is investigating Silas and his campaign manager for campaign fraud. Fraud, King!” she hisses in a whispered voice to spare her daughter from knowing what an ass that her father really is.

I lean a hip to the counter and lower my voice, and not to protect Lake's husband, but because I'll do anything for my niece. "When did this happen? Usually when Silas hits the news, people come out of the woodwork and send it to me. You're sure?"

She nods as tears come to her eyes. "Yes. His attorney came over the other night with Bill. They were arguing. It wasn't hard to understand what was going on, and he finally fessed up after his dad left. I'm pretty sure charges will be filed tomorrow. I had to get Willa out of Illinois. We've been driving for two days. The attention she gets at her age is bad enough. I do not need the press camped outside our house waiting for us to come and go. That happened a few years ago and it traumatized her. Coming to you was my only option. It's not my fault you refuse to answer your damn phone."

I push away from the counter and pull her into my arms. She presses her face into my chest, and her tears seep through my shirt. "I'm sorry I didn't answer. I had no idea your world was falling apart."

"Don't do it again," she sniffs.

"Let me guess, your father-in-law is behind this?"

She pulls in a shaky breath. "I have no idea. But Bill is behind everything so I assume he is."

I give her a squeeze. "Bill is an asshole."

She swipes the tears from her face. "I know. He always has been."

"I'm glad you're here. There's no better place to hide out than Trippy's old house. Does she know you're here?"

She shakes her head and looks up at me. "No. I didn't have the energy. She's going to go all *Trippy* on me."

"Nah. She'll go all Trippy on Silas, and he'll deserve it. You need to call her. Willa will be the distraction you need."

Lake nods. "I'll call her in the morning. Don't you dare tell her when we got here. She'll kill me."

I move to the counter and pop a stray SweetTart in my mouth that's probably Willa's since Lake hardly eats sugar. "If she kills you, she'll do it with her new golf cart."

Lake freezes before whispering, "No."

"Yes. The doc told her she couldn't drive because of her reflexes. And what does the woman who has more money than sense do? She buys herself a top-of-the-line golf cart. She doesn't think it counts as driving because it's battery operated. It's the color of a flamingo. If she doesn't kill you, she'll kill someone else."

Lake goes back to the stove when a pot of water starts to steam. I realize she's dug through the pantry and found a jar of spaghetti sauce. Probably the only meal she could piece together from what I have here. "When did this happen? The doctor took her keys away two months ago."

"I picked her up for dinner last weekend and it was parked in front of her unit. It already has scratches on it. If you answered your phone, you'd know this."

She turns and pins me with a blue-eyed glare. "That's a lie, and I'm going to tell Trippy."

"Tell Grandma what?" Willa asks as she comes back into the room. "Is she coming over?"

"I'll take you there tomorrow, baby. Trippy doesn't drive anymore, remember?" Lake says.

I bop my niece on the head. "You can drive her new golf cart. We'll all be safer that way."

She looks up at her mom, not as depressed as she was two minutes ago. "Can I?"

"We'll see. I'm not sure if I trust you around all the other golf carts in the retirement community. That's got to be like bumper cars."

Willa starts to chew on her cuticle. "How long are we going to be here? I'm going to miss all the back-to-school stuff."

"I told you, we're going to hang out with King and Trippy. It's been too long since we made a trip to Miami."

Willa rolls her eyes and turns away from her mom. “I’m not stupid. I heard them fighting in Dad’s office. Then we packed and left.”

My gaze shoots to my sister. “Silas doesn’t know where you are?”

“Nope,” Lake says, popping the P.

I pull in a deep breath and shake my head. “This is getting more and more interesting by the moment. I’m going to change, and then we’ll eat.”

Willa catches my forearm. “What are we doing tomorrow?”

“I’ve got something tomorrow night. But unless something comes up, Sunday should be good. Think about what you want to do and I’ll make it happen.”

Lake gapes at me. “You have a date? Like, an actual woman who agreed to go somewhere with you?”

I pause, thinking about Goldie and how she absolutely did not agree to go anywhere with me. At least not the real me.

She was coerced.

I should feel bad about it.

I really should.

But, because of her, I’m getting into The Pink for the biggest event of the season. I’ll be surrounded by targets, and not one of them will know who I am.

I wish I could feel bad about it. But Marigold Carter is exactly what I planned on her being.

Collateral damage.

THE BE-ALL, END-ALL

Goldie

My heels click on the pavement as my heart pounds in my chest. I haven't been back to The Pink in months.

I'm not sure what I'm more nervous about—talking my way into a venue that was promised to me or the fact Daniel Armstrong is staring me down as I approach him.

He ditched the casual sport coat and trousers that looked like he just walked out of a Ralph Lauren store. It's replaced with a crisp suit—and not one that would be worn to an office on any random Tuesday.

No.

This suit is black on black on black on black. It's a small step down from a tux.

And since I'm in the wedding business and most weddings are formal, I would know.

An entire wedding party could sport his look, and the pictures would be timeless, forever and ever. The end.

I swallow my nerves as I approach him and realize I don't know what he does for a living. I know nothing about that man besides his goal to fulfill last wishes for dying old women.

On any other day, at any other venue, old, expiring Aunt Trippy would be at the forefront of my thoughts. I always put my clients first, but I also never worry that I'll be bounced from a venue.

And the possibility of that happening in the next five minutes is probable.

Like high.

To the sky.

My desperation is making me do stupid things.

My tongue might as well be a cotton ball as I come to a stop in front of my prospective client who looks down at me through the same aviators he wore at our non-lunch meeting a few days ago.

I offer my hand. "It's good to see you again, Mr. Armstrong."

When he takes my hand in his, it's warm and strong, and he embraces me longer than necessary. "You, too, Goldie. I look forward to tonight."

I suck in a stale breath. "It's going to be great."

He tips his head as he stares down at me without letting go of my hand. "Is everything alright?"

I give my head a little shake no, because nothing is alright at the moment. "Mm-hmm. Everything is great. Why do you ask?"

He leans in two inches and lowers his voice. "Because you won't let go of my hand."

My gaze shoots to our embrace where I'm gripping onto this strange man for dear life.

I release him immediately and wipe my sweaty palm down the side of my dress. "Sorry. So, so-so sorry. I'm good."

He slides his hand into his pockets as the ocean breeze bounces off Biscayne Bay and causes a lock of his wavy hair to drop to his forehead, curling from the humidity. From the crinkle between his eyes, I'm afraid he senses my utter panic. "You don't look good."

I tuck my clutch tightly under my arm and take a step back. "Well, then."

“That’s not what I meant.” The words spill from his lips quickly as he rips off his shades. I get a good look at his bright blue gaze as he drags his eyes up and down my short cocktail dress the color of sand. “You look good. I mean, you look great. What I meant was, you look like someone just kidnapped your dog and is holding it for ransom.”

I lift my chin and straighten my spine. I swear, his eyes drop to my breasts for a quick beat. “See there? You don’t know me at all. I don’t have a dog.”

Daniel drags a hand through his hair, which only makes it messier rather than the other way around. “That’s just a figure of speech. Though, you do look like a dog person.”

I am a dog person. I love dogs, and I wish I could manage one in my life.

But that’s another mouth to feed.

“Shall we go in?” I ask.

He slides his shades back on and holds an arm toward the front door. “I can’t wait.”

I purse my lips quickly before motioning the other way. “Since we’re not officially guests of the event, I told management we’d slip in through the back.”

“The back?” He drops his arm. “Interesting. Lead the way, Ms. Carter.”

I put Daniel between myself and the entrance as we make our way past the front doors. Guests are filing in with invites and IDs in hand.

Shoot. That means it’s not a wedding.

It’s one of *those* events.

I need more than a shred of luck to pull this off. The fact that this is a high-profile event does not help. It’s either a celebrity function or one of Dex’s business soirées. I worked here long enough to know they don’t check the guest list for normal bookings.

I might not work here any longer, but I need to do what I came here to do—convince Daniel Armstrong to book his aunt’s wedding elsewhere, so I turn to him and begin the sales spiel that I hope will have the adverse effect today.

“The Pink was originally called The Pink Peony. It’s a twenty-acre estate that includes prime private beachfront that frames the property. The estate was one of the first built when Miami started to flourish during the last century. A Wall Street tycoon from The Big Apple built it for his wife who hated the cold. She would spend winters here.”

Daniel follows me around to the side entrance of the building, and mutters as he takes in every inch of the place. “Miami is nice in the winter.”

“The gothic-style mansion has its beauty, I suppose. Though it is a bit creepy if you ask me. I mean, faded pink gothic? It makes it difficult to decorate around. It’s an interesting choice for sure.” I stop where I am, lean in, and lower my voice. “Honestly, who wants that as your backdrop for tying the knot for the rest of your life? Personally, I would prefer white. It’s not loud and abrasive. Every bride deserves to be the focal point. Especially Trippy.”

King narrows his eyes and glances down to my hand. I didn’t realize I was fisting the lapel of his jacket. “You’re an interesting salesperson.”

I quickly let go and smooth it before giving his chest a little pat. “If you want a salesperson, you’ll have to find another wedding planner. I want nothing but the best for my clients. Things like this can only be done once. Just spelling out all the pros and cons. If you’d prefer I not be honest...”

He tips his head and stares at me. “Please, be honest.”

“Well then, let’s continue.” I smile and think this might work after all. I turn on my heel and commit to my make-him-hate-it strategy. “The stucco and limestone trim have faded over the years from storms and salt water in the air. None of the owners have ever repainted it to the bright pink the original owner chose. Did you know peonies don’t even grow in Florida?”

“Nope,” he answers as if he doesn’t care.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I eye the back gate ajar where the caterers and florists enter.

A bit of luck. This might work after all.

“Peonies require warmth and sun but also need a cold winter to flourish. It’s sort of ironic the original owner named it The Pink Peony when they don’t even grow here. Even less meaningful, if you ask me.”

I open the gate, but when I turn to look up at Daniel, he nods, uninterested. “Ironic for sure.”

I stop before entering to allow a rush of waiters to pass and lower my voice. “I know you said your aunt has her heart set on The Pink, but there are more beautiful venues in my opinion, especially for an intimate ceremony.”

He frowns. “Let’s look around anyway.”

There’s a lull in activity, and I’m not one to look a gift horse in the mouth. I reach back and grab Daniel by the sleeve. “Of course, I’ll show you around. We came all the way here. But just in case there’s no availability, can we talk about some alternate ideas when we’re done?”

A low chuckle hits me from behind. “We’ll see.”

I pull him through the kitchen prep area and don’t make eye contact with anyone. As we walk by the wall of ranges, a random burner flickers with a flame. I shake my head and flip it off as we walk by. I see nothing has changed. There’s always a burner left on.

“I’ve got to admit, Goldie, I thought we’d come in a side door. You weren’t kidding when you said the back way.”

“I’m no nonsense,” I mutter as I push the swinging door to exit the kitchen.

I come to a stop when we enter the grand hall.

This couldn’t be any worse.

It’s not a notoriously-single celebrity tying the knot on the sly only to sell the pictures to *People* for an exclusive.

That, I could have blended in with. Daniel Armstrong is just that hot. His *I-don't-give-a-heck* aura could mingle amongst the stars and look like one of them. The only thing I'm exuding, on the other hand, is complete and utter trepidation.

This is not a wedding or even a fundraiser.

This is a Dex event.

This is the very reason I cut ties with him and The Pink.

Men and women are dressed to the hilt in every brand I can't afford or pronounce. It makes my off the sales rack dress from the Loft feel very, very two years ago.

Which it is.

The place is packed. Every eight-top round table is decorated to the hilt. Four-foot-tall towering arrangements stand proudly and like enormous balls of flowers exploding with beauty around the room. I recognize most of the people in attendance. The Pink seats one thousand and can hold even more for a simple cocktail event.

I always found it odd how Dex managed to entwine his legitimate business with his dark one. It's like two sides of the family coming together at Thanksgiving where there's an unwritten rule that certain subjects are off the table and you accept one another the way you never would the other three-hundred and sixty-four days of the year.

"Coming through!"

I'm yanked to the left and find myself one with my prospective client.

A string of waiters file around us in unison—they might as well be starring in a musical production. Nothing has changed. If anything, the chaos that goes on within these walls is more ridiculous than ever.

Daniel's arm is wrapped around my lower back, and he glares down at me. His shades are pushed up on his head again, which makes him even more ruggedly handsome.

His level of not giving a rip is something everyone should strive for. The world would be a happier place.

Certainly happier than The Pink.

“You almost got flattened by a tray of lobster tails. Are you always this skittish?”

I wrinkle the lapels of his perfect sport coat in my sweaty hands again and don't care. I hold on for dear life. No one can hear us over the chatter that bounces off the marble floors and reaches all the way to the domed ceilings painted in dark, stormy ocean scenes with yachts from long ago.

I can't tell another lie and decide to go with the truth. He deserves that. After all, he's trying to do right by Trippy who's on her deathbed. “I don't like being here.”

His frown deepens and his arm squeezes me tighter. His body is rock hard beneath his expensive suit. I feel him from his pecs all the way down to his thick thighs and everywhere in between.

He glances up over my head as he takes a step into the shadows of a fake tree that towers over us. His blue eyes twinkle in the fairy lights entwined through the branches. “Why don't you like it here?”

I roll my lips to wet them. “There are so many reasons.”

“Start naming them,” he demands.

I pause and decide to give him the lamest one of all. “For one, it's supposed to be haunted.”

His brows shoot up. “That's it?”

“There's more.” I shake my head, not only because there's more, but because I cannot believe I've gotten myself into this situation and make myself say it. “I used to work here.”

His expression turns bland, and I have no clue what that means. “Really.”

Not a question.

“Yes. I didn't leave on good terms.”

“Why didn't you tell me that before you agreed to show me the place?” he demands.

The words that fall from my lips match the desperation that churns in my gut. “Because I want to plan your aunt’s wedding. I need this contract. Business has been slow since I left The Pink. Just when I think I have a new client in the books, they cancel on me with no reason. It’s happened more times than I can count in the last six months. My plan was to bring you here, show you its faults, and convince you to book your event elsewhere.”

He hikes a brow, and his deep exhale fans my face. I also feel it in every place our bodies touch. “Were you fired?”

I shake my head. “No. Goodness, no. I’ve never been fired from any job in my life. I’m good at what I do. If you let me plan your aunt’s wedding somewhere else, I promise it will be amazing and heartfelt and made of memories that will last a lifetime—yours and hers. I’ve had employers beg me not to leave.”

“Did The Pink beg you not to leave?”

I hesitate before answering. “Not exactly.”

He motions around the room before returning his hand squarely to the small of my back where he presses in. His patience is waning—that is if he had any patience to begin with. “Then why would you leave this place to go out on your own? This has to be the end-all be-all for someone like you.”

I lower my voice. “I thought it was, but it’s not. It’s definitely not the be-all, but it is the end-all. Especially for me.”

A string quartet tunes up in the distance, but Daniel’s intense focus on me never waivers. “You talk in circles. What does end-all mean?”

“Why do you care?” I demand. The last thing I want to do is wave my dirty-laundry drama like a red flag. I’ve already messed this up enough. There’s no way I’ll be able to plan Trippy’s wedding. I was a fool to think I could convince this man of anything else.

His square jaw goes taut as he bites his words back. He’s about to say something when a vibration hits my breast. It’s his cell tucked between us in the pocket of his jacket.

“Hold that thought.” He pushes me away far enough to reach for his phone and reads the screen. He rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

“Is something wrong?” I ask.

His exasperated glare focuses back on me. “I don’t have time for this, Goldie. It’s clear you’re not supposed to be here, which means I’m not supposed to be here either. That means you and I are crashing a party that requires an invite and more to get into. We snuck through the kitchen like we’re in the middle of a shitty rom-com masking itself as an action movie. You owe me the truth. What does end-all mean?”

I turn to look across the hall toward the front of the room.

There he is, sitting at the head table surrounded by his closest confidants. The woman by his side is fawning all over him.

She’s new.

I’ve never seen her before, but she fits the mold.

His mold.

She fits into the life I don’t want any part of. I gave up everything to get away from it.

“Goldie.” My name is sharp on his tongue, and I feel him tug me impossibly close. When I turn back, his blue eyes are demanding. “Tell me.”

My voice dips so low, I can barely hear myself over the strings and chatter. “I’m a rule follower, okay? Heck, I don’t speed. I don’t even curse. But things are not right here. Like, really not right. When I realized what was going on, I wanted no part of it. They didn’t beg me not to leave, Daniel. They threatened me not to leave, but I got out. If I get caught here, I have no idea what will happen.”

MY FIANCÉE

King

Fuck me.
Collateral damage sounded a hell of a lot different before this woman dragged me through the kitchen of The Pink.

I shift Goldie so her back is to the room and keep her close to me. “Who threatened you?”

In my gut, I know who threatened her. If I were a betting man, that’s something I’d put money on. But if Trippy ingrained anything in us growing up, it’s that gambling is for fools, no matter how good we think that bet might be. I’m a grown-ass man and can do what I want, but Trippy has a way of making shit stick.

She gives her head a little shake. “It doesn’t matter. I need to leave and so do you. This isn’t somewhere you want to be. I’m sorry. So sorry. I never should have lied to you. Let’s escape through the kitchen, and you’ll never see me again. The last thing I want is for you to be seen with me. You can’t handle that kind of attention.”

I’d laugh in her face if I weren’t an undercover DEA agent in a sea of filth. “You have no fucking idea what I can handle. Who threatened you?”

Her bottomless brown eyes glass over with desperation. “Why does it matter? This was the biggest mistake I’ve ever made outside of moving to Miami to begin with. Please, I need to

leave, and you need to come with me. You have no idea what you're getting yourself into."

I know exactly what I'm getting myself into. I'm not going anywhere until I get what I need. "Goldie, I'm going to ask you one more time. Who—"

Shit.

"Daniel?" Goldie tries to turn to see what distracted me, but I stop her by pulling her even closer. And since we were fucking close to begin with, we might as well be one. She panics. "What is it?"

Dex-fucking-Carter is stalking across the room straight for us. I need Goldie to tell me about her connection to Dex and The Pink, but none of this is happening the way it was supposed to. I thought I knew what was going on, but I was wrong.

Very fucking wrong.

I look back at the woman in my arms. Her dark hair falls down her back as she frowns up at me in confusion.

I lean down so close, our noses brush. "I need you to trust me and follow my lead."

A crinkle forms between her beautiful dark eyes. "Why?"

If I had an entire week to explain, I still wouldn't tell her shit. Instead, I go with my gut, because I need to get us both out of here in one piece instead of dragged upstairs and end the night tied up and who knows what else.

Brax and Micah would have to break out the raid gear to extract us.

I would never hear the end of it.

I never planned to come face to face with Dex Carter tonight. So I do the only thing I can do to protect her and buy myself more time.

I let go of her slim body and claim her face. My rough, scarred hands on her fair complexion looks like sin. If I could kick my own ass for dragging her into this right now, I would. I have a

feeling everything that led me to this moment with Marigold Carter is wrong.

She was my golden ticket to get to the prize, and I took it like the selfish S.O.B. that I am.

That prize is stalking straight for us, and there's no way I will hang my golden ticket out to dry.

I pull her mouth to mine and swallow her gasp like a starved man.

Goldie lifts to her toes and wraps her hands around my wrists.

But not to pull away.

To hold on.

Her grasp is bleeding terror and shock. She's gripping onto me for dear life, which makes me feel like even more of an ass for what I'm doing.

But...

Fuck.

When I slide my tongue between her pink lips, nothing has felt this good in...

Hell.

I don't know when.

And my cock concurs.

Her lips part, and I forget where we are and who's heading straight for us. I tip my head to deepen the kiss.

My golden ticket tastes like mint and something I didn't know I wanted.

But what surprises me more than anything is her response.

I'm not the only active participant doing everything I can to protect her from a man I want to put away for the next quarter of a century—maybe more if I can swing it.

Goldie's tongue slides against mine. Everything about her is small, fragile, and desperate.

There's something about that...

I like it.

It's official.

I'm a sick bastard.

That is until an even sicker bastard's guttural voice breaks into my newfound utopia. "It is you."

Goldie tries to pull her lips from mine, but I hold tight and don't let her move. Her desperation digs into the skin at my wrists through her fingernails.

Wouldn't you know it, my cock likes that too.

She was not wrong. The Pink is hell.

No one riles me, especially not Dex Carter. If I weren't standing in the middle of an organized crime convention, I'd lay the man out flat for talking to her like that.

I let her lips go and hold her face until she opens her dark eyes to look up at me. "There are times I can't keep my hands off you, and this is one of them. Will I ever get enough of you, Goldie?"

Her eyes widen as her tits rise and fall with short breaths as she stutters, "Ss-seriously?"

"Seriously. But tonight? In this dress?" I drag my gaze up and down her body that feels fucking good pressed to mine. I realize I've ignored every perfect curve and plane. I have a bad habit of hyper-fixating on the end goal. It blinds me to everything else. Trippy and Lake give me shit about it. Of all the times for me to see anything, this might be the worst. But I'm here. And since I'd prefer to walk out of here on my own accord, I kiss the tip of her nose and keep up the show, which isn't as hard as it was earlier. "I can't wait to get you home."

Her expression is about to give us away when Dex takes a step closer and has the nerve to grab her bicep. "What the fuck are you doing here, Goldie? You wanted out so fucking bad, I let you go under the terms that you'd never return and leave me the fuck alone forever. I have your signature on the paperwork to prove it. You have some nerve."

I turn fully to address the man I'd like to hit in the head with the butt of my gun. Instead, I hold onto Goldie and do my best to get us out of this shit show without a bullet through our heads before they dump us in the Atlantic. "No disrespect, Carter. This might be your party and your establishment, but don't talk to my fiancée like that."

Goldie tenses at my side, but I don't dare look away from Dex. His intense stare shifts between me and Goldie before landing back on me with disgust. "Fiancée?"

"Yep," I answer for the woman who's turned silent in my arms. "There are moments like this one that I can't believe she said yes. But I'm the idiot who couldn't figure out her ring size, so it's back at the jeweler."

I look back into the eyes of the man I almost put in prison three years ago. Even with the CIA at my back, he managed to slip through my fingers. Part of it is because he's a good fucking criminal.

The rest was luck.

Or bad luck on my part.

"I still can't believe she said yes," I add again for good measure, just in case Goldie decides to dispute my story. Her choice is me or Dex at the moment, and other than breaking into The Pink, she doesn't seem stupid. Betting on me is her only decent choice.

"Who are you?" Dex demands, shifting his glare between me and Goldie.

I offer him my right hand while keeping Goldie's front glued to my side, not that she's going anywhere. She's holding onto me like her life depends on it, which isn't far from the truth. She needs to get with the fucking program quickly so we can get the hell out of here. "Daniel Armstrong. Good to meet you."

Dex doesn't take my hand. Instead, he unbuttons his suit jacket and casually draws it back on one side, showcasing the weapon holstered on his hip. Three men who are younger and bulkier move in behind him for back up.

The show he's putting on is lame, and I'm not even carrying.

It just goes to show anyone with a shit ton of money can pretend they're sovereign.

Well, buddy, I've made my way into your lair, and I'm not going anywhere.

"Never heard of you," Dex states as he stares at Goldie. "I didn't know you hooked up with anyone, let alone anyone who would be here."

"Baby, you didn't tell him about us?" I croon and press my lips to Goldie's forehead before turning my attention back to Dex. "What can I say? I'm a lucky bastard."

"I wouldn't bet on that," Dex bites. "You didn't answer my question. Who are you, and how did you make your way in here?"

"Cory Shaw," I answer confidently. The moment I drop that name, Goldie tenses by my side. "He and I have crossed paths in the past. He insisted I attend your little get together tonight as his guest."

"Shaw," Dex echoes and turns to the henchman flanking his left. "Did we ever locate Shaw?"

The meathead shrugs a thick shoulder in his ill-fitting suit. "Haven't seen or heard from him in at least a week. Been calling ... even stopped by his place. He's nowhere to be found."

Dex turns back to me. "How do you know Shaw?"

"The same way everyone knows Shaw," I toss back. "I'm here, aren't I? Are you really the kind of man who's going to make me spell it out?"

"Only since you're with her. Goldie and I cut ties—and when I cut ties with someone, it's for life." He pauses before pinning the woman at my side with a glare that can only be compared to a violent death. "Isn't that right, little sister?"

I feel every breath Goldie takes. They're shallow and quick and edgy as fuck. So when she speaks, I'm shocked there's a backbone in her tone that I haven't experienced yet.

“Half,” she states with resolution as she stares back at her older brother. “Not the good half.”

“If you think you can waltz your skinny ass back in here and try to undo our agreement, you forgot exactly what that other half represents. And tying yourself to this no-name asshole who thinks he has some connection to the Carter family through a low-level soldier we can’t even locate is low even for you, *Marigold*.” The way Dex emphasizes her full name with disgust makes me want to implement cruel and unusual tactics we reserved for the worst enemies back in my Ranger days.

Goldie’s thin frame turns to stone at my side. It feels like she’s about to say something. I doubt that something will do much to defuse the situation.

She needs to shut up, so I take a chance, because the need to defuse the situation is my first priority. I slide my hand to her ass and give her a firm squeeze. “That’s no way to talk to your sister, half or not. I was invited here by Cory and want to work with you. How about we put our differences aside in the name of business?”

Dex’s gaze shifts from my hand on his sister’s ass back to my face. “What is your business?”

Goldie’s grip on my arm tightens, silently asking the same question.

“Cory and I met a few years back. We crossed paths in Panama when we were both there on business. When I moved back to the States earlier this year, I knew he was in Miami and looked him up. Our businesses still complement one another. He invited me to this,” I wave my hand around at the ridiculous place, “little party. I assumed if I were a guest, I’d be treated like one.”

“My invited guests are always treated with respect,” Dex says as his eyes wander to his sister. “It’s the uninvited ones that will be dealt with in a much different fashion.”

I allow my hand to wander up Goldie’s back and finger the ends of her thick brunette waves. “Everyone here has a plus

one. If you're not going to afford the same to me, I'll take my business where it's appreciated."

Dex crosses his arms. "Since Cory is nowhere to be found to make proper introductions, maybe you can explain what business you're in."

I shake my head. "Not if I'm going to be treated like this."

"Daniel." Goldie clears her voice and places a hand over my chest. "This isn't worth it. Can we please leave?"

"Wait a second," Dex stops us. "Now I'm curious about the man you tied yourself to when you wanted nothing to do with your own family. No one is going anywhere until I've learned more about your husband-to-be. He will, in fact, be my brother-in-law."

Fuck. This just gets better and better.

Dex Carter, my fake brother-in-law.

My cell goes crazy in my pocket. Cruz and Emmett need to cool their shit.

"Told you I crossed paths with Shaw. Does that not tell you enough?"

Dex shakes his head and throws a glance at one of the guards. "Leave us, but don't go far."

Like puppets being played on strings, the three men who ooze steroids make themselves scarce. It's just my new fake fiancée, her half-brother, and me—the DEA agent who's feeling more and more comfortable with Goldie pressed to my side with her ass in my hand.

"Your guards don't know what you do for a living?" I ask.

Dex lifts his brows. "I don't need my staff talking behind my back. What business do you have in common with Shaw?"

None of this is going the way it was supposed to. I was supposed to get in here long enough to make my way around and collect as many cell numbers as I can. The newest technology is small and portable. I didn't intend to talk

business with my number one target, but the closer I am to him the better.

I'm a human cell tower.

I can hear the bells now. Brax and Micah are down the road cashing in on cell numbers like they hit the jackpot in Vegas.

My wire will be live by Monday at noon if the judge is available.

“My equities company is international. Besides working in Miami, my headquarters are in Panama where I invest in private businesses throughout Central America. I don't like anyone in my business, which means Wall Street is not my jam. I'm not risk averse, and if I had to guess, I pulled in ten times the amount of cash Shaw did for you last year. Not sure what more I need to say other than that.”

He started metaphorically drooling at the mention of *ten times*. All of a sudden Dex doesn't give a shit that his sister is back on his turf, which she has as much right to as he does.

He tips his head. “You want to work for me?”

Goldie starts to shift away, so my hold on her tightens. “Fuck no. I don't need you, but I am ready to move into South America. I want to invest in your interests in Colombia.”

His brows rise in disbelief. “You have the nerve to waltz into my domain and want part of my territory. Read the room, Armstrong. Do I look like I'm in need of venture capital?”

“Capital?” I shake my head. “No. But you do need a funnel. And that's where I come in.”

Dex hikes a brow, and his curiosity gets the best of him. If I have my way, his words will be used against him in court. “You want to clean my money.”

I tip my head. “I'm good at what I do.”

“Daniel—” Goldie bites.

But I interrupt her by bringing my other hand up to frame the side of her face and stare into her dark eyes. I brush my thumb

over her lips to shut her up. “Hang tight, baby. Two minutes, and we’ll be out of here.”

Her eyes flare.

Blood rushes to my dick.

“Let’s arrange a meeting. I don’t talk business where people are watching and listening,” Dex says.

I’m surprised this guy fits through doors as big as his head is. “I’d like that.”

“And bring your fiancée,” Dex adds, turning his dark glare back to Goldie. “Maybe this is a sign we can mend fences.”

I can’t stop her from talking this time. “I’m never going to mend anything when it comes to you.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I interrupt and reach into my pocket to pull out the fake business card Tim had made for the occasion. “Call me. I’ll see if I can fit you in next week.”

“No one fits me in. If you want to do business with me, your schedule will be open.”

I let Goldie go but claim her hand tight in mine. We need to get the hell out of here. I have a feeling the woman has had enough. I pull out my cell and read my most recent text.

Brax – We’ve harvested enough numbers to keep us busy for the next two years. Get the hell out.

I lift my phone before sliding it back into my pocket. “If you’ll excuse us, I need to return a call.”

“Stay,” Dex insists. “I’m sure Goldie would be happy to show you around her old stomping grounds. Isn’t that right, sis?”

“Don’t *sis* me,” Goldie hisses and tries to pull her hand from mine.

“Sorry,” I offer. “Your family drama is a lot, but I’ll see what I can do to encourage her to come around.”

Goldie yanks on my hand. “I’ll never step foot into this place again for as long as I live.”

This has turned into a shit show.

“Some things do change. I want to know what’s so special about you that Goldie set aside her morals. Maybe it’s money ... maybe you have a magic cock,” Dex drawls.

Goldie gasps.

“You said it, not me. I look forward to your call.” I can’t help but smile and turn to the red-faced woman at my side. “Let’s go.”

I don’t have to ask her twice. Goldie leads the way—her tight ass encased in her tight dress—and marches toward the front door. Anger bleeds from her with every click of her heels on the aged marble beneath us.

She tries to yank out of my hold once again when we get to the atrium. “Who are you, and what was that about?”

I lean in and press my lips to the side of her head and whisper there, “Shut your mouth until we clear this place. You know better than me, but I’m sure every inch of it is surveilled.”

Her gaze jumps to me as her lips press into a firm, angry line.

“Give me your keys,” I demand. “We’ll take your car, and I’ll drive you home.”

“You’re not taking me anywhere,” she hisses, ignoring my warning to shut up.

I push the enormous front door open for her. The heat of the summer evening assaults us, but I don’t dare let her go and instead pull her closer to my side. “Do not make a scene. There are cameras everywhere. I did everything I could to get your brother to focus on me and not you. Don’t mess it up by throwing a fit in the parking lot.”

Her wide eyes focus on me, but she keeps her mouth shut.

“I’m the last person on earth who’ll take you to a second location, traffic you, or kill you. Let me get you home, and I’ll explain on the way.”

“There’s no reason for me to trust you. Are you even planning a wedding? I should have known. Trippy is a ridiculous

name.”

“Trust me, Trippy is real,” I mutter. “Give me your keys.”

“You’re not taking me anywhere. I never want to see you again, and I’ll never, ever walk into The Pink or see my brother again either. Goodbye, Daniel Armstrong. Good luck working with Dex. I hope you live to see another day.”

“You don’t know me, Goldie. I’m not the one who should be worried about living through anything. I knew you had ties to The Pink, but I had no fucking clue I’d be bringing this kind of attention to you.”

She stops in the middle of the parking lot lined with luxury vehicles. “You knew I had ties to The Pink? How?”

I move in front of her and lean in so we’re inches apart. “If you’ll let me take you home, I’ll explain. If you trust anyone in this situation, it needs to be me.”

“I don’t trust anyone,” she spits. “I’m done. Let me go and get the hell away from me.”

I step back and drag a hand through my hair when something grabs my attention. I turn to glance back toward the front of the estate and see two of the men who are used as Carter’s muscle stalking straight for us.

When I turn back to Goldie, her expression falls as she sees the same thing I do.

I give her the two options I’m sure she won’t be happy about. “It’s them or me.”

She looks up at me in sheer terror.

“I saved your ass in there from sneaking in. I have a feeling you know what they’re capable of. I would not suggest going it on your own. Act like you’re with me, and I’ll keep you safe. Make the right choice, Goldie.”

It doesn’t take long. She opens her small purse and pulls out her keys. “I don’t choose them or you. I’m packing up and moving back to Virginia.”

I glance back at the men headed straight for us.

Shit.

“Goldie, you don’t know what you’re doing.”

“No, you don’t know what you’re doing. Don’t ever touch me again. I did everything I could to get away from Dex. You dragged me back in and confirmed you’re one of them.”

She turns and disappears between two cars. I don’t move as I watch her run two rows over on her heels, her dark wavy hair flowing behind her.

“Trouble in paradise?”

I turn to the men who call themselves security. “Just watching my fiancée make it safely to her car since we had to meet here. I’m protective like that.”

The other lifts his chin. “I bet.”

“Tell Dex I look forward to his call.”

I yank my phone from my pocket, hit go, and move the opposite way through the parking lot.

Brax answers before it has time to ring twice and doesn’t bother greeting me. “Congratulations on your engagement.”

“Kiss my ass.”

“You really suck at undercover work,” Brax adds.

“I acted on the fly and have what I need. That’s all that matters,” I mutter.

“And in the process you hung Ms. Carter out to dry. Nicely done, your highness,” Micah pipes in. “But you probably don’t give a shit.”

I unlock my car and climb in. “Start sorting those phone numbers. I’ll be back at the office eventually.”

I can’t listen to their shit another moment. I hang up and toss the cell to the passenger seat.

I have Dex’s phone number and everyone else he works with. We might have a mountain of numbers to sort through, but we have them.

And Dex Carter stated that he wants me to clean his money on the record. That's enough for warrants and wires and whatever else I need to do to gather more evidence.

But Brax and Micah are right. I might've done what I could to cover for her, but there's no way she'll take my call again. And her brother is going to call me to talk business and is expecting to see his sister.

My *fiancée*.

A woman I kissed and didn't hate it.

I hit the steering wheel as I put it in drive. "Fuck!"

CUTE LITTLE PINK CAN OF PEPPER SPRAY

Goldie

“No, Mom, I’m sure. I’m done with Miami. I’ll call you when I’m on the road.”

“You know I want you home, darlin’. But are you sure? This isn’t like you. Did something happen?”

“Nothing happened,” I lie, holding my cell to my ear with my shoulder as I throw clothes into garbage bags. After what happened last night, I can’t wait, and I can’t afford a moving company. I’ll take what will fit into my old Honda Civic and leave the rest. “It’s time. I thought Miami was the perfect fresh start, but I was wrong. I don’t belong here.”

“You’re worrying me. Your lease isn’t up for months. This isn’t like you to turn your back on your commitments. I raised you better than that. And you had that wedding coming up that you were so hopeful about. That man who wants to marry off his dying aunt, right? I have a good feeling about that one.”

I sit on the edge of my bed and fall to my back.

I’ve been careful what I’ve told Mom. About work, about Dex, and about The Pink. I told her I wanted to spread my wings and didn’t want to work with the brother I had no idea I had. I also lied and told her The Pink wasn’t all it’s cracked up to be.

She was sad for me.

I was, too, but for different reasons. Nothing went as planned when I moved here.

Not one thing.

The fresh start I wanted was mine.

It still should be mine, but I was forced out.

I've tried to salvage what I could of a horrible situation, but here I am. Eventually I'll fess up to Mom about what really happened. There are so many reasons I've kept her in the dark.

I love my mother, but she gives new meaning to *mama drama*. When she finds out what Dex did to me, she'll lose it. I'm grateful she's scared to fly.

Going home makes me feel like a failure.

A big, fat lump of a failure the size of the universe.

I'll tell her eventually, because I tell her everything.

But today is not the day.

"I'm fine. I miss you and am ready to come home. It was a fun year." I wince at my own words and squeeze my eyes shut. Despite the beach and sun and warm weather, it's been the least fun year of my life. "You know, like a vacation. But I miss the country and four seasons and the snow."

So many lies.

I hate snow. It's one of the reasons moving to Florida was such an easy decision.

"Don't drive tonight. Sleep on it. If you feel the same in the morning, get in your car and drive home."

"I'm not going to change my mind. I'll stop at a hotel on the way. But if I leave today, I'll be home tomorrow."

"I miss you something fierce. As much as I want to wrap my arms around you, I feel bad you're giving up on your dreams." Mom sighs. "You're hard headed."

I look around the room at the mess surrounding me and exhaustion settles in. "I get it from you."

"It's our best quality."

Rap, rap, rap!

I tense as the noise filters through my apartment.

“Promise you’ll be careful. Let me know where you are along the way. And don’t drive too late after dark or if you get tired.”

I lower my voice as I tiptoe out of my bedroom. “I promise.”

“Why are you whispering?” she demands.

I closed the blinds when I got home last night, not that it helped me sleep. The possibility of Dex sending one of his thugs to check on me is a reality that kept me awake way too long. There’s no way he bought the whole engagement story that Daniel Armstrong was trying to sell. I don’t care how good that kiss was.

And it was off the charts good.

So good, I was convinced it was real and was lost in the moment.

Until it was over.

“I’ve got to go,” I whisper. “I’ll call you before I leave.”

Rap, rap, rap!

“Wait!” she shrieks so loud, I’m afraid whoever is on the other side of the door can hear.

“Love you,” I hiss. “Call you soon.”

I hang up before she has the chance to scream at me again.

Bang, bang. “Marigold Carter? DEA. We need to speak to you.”

I freeze.

The DEA?

A different voice penetrates through the door. “We know you’re in there. We saw you moving things to your car.”

Moments pass.

My heart pounds in my chest and echoes in my ears.

I don’t move a muscle even though they know I’m here. What in the world does the DEA want with me?

As if to answer the questions swirling around my head, the first voice answers what I'm desperate to know and afraid of at the same time. "We need to speak to you about your connection to The Pink."

There it is.

Of course.

I broke ties with The Pink for good only to be lured back through desperation by a prospective client who turned out to be no better than Dex. And it doesn't matter if that client used a kiss to shield me from my brother.

I'm done.

Done with The Pink.

Done with my brother.

And done with Miami.

Living in the country with Mom might not allow me to plan elaborate weddings every week, but it sure doesn't invite the DEA to bang on my door either.

"We don't want to force a conversation, Ms. Carter, but we will if we have to."

It's not lost on me that *Ms. Carter* sounds like an old spinster preschool teacher, which is probably my fate when I move back to Virginia. That's fine. I mean, kids aren't horrible ... for the most part, even if they are little germ spreaders.

I just like weddings more.

But when anyone speaks about Dex, the last name Carter is ominous and intimidating. I never hated my name until I moved here.

There's one more rap—stronger and louder this time. I can't hide in here forever. I flip the lock and turn the handle but leave the old-school chain in place.

I'm greeted by a tall, dark, muscular man in sunglasses. His hair is perfectly trimmed, his jaw is square, and he makes his basic polo look couture the way it stretches and hugs his chest and arms.

The man could be an advertisement for all that is Miami.

“Special Agent Braxton Cruz with the DEA.” He flashes a badge and ID before motioning to the second voice I can’t see through the crack. “This is my lesser half, Micah Emmett. He’s less special than me, but still an agent.”

I hear a single huffed laugh.

I don’t understand the joke and swallow over the lump in my throat. Nothing is funny at the moment. “What do you want?”

“We’d like to ask you some questions about The Pink,” he repeats.

“I don’t know anything about it. I’ve never even been there.” I’m spitting lies out left and right. It’s so unlike me, but desperation makes people do crazy things. I’m not sure when I became a liar, but I think it was sometime between eating ramen noodles on the regular and my life spinning out of control.

His full lips pull into a lazy smirk. “Given the fact you were there last night, I have to disagree with that.”

Shoot.

Not only am I a horrible liar, but I’m lying to the DEA. That’s got to be breaking some type of law.

A *federal* law, which has to be worse than speeding or parking in front of a fire hydrant, which is horrible since it puts people’s lives in danger.

I bite my lip, but don’t confirm where I was last night. If I keep my mouth shut, he can’t catch me in another lie.

“We’d like you to come down to the office to discuss what you know about Dex Carter and The Pink.”

My empty stomach churns, and not because I haven’t bothered to put anything in it today. “Do I have to?”

The agent tips his head. “No, you don’t have to.”

I exhale. “Good. Then I don’t want to.”

“But,” he amends and flips off his shades. His expression is serious. So serious, his dark eyes might as well be flesh-burning laser beams zinging me through the cracked door. “We could arrest you, bring you in, and then question you. But there’s no reason for anyone to go through all that if you’re willing to cooperate.”

“Arrest me?” I croak.

He shrugs. “We don’t want it to come to that. That would mean getting a warrant, processing you in the system ... it’s a lot for all of us. I doubt you want that, either, when we could have a simple conversation and move on.”

“Move on,” I echo, and glance back at the mess I’m trying to fit in my small car. “Yes, I’d like to move on.”

“Great.”

“Um, when? I’m sort of busy. I’m moving,” I explain.

His brows shoot up in unison. “Where are you moving to?”

Finally questions I can answer truthfully. “Virginia. It’s home.”

“Interesting.” He glances back to the ghost of a partner I can’t see before turning back. “Then we need to get this done. The sooner the better.”

“I ... um...”

“We’ll be efficient with your time. You’ll be back to packing before you know it.”

“Okay. Let me get my purse.” I slam the door and hurry back to my bedroom.

This is the last straw. I have no one to protect but myself. I’ll tell them what they want to know and get the heck out of there. The sooner Miami is in my rearview mirror, the better.

I slip on a pair of flip flops and grab my purse. After I pause to pull in a calming breath, I open the door all the way.

Agent Cruz is still standing there, and this time I see the owner of the second voice. He’s taller, wider, and tattoos decorate both thick arms, disappearing into his short-sleeve T-shirt. His

hair is dark blond and shaggy. He looks like he could take down mountains if he so desired.

I decide if they want my time, it'll be on my terms. "This needs to be fast. I'm leaving today and need to make it to Georgia before I stop for the night."

"I'm afraid you might need to be flexible, ma'am," Agent Emmett says. "We have a lot to talk about. Let's go."

Why does my life suck so bad?



King

I CROSS my arms and glare at Cruz and Emmett. "You think I should do what?"

"Look at her," Emmett says. "She's nervous as hell. We're going to go in there and ask her all the questions we already know the answers to, but we can't tell her we know, otherwise she might blab to her brother that the feds are onto him. Something has her running scared. She was about to skip town."

I glance through the one-way mirror and watch her fidget in her chair. Her foot bounces a million miles an hour and eyes shift around the bland room from time to time while she shakes her head. It's like she's reprimanding herself for taking my call in the first place.

Or Daniel Armstrong's call.

"Just figure out what she knows about her brother, and I'll take it from there," I say. "There was no love lost between her and Dex. Something gave her cold feet. She's a ticking time bomb. Who knows what she'll do next."

"We know what she's going to do next," Brax counters. "She's skipping town and moving back to Virginia. We watched her make three trips to and from her car throwing shit in it left and right. And she's not packing the way a woman normally packs."

I've moved with Landyn twice already. I know this. Goldie Carter is running from something."

"You're screwed and so is your case," Micah states. "Good luck carrying on with your shitty undercover act without her on your arm. Dex Carter has a finger on the pulse of Miami. If he wants to know where she is, he'll know."

I look back at Goldie. "Shit."

"No, your choices are shit," Brax corrects me. "Your bullshit will be exposed, and you know it."

I look at Brax. "I might not be Rico Suave like you, but no one is exposing me."

Brax narrows his eyes. "*Rico Suave*? What the fuck? You're so old."

"Let's get this done." Micah claps his hands once, and the sound bounces around the empty room. "Grandpa over here needs to eat dinner by four."

They're less than ten years younger than me, but they've made a game of giving me shit about my age. I point back and forth between the two assholes in front of me. "Get in there and find out what you can. Figure out why she's leaving. If I have to intervene, I will. The last thing I want to do is ask her to help me. She told me she's a rule follower, and she's more nervous than a whore in church. She'll be more of a liability than an asset."

"She doesn't fit the mold, that's for sure," Brax says.

Micah's grin stretches across his mug as he makes another jab at me. "She seemed to fit King's mold last night at The Pink."

I frown. "You guys are worse than Trippy and her friends at happy hour. Get in there and interrogate her, but go easy. She was freaked out last night and wouldn't let me take her home."

"That didn't stop you from following her." Brax slaps me on the shoulder before he heads for the door. "I knew you were a creeper like the rest of us."

They're gone before I have the chance to refute. I never work undercover, so I fucking never have to worry about putting

someone in a shitty position like I did to Goldie.

Guilt and I don't play. Everything I do is deliberate, so there's no reason for me to ever experience that emotion.

But guilt plagued me last night.

And when she refused my help to get her home safely, that beast might as well have eaten me from the inside out.

I sat outside her apartment longer than I care to admit. Not that I would admit that shit to anyone. Lake thought I was working, while Brax and Micah weeded out Dex's cell number.

I turn to focus on the woman who's about to skip town and turn up the volume. Brax and Micah enter the room and sit at the table. Their backs are to me, so I have a front row seat to the Marigold show.

"How long is this going to take?" Goldie asks. "I'm behind schedule as it is and was going to get on the road today."

"Sorry about the delay," Brax says. "We were gathering some paperwork."

"We understand it's Sunday, so let's get to it," Micah starts. "Tell us about your relationship with Dex Carter."

Goldie's answer comes quickly. "I don't have a relationship with Dex."

"But he's your brother," Brax adds.

She shakes her head. "Half. And I've never had any relationship with him until I moved to Miami last year. We have nothing in common."

"You're a Carter, so you must have plenty in common," Micah notes.

Damn. Micah has no finesse.

Brax leans forward and rests his elbows on the table. "Then why did you move to Miami?"

"I had an opportunity," Goldie states, but leaves it at that.

Brax and Micah glance at one another.

"And what would that be?" Brax pushes.

When Goldie's voice shakes, my gut tightens. "Why do you care? You told me you had questions about The Pink, yet all you've done is ask about Dex and me. I haven't done anything wrong."

"Shit," I mutter.

The guys don't back down. This time it's Micah's turn. "Your father owned The Pink since the eighties. You moved to Miami shortly after his death and started working there. The timing is ... noteworthy."

Her lips—ones I know how they feel intimately and taste on my tongue—press into a thin line on her beautiful, anxiety ridden face. She doesn't confirm her employment or anything else for that matter.

Brax goes on. "Recent evidence suggests money is being laundered through The Pink."

Goldie's face turns ashen, and her deep brown eyes glass over.

I can't tear my gaze away from her face, even as Brax flips open a file and begins leafing through papers. Goldie swallows as a stray tear falls from her dark lashes and lands on her cheek. She doesn't move to swipe it away.

And now I really want to know what's going through her head, because the look on her face isn't shock.

It's guilt.

"Why did you quit The Pink?" Brax demands.

She shakes her head slowly.

Micah lowers his voice. "Goldie, it would be advantageous for you to trust us."

"I can't trust anyone," she whispers. "No one."

Damn. That's a jab straight through my heart after what I did to her last night.

Brax sighs. "Let's switch back to today. Why are you running away?"

That did it. She swipes her face, and there's a backbone to her tone. She's pissed. "I'm not running. I'm moving home. I'm being forced to move home. I can't land a contract. When I think I might have prospective business in the pipeline, they either cancel on me or try to take advantage of me."

Yep.

That shot is straight at me.

Brax glances at Micah, but Micah—the asshole—turns to look at me through the mirror.

Goldie doesn't miss it.

Damn him.

"That's it." Goldie's chair scratches against the floor as she stands. "I don't have to tell you anything. Even if you arrest me, I can do the whole *I refuse to speak* thing—it's my right. And if you go so far as to arrest me, good luck keeping me locked up. I haven't done anything wrong. Not one thing."

"Sit down and talk, Goldie," Micah demands.

She grabs her purse and shrugs it up her shoulder. "I shouldn't have wasted my time. I'm done."

The men don't stand, but Brax does make a move. He flips a paper out of the file and slides it across the table. "These are copies of bank accounts. Hundreds of thousands of dollars move in and out of them every week."

She huffs a frustrated laugh that isn't at all humorous. "Well, I can promise they're not mine. I have no money. You're barking up the wrong tree."

Brax leans forward and points to the top of the bank statements that put Marigold Carter on our radar in the first place. "That's interesting since your name is the only one on the accounts—six of them, to be exact."

Her purse falls from her shoulder when she reaches down to snag the paper off the table. "You have to be mistaken."

"These accounts are connected to The Pink and were opened the day you started working there."

“There’s no way,” she whispers and her ass returns to the chair. “Where did you find this?”

“We prefer to do things the *legal* way,” Micah quips and reverts back to his first language—sarcasm. “You know, a *warrant*.”

Brax continues to be no nonsense and presents her with the rest of the file. “Your signatures are on all the accounts.”

She picks up the papers and studies them. Moments pass, and the guys give her time to process the evidence in front of her. She flips through the papers, quicker as she gets to the bottom, like she’s trying to figure out what’s happening, but reality isn’t sinking in.

“These aren’t mine. I haven’t been at The Pink for months,” she whispers. “I left. I had to beg Dex to let me leave. I gave up everything, but I left. Whatever this is—” she drops the papers to the table. Her glassy, beseeching eyes shift between Brax and Micah. “It’s not me. I have nothing to do with these accounts—not now and not when I was at The Pink.”

“That’s why you’re here. We want to figure out what’s going on,” Brax says.

She sits back in her chair. “I left The Pink because I didn’t want to work with my brother. I wanted nothing to do with what was going on there. I don’t know how any of this is happening.”

“You worked there as a wedding planner?” Brax asks.

She shrugs. “Event coordinator was my day-to-day role, but I guess you can say wedding planner since that’s most of their events. Other than the ones Dex throws for himself.”

Like the one last night that she had to sneak us into.

“And Dex invited you to Miami to work at The Pink?” Micah asks.

“Hardly. Dex wanted nothing to do with me, and he really didn’t want me to have anything to do with The Pink.”

Brax sits back and cocks his head to the side. “Then how did you make your way in?”

“If you think you have something on me, you would’ve come to my house with an arrest warrant this morning. I’m not an idiot. Don’t sit here and act like you’re doing me a favor.” She stands and moves for the door.

Shit, she’s leaving.

Brax and Micah stand, and Micah tries to convince her to stay. “We didn’t ask you to come here to trick you. We want to know how you’re connected to The Pink.”

If she were any normal human, she’d probably flip him off. But from everything I’ve gathered about Marigold Carter, she’d never do that. “Anything you want to figure out about The Pink, you can do it without me. I left for a reason. I’m done being taken advantage of by men who want nothing more than to use me—in more ways than one.”

Brax glances back at me with a glare.

I fucked up.

I thought using Goldie Carter as a stepping stone would be no big deal.

My plan was to use her to get me in and then cut her loose.

There’s no way that can happen now. Because of me, she’s gained the attention of the Carter Cartel.

Again.

After she did everything she could to escape it, I threw her back to the wolves.

Goldie is right. The guys can’t do anything outside of arresting her to keep her here. She swings the door open, and it’s Brax’s turn to try this time. “Goldie, wait.”

But that’s the last thing I heard through the intercom.

I have no choice.

By the time I’m in the hall, all I see is her messy dark hair swaying behind her as she hurries to the elevator.

“King,” Micah calls for me as I pass him and Brax standing in the doorway.

I ignore them both.

Talking to Goldie as Special Agent King Jennings will expose my real identity. It doesn't matter what scary shit I've maneuvered throughout my two careers with the government—this is so far out of my comfort zone, the hairs stand straight up on the back of my neck.

She disappears around the corner. I quicken my steps when I hear the ding of the elevator.

When I make it around the corner, there's barely a moment for me to catch her.

I stick my arm through the closing doors just in time.

She's alone, but her head pops up the moment she realizes that's not the case anymore.

The doors part, and I step onto the elevator.

It takes her a beat.

Then, her eyes widen in horror. She immediately reaches for the doors, but she's not fast enough, and they close us in the small space. I reach over to press the emergency button and the descending elevator lurches to a stop.

“What are you doing at the DEA?” she exclaims.

I hold a hand out low. “I need to talk to you about yesterday.”

“No.” Her tone is desperate as she throws her back against the wall and starts to dig through her purse. “Get out. I don't want anything to do with you.”

“Goldie, I can explain. I promise, there's a reasonable—”

But she stops me mid-sentence, and she does it with a pink can of pepper spray pointed straight at me. “Take one step, and you'll be on your knees crying at my feet. Don't test me, Daniel. I'll do it. And this is a new can. I never let them expire.”

Shit.

Now I know I'm completely out of my comfort zone because my mind only goes to one place as she wields a miniature can

of watered-down tear gas on her keychain pointed straight at me.

My desire to kiss her again ranks right up there with throwing her shithead brother away in federal prison for the next two decades.

Maybe three if I can swing it.

It's official.

I'm whacked.

I never imagined this moment would happen, but it's true.

Goldie Carter is even more beautiful standing there pointing her cute little pink can of pepper spray at me.

DO YOU LIVE UP TO YOUR NAME?

Goldie

Daniel smiles.

The jerk actually has the nerve to smile.

Fine. It's more of a smirk. And it looks really good on him.

That makes me hate him even more.

A smile indicates happiness.

A smirk, on the other hand, means he finds me funny.

Well, there's not one thing funny about this situation, buddy.

He has the audacity to lower his voice and speak slowly, as if I'm a wild animal or toddler. "If you spray that in this enclosed space, the next five minutes is really going to suck for both of us, not just me."

Anger mixes with my anxiety to create a concoction so desperate, my thumb trembles on the trigger. "Then start the elevator, and let me off."

He shakes his head. "I need to tell you something—"

I butt in and don't allow him to finish for the second time. "No. Don't you dare tell me anything. I don't want to know anything else about you, Daniel. The more I know about people like you, the deeper my troubles get. I'm already here because of what I know about Dex. I can't afford anything else. I'm going to go home to Virginia to live in my mom's attic like every other woman experiencing a premature midlife

crisis. I'm not excited to be a spinster preschool teacher, but it is what it is. Maybe I'll do it up right and start collecting stray cats."

Daniel Armstrong does not heed my warning. He takes a small step and closes the stuffy distance between us.

I grip my pepper spray tighter and try not to think about the fact he's right about our enclosed space. But I'll do it if I have to.

"Goldie, you're not having a premature midlife crisis. You were thrown into a shit situation by your brother."

"Half-brother," I correct him. "I refuse to claim Dex any more than I have to. I'm ready to be done with him."

He nods and takes another step toward me. "I get that. I would be too."

I adjust the pepper spray toward his face. "I'm ready to be done with you too. You're no better than he is—doing business with Dex and that Cory guy."

"If you put the pepper spray down, I'll explain."

"Open the elevator doors and let me out so you don't embarrass yourself and cry like a baby in the fetal position after I light your eyeballs on fire."

He sighs as his eyes drag over me from head to toe. Finally, his gaze lands on my weapon of choice positioned a foot from his face. I'm ready to rock and roll if he makes another move. The spray might recoil, but the idea of getting revenge on Daniel Armstrong for lying to me is just too appealing.

This elevator will never be the same.

"Kills me," he mutters. "This better not backfire."

My frown deepens. "What better not backfire?"

The next thing I know he moves.

Quick.

So quick, what he does doesn't register until it's too late.

I gasp before letting out a little yell. "What the heck?"

My pepper spray is ripped from my hand and he tosses it to the corner of the elevator behind him. I don't know what's coming next and go into full on defense.

I throw myself forward with all my might.

My hands go to his wide chest to push.

He doesn't budge.

I scream.

"Stop," he clips and wraps his hands around my wrist to keep from slapping him.

I hate that he overpowers me so easily.

Panic turns to tears.

And a storm of memories overwhelm me.

I scream.

He pushes me back a foot, but he doesn't let go. He stoops far enough that his piercing blue eyes are the only things I see through my terror. "Goldie, I'm not who you think I am, and I'm not going to hurt you."

"Let go of me," I beg. His words don't sink in. The only thing I can think about is being trapped all over again.

He lets go immediately and holds his hands out for me to see that he's done. His deep and foreboding tone lowers. "I'm not going to hurt you. I swear."

I press my back to the wall. As much as I want to curl into myself and give up on life, I can't take my eyes off him. He's still between me and my pepper spray, but he's put as much room between us as the small space will allow.

This surprises me.

But not as much as what spills from his mouth. "I'll say it again. I'm not who you think I am. My name isn't Daniel Armstrong. I'm Special Agent Kingston Jennings with the DEA."

Paralysis overcomes me other than my whisper. "What?"

His blue eyes bore into me. “I’m taking a chance by telling you that. I needed into The Pink, and you were my best bet.”

“You’re not...”

He shakes his head. “I do not work with your brother or anyone else. I’m investigating him. I’m not going to hurt you, Goldie. I swear. I want to talk to you, and I could really use your help.”

I have no words.

No, actually I do.

“You let me believe you were one of them? Why would you do that?”

He doesn’t back away when I get into his space like I did when the roles were reversed. I wish I were that confident. When he does speak, it’s like I’m a toddler again and he enunciates every word. “Because you’re a Carter, and I’m DEA.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” I spit.

“It does when I have no fucking clue whose team you’re on,” he shoots right back, defending his actions that scared the daylights out of me.

My tears have dried up. I violently swipe my face, happy I’m not wearing any make up today. “My last name might be Carter, but I’m definitely not on their team.”

He pulls in a deep breath. “That’s good.”

“Yes, that’s good,” I echo. “Let me out of this dang elevator. I hate elevators.”

“Let’s go back upstairs so we can talk.”

“No way. You lied to me about who you are. I need to get out of here. If Dex finds out I was at the DEA today, who knows what he’ll do.” I shake my head. “Who am I kidding? I know exactly what he’ll do, which means I need to get out of town faster than I did before.”

“Dex isn’t going to touch you.”

I huff the least humorous laugh in history. “Oh, you’re very wrong.”

He shakes his head. “There’s no fucking way that man will touch you. I won’t allow it.”

This is too much. “You have no clue how bad he is. You can’t protect me from that. No one can.”

He pulls in a deep breath, and I jerk when he moves. It’s instinct, and I hate myself for it. He picks up my purse that fell to the floor sometime during our scuffle along with my pepper spray. He holds my purse out for me, but keeps the only weapon I’ve ever owned. “Goldie, you don’t know me. I might not be the smoothest, but I promise, the one thing I am good at is fighting bad guys. I made a career of it. If you come back upstairs and talk to me, you can be assured that Dex will never touch you. Neither will anyone who works for him. I’ll die before that happens.”

This man might have kissed me and had his hand on my bottom, but I have no idea who he really is.

But what I do know is he’s lied to me once.

It’s all too much.

I let my guard down and drop my face into my hands. When I pull in a deep breath, I’m overwhelmed by the turn of events. I lean into the wall again for support and do my best to fight off the tremble that vibrates down my spine.

“Goldie,” he calls for me. “Let’s talk.”

I rub my eyes before looking up at the man who’s a stranger to me. Even so, he feels less like one than he did five minutes ago.

He lowers his voice. “Please.”

I take my purse and dig through to the bottom until I find an old mangled tissue to blow my nose. “I haven’t eaten today, and I’m exhausted. I didn’t sleep last night.”

“I can fix that.”

I can't take my eyes off the man taking up way too much of my space. "What's your name, again?"

"Kingston Jennings," he says. "You can call me King. Everyone does."

"That's some name," I note.

The corner of his lips twitch. "And Marigold isn't?"

I shrug. "My mother is a hippy from the south. No one is more flowery than her."

"My mother moved around so much she was from nowhere and gave me a ridiculous name I had to live up to."

"Do you?" I press. "Live up to your name?"

"I have so far and don't plan on failing now. No one fucks with me. I lied to you to get into The Pink, but I can make that up to you. If you trust me, I'll make sure no one fucks with you from here on out."

I take him in. He seems even bigger in the elevator.

He crosses his arms over his wide chest, and I realize how different he looks today. No expensive suit. He's wearing a faded pair of jeans that look soft from being washed a million times. His gray T-shirt is faded, and his hair isn't styled. A pair of work boots make him even taller and more menacing than I've seen him.

And, finally, more proof he is who he says he is.

A badge is clipped to the waist of his jeans and a gun is holstered at his hip.

Not that he'd be wandering around the DEA offices if he weren't an agent. That should've been my first clue had I not been so shocked to see him.

I ask what I want to know more than anything. "What do you want from me?"

"I'm not going to lie, Goldie. I want a lot. No one else can give me what you can. If you give me thirty minutes, I'll lay it out for you."

“Why would I do that? What will I get in return?”

His answer is immediate. “Freedom.”

I stare up at him. “That’s a tall order, Agent Jennings. Don’t promise things you can’t deliver.”

He shakes his head. “I’ll protect you and make sure you’re free from the filth of Carter for good.”

“This is insane.”

“This is very fucking real. If you trust me, you won’t ever have to run from anyone again. No more premature midlife crisis, and you won’t have to collect cats.”

I mull that over as a familiar voice from earlier cuts through our space. “Ah ... how’s it going in there?”

King reaches to the side and presses a button. “I haven’t been pepper sprayed.”

My teeth find my bottom lip as I think about the spectacle I put on while he stood there with a gun holstered to his hip.

“Yet,” King belatedly adds.

The voice chuckles, and I realize it’s the tattooed dirty blond who interrogated me before my visit to the DEA went completely south. “Sounds like my kind of party.”

King presses the intercom button once more. “We’ll be up in a minute.”

The voice crackles one last time. “I can’t wait.”

King pushes two more buttons, and we move, but this time we’re going up when all I wanted to do was run away from this place just minutes ago.

When a tone sounds, King holds an arm out to hold the doors open for me.

I don’t move, but I do lay out my own conditions even if they are lame. “If I do this, I’m going to need a snack and a cup of coffee.”

King Jennings levels the most serious look on me I’ve seen so far. “Goldie, if you do what I want you to do, I’ll feed you and

serve you coffee for eternity.”

I move from the elevator and sense him fall into pace close behind me. “Lucky for you I’m used to people not keeping their promises.”

“That sounds like a challenge, Ms. Carter. If there’s one thing I like, it’s a challenge.”

A funny feeling settles low in my stomach, but it doesn’t feel like hunger.

I push it away.

I can’t count on anyone.

Especially a strange DEA agent who lied to me about his identity and tricked me into getting him into the one place I swore I’d never return to.

PRETEND

King

“I didn’t have to make my way into anything,” Goldie admits. “Half of The Pink is mine.”

There it is.

She finally comes clean.

Wrappers litter the table between us, and she’s on her second cup of coffee. I raided the vending machine for her—and she wasn’t shy. I kept feeding it money, and she kept jabbing at buttons. She’s eaten a protein bar, a bag of chips, and she’s making her way through trail mix as she pushes raisins to the side.

As if I needed another reason to like the woman sitting across from me. Raisins are disgusting.

“Explain that,” I demand. We thought that was the case, but her father’s trust papers are sealed. “How is The Pink half yours?”

She finishes chewing and swallows. “You said it yourself—my father owned it since the eighties. Everything he had was tied to The Pink. He lived there. He did business there. He was a jerk to my mom and I had nothing to do with him growing up. I had no clue I had a half-brother, especially one who’s a cartel leader.”

Goldie and I are alone in the interrogation room. When we stalked back where we came from, Brax and Micah eyed us

like we were a rare exhibit at the zoo. Goldie's face was tear stained, and her eyes were bloodshot.

I was just happy I wasn't flushing pepper spray from my sinuses.

That shit is no joke, even if it's not as bad as tear gas. I would know, I've experienced that too.

I tossed the pink can of tears to Micah and took her straight to the break room where I made it my mission to caffeinate her and make all her junk food dreams come true.

Despite it being a Sunday, I have no desire to hurry this along. For one, the later it gets, the less likely it is she'll skip town today. Two, I've learned more about Dex Carter in between her ripping open wrappers than I have in the last year.

And three...

I have no desire to send her on her way now that she knows who I really am.

There's also the fact I like looking at her.

And being near her.

I lean back in my chair and watch her pop a peanut into her mouth. "You've told me a lot, which I appreciate. But The Pink is worth a shit ton of money. The land, the historic estate, not to mention the prime oceanfront that spans acres. That's not even touching the potential business revenue. In essence, you became a multi-millionaire the moment your father died. Why were you busting your balls trying to get my business planning a wedding?"

She pushes what's left of her trail mix to the middle of the table and downs the rest of her coffee. Food and caffeine have done wonders for her. She doesn't look like she's on the brink of imploding at any moment.

"Just like I told your friends, King, I'm not a millionaire—let alone a multi one. And I didn't move to Miami for the money. I came because having the chance to be a part of a place like The Pink would make all my dreams come true. When I was a little girl, I day-dreamed of happily ever afters and ice

sculptures and grand ballroom dances. Those might've been day dreams, but I've worked hard to build Amāre. I'm good at what I do—down to the tiniest detail that makes events special. I'm an event planner, but moving to Miami gave me the chance to focus on weddings.”

“Yet you walked away from all of it.”

“For my safety and sanity, yes.”

I lean forward and rest my forearms on the table. “You felt unsafe in a place that's half yours?”

She leans back and folds her arms across her chest.

A defensive move.

Or one of self-preservation.

But that's not surprising given how she reacted last night when her brother confronted us.

“Oh, I didn't just feel unsafe. I know I was unsafe. And it had everything to do with Dex.”

Marigold Carter might stand five-and-a-half feet tall. She's dressed in a baggy T-shirt, shorts, and flip flops. She doesn't flaunt her body, but I know for a fact her curves are in all the right places from when I had her in my arms last night.

And from what little I know of Goldie, I have a feeling she's as pure and as solid as her name.

I also work to put the scum of the earth in prison—scum like her brother. And people like that will take advantage of women like Goldie every chance they get when millions of dollars aren't at play.

But when they are?

They'll fucking eat her up like a delectable snack served with the finest champagne.

Not that I would know. Champagne tastes like piss. I hate the stuff.

“What did he do to make that happen?”

“Do you mean what didn’t he do? He did a lot, King. And he didn’t keep that task to himself. He delegated it among every jerk who works for him.”

Jerk.

This woman.

I lower my voice and push, “What did they do?”

She pauses as her lips press into a thin line. “Why does it matter?”

For what I want from her, it doesn’t. But I still want to know. “Because I want to know what I’m dealing with as I move forward in my case.”

She lowers her voice to match mine, but hers is delivered with a bite of anger and tension. “Drugs moving through The Pink isn’t enough? You showed me the accounts that were opened in my name, so you already know about the money. What more do you want me to add to the list? Prostitutes. Private high-stakes gambling rings. Buying and distributing illegal drugs?”

I lean back in my chair and stare at the woman across the table. “With organizations as big as Carter’s, none of that is surprising. But that doesn’t answer my question.”

She stares back but doesn’t utter a word.

“Goldie.” My voice comes out low and guttural. “Did Dex do something to you?”

She rolls her lips in, like a bad memory glides over her tongue begging to be set free, but she won’t allow it.

The air in the interrogation room is silent and stagnant.

Finally, she speaks. “Are you done? My day is shot. There’s no way I’ll get out of town before tomorrow morning. I need a good night’s sleep.”

“You’re just going to walk away from your share of The Pink?”

She leans forward and delivers her words with a punch. “I already did, Agent Jennings. There’s nothing more for me in

Miami.”

“What do you mean *you already did*?”

“How did you become a federal narcotics agent while being this dense?”

It’s everything I can do not to smile. The woman doesn’t curse, but she’ll call me dense.

My ghost of a smile doesn’t bother her. She’s on a roll and becomes animated with her sarcastic words. “Let me explain how my brother and his associates operate. When a drug dealer knows that you know their business, they’ll do anything and everything to keep you tight in their circle no matter how miserable your life is. Once you know things, you *know* ... if you know what I mean. When I found out that a wedding here and there were covering for the real business going down in the shadows of that place, I wanted nothing to do with it.”

“So you left.”

She shakes her head. “I wanted to. Trust me, I did everything I could. I tried to leave. He made my life miserable, to the point I was scared to leave my apartment, but he dragged me back. He told me if I wanted my share of The Pink, that was my new life. There was no way I was having any part of that, but I wasn’t stupid. I saw what went on there when people didn’t fall in line. I was alone and scared. Dex had someone follow me day and night.”

My jaw goes hard as I clench my teeth.

I know Carter from the outside. I might know him better than anyone who isn’t in the fucking organization.

I know how he operates.

Goldie was right to be scared. Hell, I’m not even going to ask her why she didn’t go straight to the police. Dex is no dumbass drug dealer.

He’s smart.

Smart, cunning, and sadistic.

If she tried to rat him out while she was on her own, that would have been the end of it.

Of her.

“Don’t you have anything else to say?” she bites.

I pull in a calming breath. I need one right now.

“No. I’m here to listen. How did you get Dex to finally leave you alone before I dragged you back in there yesterday?”

Of all the things she’s been through, this is what upsets her the most. Her eyes drop to the table sitting between us as she randomly fingers a wrapper. She lets out a deep breath. “I signed everything over to him.”

“Wait.” I lean forward. “You signed over your share of The Pink to Dex Carter?”

“Yes. In exchange for getting out forever. In exchange for peace of mind. No dream or amount of money was worth the anxiety. I wasn’t ready to leave Miami. I like it here. No, I love it here. I might not have The Pink to showcase my work, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t run Amāre outside of The Pink.”

“And how is that going?” I ask, knowing full well how it’s going. I helped fuck it up for her, and now she’s trying to leave and give up for good.

Her eyes narrow as she repeats my thoughts. “You know how it’s going. It couldn’t be worse. I never should have agreed to take you to The Pink. Now I’m back where I was before I handed over what was mine. This time, I’m out of bargaining chips.”

“When you say you signed over your share, what do you mean?”

“I mean, I signed it over. Like, official papers and everything.”

I reach to my side and flip open the folder I brought in with me. “I have a proposal. One I thought would solely benefit me, but now that I know more, I was wrong.”

She frowns. “What kind of proposal?”

I push the wrappers to the side and replace it with papers. “This is a contract, a legal fucking contract, not like what you probably signed for Dex.”

Her frown morphs into an expression of pure disbelief. “A contract to do what?”

I point to the top of the document. “It’s called a confidential informant. I want you to work for me.”

Her tone rises an octave. “For you?”

I shrug. “For the government. But you’ll be mine, so really for me.”

She leans back in her chair. “Do I look like I have a death wish? I’m not working for you or the government.”

“You’re running away from Miami, a place you said you love and where you want to live. You signed over millions to your asshole brother—”

“Half-brother,” she bites. “I take offense to that on behalf of my mother who has nothing to do with him. She might’ve made a poor decision in my father when she was young, but she has nothing to do with Dex.”

“Sorry. I’d never offend your mother. But you did sign over your entire inheritance to a drug dealer because you thought that would buy you freedom. So, no, I do not think you have a death wish.”

“I think you forgot about the part where I’m leaving Miami and want nothing to do with Dex ever again. Like ever and ever, for the rest of my life.”

Fuck. The woman is like a fairy princess who’s been tossed into the cauldron by the evil warlock. I’ve never met anyone like her.

“Hear me out.” I flip the document to skip the legal verbiage and get to the good stuff. “You’ll be my confidential informant. You know the ins and outs of The Pink. I’ve been introduced as your fiancé. You hate your *half*-brother. I want him and his organization taken down. Then we can work on

getting you back your share of The Pink. I challenge anyone to present you a better offer. It's a win for everyone."

I take her in as she picks up the contract. Her eyes scan the details—the fine print that outlines what I want her to do.

She drops it and glares at me. "You are dense and didn't understand the first time. I don't have a death wish."

"Since you were running away from Miami with your tail tucked between your legs, I got that the first time."

Anger emanates from her. "I wasn't running away with my tail between my legs. You don't know me. I did what I had to do to be rid of Dex forever. My wedding planning business is failing because Dex makes sure no one in this city will work with me. I've done everything I could do. I know when to cut my losses and not because I'm tired or lazy. I don't give up easily, but I'm not an idiot. I can't make a living here, and after last night, I'm not safe. I'm up against Dex and his entire organization—again."

"Cartel," I correct her. "Don't talk about it like it's some CPA firm."

Frustration bleeds from her. I'm not sure if it's more directed at me or the shit show that her life has turned into.

But there's no way I'm giving up on this or her. "Look, I know you're not an idiot. In fact, leaving Miami is your smartest move if you were on your own." I lift my chin toward the document. "But you're not. You have me."

"Right," she seethes. "You, the man who lied to me about your identity and tricked me into taking you to The Pink so I'm on Dex's radar again. You're the worst thing that's happened to me."

I shake my head. "You're wrong. I won't go as far as to say *dead* wrong, because that's just morbid given your current situation. If you think you can run off to the boondocks of Virginia to live a less than happily ever after, that won't happen. I know the Carter Cartel better than anyone on the outside. You think you were free and clear when you signed a bogus document that means nothing in the real world of

lawyers and judges, but you're not. You'll always look over your shoulder, and you know it. Do you really want to live like that?"

She goes silent but crosses her arms across her slight frame. A defensive posture. One that she'll no doubt need if she chooses wrong and tries to go it alone.

"I investigate people for a living, Goldie. Before I worked for the DEA, I did a lot of dangerous shit. You're no idiot. In fact, leaving Miami would be the smartest thing for you to do ... normally."

"Normally?"

"Under any other circumstance," I go on. "But this time, it's not your best move. In fact, I'd argue that leaving would be a shit decision."

She leans forward. "You have a lot of nerve speaking about my choices like that. Don't assume I've told you everything, King. I got out, and there's no reason to go back."

"That's where you're wrong. You have the best reason in the world to dive back into the Carter Cartel and claim what's yours."

"Now I'm curious, Special Agent Jennings. Humor me—why would I do something so idiotic?"

I hold out my arms. "Me."

She huffs one ridiculous laugh. "You?"

"Yep. Me."

She shakes her head and wets her lips like she's getting ready for the verbal fight of her life, which I have no doubt she'd win.

With anyone else.

Hell, she talked her way out of a cartel, even if she did have to sign over millions on a contract that's most likely bogus at best and non-binding in the least.

If I had to guess, she's about to tell me to go to hell, but in a nicer way since she's Marigold Carter, but I don't allow it. I

point to the papers in front of her. “Let me list the reasons why you’ll sign this contract.”

“You’re unbelievable,” she mutters. “Has anyone ever taught you that humility goes a long way in life?”

I ignore that. “If the contract you signed that forfeited your portion of the business to Dex is at all legit, any C-List attorney would be able to get you out of it. The Pink is as much yours as it is Dex’s, and I know deep down, you want it. If you leave now, you’ll never be able to live free. The shadow of Dex will chase you forever. Even if he does leave you alone—and we both know that’s a big if—you’ll always look over your shoulder. That’s no way to live.”

She hugs herself tighter.

I go on. “I know good from evil, and you’re not the latter. You’re going to sign this document because no one has the inside information like you do. You can make a difference. All that shit you said Dex does, you can help put an end to it for good.”

Her eyes fall shut.

“Goldie,” I call for her.

She slowly opens her eyes and hits me with her troubled gaze.

“And the best reason to do this is me. You’ll never be alone. No one can keep you safe like I can.”

“You can’t promise that,” she whispers. “No one can promise the unknown.”

“I can. If you work with me and do as I say, I’ll keep you safe. No one will touch you—not even Dex. This is the right thing to do, Goldie. You know it is. If you don’t put an end to the Carter Cartel, you’ll never be free. This is an offer you can’t afford to turn down, and you know it.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t know.”

I reach for the pen I brought in with the contract and push it across the table to her.

“What will I have to do?”

“Pretend to be my fiancée. Pretend you’re part of an underworld where cartels, drug dealers, and mobsters play. Pretend that you’ve turned a blind eye to your morals to marry Daniel Armstrong.”

“That proves you know nothing about me. There’s no way I can do that.”

I tip my head and shake it once. “That’s where you’re wrong. What little I know about you proves that you can do all of it. You might not think you can, but you’ll do it because it’s the right thing to do.”

“You picked the wrong person.”

“I didn’t pick you. You landed in my lap like a gift from above. Hell, when all is said and done, Dex will be rotting away in prison. The Pink will be yours again once the government confiscates the illegal shit. I’ll get you your business back. What do you say? Pretend to be mine, Goldie. Let’s get this shit done.”

The tips of her fingers dance on her lips as she mulls it over, her gaze snags on the document that will seal her to me until the last Carter Cartel member is indicted.

She looks up and licks her lips.

Yeah.

This is going to be interesting.

I AM THE POLICE

Goldie

“**Y**ou’ve got a lot of stuff in that car.”

I jump when his voice hits me from behind. I twirl on the third step up from the ground, and my hand flies to my chest willing my heart to slow to a normal cadence.

“Mr. Elrod, you scared me. Please don’t sneak up on me like that.”

Seriously. I hate that Agent King Jennings was right about me looking over my shoulder. I’ve been doing it too long at this point.

“You’re jumpy,” Mr. Elrod announces.

“Ruff!”

A Pomeranian tucked under his arm makes me jump again. It’s tiny, gray around the muzzle, and looks like it might be fifty years old.

I take the three steps back down the stairs toward him. “You got a dog?”

“I’m dog-sitting for Elvira from the supermarket. She had to make a trip up to Tampa to visit her sister. This is Squirrel. She named him for his tail. He looks like a squirrel,” he says, explaining the obvious.

“I didn’t know you liked pets.” My magnetism when it comes to dogs is strong, so I reach over to scratch the little guy on the head but jump when he snaps at me. “Oh. He’s cantankerous.”

What I want to say is they make quite the pair. The dog is as crabby as Mr. Elrod.

But my downstairs neighbor lifts the yapper up to his face and the dog licks his beard like he's a sweet lollipop. "He just needs to get used to you."

I have too much going on in my life to win the affection of a furry geriatric squirrel-dog. Gaining the fondness of Mr. Elrod was hard enough.

I start up the stairs again. "You two have fun."

"You didn't tell me... Where are you going with your car packed like that?"

I stop halfway up the stairs and glance back at my neighbor and his houseguest. Mr. Elrod is the last person I'd share my current life woes with. He'd inform the world of my canceled plans before I could unlock my door and flip on the lights. "I was going to make a trip back home to visit my mom, but something came up. Now I need to unpack."

Mr. Elrod nods and carefully sets the dog on what little grass we have in the courtyard. "Better unpack your car tonight. We don't need to attract any burglars with all that stuff visible for someone to bust out your windows."

Exhaustion overwhelms me. This day needs to end so I can prepare for what's to come. But Mr. Elrod's penchant to boss everyone in the complex is annoying at best. "I'm sure it will be fine."

I continue up the stairs as he calls after me, every word louder than the one before it. "First it's your car, and then they'll start busting into every car in the lot. Don't do that to us, Goldie!"

"Goodnight, Mr. Elrod."

When I finally get into my apartment, I lock the door and collapse on my sofa.

My phone vibrates with a call. My head falls back to the cushion, and I close my eyes when I answer. "Hey, Mom."

"Where are you?"

I sigh. “I’m still at home. I had something come up this afternoon. I’m not leaving today.”

“That’s good. I’d rather you drive after a good night’s sleep.”

I wish. I have a feeling I won’t be sleeping anytime soon.

“Yeah, about that...”

“I’ve got your room ready to go. All clean with fresh sheets. I even moved my old purses out of your closet.”

“You didn’t need to do that—”

“You’re moving home. You’ll need your old closet back.”

“No, what I’m saying is, I’ve decided to delay the move for a bit.”

She pauses, but doesn’t sound mad when she speaks. “You did? What changed your mind?”

The contract might as well be burning a hole through my purse that sits on my lap. I pull it out and stare at it. “Do you remember the last client who I thought was going to fall through?”

Also known as the asshole who lied about who he is and placed me in the exact spot I never wanted to be in ever again.

“I do. The handsome man with the sickly aunt.”

Handsome is an understatement. “It seems the project isn’t off like I thought it was. I’ve decided to see it through.”

“Well,” my mother exclaims with glee. “I knew it would work out. Remember, I said I had a good feeling about him.”

“You did. Go ahead, Mom. You can say it.”

She doesn’t waste a moment. “I told you so.”

The first smile all day touches my lips. “Do you feel better?”

“When you’re right, you’re right. I can’t help my intuition. You never know, maybe he’s single. It’s about time the wedding bug bit you on the butt.”

I sure feel bit on the butt after today, but not in a good way.

“That’s not going to happen with him. He’s the last person I’d want to be with.”

“You’re always a believer in love until it comes to yourself.”

“I’m a believer in love, but I’m particular. I know what I want.”

“I don’t think you do. I thought I knew what I wanted. Turns out your father proved me wrong. You only think you know what you want. Sometimes, that’s not what we need.”

“Interesting coming from you. You never tried love again after the sperm donor.”

She keeps talking like I didn’t just call her out for shunning love for the rest of her life. “I blame myself. It was just you and me. You say you believe in love, but you don’t know how to count on anyone else. You’re just like me, dagnabbit.”

“There are worse things in life than being like you.”

“I’m sitting by myself in a creepy old forest that feels like home. You’re on the beach. Take advantage of it, Goldie. Experience it all.”

“I think it’s safe to say I’m going to experience it all.” I stare down at the contract in my hand and flip the last page. “I need to go. I’ve got a busy week.”

“Call me and tell me about the wedding for that dying aunt.” She pauses and then says, “Huh...”

“Huh what?” I ask.

“I wonder what a woman wants when she faces death in the eye.”

“I’ll let you know,” I mutter and hope I won’t be able to tell her firsthand. “Love you.”

“Grip life by the pearls, baby girl. Go get ‘em!” she cries with so much enthusiasm, it makes me want to take a nap. “Okay, love you too.”

I hang up, toss my phone to the side, and stare at the papers in front of me.

I made King sit while I read every word. I know he works for the DEA and is more legit than Dex, but I refused to take any chances. I can’t refute that it is my signature on those bank

documents. That's what I get for not signing in blue. I'll never make that mistake with a document again.

I have no desire to reread the legal mumbo jumbo and skip straight to the good stuff.

Well, not good.

More like the anxiety-ridden details that have freaked me out more and more since I agreed to them.

Talk about signers' remorse.

To sum up the details...

Marigold Violet Carter agrees to be a confidential informant to the Drug Enforcement Administration for the term of one year from today and will be compensated for the information provided to the government.

I still can't believe I did it.

I signed.

And I start tomorrow.

The logo for 'The Pink' is written in a cursive, handwritten style. The word 'The' is in a smaller font above the word 'Pink'. Below 'Pink' is the text 'EST. 1981' in a small, sans-serif font.

King

"I HEAR CONGRATULATIONS ARE IN ORDER," Tim says over the phone. "On your engagement."

"Very funny," I mutter.

Tim Coleman is my supervisor. Brax and Micah have worked for him their entire careers at the DEA, but not me. I had to weasel my way into this tight-knit group a few years ago. My case headbutted Micah's at the time.

This is not my first rodeo with the Carter Cartel. I landed in Central America the first time I targeted Carter. My case was picked up by the CIA, and the officer I was assigned to knows this group from Brax's big case. My CIA contact put in a good word for me. Brax and Micah actually listened to him, but it was Tim who pulled the strings to get me back to Miami.

I knew Dex Carter had ties here. It made jumping back into this case easy. I thought I knew them when I was in Panama, but it's nothing compared to what I've learned over the last few months.

It's Sunday. There's no reason for any of us to be in the office, but after I decided to drive by Goldie's place to see if she was home, I realized what was happening and had to call in Brax and Micah.

Exposing my real identity to Dex Carter's sister was the last thing I wanted to do. The woman I made my fake fiancée was about to skip town. I need her and had no other choice.

That was hours ago. I have affidavits to write and reports to catch up on, especially now that I have a new informant that's all mine.

I keep talking as I climb into my car and start it up. "She signed. I don't know why she signed, but she did. This isn't going to be easy, but I can wrap this shit up faster with her. If you would've asked me yesterday if I thought I'd be face to face with Dex Carter this fast, I would've called you crazy. But here I am."

"The only problem I see is your confidential informant is reluctant," Tim goes on. "If you're counting on her to have your back and keep your secrets, you've got a bumpier road ahead of you than you thought."

"This might be new for Goldie Carter, but she's not reluctant. If I know anything, I know that. She hates her brother and walked away from her inheritance because she had no one at her back. She's got as much or more on the line than anyone. I actually feel good about it."

That's a lie.

I have no fucking idea if the prim and proper Marigold can do what I need her to do. But if I'm going to carry on as Daniel Armstrong, I can't go back now. I'll make sure Goldie is solid.

"If you say so," Tim says, even though I can tell he has no confidence in my new informant.

"I sent her home after she signed, but we're meeting tomorrow. I'd bet Trippy's house on the fact no one on the outside knows as much about the Carter organization as her. And now she's mine."

"You sound awfully sure about yourself. Brax didn't seem so confident in your new sidekick when he called to fill me in on the case."

I can't blame Brax for telling the truth. I've never been less confident about a case since I started at the DEA. "I can handle Goldie Carter. We're meeting tomorrow. She'll be ready the next time we face the cartel."

"Keep me up to date. I'm out for the next few days. We drop Teagan at school this week to start her sophomore year. Samantha left last week. Annette is a mess thinking about the empty nest again, but less of a mess than she was last year. We're going to take an extra couple of vacation days on the way home."

I'm about to put it in reverse when the phone that the tech guys set up for me rings. "Gotta go. I'm getting a call, and it might be the one I've been waiting on."

I can't risk missing it, so I hang up on Tim and answer just as fast. "Daniel Armstrong."

The voice that hits me from the other side is professional and all business. It sounds like someone calling to schedule my six-month dental cleaning rather than setting up a meet with a kingpin. "Mr. Armstrong, this is Rebecca from The Pink. I'm calling on behalf of Mr. Carter to set up the meeting that was discussed yesterday evening."

I throw my car in park and settle back in my seat. Dex Carter has a set of balls on him having his receptionist schedule meetings to discuss money laundering. "That sounds great. I

appreciate the opportunity. My schedule is tight this week, but I'm willing to move meetings around."

"Lovely," she states blandly as if everyone in the world bends over backwards for her boss. "He would like to kindly host you and Ms. Carter tomorrow night for dinner at seven o'clock."

Shit. My new confidential informant is too green around the gills. I planned to have more time to prep her. "I'll have to check with Goldie. I think she has something scheduled tomorrow night, but I can be there."

Rebecca's tone remains even, as if she doles out threats on the regular. "I'll put this as politely as I can ... Ms. Carter's presence is required. Directions from Mr. Carter himself."

I drag a hand down my face and keep the frustration out of my tone. "I'll see what I can do."

"Do that," she croons. "Mr. Carter's directions were abundantly clear. He wants to meet with both of you, or the meeting is off. Shall I schedule the two of you with Mr. Carter tomorrow for seven?"

I wonder what the fuck I'm doing—or more specifically, what the fuck I'm doing to Goldie. "We'll be there."

"Wonderful." A smug smile echoes in her tone. "Feel free to come a few minutes early for a cocktail."

I'll need one. "I wouldn't miss it. Thank you, Rebecca."

"Do enjoy the rest of your evening." And without allowing me to say goodbye, she hangs up.

It doesn't take long when I get a call on my government phone from the office. It's the tech department.

"Hey," I answer. "That came through as an unknown caller."

"Not for me," he says. "And that was a number we didn't have from last night."

I reverse out of my spot and hit the road as I talk. "Perfect. Shoot me that number, and I'll add it to the list. I want those wires up and running. I'm writing the affidavits tonight and

have an appointment with the judge first thing in the morning.”

“Will do. Sounds like that’s not the only appointment you’ve got tomorrow. You want to wear a mic again or just carry your cell?”

“This time I’m not sneaking in. Let me talk to my informant. We’ve thrown up enough red flags, and I can tell they don’t trust me because of my association with Goldie Carter. Let me gain their trust.”

“Sounds good. I’ll touch base tomorrow.”

I disconnect, merge onto the freeway, and dial Lake.

She answers after two rings. “I drive all the way to Miami, go grocery shopping, fill your fridge, and I’m cooking again. The least you can do is show your face at home. Your niece is bored, and I’m on the verge of a personal crisis thanks to my husband who’s going to be charged with campaign fraud tomorrow. You’re not at all helpful with any of that.”

I ignore my little sister’s inclination for drama. “I thought he was going to be charged today.”

She huffs a sigh. “Apparently they’re waiting for Monday, so that the small percentage of people who actually have a life and don’t watch the news on weekends will see it.”

I merge north, which Laken will not be happy about because it’s the opposite direction of her. “How do you know that?”

“Bill told me.”

“Everything is staged,” I mutter.

“Hell, yes it is. Other than the effect on Willa. That is not staged. I’m trying to prepare her for it. But when you’re a tween whose father regularly makes the news in a negative way, the mean girls at your private school don’t let you forget it. Life isn’t easy.”

“Then you’re really going to be pissed.”

“As if,” she mutters.

“I’ll be home late. My case blew up today. I need to check on a few more things. You know I’d be there for you and Willa if I could. I just signed a confidential informant. I’m afraid she’s going to skip town—and she cannot skip town.”

“She? That’s not common is it?”

“Not for me. But for her safety and the sake of my case, I need her in Miami. And as of this afternoon, her car was packed. I’m not sure when I’ll be home, but since I’m headed to the north side of Miami, it’s safe to say I won’t make it for dinner. And why isn’t Trippy there for dinner? Did you not see her today?”

Laken sounds like she’s about to give up on life. “Our great aunt is too busy to come over for dinner, if you can believe.”

“Oh, I believe.”

“We were at her place for two hours this afternoon. We played bingo for an entire hour. Willa pretended to be miserable, but she won twice and pissed off two blue-haired biddies. That’s when Trippy risked all our lives and took us for ice cream in her new golf cart. Willa even took it for a spin. It was the only time she smiled all day. We left when Trippy had to get back so she could get ready for movie night. That’s all the time she could carve out for us.”

“Trippy’s social life puts the rest of us to shame.”

“You’re right. You worked all weekend and my social life at home is taxiing Willa around and trying to not gag at Bill’s political events. Someday when we move to a retirement home like Trippy, we can live our best life.”

“Not sure that’s the kind of fun I want.”

“Wait until it hurts to bend over and put on your socks. You, too, will buy a golf cart and almost cause fatalities on a sidewalk.”

“Shit. I told her to stay off the sidewalks. She never listens.”

Laken finally laughs. “Trippy doesn’t listen to anyone. I’ve got to go. I’m about to start the risotto. It needs my full attention.”

“Risotto. I might be home sooner than I planned.”

“I know for a fact you know how to cook, King. You could put your skills to use every once in a while.”

“I’m never home, and you’re there to do it for me.”

“Love you, asshole, but I’ve got to go.”

“Love you, too, sis.”

She sighs. “Whatever you’re doing, be careful.”

I exit the highway and turn toward The Colony. “Always. Don’t wait up on me. I might be a while.”

“Your loss. Risotto is never the same reheated.”

“It’s better than jar sauce,” I say.

“True, true. I’ve got to go. The only time you’re chatty is when you’re in the car.”

“Tell Willa hi for me. Sounds like you’ll be here for a while. I promise I’ll spend time with her.”

“She loves you.”

“What can I say? I’m lovable.”

“Ha!” she bellows. “As if. Be careful.”

“Always.” I disconnect the call and toss the phone into the seat next to me.

Then I pull to the side of the street across from the old Art Deco building. It looks like it’s from another decade.

Hell, another century.

Her car is still packed to the gills like it was this morning, which preempted me to bring her in today instead of later in the week. I planned to wait it out and see how she’d react to what went down last night with her and Dex.

Colony Park is the shit. How she managed to get a unit in this place, I’ll never know. It’s one of the most sought-after historic buildings in Miami. It might not be on the beach, but the neighborhood is unique. There’s no nightlife which keeps it quiet. Markets, restaurants, and coffee shops line the streets. It looks like something from a movie rather than real life.

Living in this area of Miami comes with a price tag. If Goldie gave up her inheritance and hasn't landed any jobs, it's no wonder she took my bait and tried to sneak us into The Pink just to convince me it's haunted. The woman must be on the edge of desperation.

The sun is setting over the Magic City. Golds, coppers, and pinks give way to the dark of night. I never noticed the sunsets growing up. I had other shit to distract me. There was enough to get used to moving from South Dakota to Florida as a kid. Grasping the beauty of the city, no matter how crowded it is, was not on my radar.

Hell, now that I think about it, I'm not sure I've fully appreciated the beauty of it until recently.

Goldie's unit is on the top floor on the corner overlooking the courtyard. Every blind is shut but every room is lit up like the Fourth of July.

I doubt she'll take off tonight. I'll call her first thing in the morning to make sure she won't ditch me. She signed the confidential informant contract, but that doesn't mean I can make her do shit or tell me anything. That's up to her, even though I plan to compensate her well.

I have a feeling very few people have the kind of dirt on Carter that she does. The fact she was willing to walk away from half of her father's estate and the potential revenue it will bring in for the rest of her life, is telling.

And she did it for her own safety.

Goldie Carter might be alone and out of options, but she's smart.

She was in over her head. Hell, I'm surprised she didn't leave Miami the first time Dex threatened her.

Because his threats are not empty. I saw it three years ago when I was close to throwing his ass in prison. Wherever he goes, he leaves death and anguish in his wake.

A shadow moves through her unit behind the blinds.

I can't sit here all night. I'll be dead in the morning and Lake will kill me. At some point, I'm going to have to trust that Goldie's word is as good as her name.

I put my car in drive and wait for traffic to clear before I pull away from the road.

That's when a black Corvette swings into the private parking lot of Colony Park. It looks less out of place than Goldie's old sedan.

"What the fuck," I mutter and put it right back into park. I grab my cell and dial Micah.

I think it's going to go to voicemail when he finally answers. "You're a needy asshole this weekend, Jennings. Have I not done enough for you today?"

In the interest of time, I do not tell him to fuck off and get to it. "I'm sitting outside Goldie's building to make sure she keeps her word and doesn't run off into the sunset."

"If I didn't know that you have no life, I'd think you were a stalker," he mutters as I hear a baby squeal in the background.

I watch the driver of the Vette climb the stairs and make his way to the end unit. Miami is too big for this to be a coincidence.

I put my car in drive and gun it, pulling in front of traffic and cut across two lanes to pull into the lot. I park as far away from the Vette as I can. "I might not have a life, but Goldie's could be cut short soon if I don't intercede."

That gets his attention. "What the hell?"

"One of Dex Carter's soldiers just pulled in and is about to knock on Goldie's door. I'm going in and wanted to let someone know."

Micah lowers his voice. "You mean in case there's a shootout at Colony Park on the news tonight, I'll know to check in on you?"

I put him on speaker so I can pull up a text string before glancing up. The asshole is banging on her door. "Yeah, something like that."

“Call a unit to drive by and back you up. I’m over forty minutes from you and Brax is at least thirty.”

“There’s no time, Micah.”

I pull up Goldie’s number and shoot her a text.

Me – This is King. Or Daniel. Your fiancé. Is your door locked?

“Tim will shit if you go in alone,” Micah warns.

Bubbles play on my screen before a short, clipped text appears.

Goldie – What are you talking about? And why wouldn’t I lock my door?

Dex’s soldier turns to look around and before taking the handle and trying to turn it.

Me – Because someone is trying to get in.

“King,” Micah bites. “Do I need to radio for backup? Do not fucking go Rambo on anyone.”

Goldie – How do you know this?

The guy actually jiggles the handle.

Goldie – Someone’s trying to break in!

Me – I’m sitting in your parking lot. Don’t open the door until you hear me on the other side.

Goldie – No! If he’s trying to break in, I’m calling the police.

“King,” Micah bites. “What the hell is happening?”

“I’m going in.” I grab my weapon and climb out of the car. “If I can’t defuse the situation and send him on his way, you

might see me on the news. But the last thing I need are squad cars swarming the place. That'll ruin everything.”

“Dammit.” Micah sighs. “If I don’t hear from you in the next five minutes, I’m calling for backup. We need pole cameras on that building.”

I holster my gun in the back of my pants and yank my shirt out of my jeans to cover it.

Me – Open the door when you hear me. And by the way, I am the police.

SHUT YOUR MOUTH

Goldie

My stare is pulled away from my rattling door knob to my cell.

Fiancé - Open the door when you hear me. And by the way, I am the police.

OH.

I guess he is sort of the police.

But I jerk when a bang hits my door followed by a demand from a voice I recognize. “Open the fucking door, Goldie. I have a message from Dex.”

That is not my fake fiancé.

I step back, stumble into the wall, and have to catch myself so I don't lose my footing or go crashing to the floor.

“Goldie!” he yells.

It's Randall Becerra. I'd recognize that evil voice anywhere.

I squeeze my eyes shut, because as much as I do not want to see the DEA agent who threw me back into Dex's spotlight, I need him to hurry the heck up.

Moments feel like days as I clasp my phone to my chest and listen to the man bang on my door three more times. “Open the fucking door—”

But he stops mid-demand.

Voices.

I hear voices, and not friendly ones. I can't make out what they're saying. Every blind is drawn and I can't see outside other than a silhouette standing beneath the light outside my door.

"Who are you?" Randall demands.

I get another knock, but this one isn't demanding or angry. It hits me somewhere deep and feels like a promise when it's followed by my DEA agent's deep timbre. "Baby, it's me. Open up."

I exhale and rest my forehead on the door before I turn the deadbolt with shaky fingers. When I pull the door open, I find King and Rand facing off.

I focus on the man I spent most of my day with. He's glaring at Rand before he barely throws me a glance. "Who's this guy?"

Rand crosses his arms and doesn't wipe the smug expression off his face.

I know it well.

I hate it.

And I hate him.

Mom might have raised me in a southern home with manners and piano lessons and the skills to plant my own garden should I ever need to live off the land, but she did not raise me not to hate.

She raised me to be honest. And not just honest to the rest of the world.

But more importantly, honest with myself. Maybe it came from what my father did to her. The way he strung her along, and then pushed her into the shadows when she found out she was pregnant with me.

Mom always told me it's okay to feel what you feel. And if someone has wronged you, hate is okay. They deserve to be hated.

Don't rob yourself of your true feelings, she'd always say.

I'm not sure that was healthy or politically correct or even emotionally beneficial, but it's all Mom.

And when it comes to Randall Becerra, hate is well deserved.

"Goldie," King bites. "Who the hell is banging on your door?"

"Goldie used to work for me," Rand states.

My gaze shoots to him. "I never worked for you. If anything, you worked for me."

If looks could kill, I'd be a bloody mess on the floor. Rand is livid.

King hikes a brow and nods. He's impressed. If he thinks I'm acting and this is a part of our new arrangement, he's mistaken. But then again, nothing is an act other than me professing my love and being engaged to Daniel. He's the one carrying most of the lies.

King focuses his attention back on Rand. "You work for Dex?"

Rand nods. "It's Mr. Carter to you and the rest of society. And I know who you are."

King shrugs. "A lot of people know who I am. The people who really know me know not to be banging on my fiancée's door. Not after dark, not before dark, not fucking ever. The fact I walked up and you were trying to break in tells me you do not know me at all."

My mouth goes dry.

King doesn't stop talking nor does he refer to my older half-brother properly the way Dex demands of everyone around him. "I have a meeting with Dex tomorrow night. You'd better believe I'm going to bring this up with him. If he wants my business, no one touches Goldie. No one," he emphasizes.

Rand brings a hand up to stroke his jaw, shifting his glare to me before it settles back on King. "You have it all wrong. Mr. Carter doesn't need anyone's business. It's the other way around. Everyone needs him."

I'd like to huff a laugh, but poking the bear is the last thing on my to-do list if I want them to believe that King is the love of my life.

King, on the other hand, is calm, cool, and collected playing the part. He's nothing like he was the first day we met. "We'll see about that tomorrow when I tell your boss what I can do for him."

Rand shakes his head once before turning back to me. "Your brother wants to talk to you. I was sent here to collect you."

I open my mouth to tell him there's no way I'm talking to Dex about anything, but King beats me to it. "He can talk to her tomorrow night. She's coming to the meeting with me."

My eyes go wide, and my gaze shoots to King. "I am?"

King turns to me, but this time he moves. I'm taken aback when he tags me around the neck. I'm forced to grab his forearm to keep my balance when he pulls me close. He doesn't stop until his lips land on mine.

This is different from last night. There's no tongue and he doesn't wrap me up in his arms. His kiss is firm yet quick. It feels like an *I haven't seen you all day* kind of kiss, though if I had to guess, it's more like a *shut your mouth and let me lead* kind of kiss.

I fall to my bare feet from where he pulled me to my toes and looks down at me with another satisfied smile. "I didn't properly greet you when I got here. How did the packing go today?"

My brows pinch. "Packing?"

"I see your car is loaded. You got a head start." He tips his head to the parking lot outside. "So anxious to move in with me. I like that."

"Yeah." I swallow over the lump in my throat. It's either that or gag on my lie. "Can't wait."

"I'll help you pack tonight before bed."

"You hate packing," I add, wondering just how far to take this. I was on my way to bring my things back up to my apartment.

“Sounds like I’m not the only anxious one.”

His smile swells, but it does not look fake. “Anything for you.”

“I’m going to hold you to that. Forever and ever, ‘til death do us part,” I throw back.

“Ah-hem.” Rand clears his throat.

King ignores him and leans in to plant another peck on my lips before taking his place at my side with his arm draped over my shoulders. Only then does he give his attention back to Rand. “You can tell your boss that if he wants to talk to Goldie, he can do it with me by her side. See, I can separate business from family, but my fiancée is my first priority. I know what went down at The Pink and why she left.”

Rand’s jaw goes hard, and his eyes narrow as they focus on me. “Is that so?”

That look brings back memories I’d rather never revisit. I lean into my fake fiancé who’s nothing but a stranger to me and pray I haven’t made the wrong decision.

“This is a worthless conversation,” King states, like the man in front of us is as boring as last week’s news from my hometown of Roseford Falls, where the most exciting thing to happen is my high school nemesis getting an STD. “I don’t communicate with messengers.”

I fist the material at his back and give it a little pull. King has no idea who he’s dealing with. Dex is the boss of his small kingdom, and no one talks about him like this. This is sure to get back to him through Rand.

Unless you have a death wish, and I’m beginning to wonder if King falls into that category.

“Because you’re Goldie’s man, I’ll give you a chance to take that back and apologize.”

King glances down at me before turning his uninterested gaze back to Rand. “I have nothing to apologize for. Now, if you’ll excuse us, I’ve been away from Goldie all day, and you’re ruining our evening. See yourself back to your car and go back

to The Pink to finish the rest of Dex's dirty work for the evening. If you're around, we'll see you tomorrow night at dinner."

Dinner.

Great.

The last meal I shared with Dex did not go well. That was the beginning of the end.

For me.

Dex is living his best drug-dealing life with his inheritance and mine.

Rand points at King like he's dotting an "i" in the air with his index finger. "We'll see how Mr. Carter feels about you tomorrow."

"Dex will feel just fine when I tell him what my business can do for him."

Rand turns to leave, but stops himself one last time and turns to me. "Watch your back, Goldie. You and I have unfinished business. I plan to see it through."

King's arm around me tightens, but we don't move. King doesn't take his eyes off Rand as he casually jogs down the stairs and stalks through our beautiful courtyard to the parking lot.

I'm still fisting his shirt as my heart starts to calm. I pry my fingers loose and slide my arm away, but not before I come into contact with something rock hard above his waist.

A gun.

"Let's get you inside." King finally lets me go and puts a hand at the small of my back to give me a little shove. The door slams, and the locks click. "I take it you know that guy."

My fingers tremble as I bring them to my face and will myself to calm down. "If that's how this is going to go, I might have to tear up our contract. I can't handle that, and you want me to attend a dinner meeting with you and Dex at The Pink?"

King doesn't try to make me feel better. Instead, he goes straight to my kitchen and opens my refrigerator. Without looking at me, he asks, "Water, seltzer, or wine?"

"Water."

He reaches in the fridge for my filtered water pitcher, but he also grabs a bottle of wine that's half empty. It's nothing fancy. I think it might've been seven dollars.

What can I say, times might be tough, but sometimes a girl just needs wine.

He rattles through two cabinets, but it doesn't take him long. My kitchen isn't that big after all. He pours me a glass of water and a brimming glass of wine before turning back to me. "Sit. Our list of shit to talk about just got longer."

That's one thing I won't argue. I feel like today will never end. I'm exhausted and the only meal I've had was from a vending machine. I fall to my sofa leaving plenty of room for my guest. But King doesn't sit at my side. He plants his behind on my coffee table directly in front of me.

"I feel another interrogation coming on," I mumble. "Two in one day. Yay me."

"Here." He hands me both drinks, and I gladly take them. I gulp half the water before setting it on the table next to him and settle in with my glass of wine, probably the last I'll have for a while if my checking account has anything to say about it. "Time is not on our side, Goldie. I know who Randall Becerra is. That motherfucker is high on my list of targets to arrest. There's nothing good about him, and he proved it tonight by trying to get into your apartment. Had I not been here, he might've succeeded."

I shift to sit up straighter and rest my wine glass on my thigh. "You're right. What Rand wants, Rand usually gets. Unless it comes to me, which is why he hates me. And how did you know he was here?"

King shrugs like it's no big deal. "I was parked across the street making sure you didn't run off into the night and renege on our deal."

“That sounds like a good idea at the moment,” I mutter.

“I’m not sure you understand, but moving back to Virginia will not make you safe. Drug dealers do travel, you know.”

“I’ll be safer there than here,” I argue.

He’s about to argue further, but pulls out his phone and puts it to his ear. “Shit. Sorry. Yeah, he’s gone. I’m with Goldie.”

He doesn’t take his eyes off me as he listens to the caller.

“I’ll be here. I’ll touch base in the morning. Later.” He puts his cell on the coffee table next to my water. “I got a call from Dex’s assistant. We’ve got dinner tomorrow at The Pink. I did everything I could to keep you out of it, but Dex insisted. In fact, he wouldn’t take the meeting with me if you weren’t there. We have less than twenty-four hours to prepare and get our stories straight. I need to know if you’re in or out. If you’re in, you need to be all in. You signed the contract, but now you’re freaked. I get it.”

I shake my head. “You don’t get anything.”

King leans forward, resting his forearms on his knees and lowers his voice. “Then help me get it. No one has information on Carter like you. I want that information. All of it. The more you communicate with me, the faster this will go. But the most important thing is I can keep you safe. Swear to you, Goldie. Nothing will happen to you—I won’t allow it.”

My apartment is so quiet, I’m hyperaware of everything.

His blue eyes boring into me.

My shallow breaths.

The small space between us. His legs are spread to make room for mine. He’d barely have to lift a finger to touch my knee.

“I’m scared.” The words come out on a whisper.

He exhales. “I know.”

“I don’t know what to do,” I admit.

He tips his head and wets his lips as he contemplates his words. Or maybe he’s just contemplating me.

I haven't had anyone contemplate me in a long time. Not in any way. And since the man doing so has actually kissed me, even if it was for show, it feels strangely intimate.

"For the second time today, I'm asking you to trust me when you know nothing about me, and that's after you got fucked over by your brother."

I lift my cheap wine to my lips and take a sip. "That's true. You should tell me about yourself. Your real self."

He stays where he is, firmly planted in my space. "I had a career in the army before I became an agent. I was a Ranger for most of that time. I specialized in raids and carrying out missions deep inside enemy territory."

"Oh. That's impressive."

He simply shrugs. "That career ended before I wanted it to. Surgery after blowing my knee out meant I can live a normal, healthy life, but not at the level to be a Ranger. Pushing papers on a desk for years sounded like hell, so I retired. The DEA hired me. I barely made the age cut off, but here I am. I've been doing this for seven years. And I almost took the cartel down three years ago in Panama. Another case blew mine to shit, and I had to start over."

"Dex?"

"Yep. His money laundering funnel was cut off before I had the chance to make the case." He lowers his voice even more, and his tone makes the hair on my arms stand straight. "This case has gotten under my skin in a way that keeps me up at night. I'm going to get your brother. I refuse to stop until I do."

I bite my lip. "I'm sorry I'm being wishy-washy. There's nothing I want more than for you to stop Dex and everyone who works for him."

"The way I see it, I get my man and stop the biggest importer of cocaine in this part of the country. And you get your inheritance back."

"You've said that more than once. I want all that, King. I do."

“In all my years as a Ranger, I never left anyone behind. Not one. And I did scarier shit than dealing with Carter. I’ll take care of you, Goldie.”

“Thank you.”

His blue eyes narrow. “For what?”

“For telling me something about you. I appreciate that.”

He nods. “Should’ve done it earlier.”

“But you did it now. That’s all that matters.”

“Are you in?” he asks flat out. “Because if you’re not, I’m starting from scratch and need to figure my shit out.”

“What is it about you that’s made me say yes to the same thing twice in one day?”

A small smile touches his lips. “I’d say it’s because I’m charming, but I’m sure you can see that’s not the case.”

“No, you were anything but charming the first time we met.”

“Goldie, I’m used to working with the scum of the earth. I’ve never gone undercover with a beautiful wedding planner.”

“I made you nervous?”

He shakes that question off. “You’re not exactly the kind of target I’m after.”

I take another sip of wine, needing the cold, tangy alcohol to cool my nerves. He was nervous. He was a Ranger and chases drug dealers, and he was nervous about our non-lunch meeting.

“I’m going to need you to assure me that when we walk into The Pink tomorrow night for dinner with my half-brother, you’re not going to be nervous. I will be shaking in my heels. One of us has to have their act together, King, and that person needs to be you.”

And just as the conversation took a lighter tone, King brings us right back to the ugly reality of what I’m about to walk into. “I’ll be your rock. I’ll never waver. We’ll make a plan, and I won’t leave your side.”

“I believe you.”

“You should. I’ll never lie to you.”

I hold up a finger. “You’ve lied to me plenty.”

That wins me a smirk. “That was necessary. But from here on out, no more lies.”

I pull in a deep breath. “Okay. I promise not to flip out on you again.”

He finally gives me some space and sits up straight. “Okay. Let’s get to work.”

“Now?” I ask. “We already agreed to meet tomorrow. It’s late.”

My eyes follow him up and up and up as he stands over me and reaches behind him to pull out the gun from beneath his shirt that I felt earlier. He places it on the table and starts to unload his pockets. “Rand already tried to break in here once. I bet they have someone outside watching. I’m staying.”

My eyes go big, and my wine sloshes when I stand abruptly. We’re so closely smushed between the sofa and coffee table, that my breasts brush his chest for an instant before I lean back. “You’re staying? The night?”

He finally takes a step to the side and goes to my kitchen. “Just told you I’ll keep you safe. I can’t really do that from twenty minutes away sleeping in my own bed. I’ll crash on your sofa.”

“Wait.” I follow him the short distance to the kitchen as he starts to dig through my refrigerator again. “You can’t sleep on my sofa.”

“Your sofa is like the Ritz compared to some of the places I slept when I was a Ranger.” He gives up on my fridge and opens the freezer. “Bingo. A pizza.” He looks from the box to me and frowns. “Are you a vegetarian?”

“No, but I don’t eat enough vegetables, so buying a veggie frozen pizza is my way of trying harder.”

“A frozen pizza isn’t the place to try to be a better person, but if this is all you’ve got, we’ll make do.” He preheats the oven and turns to me. “Is that a yes?”

No. I am absolutely not ready.

“I guess,” I mutter

“That’s better than a no. Are you ready to create a life with me from the ground up in a matter of hours?”

Take down Dex. Get my share of The Pink back.

Make it or break it.

“Sure. I mean, yes. Yes, I guess I’m ready.”

“Let’s do this.” He claps his hands so hard, it makes me jump.

“Time to fall in love.”

Oh.

My.

Gosh.

OLIVES

King

“Sorry, but I would never fall in love with a money launderer. The minute I found out you were a cleaner, I would run the other way. I did the same with Dex. And the fact that I turned my back on the Carter Cartel will blow our story out of the water. No one will believe us.”

We’ve been at this for hours. We’re getting nowhere.

I have no idea how Brax did this for two years. I don’t have the patience or the acting skills to pull this off.

I turn and hold out my arms motioning to myself. “Can you not make an exception for this? Not to yank my own chain, but it’s not like I’ve let myself go.”

That doesn’t faze her. “I’m sorry, King. If I’m going to walk back into the place I was chased off from, the part I play in this needs to make sense. I need to feel it, not just act it.”

I look down at the woman who’s sitting in the middle of her sofa with her legs crossed. She’s wearing the same baggy T-shirt and tiny shorts that I know are there, but can’t see at the moment. She’s barefoot, isn’t wearing makeup, and her hair is a mess.

She’s a fucking beauty.

“Were you a thespian in high school?”

She frowns. “And show choir. How did you know?”

I shake my head and mutter, “Just a guess.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. My acting skills aren’t great. I’m from a tiny town at the foot of Shenandoah National Park. Imagine backwoods, then make it worse than that. No one was cut from anything. If you tried out, you got a part. I also played basketball, and if you saw me play, you’d get that my high school extracurricular activities had nothing to do with skill and everything to do with them needing bodies to fill a roster or playbill.”

I’m pushing thoughts out of my head of Goldie playing basketball and choke down the last of the seltzer I helped myself to from her fridge. I didn’t think anything could be worse than a veggie frozen pizza, but this shit tastes like hand sanitizer. If I’m going to be here playing the fake fiancé, I’m going to need to fill her fridge with real food and some beer. Maybe a bottle of whiskey.

And she needs a decent bottle of wine if we’re going to get through this together.

I crumple the skinny can and toss it on the platter with the remnants of the frozen pizza. I don’t eat green peppers, and she doesn’t eat crust.

I put a hand to my chest and do my best to keep the bite out of my tone. “Goldie, I’m begging you, work with me here. I’m just a man asking a woman what it will take for you to fall in love with a money launderer who works with the cartel. Because that shit is non-negotiable. You’re going to have to find a way if we want this to work.”

She mulls that over as she nibbles on her damn bottom lip. “How old are you?”

I cross my arms. “Older than you.”

She unfolds her legs and shifts positions so she can lean on her knee. “You know how old I am?”

“I’m the government. I know everything there is to know that they know, right down to your social security number.”

She rolls her eyes. “There’s a power imbalance here that I don’t like. We’re making this up, but it would be nice to know something about *you*. The you that I’m supposed to trust.”

“I’m forty-three. What else do you want to know?”

“Huh.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “What? Do I look older?”

She tips her head to the side and studies me. Hell, she doesn’t even pretend she’s not checking me out. “I don’t know if it’s so much about age. It’s more like you’ve lived more than most humans, if that makes sense. Like you’ve done more, experienced more—and if I had to guess, it’s not all good.”

Note to self, Marigold is astute. “Oh, I promise I’ve lived more than almost every human.”

She leans forward. “That’s the part of you I’m curious about.”

I shake my head. “That part of me has nothing to do with this job.”

“You’re wrong,” she pushes and leans forward an inch. “You’re a sum of your parts. We all are.”

“Not for this, I’m not.” This is getting deep. Too deep for some undercover work with a fake fiancée. “I’m not dropping to my knees and proposing. Feel free to make up any shit you want to about me to act like you’re in love. Do whatever it takes, but make it believable.”

She unfolds her legs to stand and shifts around the coffee table. Most of the time I’m around her, she’s been in heels. On bare feet, she’s smaller. Her forehead barely hits my shoulders when she tips her face to look up at me. “Daniel Armstrong ... we met three years ago in D.C. You were there for meetings with a prospective client. I was managing an event in the city when I was trying to get my business up and running. It was pouring—a real gully washer. It was one of those early summer rain fests that Virginia is known for. But it’s that rain that makes it so green, so no one really complains, right?”

I stare down into her deep brown eyes as she sets the stage for our relationship. “If you say so.”

“I do. Anyway, my event was wrapped up and I was trying to make it back to my car, which was at least a half a mile away. You know parking is horrible there.”

“Horrible,” I agree.

She continues. “I forgot my umbrella and had to duck into a small restaurant in Georgetown to wait out the downpour. You were alone at the bar. You were meeting your client, but you were early. You are notorious for being early.”

“Warning,” I say and lift my hand to wrap a finger around the end of a stray lock that has fallen from the mess on top of her head. “I’m never early.”

She frowns. “Is this my story or not?”

I can’t help my lips from tipping up. “My apologies. Continue.”

“Thank you.” Her manners don’t wane even when she’s frustrated. “You’re always early. The place was crowded because it’s Georgetown and because of the rain. I took the only available seat at the bar and it happened to be next to you. You were drinking a dirty martini.”

“I hate olives.”

She huffs an exasperated sigh. “Seriously, King. Is this my story or what?”

“Fine.” I grimace. “Olives are fucking great.”

“Are you going to keep interrupting me?”

“I’ll keep my mouth shut until you get to the part where I drop to one knee.”

“I was drenched. My hair was a mess. My makeup might’ve been running down my face, but I didn’t care. Because I was mesmerized by the icy blue eyes of the stranger sitting next to me.”

I fist my hand at my side itching to touch her.

“You offered to buy me a dirty martini, but I don’t like olives.”

I narrow my eyes.

She smirks.

“Instead,” she goes on making up a story that belongs on network TV and not in the world that the DEA and cartels

play. “You bought me a glass of wine. You asked me about my business. You asked me what I liked to do in my free time. You asked about the small town I grew up in and if I wanted to live there for the rest of my life. Then.” She pauses, and places a hand flat on my chest over my pounding heart. “You made a phone call and canceled your potential client and bought me dinner instead.”

“Finally,” I interrupt her and smother her hand with mine so I don’t lose her touch. “Something I would definitely do if I met you in a bar.”

“We sat there for hours,” she goes on, her voice smooth and low, like storytelling is her life’s work. “I told you about my family, my hopes, my dreams, my fears. You, on the other hand, only told me about your work, which at the time was on the up and up. Then you told me you were moving to Panama the next week. I had only spent two hours with you, but that bit of information gutted me.”

“I’m sorry.” I press her hand to my chest tighter. I have no idea why I’m apologizing other than the fact her story is playing out like a sappy-ass movie in my head, and I feel like shit for letting her down.

Goldie shrugs. “I should have walked away. The rain had stopped by then. Staying wasn’t like me, but I did. I didn’t do anything that was normal for me that night.”

My heart speeds. She no doubt feels it.

“The hustle and bustle of the bar melted away around us. There was only you and me. Our connection was pure magic. Even though I had hours to drive home, we stayed until last call, not that we needed it. We’d quit drinking hours earlier. That night, I didn’t care about anything or anyone else but you, and in my heart, I prayed you felt the same way. Because, if you didn’t, I knew it would tear my heart in half. I let myself get lost in an older man with rugged good looks that made him more interesting than handsome, even though he was plenty of that.”

Fuck.

All my blood shoots straight to my cock. If this story doesn't end the way I want it to, I'll kick my own ass for letting her walk out of that bar and my life.

Fuck me—my fictional life.

“When the lights came on, it was like a big bucket of ice water on the best night of my life. Reality slapped us in the face, and my dream night with a stranger who I didn't want to let go was about to end. I reverted back to the normal me—awkward, tongue-tied, and self-conscious. I'd never given a strange man in a bar any attention, let alone spilled my life story and shared my deepest secrets with. I didn't recognize myself. The only thing I could think of was getting out of there so I could properly cry all the way home since my fairy tale night was about to come to an end.”

I swallow hard and do everything in my power not to wrap her up in my arms and kiss her.

And not to protect her from her brother or the cartel.

I want to do it for me.

And my dick wants a hell of a lot more than that.

“There's something about the bright lights that casts a truth after being protected by the darkness, you know?” she asks, but doesn't bother to wait for an answer. “It's like you're exposed for who you really are. You've lost that veiled filter that makes you feel free. The moment those lights popped on, I knew it would disintegrate into thin air.”

“But we're here.” I can't take it another moment. Her talk of being exposed for who you really are hits me in a place I rarely think about anymore. “That means I didn't let you walk away from me that night. Because I can tell you without a doubt, I would've chased you to the ends of the earth.”

“You didn't have to chase me.” Her voice isn't a whisper, but it is low and smooth. “In the bright lights, you stood from your stool at the bar and took my face in your strong hands for the first time and kissed me.”

“That,” I emphasize, “sounds like something I would do.”

“It was the best kiss of my life. It was new and full of promise, even though whatever connection we had was going nowhere since you were moving to Panama, and I lived in small-town America. So when you begged me not to end the night, there was no way I could leave.”

I bring my other hand to her face and cup her cheek. “Did I beg hard enough?”

“You did.” This time her words are a whisper.

A whispered dream.

I lick my lips.

Then her tone turns matter of fact. “We had one night.”

“Whoa.” I frown. “That’s it?”

I want more.

No, I fucking need more.

I need details and orgasms and positions and morning sex.

I need follow up sex in the shower. A little kink sprinkled in for fun wouldn’t hurt.

I need to know if it was fast and rough or slow and carnal.

Because I need it to be both, dammit.

But she offers me nothing.

Not one scene.

Not even goodbye sex.

My brain picks up where she left off like a highlight reel. I prefer her storytelling, but beggars can’t be choosers.

Together, we were fucking amazing. The hottest sex I’ve ever had. That fucking hotel room will never be the same.

My thoughts skid to a quick stop when she interrupts my fictional utopia. “The timing was bad.”

“That’s it?” I bite. “There’s no fucking way. I’d never let you go after a night like that.”

What can I say? There was even background music. Music mixed with bodies slapping, and her moans were the highlight.

She shrugs. “But you did. You had Panama. I couldn’t leave my mother—I was all she had. It doesn’t matter how much I’ve always wanted to see the world and live in a city with its own heartbeat—I couldn’t leave.”

“But I have a fuckload of money. I could’ve kept in touch. What the hell, Goldie. I was just thinking you were the best storyteller ever, but I take that back. I want a different ending.”

Her smile turns sly. “But if I were with you while I was at The Pink, they would’ve known about you.”

Shit. She’s right.

And this is fictional.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I drop my hands from her and take a step back.

She seems unfazed. Doesn’t even flinch. Unlike me who wants to pull her into my arms and all of a sudden become a thespian.

She moves away from me and goes straight to the kitchen. Her back is to me as she starts to load dirty dishes into the dishwasher. “We ran into each other a few months ago. It’s all history from there.”

“That’s it?” I demand.

“Yep,” she quips in a high voice. “Now we can keep our stories straight.”

I stand here in the middle of her apartment that feels like a thrift store. It looks like it was curated over the last five decades. Nothing makes sense but it works.

Weirdly, it’s just like her.

“Has that happened to you before?” I demand. I need to know if she met some stranger in a rainstorm, had the one-night stand of her life, and fell in love.

She doesn't turn to look at me. "No. I wish that would happen. But then again, I guess I have to be brave enough to put myself out there to allow the universe to let something that magical happen."

I exhale, relieved the backstory she created for us is just as unreal as our fake engagement, even though I shouldn't give a shit.

But when she was describing every detail, I could only see us. The thought of her replacing me with someone else is...

As depressing as me thinking like a chick at this exact moment!

I need to get my shit together.

I drag my hand through my hair and do everything I can to focus on cartels and cocaine. "I have no idea how Dex is going to receive me tomorrow. I think we both know he'll be an asshole to you. My cell will act as a wire and agents will be down the street. If something goes south, they'll be close."

She flips the water on to wash her hands before grabbing a towel. When she finally turns to face me, she's back to nervous and inhibited. "That makes me feel better."

"Don't leave my side," I demand. "Not to use the bathroom. Not to check your lipstick. Not for anything. Prepare for me to be the most obsessive, possessive, and jealous man on the planet. If you're okay with that, you'll be just fine."

She rolls her eyes. "So you're a controlling jerk. Got it."

I hold up a finger. "That's not what I said."

"Isn't it the same thing?"

"Goldie, if you think that's the same thing, then you've never had anyone obsessed with you. Prepare yourself for a new experience."

"Ouch," she feigns. "Thanks for pointing that out."

"You're the one who said you haven't been brave enough to let the universe do its thing."

She holds her arms out dramatically and emphasizes her words. “Well, I feel like *me* doing *this* with *you* is pretty darn brave. And newsflash, Special Agent Jennings, I don’t like it one bit.”

“It is brave,” I confirm. “That’s why I want to make sure you know that I’ll take care of you. But you also need to cooperate so I can do my job.”

She shakes her head and pushes off from the counter where she was leaning and marches past me in a huff.

“Where are you going?” I call after her.

“To get you a pillow,” she snaps from the other room. “I’ve had about all the cooperation I can handle for one day.”

I take this opportunity to adjust my cock in my pants. Trying to sleep on the sofa with her in the next room after thoughts of fucking her until the sun comes up was not what I had in mind when I decided to drive by to see if she’d skipped town on me. The night took a sharp turn toward the intersection of blue balls and insomnia.

She returns and shoves a pillow, sheet, and blanket into my arms ranging in every color under the sun. The mismatch matches her apartment. “Good luck not getting a backache.”

I can’t help but smile. “Is that a dig at my age?”

“Maybe. But seriously, my sofa is lumpy. May the leaping cows be ever in your favor.”

“I didn’t take you to be a dystopian fan after the story you told tonight.”

“My entire life is playing out as dystopian fiction right now, King.”

She bites my name out as if it were a curse word, which I know never touches her lips. It doesn’t sound anything like it did in my head when I imagined having my mouth between her legs at four in the morning in the hotel room that was so epic, it should be retired and never used again because there’s no way anything could live up to that fantasy.

“Goodnight,” she goes on. “I don’t have an extra toothbrush, and if you even think about using mine, I will tear up the contract and head north.”

“But I’ve had my tongue in your mouth,” I point out, remembering it in great detail. “What’s the difference?”

“That fact that you’d even say that makes me want to sleep with my toothbrush under my pillow.” She closes her eyes, holds her hands up, and sighs like she’s about to give up on life solely because of me. “Goodnight, Agent Jennings.”

I watch her tight ass encased in biker shorts that are too short to actually bike in.

I have no fucking idea what they are, but I like them.

“Goodnight, Marigold.”

And with that, her bedroom door slams. Even the turn of her lock sounds frustrated.

I toss the pillow and blankets on the sofa and head to the bathroom.

Undercover work might not be my forte, but I don’t think it’s going to be hard to be possessive of Goldie Carter.

That might be the easiest thing I’ve ever done.



Goldie

MY HEAD FALLS to my pillow, and I stare into my shadowed room.

I lied to King.

I’m not brave.

Not at all.

It’s why nothing exciting or sensual or spur of the moment ever happens to me.

My one long-term boyfriend back in Virginia enjoyed missionary. That little depressing detail might as well be the slogan for my life.

Safe. Basic. Boring.

I've always wanted more.

But not this.

This is the kind of more that only plays out on cable TV and causes me sleepless nights.

I'm not cut out for this kind of more. The only kind of more I want is the fantasy love story that spilled from my lips when King demanded I create our fake history. I was so lost in it, I could have gone on and on and on.

Sans Dex and the Carter Cartel.

The fact I have to carry the same last name as my half-brother is bad enough.

I'm banking on King being good at his job. I need this to be over. I'm not sure how many more times I can walk into The Pink and see it crawling with Dex's crew like a bad rat infestation.

Because that's just what they are.

I wish I could burn the place down and start over.

I roll to my side but my extra pillow that is usually tucked to my chest is missing. Knowing it's being slept on by the man on the other side of my door is strangely comforting and equally nerve racking. I'm not sure which one wins.

I just know tonight could've ended a lot differently had he not been stalking my apartment.

And I shouldn't get excited when he touches me.

It's fake.

So very fake. He needs me for my last name.

And that's it.

FAMILY

Goldie

His strong fingers touch my jaw as he forces my gaze to him. All I see are blue eyes that are somehow bluer today. It's either from the color of his tie or the early afternoon rays bathing us where we sit in the car.

I'm frozen in my seat despite the warm sun.

"Goldie."

"Hmm?"

"You okay?"

I give my head a tiny shake. "No. I'm definitely not okay. Can we please get this done so we can leave?"

The day has been a blur. I woke up to the smell of coffee. When I followed the aroma, King was standing in my kitchen wearing only a pair of jeans. No shirt. No shoes.

Naked other than jeans.

I'm not sure which one felt more intimate as his faded jeans hung perfectly on his narrow hips. I was overtaken by his rippled muscles and black underwear band winking at me. It was all so much, I barely realized he was frying eggs.

After eating breakfast and complaining about the lack of food in my refrigerator, he left me to go to work and told me he'd be back after he did something with a judge and reports and other whatnots that I can't remember right now. He told me to

stay in my apartment with the door locked and not to open it for anyone. I responded that I was not an idiot.

He smirked, told me what time to be ready, and that he would return with groceries because my food was crap.

He used another word, but that's what he meant.

I guess the DEA is putting up cameras on a light pole outside The Colony to keep an eye on the place after what happened last night. I felt a lot better about him leaving for the day.

“Yeah, let's get this over with,” he says, dragging me back to reality in the parking lot of The Pink. My palms are a sweaty mess from nerves. “You're sure you can do this? I'll cancel the meeting and make an excuse if you're not okay.”

I look into his piercing eyes and study him. His hair is perfectly styled and looks nothing like the ruffled mess it was when he made me breakfast this morning. He's in a crisp black suit, and I'm in a little black dress. It's like we coordinated our outfits like a real couple. I decided to go for it and wear something totally different from the conservative dresses I wore when I was in and out of The Pink on a daily basis for work.

This is a baby doll dress with poofy organza cap sleeves and layered taffeta and more organza on the bottom. It hits the middle of my bare thighs, has a neckline so wide and low, there's no space for a bra. My boobs are front and center. They don't look bad if I do say so myself.

I grabbed this dress on clearance before I moved. I thought living in Miami would include nightlife and bars and eccentric new friends.

I was a different person then ... one who was optimistic and excited about my new life.

I wonder what glass-is-half-full Goldie would say back then if I told her she'd be wearing her clearance-rack sexy LBD when she worked undercover as a confidential informant for the DEA.

Well, since I am her, I know exactly what she'd say. She'd say, *that's cute* and laugh at me.

But here I am, glass-is-half-empty Goldie with hot, broody King.

We're quite a pair.

I don't care what the occasion is—this dress was made for my body whether or not it was made for my psyche. Tonight, I need to feel like someone new. I decided I'm going to walk into The Pink like it's mine.

Which half of it is.

King and I look good together. I can't argue that. Gorgeous and formal—ready to take on money launderers and family drama. A dinner that will no doubt end in the fiery pits where the Devil himself lives.

I swallow my fears and pull down the vanity mirror to check my lipstick before flipping it closed and turning to him. "I'll follow your lead, stick to your side, and put up with Dex being a jerk. I've hyped myself up. I even wore a dress that isn't me hoping it will give me some good juju. Let's do this before I chicken out."

King doesn't move. His stare drags down my body as slow and smooth as a drip of thick honey. It's not the first time he's done that tonight. But this time, his eyes bounce back up to my face with a frown marring his square jaw. "Did you always dress like this when you worked here?"

I look down and all I see are the swell of my breasts that are perfectly supported by the bodice. Now that I think about it, the top looks like something from a different century.

I look back at King. "Not really. I decided I needed to be a little extra tonight. Step out of my shell and wear something I normally wouldn't. You don't like it?"

His exhale fans my skin like a caress. "You have every reason to be confident in that dress, Goldie. I'm going to have my work cut out for me tonight."

King's attention is pulled from me when the phone rings over the Bluetooth. He touches the screen and doesn't bother with a customary greeting. "What?"

“Honest to God, King, this is more entertaining than the Carter Cartel, but you’re going to be late. Consider this your wake-up call to get your shit together and focus on drug dealers.”

“I’m focused, asshole,” King says, but never looks away from me.

“Right. If you say so.”

“We’re going in.” King doesn’t say goodbye and disconnects the call.

“Who was that?” I ask.

“Micah. He’s giving me shit. Hang tight—I’ll get your door.”

“Wait.” I grab his forearm to stop him. “They can hear us?”

He nods. “We’re smarter than the bad guys. Everything said tonight will be recorded.”

I’ve just gotten comfortable being around King, but I had no idea anyone else was listening to us. That’s a whole new level for a wedding planner to adjust to.

King gets out of the car and opens my door. I give him my hand and he pulls me to my feet, never letting me go. As we walk up to the faded mammoth estate, I’ll never forget what it was like when I first started working here after I moved to Miami.

I thought The Pink was gorgeous and mysterious. I guess it would to anyone with an outside perspective. It’s why it’s one of the most sought-after venues in Miami. Who needs décor when it’s built in?

Now I find it ominous and daunting. I hate everything about it.

It’s Monday. The Pink is supposed to be closed today to give staff the day off and allow crews to come in and deep clean after the weekends’ events and gardeners to do their twice weekly manicuring.

But not tonight. There are a few cars parked in the employee lot and Dex’s electric blue Lamborghini is parked in his reserved spot closest to the entrance.

That's so Dex, elevating himself above everyone. One more reason to hate him.

King holds my hand in his big one in a tight grip and doesn't let go until we arrive at the entrance and he opens the door for me. He directs me to the dining room with his warm hand firmly placed so low on my back, his fingertips flirt with my bottom.

Acting the part.

He's very good at it.

I need to up my game.

We're a few minutes early and head to the bar. Oliver, who rarely gets a day off, is standing behind it and beams at me while trying to stay professional. "Goldie! I miss you, girl. I hear congratulations are in order."

I return his smile, which might be my only genuine one tonight. "I miss you too. How's Lonnie?"

"Great. He graduated from nursing school last week."

"Tell him congrats for me." It's time to settle into my role and who better to practice on than my favorite bartender. I turn to King. "Daniel, this is Ollie. He's one of the last holdouts from before my father died. Ollie, my fiancé, Daniel Armstrong."

There.

That wasn't so bad.

I can do this after all.

"You're Goldie approved," King states. "I like you already."

Ollie reaches for the bottle of cabernet. It might be the house wine, but it's way better than I buy for myself at home. "Can I get you your normal, Goldie?"

I'm about to accept his offer and tell him to pour with a heavy hand, because I'll need it.

"Goldie won't be drinking for a while." King interrupts and looks down at me. I frown and am about to open my mouth to

ask why when he blows my mind. “For another seven months and two weeks. Right, baby?”

I suck in a breath, but before I can scream or kick him in the shin for altering our love story without discussing it with me first, he leans in and seals a kiss right on my smacker.

“You’re pregnant?” Ollie exclaims. “That’s amazing. I didn’t know you liked kids! Congratulations.”

“I’m—I…” My words come out jagged because I can’t focus on anything other than how happy King is about his lie. His smile has swelled into a huge grin. To anyone else, he’d look like a proud, expectant father. But to me, he just looks like an arrogant agent who’s not making this any easier on me. Finally I turn to Ollie. “It was a surprise.”

“Best surprise ever,” King exclaims. His hand that was flirting with my bottom just moments ago slides all the way down and gives me a squeeze. “Goldie’s coming around to the idea. She’s too polite to let on that she’s not crazy about kids.” My eyes widen in horror as King turns to Ollie. “I’m just lucky nature took its course.” He turns back to me and takes my mouth for the second time before gazing into my eyes and professes, “I could have ten babies with you and it wouldn’t be enough.”

“Ten?” I repeat.

He shakes his head. “Let’s make it a dozen. Hell, a baker’s dozen. It’s going to be fun keeping you pregnant.”

My face heats. Ollie will most likely think it’s from embarrassment from King talking about all the sex that will be required to make thirteen babies, when really, it’s from anger.

I place my hand low on his abs starting just above his belt and slowly slide up before landing on one of his rock-hard pecs. I might enjoy it too much after ogling him shirtless in my kitchen today. “Darling, there’s no way we can have thirteen children. At your age, I’ll have to wheel you into their high school graduations. You may have one. If it doesn’t turn out to be a menace, I’ll think about two.”

His eyes dance with a glimmer. If eyes could speak, they'd say *touché, my fake love*. He shakes his head. "This is why I love you. You'll keep me young drinking from your fountain of youth."

I turn to Ollie, finding it easy to pretend with someone I know. "Pregnancy makes my broody fiancé turn sappy. And here I thought I'd be dealing with hormonal mood swings." I look up at King and smile. "When, really, you're the hormonal one. It's okay, Danny. You're getting in touch with your feminine side. You've surely given me a girl."

"Or a gay son," Ollie interjects with a smug smile. "Just saying."

I smile at my friend who I miss. "Love you, Ollie."

My booty gets another squeeze. "Don't make me jealous. You know how I get."

"A-hem."

King doesn't let my bottom go when he swings us around. That throat being cleared was not a friendly sound, and now I know why.

Dex.

"No offense, but I got tired of waiting," Dex grits before stating with contempt, "You're pregnant."

Nothing has felt more unnatural in my life, but I bring my hand up to my fake baby bump. "I am."

Dex glares at me. "Congratulations."

Nothing has sounded as opposite of the salutation than the way he offered that word.

I lean into King who supports my weight like he's done it a million times and smile. "Thank you."

Dex looks at King. "Since you have a designated driver, would you like anything before we sit down?"

King shakes his head. "I'll stick with water."

Dex rolls his eyes and turns to Ollie. "Whiskey neat."

“Sir.” Ollie doesn’t waste a second and reaches to the top shelf for the most expensive bottle.

Dex snaps a finger and Rand appears like the minion he is. “Pat Mr. Armstrong down. Guests don’t carry in The Pink.”

King lets go of me and takes a step forward to raise his arms. I hold my breath as Rand checks him for weapons. King turns a one-eighty wearing a bland expression on his face like he does this all the time. He finally turns once more before relaxing his arms.

That’s when Rand starts for me.

I take a step back on my spiked heels.

And King steps in front of me.

The tone of his voice is one I’ve never heard before. “If you even think about fucking touching her, you’ll end up with nine fingers instead of ten. And that’ll just be a warning. I will take you down and won’t need a weapon to do it.”

Rand pauses before looking back at Dex. “Boss?”

Dex picks up his whiskey and waves off the man that sends chills down my spine. “It’s fine. Let’s get this meeting going. I want the rest of the evening to myself.”

I exhale.

Finally. Something we can agree on.

King collects my hand in his and gives it a squeeze. Then he presses his lips to my temple and murmurs, “Time for dinner, baby.”

This might have been fun and games, trying out my new undercover role on Ollie. That was safe and even flirty.

I have a feeling the rest of the night will be nothing but a challenge.

Maybe I can feign sickness.

I am in my first trimester, after all.



King

“IMPRESSIVE,” Dex says and tosses his cloth napkin onto a dirty dessert plate. “If this is true, I underestimated you.”

I’m reclined in my chair with Goldie tight at my side. I finger the ends of her thick wavy hair where my arm is draped over the back of her chair, but I never take my eyes off Dex. “Don’t ever do that. I don’t move drugs and have five times the amount of legitimate business as you. I’m not on anyone’s radar. Not even the IRS, because my books are fucking tight. Even if I did get audited, I have ways to prove every expense and revenue stream on my balance sheets. My hands are clean, Dex. That’s why I can charge the rates I do.”

“About that,” Dex muses. “Your rates are fucking insane. I don’t pay anyone that kind of cut.”

“My guess is you don’t have anyone who can move the amounts of cash I can. And I know you’ve got cash. This isn’t the eighties in Colombia. You can’t sit on mountains of it and live in Miami without drawing the kind of attention you do not want. I bank everywhere and own businesses in Central America to support it. You do not. I have the means to transport your cash safely. It will be deposited as payments for services rendered in my banks in Panama. I’ll set up investment accounts for you offshore in the Caribbean. You might be able to pay your runners, traffickers, and whores with cash, but that’s it. But if you want respect in the legitimate world, you need money in the bank. Hell, you need it in the bank if you want to buy a house or go crazy buying shoes online. I don’t give a fuck what you do with it, but the money I clean for you will be legit, and no one will question where it came from.”

Dex looks between me and Goldie and shakes his head.

He’s going to bite. The security I’m offering him is second to none.

None being the operative word since the only thing he'll be offered is thirty to life in a federal penitentiary.

Dex stares at the butter knife he's spinning in circles on the table in front of him. "I've checked in on you. You say you found me and got into The Pink because of Cory Shaw."

"I did," I confirm.

Goldie shifts her weight.

Uncrosses her legs.

Crosses them the other way.

That damn dress sits high on the middle of her thighs, her fair, smooth skin teasing me.

Dex looks up at me. "The thing is, we can't find Cory. He hasn't reported in."

"Sounds like you have a personnel problem," I say, letting go of Goldie's hair to run my fingertips along the bare skin of her neck to try and calm her. "No offense, but my reputation is impeccable. I'm not exactly setting up tee times with the cartel for shits and giggles. I have no desire to talk to anyone in your organization unless it's necessary. I'm not interested in building friendships. I'm here to make money. I haven't needed to talk to Cory, so I haven't."

Goldie finally relaxes into the side of my chest. Dex doesn't miss it. "So you're saying when you become my brother-in-law, we're not going to spend Christmas together?"

A cartel Christmas.

I want to laugh in his face at the thought.

"Fuck no," I say. "We are not family and never will be. You made sure of that."

And that's the end of Goldie relaxing. She's as tense as a tightly strung cord.

"Speaking of family, *sis*." Dex leans forward and rests his forearms on the table to address my fake fiancée for the first time since we sat down. "Let's talk about the fact you couldn't wait to haul your bony ass out of here, but you're willing to

hook up with a drug money launderer. A bit of a double standard for you. One I do not appreciate.”

“Dex.” His name rolls off my lips as a demand. When he shifts his beady glare to me, I feed him the abbreviated version of the story Goldie created. “Goldie and I met years ago, and the timing didn’t work. We ran into each other a few months back and it’s all history. You wanted Goldie here tonight to meet with me, so she came. But you will do business with me and only me. If you can’t do that, we’ll leave right now. Goldie signed her share of The Pink over to you—you’re lucky that happened before I came into her life again. But that’s history. I want to look forward. Outside of my legitimate business, I clean cash. You’ve got a shit ton of dirty cash. It makes sense that we work together. Thirty-five percent. Take it or leave it. The risk isn’t worth anything less to me.”

Dex picks up the fucking butter knife he can’t stop fidgeting with and pokes the table with it. “I have one condition.”

I shake my head, because I will lower the rate to get him to sign, but doing it too early will make me unbelievable and weak. I can’t be either of those things right now. “Told you I’m not lowering my rate—”

“No,” Dex interrupts and leans back in his chair, still fucking around with that damn knife. “I’ll pay the rate.”

I freeze, because I did not expect that. “What other condition would you have?”

“I want Goldie to come back to The Pink.”

It’s my turn to tense in my chair. Goldie’s hand lands on my thigh, and she squeezes. I glance over to see her skin has paled.

“No,” I growl. “No fucking way.”

“The clients miss her. She became the face of The Pink that everyone wanted to see. I’ve tried to replace her, but none of them have stuck. The customers want her back.”

“You’ve got a lot of nerve, Carter.” Goldie jerks when I slam my hand flat on the table in front of me before I point to the asshole who I watched try to break into Goldie’s apartment

last night. Rand is standing to the side of our table. “I came home to my woman’s apartment last night, and that asshole was trying to break in. Do not tell me that wasn’t an order from you. It was, and we all know it.”

Rand moves in, but he’s not alone. Men move in from where they were watching in the shadows.

“What the fuck is this about?” I demand for the sole sake of letting Brax and Micah know what’s going on. “Guns drawn at a business meeting? You must not need my services at all.”

Dex sits unfazed. “You threaten my people, I’ll react. Certainly you’re not new to this.”

Goldie’s hand rests lightly on my forearm. “Daniel—”

I turn to her and do everything I can to soften my expression. “Hang on, baby, and we’ll be out of here. I promise you’ll never have to come back.”

“If you want my business, she will,” Dex keeps on. “That’s the deal. Of course, she’ll be paid. I’ll even double her salary since I now own The Pink outright. I’m not a complete monster.”

“Fuck you,” I grit. Nothing feels like an act right now. The fear on Goldie’s face last night told a different story, and not a fictional one. A real fucking one that I have a feeling she hasn’t shared.

That ends the moment we get back to her apartment. She’s telling me everything.

Dex thinks he has the upper hand. There’s no way he’s going to bend unless I walk out of here, and he realizes he’ll never get Goldie back into this place again.

“Good luck finding someone else to get that amount of cash cleaned and back into your accounts.” My chair scrapes across the floor when I stand and offer Goldie my hand. “Let’s go, baby.”

That’s when Rand moves, and he does it without an order from his boss.

But he doesn’t make a move for me.

He moves straight to Goldie.

I reach over her and cut him off. He's focused on his target and doesn't see me coming.

I punch him right in the throat.

Everything happens at the same time.

Goldie stumbles back and screams.

Rand's gun fumbles to the floor with a clank, right before he hits the deck holding his neck. I push Goldie to the side and kick the gun across the marble before Rand can reach for it.

Even if I could get to it, there's nothing I can do with one pistol when there's a room of long guns pointed at me.

And there are. They close in on us, but halt at the last minute when Dex yells, "Stop!"

I'm breathing deeply, and Goldie is plastered to my back like a second skin. I dare anyone to pry her from me.

If I don't save this operation right fucking now, the DEA and Miami SWAT will bust through doors and windows with what they've heard. I know I would if I were managing this operation.

I focus on Dex and ignore the choking sounds coming from the floor next to us. "I might've walked in here unarmed as a sign of good faith to you, but do not mistake that as a sign of weakness. I might be a businessman, but that does not mean I'm a one-man army. My entire organization knows we're here. If something happens to either one of us, you will have a battle on your hands that will make the cartel wars of the nineties look like a theme park parade. When I warn someone not to touch Goldie, that warning is not empty. You do not want to fuck with me, Dex, just like I don't want to fuck with you."

Dex never shifts in his chair but he does tip his head to study us. With the flick of his hand, he orders, "Stand down."

Goldie clenches me tighter. It's all I can do to pry her away from my suit jacket, pull her to my side, and wrap her in my

arms. She tucks herself into me like I'm her home and she never wants to leave.

"When is the wedding?" Dex asks, bringing this shit-show dinner to a new level of weird, like he didn't just have five weapons aimed at us. Rand struggles to his feet—red in the face and clutching his neck. If I didn't have Goldie to worry about, I would've done worse.

I drag my hand up Goldie's back and bury it into her dark, thick hair. She's trembling. I need to find a way to salvage this ASAP or give it up and get her the fuck out of here. "Next month."

"You'll do it here."

Fuck.

My plan was to get Dex to sign on the dotted line and then deal with the rest over the phone. But he proves he's either Jekyll and Hyde or has shit up his sleeve that I want nothing to do with.

And Goldie is definitely done. I'll let her give me any information she has on Carter and The Pink, but she'll never walk into this place again.

I won't allow it.

I shake my head. "It's planned. We're getting married in Virginia next month. Goldie wanted to do it at her home."

Dex motions around us. "This is her home."

Goldie huffs into my chest, and I look around at the armed guards surrounding us. "Yeah, I can tell. You've made it real welcoming for her."

"It will be my wedding gift to my little sister." Dex stands and walks around the table. He slides a hand into his trouser pockets and reaches out to try to touch Goldie's arm with the other.

I shift her back. "That warning goes for you too. Goldie is mine. No one touches her."

Dex's brows rise, and fuck me, I think he's impressed. He pulls in a deep breath and rocks back on his heels. "Twenty-five percent. That's it. I've never paid more than fifteen. We'll see if you can fulfill your promise to double my cashflow. I'll believe it when I see it."

I don't breathe a sigh of relief. Not yet. Not until I can get us far away from this place. "I'll be in touch."

"And the wedding. I insist. It's the least I can do. But it needs to be soon." Dex adds and shifts his gaze to the woman in my arms and lowers his voice to feign a whisper. "You don't want to look pregnant in your wedding pictures, do you, Goldie? My perfect and proper sister knocked up out of wedlock. You really are pushing the boundaries, aren't you?"

Goldie turns her head against my chest to look up at Dex, but she doesn't make a move away from me. She shocks me when she does something I told her not to do when we were preparing for tonight. Engage with her brother and input herself into business. "I'll agree to the wedding if you promise that Daniel and I are safe from the cartel. Forever. You got The Pink and that's what you wanted. But what happened tonight will never happen again. You'll treat my fiancé like family—real family. Not like you ever treated me."

Dex looks impressed.

Actually impressed.

Hell, I am too.

This shit will be wrapped up long before any wedding can happen.

Dex nods. "I'll have scheduling reach out to you. We'll get you the soonest available date."

If what Goldie says is true, that'll be two years from now.

Easy.

"I'll cancel and move things around for you. We'll get it done fast."

Shit.

I'm about to argue, but Goldie continues to negotiate the deal. "I have no desire to get married fast. Being pregnant in pictures is just fine with me." She tips her head to me. "If you're okay with that. Our love for our baby will be preserved forever."

I press my lips to her forehead. "Whatever you want, baby."

The fear that's been etched in her expression fades when the new-to-me nickname hits her like I use it daily.

She turns back to her brother. "It will be the date we want. I get one wedding. I want it to be perfect but small. And I want my mother here. That won't be easy. But if you agree to do business with Daniel and give us the safety you afford to everyone else who works for you, then I agree to be married here."

Dex looks at me and holds his arms out. "My little sister ... she acts like it's a burden to be married here. Twenty-five percent and a wedding. We have a deal."

I shift Goldie to my other side and offer the leader of the Carter Cartel my right hand. "I'll get with you about the first shipment. I'm ready to get this shit going."

"And get married," Dex amends.

"Only if you agree to Goldie's terms," I remind him.

"Family," Dex drawls, making the word sound dirty, like something you'd scrape off the bottom of your shoe after walking through the pits of hell. "I'll do anything for family."

I reach to the table and grab Goldie's small purse to hand it to her. "I'll be in touch."

"You'll both be in touch." Dex looks to Goldie like he's just called checkmate in some sick game of chess. "Pregnant or not, you'll make a beautiful bride, Goldie. I can't wait."

ROMEO

Goldie

“What just happened?”

King squeezes my hand as he walks nonchalantly to his car while scanning the parking lot and surrounding acres like we’ll be attacked on our way out.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here before we talk.” His voice is so low and muffled, I wonder if he even moved his lips.

“Sorry,” I whisper.

But seriously.

A wedding? My wedding? And at The Pink?

I will my heart to slow as we walk to King’s car. He beeps the locks and opens the passenger door for me. I climb in and finally breathe a sigh of relief.

King is in the car, and we’re out of the parking lot in no time.

“We’re on our way out. Did you get all of that?”

I turn to him. “Are you talking to me?”

“No. I’m talking to Brax and Micah.”

The Bluetooth immediately rings over the speakers. He touches the screen to connect the call before reaching over to give my hand a squeeze.

I hold on and don’t let go. I pull it closer to me, wrap my other hand around our connection, and close my eyes.

We're alone, and we don't have to fake it for anyone.

But I don't care.

That was too much.

"That was a fucking lot," Micah says as his voice booms through the car. "Do you know how close we were to coming in?"

King takes a left turn out of The Pink. I've never been so relieved.

"I do know. I thought I was going to have to give you the signal. That did not go the way I planned. I was counting on Dex to be more motivated by money than revenge. It appears he holds a grudge."

I interject into the conversation without being asked. "I could've told you that."

King glances over at me. "You could've filled me in on that little bit of information."

I shake my head. "He's the leader of a cartel. I assumed you'd know that."

"Let's agree from here on out that I know nothing," King says. "Before we walk into the lion's den, I need to know everything so I can be prepared."

My eyes go wide, and I turn to him in disbelief. "Like you're one to talk. I'm pregnant, King. Pregnant! That's kind of a big deal and would've been nice to know."

"I came up with that on the fly," he bites as he merges onto the interstate. "You've never done this, but sometimes you have to improvise."

"Oh, please school me on the ins and outs of undercover work. You said yourself you hardly ever do this. Don't act like you're the expert. I'm not sure if you remember our first meeting. There was nothing smooth about you. You were so awkward. I wrote it off to you having social anxieties."

King doesn't take his eyes off the traffic, hits the gas to change lanes, and hops into the HOV. "I spent years fighting in

deserts, jungles, and every other crevice of hell on earth. I do not have one fucking ounce of anxiety.”

“You did that day,” I argue. All the tension from our time with Dex has exploded, and I hardly recognize myself. I never argue with anyone. “You were awkward as heck. All I’m saying is that Dex was not going to take your deal until I agreed for us to be married at The Pink. I know Dex. He doesn’t do anything unless it’s on his terms. We had to give in to something to get out of there in one piece, and you weren’t relenting to anything.”

King throws me a frustrated glare. “If I gave in to his terms too fast, he would’ve seen right through me, and I would’ve come across weak. I was planning on giving him whatever percentage he wanted, I just needed a minute.”

“He wasn’t going to agree without more. The minute we sat down at dinner and he tried to make small talk with me about trying to make it on my own as a wedding planner, I knew what he was doing.”

“Baby, you don’t have to tell me what he was doing. I knew what he wanted the moment he wouldn’t take the meet with me without you there.”

Baby?

We’re alone.

There’s no reason for the baby.

“Ah, hello?” A different voice echoes through the car. I totally forgot Micah was on the phone, but this is Brax. “As much fun as it is to be a fly on your wall, let us know when you two lovebirds are done arguing. We’ve got another issue on our hands.”

“Add it to my fucking list,” King bites. “Now I’ve got to find a way to wrap this shit up before a wedding.”

“You’re being followed,” Micah says, like it’s no big deal.

I gasp and try to look out the back. “Who’s following us?”

“Don’t turn around.” That’s when I realize I’m still holding King’s hand because he jerks me to stop, but I push his hand

away. “What kind of car is it?”

“Red McLaren. You know, super lowkey,” Micah drawls. “No offense, Goldie, but the Carter Cartel is full of fucking idiots.”

“None taken,” I mutter as I scrunch down in my seat and glance at the side mirror before turning back to King. “What do we do?”

King doesn’t look stressed or upset or even riled. “Well, this cancels the debriefing at the office. And there’s no way I can go home.”

“Then where are we going? Can they not stop them or something?”

“There’s no reason to stop him. He’s not doing anything wrong.” King’s gaze juts between the highway in front of us and the rearview mirror. “We’ll go to your place.”

I turn to him. “Why my place?”

“Because that’s what they expect. They already know where you live. My guess is they want to follow me. And if they’re waiting on me to leave, I can’t really leave you alone. We’ll wait it out.”

“Wait it out.” I’ve already had one night with King Jennings. I’m not sure I can handle two. “How will we know how long to wait it out?”

“Pole cameras,” Brax reminds me of what they did today. “We’ve got eyes on your complex and up and down the streets. We’ll know if they’re stalking you.”

I lean my head back, close my eyes, and mutter, “Great. I can’t believe I’m here all over again.”

“Again?” Fingers touch my chin, and I’m forced to look at my agent. “What do you mean again?”

“I’ve been through this once. It wasn’t fun the first time, but I guess if there are pole cameras this time around, it makes it all better.”

“You should get to the bottom of that,” Brax says, matter-of-factly with zero emotion.

Meanwhile, I've got all the emotions flowing through my veins, and none of them are good.

"You think?" King bites. "I'm going to mute you asswipes until we get to Goldie's. Follow us and make sure I get her in okay. We'll debrief tomorrow morning. The wire goes up tomorrow. I want to know every fucking word uttered by Dex Carter, then I've got to arrange for the first cash pick up."

Micah laughs. He actually laughs. "I beg you, don't mute us. I haven't had this much fun since I had to listen to Brax and Landyn six years ago."

"Fuck that. I'm hanging up," King says. "Call me if this turns into something other than a stalker."

King reaches forward and disconnects the call. Quiet blankets the car other than the hum of the engine and road below us.

"You didn't have to hang up. Today has been a lot. I've decided I'm not speaking to you for the rest of the day." I say looking out the window, watching the McLaren swerve in and out of lanes four cars back to keep an eye on us.

An audible sigh is released next to me. When I look over, King is driving with his right hand. His left elbow leans on the edge of the window with his head resting in his hand.

If there were ever a graphic of a man giving up on life, it would be him.

I thought tonight was going to be it. I'd play my part and never have to return to The Pink.

But here I am pregnant and getting married at the very place I hate.

As we speed down the highway with someone on our tail, I finally ask something I've been dying to know.

"King?"

He drags a hand through his hair, mussing it in a way I can't stop thinking about. He's not Daniel when he's like this.

This is pure King.

"I thought you weren't talking to me."

“I need to ask you a question.”

He sighs again. “Ask away.”

“Why did you say that I’m pregnant?”

“Because you said I liked olives.” His answer is quick and efficient, as simple as the answer to two plus two.

I gape at him. “Seriously? That’s so petty.”

“No, it’s brilliant. You’re pregnant. Who wants to fuck with a pregnant woman? Other than Daniel. I’m sure he’ll be happy to do that. But you know what I mean. If anyone has any boundaries at all, the fact that you’re with child might mean something to someone. It was worth a shot to keep you safe.”

I stare at him.

“I don’t understand you,” I whisper.

“I don’t understand women in general, so we’re even,” he mutters. “Speaking of, I need to make a phone call.”

This time he doesn’t mess with the Bluetooth and picks up his phone. “Hey. How’s it going?”

Pause.

“Yeah, about that. I’m not going to be home tonight.”

I gasp.

He’s married?

Pause.

“Well, if you want me to leave my informant in danger and lead the cartel to the house, then sure, I’ll be home for scallopini.”

His wife wants him home for dinner!

Pause.

Pause.

King sighs.

Pause.

“I’m doing my best here, Lake. Tell Willa I’ll try to be there tomorrow, but I can’t make any promises.”

It’s even worse.

He has a daughter.

Pause.

“Tell Trippy I’ll stop by to see her by the end of the week.”

Wait.

Trippy is real.

Dying Trippy is real!

Unbelievable.

“Yeah. Love you too. Bye.”

The moment he tosses his phone into the cup holder, I exclaim, “You’re married? You kissed me and held my hand and spent the night at my house and touched my bottom, *and you’re married?*”

He frowns at me, but I don’t let him answer.

“You’re a monster. No, you’re worse than a monster. You’re a cheating monster.”

He raises his voice to match mine. “I’m not a cheater.”

“It doesn’t take sex to cheat. And it doesn’t matter that it might’ve been for show. You touched me and you have a wife. I feel horrible.” I look out the window and start talking to myself. “Like this couldn’t get any worse. He cheated, and I’m the other woman. I don’t even know what to do. I hate myself.”

He cuts into my audible thoughts. “Would you stop? Just quit talking. I’m not married, and I’m no cheater—in any way. Good God, Trippy would have my ass if I cheated.”

“Does that mean Trippy is real and dying? I thought that was just a part of your story.”

“Oh, Trippy is real, all right, but she’s not dying. Trippy is living her best life running people over with her new golf cart.”

“That’s insane. Everything you say is insane. I don’t believe a word you say. If you’re a cheater, that makes you a liar. You can drop me off. I won’t be a willing participant to the games you’re playing with women’s emotions.”

“As much as I don’t want to sleep on your lumpy-ass sofa again, if I drop you off and leave, Carter’s guy will be right back at your door, but no one will be there to stop him this time.”

I shake my head and realize we’re changing lanes to exit.

We’re almost to Colony Park.

“You’re not staying,” I utter as tears pool in my eyes. “I’ll call the police if I have to. Just plain old nine-one-one. I’m done with agents and contracts and informing anyone about anything. It’s stressful and turned me into someone I don’t want to be.”

“For fuck’s sake,” King mumbles and picks up his phone again. This time he puts it on speaker.

“What are you doing now?”

“I’m making you a better person,” he growls.

The name Lake Scanlan comes across the screen as the phone rings twice. A female voice sounds across the line and proves to have the same phone manners as King. “What now? Are you calling to tell me we won’t see you at all before we go back to Springfield?”

King glances at me with a hiked I-told-you-so brow. “Who are you to me?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” she asks.

“Who are you to me?” King repeats. “The sooner you say it, the sooner you can return to your drama-filled life.”

“You’re the most annoying brother in the world, King. And now you’ve proven you’re going crazy too. What is wrong with you?”

Sister.

Oh my gosh.

“I’m trying to prove to someone I’m single and not a cheater.”

The woman laughs.

And it’s not just a chuckle.

Like, she laughs and laughs.

“Trippy would cut off your fucking balls if you cheated on anyone. But then again, you’d have to at least commit to someone before you can be a cheater, and we all know that’s an issue for another day.”

King pulls to a stop at the end of the exit to turn toward my neighborhood. He shifts in his seat and glares at me. “Appreciate your help ... *sis*.”

“Look I know cheaters since I’m married to one. Cheaters need a certain level of chill that you’ll never have. You’re wound too tight.”

“Thanks,” he says as he stares right at me. “I guess.”

“What else would you like me to confirm?” she asks.

“That’s plenty.”

But his sister keeps talking. “That you’re a workaholic with commitment issues?”

King rolls his eyes.

“That you stopped putting the toilet seat down when you went into the Army? That you don’t call me enough? That when Trippy kills someone, it’ll be on your soul, not mine, since she bought the damn golf cart on your watch? Should I go on?”

“Nope,” King says. “That’s plenty. Talk to you tomorrow.”

“Wait, I’ve got more—”

But King touches the screen and hangs up on her.

“It’s your sister,” I whisper.

“My sister,” he confirms. “So you can calm your tits and sleep well tonight. You are not *the other woman*.”

He shakes his head and accelerates when the light turns green.

“I’m sorry. I really am. It just sounded like your wife from my perspective.”

“I’m not married, Goldie. Not even divorced. I’m not seeing anyone. Hell, I’m not even texting anyone. Does that make you feel better?”

“No,” I admit. “I’m sorry I flipped out on you. I feel horrible. It’s been a long day. I’m exhausted and emotional.”

“I never would have guessed.”

I lean in on the console and poke his shoulder with my index finger. “I’m going to blame it on the hormones. You’re the one who made me pregnant.”

This wins me a hint of a smirk as he pulls in the parking lot of Colony Park. But he says nothing.

And I don’t blame him.

“I’m really sorry. You have to be sick of me. I’ve got to be the most high-maintenance confidential informant you’ve ever worked with.”

King pulls into a spot, puts it in park, and unbuckles his seatbelt.

The next thing I know, my face is framed in his big hands and his lips devour mine.

And this isn’t like the kiss at The Pink the other day when I didn’t know who he was.

That was Daniel Armstrong saving me from getting caught by Dex.

This is different.

This is King.

He spent the night on my sofa so I wasn’t alone. He made me breakfast and stocked my refrigerator. He stood up to Dex.

And he told me I had every reason to be confident in my clearance-rack dress that made me feel prettier than I have in a long, long time.

Or maybe it was just the way King looked at me when he walked into my apartment weighed down with groceries.

He somehow unhooks my seatbelt and pulls me across the console. One of my heels falls to the car floor with a thud as he twists me across his lap. One hand dips in my hair and the other goes to my bottom.

My hands go to his jaw.

Square.

Stubbled.

Strong.

No one like King has ever touched me, and I've never touched anyone like him. There's something natural about the way we fit.

It's fake.

Or it's supposed to be.

But I've never felt anything less fake in my life.

When I'm with him, I feel alive.

In fact, I've never felt more alive in one way or another since he walked into our lunch meeting.

His hand slides down, and my dress is so short, it doesn't take long for him to find skin.

He squeezes right below my bottom.

I feel that everywhere and moan into his mouth.

He pulls me tighter and slides his hand up the back of my leg when the phone rings over the Bluetooth again.

King freezes before letting my mouth go. We're both breathing hard, and all I see are stormy blue eyes when he lets go of my leg to answer the call.

"What?" he growls.

"Hey, your highness. Just letting you know the McLaren pulled into the parking lot after you, took a slow loop to ... ah, check on you, and left," Brax says.

King's gaze drops to my breasts before focusing on my eyes again. "Where are you?"

"Across the street, Romeo," Micah barks.

I pull my swollen lips between my teeth and feel my face warm.

King's microphone. Or wire. Or whatever it is.

I'll never be able to look them in the face again.

My eyes go wide when King's hand lands back on my bottom.

His eyes are burning and intense when he says, "Let me get Goldie into her apartment, then you can go."

"Yeah, you go do that while we go back to the office and write this up and fill out a million reports," Micah adds, and doesn't sound happy about anything he just said. "This shit might be amusing as fuck, but you know we can't keep Tim from finding out about this. The recording cannot be spliced."

King licks his lips. "I know."

"Don't worry about Tim," Brax interjects. "He'll be cool."

"Oh, Tim is so not going to be cool," Micah argues.

King's eyes fall shut, and he pulls in a deep breath. "Great."

"True," Brax relents. "He's just getting back in town from taking Teagan to school. Maybe he won't listen to the recording and just let us sum it up for him."

"It is what it is. I'm hanging up," King warns and lets go of my bottom.

"Wait!" Micah tries, but King doesn't wait on anything. He disconnects the call and kills the engine.

I lower my voice. "Are you in trouble?"

"Baby." Oh, man. He might throw that word around casually, but it seeps into my pores and penetrates my entire body. It warms me all over just like he does. "The technology is good. Until I turn this mic off, they can hear everything you say."

I clamp my mouth shut.

“And no, this isn’t middle school. I’m not in trouble. And even if I were, I wouldn’t give a shit.”

“I’m a rule follower.” My hands slide down to his chest and smooth the lapels on his jacket. “I take it you’re not.”

King touches my chin to tip my face to his. “I always do the right thing, but some rules are idiotic. That means I bend them at times. Other times, it means obliterating them.”

“And this?” I trace his bottom lip softly with the tip of my index finger. “This is against the rules?”

“Micah knows every rule in the book. I think a good guess would be, yes, this is against the rules.”

I look down to my fingers that are fidgeting with his icy blue tie. “I feel bad.”

“That doesn’t do much for my confidence. That’s the last thing I thought you’d feel.”

A small smile touches my lips. “You know what I mean.”

He leans in and presses his lips to my forehead. “Let’s get inside. We can talk about that more when I’ve got you locked up for the night.”

Hmm...

Locked up by King Jennings who is single and staying the night with me again.

My life has gone from a boring, depressing one-star tale to more excitement and drama than my heart knows how to handle.

MINE

King

Call it intuition or wishful thinking, but I packed a bag. Even though when I packed it, I told myself it was because we'd be going back to the office to debrief and wearing a suit one minute longer than necessary is a crime. I'll take my BDUs over business casual, business formal, or just plain business any day.

With her shoes in one hand and her purse tucked under her arm, I claim her hand and carry my bag in the other. I'm not worried about Randall Becerra or anyone else.

I can't fucking wait to get the wire up. If I only knew what Dex said after our meeting tonight. Going live first thing in the morning is too late in my book.

"Oh no," Goldie whispers and pulls me to a stop.

I look back at her. "What's wrong?"

"Mr. Elrod."

I follow her gaze through the gate and gardens to find an old man glaring at us. He's standing in front of the door to the unit below Goldie's with a rat of a dog tucked under his arm.

She tries to pull her hand from mine, but I hold tight. "Is there a problem with Mr. Elrod?"

Goldie shakes her head, but her answer doesn't match. "Yes. So many problems."

“Goldie!” the old man yells.

The poor excuse for a dog echoes his greeting. “Ruff!”

“I saw you in that car with that man!” Mr. Elrod yells.

“What the hell?” I mutter and give her a yank. I feel like the entire fucking world is working against me. I wasn’t kidding about locking her up. I may never let her out and will be happy to stay forever.

Goldie moves when I pull her through the gate, but it’s reluctant. When we get to the stairs, Mr. Elrod comes after us. “Who are you, *sir*?”

I stop. The way he said *sir* sounds more like *boy*. I wouldn’t give a shit about either, but Goldie is clearly uncomfortable, which is not cool with me.

What he doesn’t know is I’m not new to old, nosy people. Ever since I moved back to Miami, they’re a constant in my life.

I can charm the blue hair off old ladies, and the men usually like to talk about the weather or how technology is making our society fall apart. What none of them do is call me *sir* like they’re challenging me to a duel.

“Daniel Armstrong.” I let go of Goldie’s hand and offer it to the old man. “Goldie’s fiancé.”

Goldie sucks in an audible breath.

And the old man does not accept my hand but rather bellows, “Fiancé?”

I glance at Goldie. “Are you keeping our engagement a secret?”

Goldie doesn’t have a chance to answer or yell at me.

“She hasn’t told me anything.” Mr. Elrod glares at his neighbor. “Are you the reason there was a scuffle last night outside of her apartment?”

“No, no, of course not,” Goldie says. “I had a misunderstanding with a delivery driver. That’s all. My order was mixed up. It was nothing.”

“It didn’t sound like nothing,” Mr. Elrod goes on. “One man was threatening another. I heard the whole thing. It was all I could do to keep Squirrel from barking at the commotion.”

Goldie comes to my side and this time she takes my hand and rushes for the stairs as she speaks, “I’m so sorry. It won’t happen again, I promise.”

Mr. Elrod follows us to the base of the stairs. “Hang on there, mister. I don’t know anything about you.”

“Nothing to know,” Goldie calls. “Love and marriage, ‘til death do us part. That’s all.”

Mr. Elrod raises his voice as we climb the stairs. “When’s the wedding?”

“Next year,” Goldie calls at the same time I say, “In a few weeks.”

I hear a frown in his voice. “So when is it? I need to mark my calendar.”

Goldie peeks over the railing. “It’s a small wedding. Very intimate. Family only.”

She rolls her eyes and digs a ring of keys from her purse even though Mr. Elrod keeps talking. “But I am family!”

She turns the lock, pushes the door in, and calls, “Have a nice evening!”

I follow her in and slam the door behind us when she turns to me. “Why did you tell him that? I’ll have to create an entire breakup story when this is all over. I’ll never keep up with the lies.”

“You’re a hell of a storyteller. I have confidence in you.” I toss my bag on the floor and loosen my wrinkled tie. “Are you changing first or should I? I can’t wait to get out of this.”

Goldie stands on bare feet in the middle of her apartment and stares up at me. “You’re a lot.”

I ignore that, go to her fridge, grab a beer, twist the top off, and hold it out to her. “You want one?”

“No.”

I narrow my eyes. “Wine?”

She rolls hers. “Since I’m not actually pregnant, yes. I would love a glass of wine.”

“Red? White? I got you both.”

“I’ve never met a wine I don’t like,” she says. “Fill me up—I’m going to need it. We need to talk. It’s one thing to act like we’re engaged in front of Dex, but you cannot carry on like that in front of Mr. Elrod. Or anyone else in my life for that matter.”

I dig through a drawer where I swear I saw a cork screw this morning. “Who else is in your life that I can’t tell?”

“That doesn’t matter, King. We’ll pretend for the cartel, that’s it. This is getting too complicated. Lying is bad enough. When it’s all over, I don’t want to have to lie further to cancel out the first lie. I can’t handle that.”

I pour her a glass of cab and fill it almost to the brim. With a drink in both hands, I go straight for her. She doesn’t hesitate and takes a gulp. Since I know what that tongue tastes like, my mouth actually waters when she licks a drop off her bottom lip.

Her big brown eyes angle up at me. “This is really good.”

“You’re welcome.”

She sighs. “Thank you.”

I move on from the conversation that’s happening out of order. “Here’s the thing, Goldie. I investigated you long before you knew me as Daniel Armstrong. Remember, your name is on the bank accounts. I watched you. I followed you. I studied you. Besides your mother and a couple friends in Virginia, I’ve never seen you with anyone else when you weren’t working or trying to land an event to work. You don’t go out. You come straight home, sometimes talk to Mr. Elrod, and avoid the cartel and The Pink like the plague.”

She stares up at me with blank eyes.

I cup the side of her face and run my thumb along her cheek. “Am I wrong?”

Her voice trembles. “How long did you follow me?”

I lower my voice. “Long enough to know I’m right, and long enough to know you’re innocent when it comes to the Carter Cartel.”

“So you know everything about me.” Tears brim her dark eyes. Her words are not a question. They’re an accusation.

I shake my head. “No, baby. But I’m going to make it my goal to make that happen. And not because of my case. What just happened in my car was not for show. It was for us, and I’m a selfish bastard. That’s why I want to know everything there is to know about you.”

Her tits rise and fall with heavy breaths in that damn dress that I’d like to frame so I’ll never forget tonight.

Pretending she’s mine.

Pretending she’s pregnant with mine.

And protecting her like she’s mine.

That last ... there was nothing to pretend about that. Nothing has felt more real than that for a long time.

I take her wine and set our drinks on the coffee table and frame her face in my hands, just like I did in the car a few moments ago. “I’ve got to be honest, Goldie. There was something about watching you. About knowing that you removed yourself from that situation with the cartel, and you did it on your own.”

“Now I’m back,” she says.

“I’ll take care of you. Besides Becerra trying to touch you, they weren’t going to do anything to us. Your brother wanted to flex, and he did.”

“He doesn’t trust us. That’s why he demanded I return to The Pink. He might’ve agreed to do business with you tonight, but I doubt he’ll follow through if he doesn’t get what he wants.”

“Maybe. But he’s also one of the largest importers of cocaine in the U.S. He likes his money and wants it in the bank. He’s motivated by what I can do for him. He’s not getting you back.

He had his meet in person. We gave him that. You're never returning to The Pink while he's there. I'll make sure of it."

She leans into my hand. "I'm tired, King. I was tired before you pushed your way into my life. Now I'm exhausted. And I don't know what this means."

"Do you mean this?" I lean in and press my lips to hers.

It's light and tender and nothing like me.

Hell, I haven't been like the normal me since that damn fake lunch meeting.

Her brown eyes are pleading when they confirm. "Yes, that."

"This is not fake," I confirm. "I can't help it and I'm not sorry. I'm also not going to fight it any longer. Tell me you don't feel it, Goldie. I dare you."

Her gaze drops to my mouth. I feel her swallow before she gives her head a shake in my hands. "No, I can't deny it."

I exhale and pull her in for one more kiss. "Go change. You need to chill after tonight. We'll address Dex again tomorrow. But I think we've both had enough of cartels and lies for one night."

She raises a brow. "The lies bother you?"

"Fuck, no, baby. I have no problem lying to a kingpin. I'm going to take him down for money laundering, and that money is going to lead us directly to where the drugs are originating. It doesn't get any easier than this."

"If that was easy, then I want no part of your business after tonight." She pulls my hands away from her face on a huff. "I'll be right back. I'm going to change and wash my face."

I pick up my beer and yank the phone from my pocket that's been going batshit crazy for the last five minutes.

Two calls and even more texts

From Tim.

Shit.

I skip the voicemails and go straight for the texts.

Tim – You’ve got to be shitting me.

Tim – When I helped you get to Miami, I thought you were going to be the drama-free agent. But no. You’ve hooked up with your confidential informant?

Tim – I’m going to guess that your silence confirms your guilt.

Tim – It’s late, and we just got back into town. But, yeah, I just logged in and heard the recordings from tonight.

Fuck.

Tim – In my office first thing tomorrow.

I don’t waste another moment. I want to get this shit done and focus on Goldie. I don’t give a shit what my boss says. Hell, Brax and Micah have done worse.

Me – See you then.

He hits me back immediately.

Tim – That’s it?

Me – Sorry. See you then, boss.

Tim – Fuck me.

Tim – No. Fuck you. And fuck Brax and Micah for thinking this shit is funny. My team is the badass group who likes to go rogue, and I’m the one left to pick up the pieces when my bosses make me eat shit.

Me – Thanks. It's not like I saw this coming. I appreciate it.

Tim – I'm done. See you tomorrow.

I toss my phone to the sofa and take a long pull of my beer.

Well.

That's going to suck.

HIGH STANDARDS

Goldie

King refills my glass before sitting next to me with a fresh beer.

Last night was a surprise sleepover.

Tonight King came prepared. Awfully presumptuous. After dragging me onto his lap in the parking lot for Mr. Elrod to gawk at, all I can do is sit here and think about King's expectations for the evening.

I haven't had a man sleep over in a long time, and not once since I moved to Florida. It wasn't even a week ago that King lied about his identity in a fake meeting to use me to get to Dex.

The thought should make me kick the man out of my apartment and never speak to him again.

But I can't.

That alone is making me question everything about myself.

King sits next to me taking up way more of his share of the sofa than he deserves. He pushes his way into my space and rests his thick arm behind me.

"What are we watching?"

I use the small space to shift but ignore his question. "I need to know what happens next."

He takes a drink before resting the bottle on his bare knee. He's taken comfort to a new level in my home. Not only did he bring enough food for two people to live on for at least a week, he's wearing a pair of workout shorts and a worn T-shirt.

He's not dressed to impress. It looks like he grabbed clothes that were unfolded in the dryer. Gone is his perfect suit—he's dressed for maximum comfort and to chill.

I, on the other hand, contemplated my outfit for so long it's embarrassing. King even called from the other side of the door to see if I was okay. I'm wearing an oversized linen button down and an old pair of cutoff jean shorts. I didn't want to look like I was trying too hard. I downed my first glass of wine while flipping through my closet. I needed it after tonight.

"Next," he echoes and contemplates that word. "What do you mean?"

"There are a lot of *nexts*. I don't do well with the unknown. I signed on the dotted line to be your informant, but all I've done is attend a scary meeting with you, and now you say I don't have to go back."

He shifts to face me. "We'll get to the informant part next. Today was a rush getting surveillance ready for the meeting tonight at The Pink so we could make sure we were ready for any possibility."

"You mean Dex's guys holding us at gunpoint? Because if you anticipated that, you could have warned me."

He shakes his head. "We were hardly held at gunpoint."

I lean my head back. "Multiple guns were pointed at us. That's the very definition of being held at gunpoint."

He shrugs like it's no big deal. "Dex wasn't going to do shit. It was easy to see he was bluffing."

"If you're always so clairvoyant, fill me in next time."

He bops the tip of my nose with his index finger. "I'll do my best."

“You didn’t answer my question, King.”

“We need to talk about that,” he takes another sip before setting his beer down on the coffee table. “We have meetings at the DEA tomorrow. I need to know everything you know about Dex and his organization. And The Pink for that matter.”

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know.” I don’t care if I come across anxious. I am.

King reaches up and fingers a lock of my hair but never takes his eyes off mine. “I appreciate that, but it can wait until tomorrow.”

“You don’t seem to be in much of a hurry. Why are you so calm?”

“Baby, I’ve been trying to nail the Carter Cartel for years. I am not patient or calm in general, and I’m really not when it comes to them. But tonight was a lot. You’re not used to any of this. We’re taking a break until tomorrow.”

“A break,” I echo. “There’s a lot of excitement when it comes to you and not in good ways. What exactly does a break mean?”

He stretches an arm behind me on the sofa and does the thing with my hair again, wrapping his finger around the end, but this time not letting go. “Don’t stress, Goldie. You want to talk, we’ll talk. You want to watch shit TV, we’ll do that. You want to go to bed and ignore me for the rest of the night because you’re sick of me creating havoc in your life, I won’t be happy, but I’ll understand.”

“So you admit to creating havoc in my life,” I deadpan.

He has the nerve to smirk. “Absolutely.”

I push back against his utter and total arrogance. “And you haven’t apologized for it.”

“That’s because I’m sitting right here. I’m not sorry about that. I just hope you don’t lock yourself in your bedroom and ignore me for the rest of the night. I’m also not leaving you here alone for the time being since the cartel insists on tormenting you.”

At the reminder, I drop the flirtatious banter. “Oh, they want to do way more than torment me.”

That wipes the smirk right off his face. “I want to know more about that, but tomorrow. Talking about the Carter Cartel right now is not giving you a break.”

“You were the one who brought it up.”

“Fair enough. Pick a new topic, Goldie. I’m up for the challenge.”

I take a sip of my wine and lick my lips. “I want to talk about you.”

He shrugs a shoulder and takes way more than a sip of his beer. It feels like he’s killing time or putting me off. “What about me?”

“Tell me something about you that most people don’t know.”

“You’ve got to have people in your life for them to know shit about you. I don’t have a lot of that.”

“Why is that?” I demand.

“You’re one to talk.” He turns the tables on me, and it’s his turn to push back. “Remember, I investigated you. Other than the Carter Cartel, you’ve got your downstairs neighbor. It’s not like you’re hitting South Beach with a posse of friends.”

“A posse?” I mock. “Are you from the wild, wild west? You’re really showing your age, and it’s not a good look.”

He narrows his eyes. “That’s the second time tonight you’ve given me shit about my age.”

I shake my head. “No. I gave Daniel Armstrong crap about his age. You’re the one using words like posse.”

His exhale is heavy. “What can I say? It’s a habit. I blame that on Trippy.”

“Oh, yes. Old, dying Trippy. I want to know about her, and why you threw her under the bus as being on her deathbed the day we met.”

“Trippy is my great aunt. She raised Laken and me.”

“Oh.” I’m taken aback but don’t ask why. It’s not like I grew up in a two-parent home. My father paid child support, but being financially cared for is much different than being present.

He gives my hair a tug. “*Oh*. That’s all? I thought you wanted to know about Trippy.”

“King...” I have no idea what to say. “I think anyone who raised you to not be a cheater is amazing. I hope Trippy lives a long, happy life.”

“Trippy is the youngest eighty-five-year-old you’ll ever meet. She’s living her best life in a retirement community. If you call it assisted living, it’ll piss her off.”

I shake my head. “I’d never.”

“Our parents...” He lets that thought fade off into nothing leaving me wanting everything from King Jennings, but I don’t dare probe. “Laken only knows Trippy and Don. Don was our mother’s uncle—he died almost ten years ago. I’m not quite sure what happened to our family after his generation, but let’s just say they strayed. At least that’s how Trippy and Don explained it when we were old enough to understand. Laken and I were removed from our home by child protective services when I was four. Lake was one.”

I set my wine on the coffee table and turn fully to him. No one likes being right about stuff like this. I scoot closer on the sofa and take his hand in mine. “I’m sorry I asked.”

He shrugs. “Don’t be. I had four shit years but after that it was great. I can’t complain. I have no clue who my birth father is, or Lake’s for that matter. We do know they’re different. Our mom was in and out of prison for years. Lake and I were lucky that Don and Trippy stepped up to raise two young kids when they did. They never had kids of their own and didn’t know us, but they were awesome. Lake doesn’t know anything other than them, and I went from a shit birthmother to parents who were *the* shit. There’s nothing to be sorry about.”

His sister’s words about him being a workaholic with commitment issues ring through my head. But then again,

there are a million reasons why people have commitment issues. Mine are because of my father but for much different reasons.

“I take it that’s not something you share often. Thank you. I don’t take that for granted. It means something to me.”

King tips his head as he studies me and twists my hand in his. He’s the one holding on now. “How are you alone?”

I shake my head. “I’m not alone.”

“You are in the sense you’ve made it this long in life without anyone scooping you up and keeping you forever.”

I narrow my eyes. “I haven’t even met Trippy, but she sounds like the kind of woman who would raise you to know that a woman chooses to be scooped up ... or not.”

“Point taken, Marigold.” He takes another drink before setting his bottle next to my wine. “Then tell me how you’ve made it to the ripe age of thirty-four without allowing anyone the privilege of being yours.”

I tell him the truth. “No one has earned the spot—no one worth keeping, anyway. I have high standards.”

King’s warm hand wraps around the top of my bare thigh. “What would you say if I told you that there’s nothing more I want in this world than to know what those standards are? And that’s a big deal, because I want a lot of things.”

“That wouldn’t make it natural or organic. And love should always work on its own. Also, you have commitment issues,” I throw back, not able to let go of the thought. “You didn’t dispute that when your sister called you out.”

“So you can have high standards, but I have commitment issues? You’ve got to want to commit to have issues.”

For the second time in a matter of moments, King shocks me. “Very true.”

“Lake is in a shit marriage that she refuses to leave because of guilt and public perception. I’ll take high standards over that any day,” he bites. “Do you know the problem with high standards?”

This conversation is hitting close to home. Too close. “The list is long. At least that’s what I’ve been told more than once. So often, I’ve been convinced the problem is me.”

He shakes his head. “Don’t ever let anyone convince you that you deserve anything less. Never settle. I’ve known you a week and I know that the problem is not you. We have that in common. The longer you look, the higher the standards become.”

I tell him the truth. “It makes me question everything about myself.”

His eyes fall to my mouth.

I lick my lips.

His hot stare snaps back to mine, and his hands grasp my hips. I grip his thick biceps to hang on when he drags me over his lap.

I straddle his hips and his arms part—one angles up my back and the other hand lands on my bottom.

Both press in.

I do my best to quiet my gasp as I’m pressed to King everywhere.

My breasts are tight to his chest.

And his growing erection fits against my sex like we were created for each other.

His endless blue eyes burn into me. “Don’t ever settle, baby. You deserve everything and more.”

I slide my hands up until they land on his neck. Our lips are a breath away from each other, and I’m overwhelmed in every way.

Good.

And bad.

I decide to tell him the truth. “I don’t know what to think about you. You make me question everything.”

He spreads his legs, which opens my sex farther. “There are some days I don’t know what to think about me, either, so I don’t blame you.”

Lord. I thought his erection was thick and long before.

He feels so good even through jean shorts. I can’t help but grind myself down onto him.

“You make me question those standards I’ve held onto like a lifeline.”

My words don’t offend him. If anything, I think they might challenge him. Either that, or he just doesn’t care at the moment. “Am I that bad?”

I shake my head. “No. You’re that different.”

His hand on my bottom slides down to cup me between the legs.

My eyes fall shut, and my jaw goes slack.

I feel that everywhere. Low in my belly and farther south, between my legs. I’m not sure I can focus on anything at the moment besides what my body wants. Not standards, not cartels, and not broken childhoods.

All I can think about is the present.

King does not fit the mold I created in my head of the perfect man, because King is not perfect. Not in the least.

King is extra in every way, especially in the ways that don’t fit me.

And it’s those things that intrigue me the most.

“How lucky am I that you didn’t know what you wanted,” he murmurs against the skin at my neck. His warm tongue snakes its way along my collarbone to dip between my breasts before his hand tangles in my hair and pulls, forcing me to open my eyes. “Tell me what you want. Because right now, there’s nothing I want more than to touch you. I want to make you come so hard, you’ll forget everything in the world but me.”

The whirlwind he’s creating between my legs screams yes.

My heart agrees.

My head, on the other hand, is cautious.

Majority wins.

“Please.”

His eyes flare as he pulls my lips to his. If this kiss is a promise of what’s to come, I’m grateful for the popular vote.

I didn’t think his grip between my legs could be more possessive, but it tightens when he surges to his feet with me in his arms. I wrap my arms around his neck, and my legs round his waist in a vise. My home might be spacious for an apartment, but it takes no time to make it to my room.

My back hits my bed, and his fingers make quick work of the top two buttons of my shirt. King isn’t patient enough to mess with the rest when he realizes I’m bare beneath. I didn’t bother putting on a bra when I changed.

He pulls my shirt to the side and wraps his lips around my nipple.

He sucks.

Lord Almighty, does he suck.

I arch into his mouth for more.

King isn’t taking his time. There’s no working up to anything.

The button on my shorts rips open as I lose his lips and mouth when he puts a hand to the bed and looms over me. He looks straight into my eyes when he slides a hand down my shorts and straight into my panties.

“I’ve been thinking about this since the first moment I kissed you at The Pink and you had no fucking idea who I was. Held you in my arms, tasted your tongue on mine, and I knew it wasn’t enough. Knew I’d need more of you. What I didn’t know is that the promise of you would be so much, that this part of you would just be a bonus.”

His fingers slide easily through my sex, and I’m not the only one who notices.

“You’re so fucking wet. The promise of this is just as sweet as your heart. And right now, I don’t want to stop until I’ve earned both.”

Earned.

That hits me somewhere deep I’ve never felt before.

I put my feet to the bed and press into his hand.

His eyes roam my body, from my shirt askew revealing one breast, to my shorts ripped open with his hand buried deep inside.

And I have no idea what my expression looks like. My entire body is on fire in the best way possible.

“You like this.”

His smooth, cool tone gives me goosebumps. When I open my eyes to look at him, a satisfied expression sits on his handsome face.

“I do,” I confirm on a breath.

I’m not sure what’s different about King. Maybe it’s the stress from the last week. But I don’t overthink or compartmentalize or evaluate why I want this more than anything I’ve wanted in a long time. Maybe ever.

But I’m in control, and I love that.

I give into my aching desire.

For him.

“Don’t stop,” I plead and realize this is the second time I’ve begged for his touch.

That wins me a firm circle of my clit. It’s delicious and slow. It also takes my breath away.

So when I do lose his touch, my complaint slips out before I can stop it. “What ... what are you doing?”

“Do you think I’d really leave you like this?” His smirk swells into a grin that looks too good on his rugged face. “I want to see.”

As I lie here in a state of twisted sexual frustration, he dips his fingers into my shorts at the hips and pulls. Denim and cotton slide quickly down my legs and clear the tips of my toes.

“So fucking beautiful,” he murmurs.

When I look up, King is staring down at me, studying me like there might be a test later.

He pushes my knees away and my legs part. He’s hungry. Ravenous. It’s his expression that pushes me to a place that is so not like me, I hardly recognize myself.

I’m not embarrassed or shy or self-conscious.

I should be.

The real me would be mortified.

I don’t know if this is the new me or the desperate me or the me with Kingston Jennings.

He makes quick work of the last two buttons of my shirt and flips it open. It’s a good thing I’m the new me because I’m utterly bare, open, and wanton while he’s completely dressed.

The tip of his index finger dips between my legs and slides inside. When he adds another finger, a mew slides from my lips.

When a third joins the other two, he stretches me, and I fist the comforter on a groan. “Yes.”

“Baby,” he calls for me without taking his eyes off the magic he’s creating. He pumps me two more times and moves back to my clit. His touch is slow and light and I think I might die if he doesn’t give me something more soon.

“Hmm?”

“What do you want?”

I feel a frown form at my brow. “It’s not obvious?”

“Oh, I’m going to make you come no matter what.” He looks slowly up my body when our gazes collide. “My question is do you want to come on my hand or my cock?”

He flicks my clit with the lightest touch.

It's a tease.

"I want both," he goes on. "So I'm good with either. Tell me."

"I..."

This time he circles my clit, but doesn't touch it.

"King," I complain.

"Baby, I'm not sure if you understand how much I'm enjoying this. If you want to think it over until the sun comes up, I'm good. I could do this for a lifetime."

I'm flushed and warm and find myself pressing my hips into his hand for something more than the flirtatious tip of his finger. His other hand lands on the inside of my thigh as he kneads the muscle to hold me where I am as he continues to torment me.

"Please," I beg again.

"I'm in no hurry," he says. "Edging you might be my new favorite pastime."

His fingers slide south, dip into my sex, and starts to play with me. In and out, tracing my lips, circles. Everything but what I really want.

"King. I want you." It's all I can do to steady my tone. "All of you."

His gaze snaps to me and doesn't say another word. He reaches for his exploding bag on my floor where he changed his clothes earlier and rustles through it. A condom hits the bed next to me before he yanks his T-shirt over his head. He tosses it off in the same direction as my shorts.

"Goldie." His hands land next to my head, and his bare chest hits mine. Skin to skin for the first time. He's warm and the smattering of chest hair against my sensitive nipples is just one more element to heighten every nerve in my body.

I wrap my legs around him and relish in his closeness. He bumps the tip of my nose with his before pressing his lips to mine.

This isn't like our past kisses. This feels different.

Even though no promises have been declared, this kiss sinks into my bones so deep and heavy, I know it will stay with me forever.

Even if King doesn't.

This feels like more than it ever has.

King tips his forehead to mine and whispers, "Talk about standards. Haven't even had you yet, and you've raised the bar to heights I didn't know existed."

My hand frames the side of his face. "Get out of my head."

"I don't plan on getting out of your anything anytime soon."

I bite my lip.

King leans up far enough to nab the condom and bites it between his teeth to tear it open. After pressing his lips to mine one last time, he straightens, and in a whoosh, his shorts are gone.

Oh my.

The hint of Kingston Jennings did not disappoint. He's all that...

And more.

His cock stands at attention—long, strong, thick. All for me.

I lick my lips as I watch him slide the condom down his length, and I'm shocked at the thought that zips through my mind.

I wish I were on the pill. I know I'm clean. I haven't been with anyone in a couple of years.

But seeing him stand over me like this, I wish I could feel him.

Just him and me with nothing between us.

"Hey," he calls for me. When I look up, he's frowning. "You okay?"

I nod but don't dare utter my ridiculous thoughts aloud and instead nudge his muscled thigh with my toe. "I'm more than okay."

He takes a step closer to the bed and grabs my legs, giving me a good yank to the edge.

Until now, it's been slow and all about me. But when he parts my legs, it's like he can't wait another second, and I'm here for it. Looking down at our connection, he positions himself.

And in one firm, hard thrust, he stretches me to him.

I moan at the sensation. His hands reach under me to squeeze the globes of my bottom as he pulls out and thrusts two more times, but then he stops. He plants himself deep and stays there.

His expression is part tortured and part erotic. His hair is mussed, and his stare is heavy. "I want to feel every bit of you. Inside and out. Now you can come."

If his blue eyes could bore into me, I'd be marked for life.

His fingers return to my clit, and he's not edging me any longer.

It's more. Better than it was when he was teasing me. Keeping me on the edge in a fury of sexual tension.

Because of that tension, it happens faster than before. Faster and better.

Better with King inside me.

My moans and groans get louder, sounds that have never filled this room before. My head lolls back, and I see nothing but stars when I come.

"Fuck," he grits and starts to move as I come. "So good. I feel you everywhere."

He's right. With King inside me, this is unlike anything I've experienced before. He moves.

Like really moves.

And King moving inside me with what he's doing to my clit produces an orgasm unlike I've ever had.

It's not quick. It's drawn out and deep and new.

King is hammering into me so hard, my bed rocks, but I don't care because a new feeling comes over me. This one from within. "Don't stop."

I only thought he was moving before. He lets go of my clit and really moves. Pounding into me, harder than I've ever had. I don't know if I'll be okay tomorrow, and that's something I'm completely okay with.

Three more intense thrusts, and King buries himself in me. His eyes shut, and his brows pinch.

I put a hand over my bare chest. "My heart. That was..."

He's breathing as hard as me and loosens his grip on the backs of my thighs. Then he does something that surprises me. Still planted deep, he bends at the waist and gives me his weight.

Together, our skin is clammy, and his heart speeds to the beat of mine. King buries his face in my messy hair, his warm, heavy breath in my ear is something I could listen to for hours.

He's this way because of me.

"Thought I couldn't get you out of my head before," he murmurs into my ear and leans on a forearm to look into my eyes. He gazes down at me and shakes his head. "I don't know what you've done to me, Goldie, but I have a feeling I'm fucked."

"I'm trying to figure out if that's good or bad."

A ghost of a smirk kisses his lips. "As long as I meet your high standards, it's good, baby. It's really fucking good."

My smile isn't small. It's satisfied. "After that and the last week, I think my only standard is you."

He surprises me one more time. Without breaking our connection, he scoops his thick arms under me, proves he was a Ranger in another life, and doesn't miss many days at the gym. I yelp from the sudden movement when he straightens with me in his arms.

"We're going to shower the sex and sweat off. And I am not sleeping on the damn sofa tonight."

I'm about to agree, but we both freeze when three loud bangs come from below us followed by a muffled voice. "I can hear you up there, Goldie Carter!"

That's followed by a muffled bark. "Ruff-ruff!"

My eyes widen, and I have to choke back my laugh.

"That's not good," I whisper.

King does not whisper and pulls me down onto his still semi-hard cock. "Right now, I don't give a shit who knows. You're all mine, baby."

GOLDEN TICKET

King

We stare at blueprints, photos, and banking reports on the table in front of us.

So far, Goldie has taken the floor plans that are on file with the City of Miami and has labeled how every part of The Pink is used by Carter. We've gone over every credit and debit of the bank reports since she moved here. She marked which ones are legit event costs and revenue and which ones are bogus that she knows of.

We tackled surveillance photos.

The woman—who I fucked for the first, second, and third times last night and the fourth this morning—studies the photographs in front of her. She moves them like tiles in some sort of puzzle and pushes three to the side and switches the order of the others around a few times until she sits back in her chair with a sigh.

She motions to the three at the side that are from surveillance cameras. “I can't place them. I mean, maybe? The one is too far away. People were in and out all the time. I did my best to ignore Dex's personal guests. I stuck to my responsibilities and focused on the clientele. But these.” She points to the rest of the pictures. “I know them. They work directly for Dex but have nothing to do with The Pink. At least, not officially.”

Goldie sits across from Micah and Brax. I'm perpendicular to all of them. As much as I wanted to grab the seat next to her, I also know the need to put some space between us for her sake,

professionalism, and, finally, for my sanity from having to work with these guys daily.

We've been at this for over two hours. And during that time, we've learned more than I have in the last year since Dex took over The Pink.

Targeting Marigold Carter was my golden ticket—in more ways than one.

Professionally.

And, given last night and this morning, personally.

I am not upset about the new developments.

Besides identifying most of Dex's organization and confirming names and involvement, Goldie has given us the layout of The Pink and what Dex has used it for. Not only is the estate huge, but the grounds go on and on, especially for that area of Miami that grew up around it. Having that much space in the city is not common.

Dex might've gotten away with it all had I not run across his organization when I was working in Panama. It took crunching the numbers and following so many financial routes, it would make the IRS dizzy. He crossed paths with one of the bank accounts I knew was used for money laundering.

And that's how I got here.

"Anderson Marshall." I reach across the table and slide one of the pictures she ID'd when we first sat down. "How far up the chain is he in Dex's organization?"

She shrugs. "Not far up when I first moved to Miami. But he became more and more important as time went on. He was always near Dex when I was there. Rand is, well, *Rand*," she says with disdain. "But Anderson ... he was different. He's nothing like Dex or Rand. He was actually nice ... *ish*. I wasn't scared of him when I was there. He never threw his power around or tried to intimidate me. He wasn't violent."

Micah is about to open his mouth, but what I need to know takes precedence. "Who *was* violent?"

I have to remind myself that this interview is being recorded.

With video.

Brax and Micah might know that I didn't leave her place last night—hell, Tim too. That's a meeting that I've been able to put off so far today. They can assume what they want. I know they've got my back.

But this video can be used in front of a grand jury, should we need it. It can be used as probable cause. It'll certainly be used if Goldie is presented as a witness to the shit that went down during her time at The Pink.

I might not know every tick or minute expression on her face yet, but after the last week, I feel like I know her well enough. So when Goldie turns her gaze to me, it's filtered.

As fake as our engagement.

“You were there last night and saw what they do.”

“They pulled guns on you,” Micah confirms what we all know. “Like that kind of violence?”

Goldie shifts in her seat. “Along those lines.”

“That's definitely intimidating,” Brax notes but leaves it at that.

He's thinking what I'm thinking. Violence and intimidation are two different things.

I lean forward to the table and lower my voice. “What else?”

She shakes her head and her tone rises a notch. “What else is there to say? Stuff like what we saw last night. That went down all the time after hours. Never in front of customers or during events. Dex was always careful to keep public business and private business separate. Distributors would meet him there. He'd throw private parties. And none of it was fun and games.”

I tip my head and look at her.

Brax and Micah get the hint and keep their mouths shut.

“What?” Goldie bites and gives me a hint of who she was the other day in this very room when I exposed my real identity to her. The fire that probably saved her own ass shines through.

I lower my tone. “We’re just trying to understand.”

She leans toward me and mocks my tone. “Don’t talk to me like that.”

I sit up straight and shake my head. “Goldie—”

“Like that,” she interrupts and raises her voice. “Like I’m some victim who can’t take care of herself. I was just fine before the three of you decided I was your way into the Carter Cartel just because of my last name. My last name means nothing. I’ve always hated that my mom didn’t give me hers. The cartel has been nothing but a curse since I crossed into the Miami city limits. Heck, it probably happened the moment I entered Florida, but I was clueless to it.”

Well, shit. I shut my mouth and lean back in my seat.

Now I want to know about her mom, but I’ll ask her about that later.

“You took care of yourself when you needed to. Everything you’re telling us is great,” Brax says.

“More than great,” Micah one-ups him. “You’re doing the right thing.”

“I know I am,” Goldie speaks to Micah like he’s a toddler.

And fuck me, I realize it’s the way I was talking to her.

At least it’s not just me. The prim and proper Goldie has a streak inside her I won’t soon forget as she goes on. “Why do you think I’m here? I’m not just doing you a favor. I want Dex and everyone who works for him to be put away forever.”

There’s so much there. I decide to leave the personal shit for later and treat her like I would any informant. “Let’s back up to Anderson Marshall?”

She tucks her hair behind her ear and picks up the Diet Coke she insisted on stopping for on the way here. “What about him? I told you, he’s different. Not at all like the others.”

“But you said he’s been elevated,” Brax confirms.

“Yes,” she says, like she’s answered the question ten times instead of once.

I lean to pick up the picture of Marshall and study him. He's probably in his late twenties and isn't a big guy. He's definitely not muscle for Dex. "He wasn't there the other night."

"I told you, he's not the gun-wielding type. He was always on his phone or tablet. But I'm telling you, Dex likes him. Not just likes him. He trusts him. And I don't think Dex trusts many people. Not even Rand. He likes having him around to do his dirty work, but that doesn't mean he wouldn't throw him under a bus if it benefited him. Dex would do that to almost anyone. But, like I said, I think Anderson is different."

"Accountant?" Micah asks.

I shake my head. "The accountant is a woman—almost as old as Trippy."

"Amelia," Goldie adds. "She's the grumpiest woman ever. I hated working with her."

"She's also the one moving money in and out of the accounts with your name on them," Brax adds.

"I knew there was a reason I didn't like her," Goldie mutters.

"Is Marshall tech?" I ask.

Goldie takes another sip of her drink until it gurgles through the straw before answering, "If he's tech, he didn't manage the website. Dex contracts for that outside of The Pink."

"The wire went live this morning," I say. "If Anderson is that important to Dex's business, we'll hear from him soon."

Goldie massages her temples. "I hope that means this will be over soon. I'm not cut out for this."

I nudge her foot under the table with mine. "With what you told us, we're a hell of a lot closer than we were last week."

Brax scoots his chair back to stand and Micah starts stacking paper when Goldie's phone vibrates with a call on the table in front of her.

"It's him," she whispers. Her gaze zips from the screen to me. "It's Dex. What do I do?"

“Answer it,” I clip. “Put it on speaker.”

The air in the room turns electric, anxious to see what he wants. Brax and Micah both retake their seats, leaning in as if they’ll be able to hear better.

She pulls in a deep breath and touches the screen twice before answering. “Dex. This is a surprise.”

“Really?” Dex clips. “After you showed up engaged and pregnant at The Pink last night, this is a surprise?”

Goldie looks up at me with big pleading eyes. I motion for her to talk. I know she can get through this.

“I...” Her words trail off. “I don’t know what to say other than I can’t help who I fall in love with.”

My gut wants to smile, but I don’t dare. Not with the cameras recording every second.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out, little sister.” Dex hisses those last two words like they’re sour on his tongue. “It’s an interesting development.”

“Nothing has changed, Dex. I still want nothing to do with The Pink, so I’m not sure why it interests you.”

“It’s interesting to me because I’ve spent the last twelve hours doing everything I can to look up your fiancé. Daniel Armstrong is a pretty generic name. I can’t find one that matches your baby daddy, let alone one who has the funding to back up what he proposed last night.”

She closes her eyes while she speaks. The woman who insists she hates lying and never breaks the rules is more than convincing. “Daniel is private. You won’t find him on social media or anywhere else on the internet for that matter. He has no trouble doing business without that kind of attention.”

“I don’t like it,” Dex says. “If I’m going to do business with someone, I need to know my investment is safe.”

Goldie’s expression looks like this is painful even though her tone is as even and smooth as her bare skin was in the shower last night.

“There’s nothing to question. He’s with me. Isn’t that enough? I mean, I’m still in Miami after what you put me through. I’m not going anywhere.”

Dex ignores that. “His only connections are a guy who’s disappeared from the face of the planet ... and you.”

“Look, Dex. I don’t care what you do. I don’t have anything to do with Daniel’s business. He’s good at what he does, but my life will go on with or without your and Daniel’s partnership.”

There’s a pause over the line. One so long we all glance at each other, and I’m afraid we lost him.

Goldie gives her head a little shake and calls, “Dex, are you there?”

He immediately answers. “We had a last-minute cancellation a week from Saturday. The bride caught her fiancé with her maid of honor or some shit like that. Mark your calendar.”

“Mark my calendar?” Goldie asks. “For what?”

“Your wedding day. Congratulations. You’re getting married.”

Goldie’s big brown eyes go bigger as she stares at me.

“But—” she stutters. “I’m not ready.”

“Get ready,” Dex demands. “Get a dress and show up. We’ll take care of the rest.”

Goldie shakes her head, as if Dex can see her through the phone. “It’s too soon. Let me start planning, and we’ll take the next cancellation. Really, I just need a few weeks. Or months.”

“You’ve got twelve days—deal with it. If Daniel Armstrong wants to do business with me, and if you want to ever plan another event in this city, you’ll make it work.”

Goldie sucks in a breath. “I knew it. You are sabotaging my business, aren’t you?”

“You’re a competitor. What did you expect me to do?”

“I’m hardly a competitor—”

I reach over and put a hand on her forearm since Goldie is about to lay into her brother.

I give her a nod.

“If you want me to give your fiancé a shot, I need you to prove you’re not planning on asking for your share of The Pink back.”

“I signed it over to you so you’d leave me alone, Dex. What more do you want from me?”

“Proof we’ve moved on. For some reason our father insisted on giving you half of everything when you weren’t loyal to him whatsoever. I have no fucking clue what he was thinking. If you say no to me, then consider the deal with your fiancé dead. Do you get me, Goldie? Dead.”

It doesn’t take an investigator to read between those lines.

And Goldie knows exactly what he’s saying too.

“I get it,” she whispers into the phone. “A week from Saturday. We’ll be there.”

“Fucking perfect,” Dex bites. “The ceremony will be at sunset. A small reception will follow. I can’t wait.”

Goldie’s head drops to her hand, and I wonder which she is regretting more—moving to Miami or taking the meeting with me.

My guess is it’s a mix of both.

She swallows hard before she utters the next words. “Thank you.”

Dex does not respond.

He hangs up.

Goldie disconnects the call, slumps into her chair, and stares at her cell like she can’t comprehend what just happened.

“And now it gets interesting,” Micah bellows.

“Shut the hell up.” I frown at him and turn to Goldie. “Are you okay?”

Her gaze shifts to me. “Do I look okay?”

No. She does not look okay. Not at all.

“You look fine. You did a good job,” I offer.

“Looks like we just got put on the clock,” Brax drawls and stands for the second time.

“Days. Not even weeks,” Goldie mutters. “Can you get this done in a matter of days?”

I lift a shoulder and do my best not to lie to her. “Probably.”

Her voice rises. “Probably?”

I don’t have time to answer, because there’s a knock on the door before it’s pushed open.

It’s Tim. “King. In my office.”

I barely have a chance to give him a chin lift when I get his back and he’s gone.

Goldie shakes her head. “This is crazy. I’m engaged, pregnant, and getting married to a man who doesn’t exist at the very place I don’t want anything to do with.”

I stand and give her shoulder a squeeze when what I really want to do is kiss that expression off her face. “Stay with Brax and Micah. I’ll be right back.”

“Come on,” Brax opens the door. “I’ll get you a cup of coffee while King gets his ass chewed by the boss.”

“I’m not going to get my ass chewed,” I say as I walk past him.

Micah laughs. “Oh, prepare for your ass to be thoroughly gnawed on, Jennings.”

“Another thing for me to be mortified about,” Goldie mutters.

I’m halfway out the door when I hear Brax try to comfort Goldie. “Trust me, with the shit that’s gone on before you, there’s nothing to be mortified about.”

No truer words have been spoken, even though I am not looking forward to this meeting.

When I finally make it to Tim’s large corner office, I’ve barely crossed the threshold when he demands, “Shut the door.”

It clicks as I start damage control. “Boss, I didn’t mean for any of this to happen—”

He waves me off as his ass falls to his office chair and the palm of his hand shuts me up. “Save it. I’ve heard it all before.”

I stuff my hands in my pockets and decide to stand.

I think about all the times I’ve sat in his office and chewed the shit with my boss for longer than I should have. Brax and Micah are tight. They have been since they were roommates in the academy.

The DEA is my second career. It’s a whole different battlefield than the one I was used to as a Ranger in the Army. It’s been an adjustment, but one I made easier since the man sitting in front of me pulled every string possible to get me back to Miami. It was my turn to step up for Trippy after Don died. Lake can only do so much from Illinois and she can’t be back and forth all the time with her asshole husband and Willa in school.

“You know, I thought you’d be different,” Tim starts as he stares out the window at the view of downtown. “Brax and Micah have been with me since they were young. Brax couldn’t see straight until he finished what he set out to do when he hired on. I knew he wouldn’t stop until he took down the Marinos. When I look back on it, that’s when I lost control.”

I frown. “Lost control?”

Tim looks back at me and sighs. “Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about. I really wasn’t surprised by Brax. But Micah? I didn’t think Micah would ever settle down. Well, you know how that went.”

“Yeah,” I agree, hoping Tim just needs to talk it out. If that’s the case, I’m here for him. “I was here for the tail end of that.”

“But you?” He narrows his eyes on me. “I didn’t think you’d do this to me.”

I hold my hand out low. “For what it’s worth, I didn’t think I’d do this either.”

“Man, that does not make this okay. You made her a confidential informant ... and now this.”

I say nothing, because he’s not wrong, but I’m not about to confirm anything.

He leans forward and lowers his voice. “With Brax, we were basically wrapping shit up and had enough evidence to take down ninety percent of the cartel by the time Landyn came along. Micah might’ve used himself as a shield, but he was never a target. This is different.”

Tim is the shit, and we’re close. I’ve gotten to know his family. His in-laws live in the same community Trippy moved to three years ago. Hell, I’ve eaten more meals at his table than I have my own in the last year. Probably the year before that too. His wife is the shit.

Micah has Brax and vice versa.

In the short time I’ve been here, I feel like Tim is that to me. I have no fucking idea if he feels the same, because we talk work and sports. What we do not do is discuss shit like this.

I finally take a seat. “This isn’t different.”

His stare is intense. “It’s Carter and it’s in our backyard. You fucking know it’s different.”

“I can handle it.”

“You’ve never gone undercover with a group like the Carter Cartel. Not like this.”

“Are you saying I can’t do it?” I bite. “Because that pisses me off.”

“If I were asking you to bulldoze your way into a warzone to take out the enemy, I have no doubt you’d lead that charge and conquer all. But this is not that, and you know it.”

“I’ve been fine.”

“You have not been fine. I’ve listened to every op you’ve been on undercover. You might’ve been fine last night, but before then, you were awkward as fuck, and you know it.”

I shrug that off. “I had to pop my cherry. I’m good.”

“Better is not good. And I wouldn’t normally worry about a confidential informant. They know what they’re getting themselves into, but she is not normal. You know Dex Carter. You’ve been after him for years. You cannot afford to be exposed. Even here in Miami, I’m afraid of what will happen. So now I’ve got to worry about you not only watching your own back, but hers, too, because all I’ve had to do is listen to you for five minutes on the feed last night to know you have lost your fucking head over that woman.”

“My head is just fine,” I assure him.

“Is that so?” He leans back in his chair. “Did you go home last night?”

He knows exactly where I was last night. Micah was as chipper as a puppy when I got here this morning and told me that Tim knows everything. “I’m a grown fucking man, so I’m not going to answer that.”

“That’s because you know that I know. You’re lucky I’ve allowed you to continue with this Daniel Armstrong bit, because you might be solid in every other part of the job, but undercover you are as fresh as newly fallen snow.”

“Nothing is going to happen to me,” I assure him. “And I can fucking assure you nothing will happen to Goldie.”

He lifts a hand to point at me like he’s dotting a damn exclamation point. “And that right there is what will get you exposed.”

“No way,” I argue. “I appreciate your concern—”

He’s on a roll and just won’t stop. “You’re staying at her place, which I’m not even going to get into how I’m not supposed to be okay with it, and still, I get it. But that means you have to watch your back when you come and go.”

“Which I can do. I was a fucking Ranger.”

“And you worked with a team.”

“You think I’m not used to watching my back? I’m not some kid fresh out of college who went straight to the academy. I’m good, and I’m going to make sure Goldie is too. She’s in this

position because of the DEA, but really because of me. If there's no other reason for me to see this through, it's that Carter needs to be taken down so she can live her life without having to look over her shoulder."

Finally, he shuts up.

I lower my voice. "If you want to stop me, you're going to have to officially take me off this case. No one knows Carter like I do after my time in Panama and the last year. You know I'll be careful."

"You'd better be. I allowed my wife to become too invested in my agents' lives. Annette is on my ass about this, and not in a good way."

I stand and move for the door. I need to get out of here before he tells me Annette has been talking to Trippy. I'll never hear the end of it.

"Tell Annette I appreciate it."

"You can tell her. Dinner is at our house this weekend. Be there. And I can't tell you who to bring or not to bring, but if you don't want the attention focused on you as to why you're there alone, I suggest a plus one."

I stop at the threshold. "Another time. It's too soon."

Tim slides on a pair of reading glasses and doesn't look at me, but he does mock me. "Too soon? I thought you were on your way to thirteen kids. You'll be ninety before you can enjoy being an empty nester."

"What the fuck is it with my age. I'm not that old."

Tim peeks up at me over the rim of his glasses. "A couple kids no. A bakers' dozen? No one needs that many kids."

"Even the cartel could tell I was being facetious. You all need to get a life."

"I'd tell you to get a life, but you're on your way to one it seems."

All I can think about is getting Goldie out of here. Every time I bring her into the interrogation room, I piss her off. I need to

remedy that.

“King!” Tim calls.

“What now?”

“Tell Goldie good work. There’s an envelope for her in exchange for her information. Be sure and give it to her before you leave. Maybe that’ll help make up for pissing her off again.”

That’s it.

I’m done.

But I do stop at the next hall to pick up the money.

COFFEE, EGGS, AND A THROAT PUNCH

Goldie

“**W** here are we going? My apartment is the other way.”

“I need a change of clothes,” King says as he pulls onto the highway. “And I haven’t seen my sister since they got to town. I figure two birds, one stone. The only problem is that she’s going to go ape shit when she meets you.”

I lean back on the headrest and close my eyes. “I’m getting the feeling no one in your life is happy about me.”

King claims my hand. “That’s not true. In fact, I was informed today that we’re expected to be at Tim’s house this weekend.”

I turn to him. “If Tim is so worried about someone following you, why is he inviting us to his house?”

“No one is going to follow us. I’ll make sure of that, and Tim knows it. If I don’t go, I’ll never live it down, and I’m not leaving you alone. I’m sure Brax and Micah will probably be there with their families. They always are.”

I gape. “I’m meeting entire families?”

“For someone who had no trouble handling yourself with Dex Carter on the phone today, why are you so worried?”

“I’m not worried. I’m emotionally taxed. That’s different. We’re on our way to your house. Your house, King, where your sister and niece are.”

He pulls my hand to his lips where he kisses my knuckles. “I figured why not. I had dinner with your brother last night. It’s

sibling week.”

I yank my hand away from him and give him a playful slap on the shoulder. “Stop. That’s not the same, and you know it.”

“An eye for an eye.” He throws me a smirk. “Laken is a good cook. Trippy made us take turns in the kitchen and was bossy in the process. The difference between her and me is Lake chooses to hone her skills, and I don’t give a shit. I can make my way around a kitchen, but I’m not gourmet.”

“You can certainly make your way around the grocery store. I don’t know who’s going to eat all the food you bought.”

“Since I can’t leave you alone at your apartment yet, I need real food.”

“Eggs are real food,” I said.

“Correction. I need more food.”

I drank another cup of coffee as Tim yelled at King. At least that’s what Micah said was going on. I made myself at home at King’s desk and used the time to grill Brax and Micah about what would happen next.

Much to my disappointment, neither of them seemed to be in a hurry, and the common answer was...

We wait.

Wait on phone calls.

Wait to see who comes and goes from The Pink.

Wait on deposits or withdrawals from the very bank accounts with my name on them.

Wait.

Wait.

And wait some more.

Disappointment must have seeped from my pores, because Brax explained to me that his career-making case lasted two years.

Two years!

I do not have that kind of time.

When I told them so, Brax smiled like he felt sorry for me.

Micah rolled his eyes.

When King returned, my patience was teetering on the edge of no return. I was practicing my rant that I might be overwhelmed, but I don't need to be treated with kid gloves. That's when he presented me with an envelope. A fat one.

Money.

Payment for the information I provided the government about the Carter Cartel.

I almost forgot this was a part of the deal. I want to do everything I can to help take down Dex and everyone who works for him. I forgot that being a confidential informant came with a sliding pay scale depending on the information.

The amount of cash wiped the rant clean out of me. It's not enough to live on for a year, but it is enough for me to pay bills for the next month and a half. And since King stocked my refrigerator and pantry with more food than the two of us could possibly eat, I have enough left over to hit the thrift stores, should I so desire.

But who has time for that when there's a fake wedding to plan and a fake baby to prepare for, while having real, mind-blowing sex with the man who fictionalized your fake life, all while working on the side for Uncle Sam?

Not me.

So knowing there's a little padding in my bank account is a relief.

My real bank account. Not the money laundering ones with my name on them. I want nothing to do with that money.

King even swung by my bank for me to deposit it after he loaded me up into a different government car. I was too happy about my payday to lament the fact we switched our rides up *just in case* someone from the cartel spotted us.

That hasn't stopped King from paying as close attention to the rearview mirror as he has the road in front of us.

I try not to think about anyone following us as he breaks into my jumbled thoughts. "A little backstory before we get there. Have you heard of Senator Silas Scanlan?"

I look from the side mirror to King. "Please don't tell me a senator is involved with Dex."

King shakes his head. "Not that I know of, but given the fact he's my brother-in-law, I wouldn't be surprised."

"Your brother-in-law is a U.S. Senator?"

King changes lanes. "Yep. The crooked senator from Illinois. The news blew up last week about campaign fraud. Lake wanted to get Willa out of town until the media calmed down. They're going home tomorrow, which is why we're here. I've seen them a couple times coming and going."

Guilt floods me. "Because of me. You've been too busy dealing with my drama to tend to your family. I feel horrible."

"Your drama is my case," King reminds me before throwing me a glance. "I might've been sleeping in my own bed instead of yours, but I still would've been working. Lake is used to me working. She should be happy we're in the same country."

"I'm hogging you from your sister and niece. Even Trippy. That's not okay."

King exits the highway, and we come to a stop at the intersection. He turns his attention fully to me. "Here's the thing, I need you to be prepared for what you're about to walk into. She's tried to fix me up with people for years, but I refused. Bringing you here for dinner might be the highlight of her year. And considering her marriage is tainted by the poison of politics and seems to get worse with every anniversary, I'm not kidding."

"King, we only met last week. The situation between us is intense, which has created..." I wave my hand between the two of us. "This. You don't have to introduce me to your sister, and you definitely don't have to pretend that this is anything more than it is."

He studies me for a moment before the light turns green, but says nothing as we move through the intersection and toward one of the older neighborhoods of Miami.

These homes were built in another era. Not as old as The Pink era, but more like *The Golden Girls* era. They're from another generation with sprawling ranches on big lots that are hard to find in southern Florida.

And King says nothing as I take in yet another part of Miami that I've never experienced since I moved here.

“King—”

He holds up a hand to shut me up. “Hang on. I'm not going to talk to you until I can look you in the eyes.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

He takes another turn and drives clear to the end of the block before he swings into a long drive next to an F-Type. He pulls out a cell, touches the screen a few times, and the garage door magically goes up.

“It means I need to focus when I address your issue.”

“I don't have an issue that needs to be addressed.”

He pulls into the garage next to a minivan that looks like it's over twenty years old, kills the engine, and shuts the garage door behind us. He finally turns to me in the darkened space. “You definitely have an issue.”

There's something about being trapped in the dark garage that makes me lower my voice. “Okay, fine. I have a lot of issues. Brax and Micah informed me today that none of them would be worked out anytime soon. That I'm in a *wait-and-see* holding pattern until Dex or someone in his organization messes up. Meanwhile, you and I are to be married a week from Saturday. But not the real you, the fake you, but to the real me. I'm trying to wrap my head around a wedding date that's less than two weeks away with a wiretap and pole cameras and praying the bad guys cooperate so this nightmare doesn't last until the end of time.”

“Those are not the issues I’m talking about. I’m talking about you and me.” He motions between the two of us, but it really feels like he’s mocking me. “This *thing*, as you describe, that isn’t anything more than it is.”

I sit back in my seat and lean against the door. It’s not like I can escape. This is his house, and I’ve never been here before.

“Do you know how many confidential informants I’ve had sex with?” he growls.

My jaw goes slack at the audacity of his question, all while a shot of panic cracks my heart. “Excuse me?”

“Answer me,” he demands, reminding me more of the man he was the first day we met—gruff, grumpy, and short with his words.

Not at all like the King who made me coffee and eggs and throat punched a man who tried to touch me.

And absolutely nothing like the man I’ve had a good deal of sex with in the last twenty-four-hours.

I’m afraid of the answer.

“Goldie.” His anger is palpable in the small space.

“I don’t know!” I exclaim. “The thought never crossed my mind, but now I’m afraid to know the answer. Is it a lot?”

“Fuck no!” His answer booms through the car. “The answer is not-fucking-one. At least not before yesterday.”

I exhale and don’t care that he’s angry. “Oh. Well, I can’t lie. That’s a relief.”

He drags a hand down his face and turns to stare out the windshield to the messy garage. A lawn mower sits next to a shelf stacked with odds and ends that are not at all organized. A half-used roll of paper towels even hangs unrolled from the top shelf. I think it’s sitting next to a bottle of ibuprofen.

Ibuprofen in the garage.

Interesting.

“And people want to know why I’m still single at the age of forty-three,” he grits, staring at the same mess I am.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

He doesn’t look at me. “It means women are fucking frustrating.”

I poke him in the arm. “Just for your information, men are pretty stinking frustrating too. If I weren’t locked in the garage of a house I’m not familiar with or have a sleazeball like Rand stalking me, I’d leave.”

He pulls in a deep breath before looking over at me and mutters, “There’s something about you.”

My stomach does a flip-flop, and I don’t think it has anything to do with all the caffeine I’ve had today, even though my nerves are shot. “Why does it seem like you’re talking to yourself?”

“Because I am. I don’t know what the hell is wrong with me. And it’s not the sex.”

“The sex?” I bite. I thought the sex was amazing, but it’s been a long time for me. Maybe any sex would be amazing for me, but apparently not for him. “What was wrong with the sex?”

He shakes his head. “I guess when it comes to you, the sex is just a bonus, which I can’t believe I’m saying. I was fucked before the sex.”

My face warms, and I don’t care who’s after me. I’m not sticking around for more of this.

This is mortifying.

“I’m out of here. Goodbye, Kingston Jennings. You are a stressful rollercoaster, and I want off.” I reach for my door. “I should’ve left Florida when I had the chance. I’ll call an Uber.”

The car lights flip on when I open the door, but that’s as far as I make it. His hand catches my arm and stops my escape. I’m no sooner flipped around when he claims my face with his other hand and pulls me to him.

There's no point in me hanging on. King has me locked in his grip and with his lips. This kiss reminds me of our first at The Pink.

But we're not strangers any longer.

The drama.

The orgasms.

The sex.

His lips bruise mine, and it happens again. Just like last night and this morning.

I lose myself in his embrace. Heck, I lose myself in him.

The way he groans into my mouth, I'm desperate for him to feel the same way.

King pulls me farther across the console, and I think this is going to turn into what happened in my parking lot last night, when the car dome lights seem like no big deal.

The garage is flooded with bright fluorescents and a scream comes from somewhere outside the haven I've found in the special agent who continues to rock my world.

"Oh. My. Lanta! Laken, get out here! He's kissin' her!"

King's hands flex on my jaw where he holds me tight. We stop moving with our mouths fused as one.

"Come here, Lake!"

I open my eyes when I feel King's exhale caress my face. I try to pull away from him, but he presses his lips to mine once more.

"Well, lookie there," another voice enters the garage. "I told you."

I pull away again, and this time, he allows it. I glance toward the house and see an old, round woman who can't be taller than five feet standing in front of a younger woman with the same coloring as King, but with blond highlights. A little girl runs in front of both of them. "Uncle King has a girlfriend!"

“And he was kissin’ her,” the old lady announces for the second time and doing it loud enough the neighbors two houses down will know, even with these large lots. “Get in the house so we can meet your lady, King. I’m starving. My dinner time was hours ago. If I don’t eat soon, I’m gonna have nightmares.”

“I don’t want nightmares,” the girl drawls in a way she’s bored with life.

I turn back to King who’s reaching for his phone and keys. “That’s what you get for being difficult.”

I wait for all three females to file back into the house—the one who I assume is Laken is grinning from ear to ear as she shoots her brother an amused expression. I realize she has the same bright blue eyes.

“Let’s go,” King says and climbs out of the car.

I don’t move and stay planted in my seat. I don’t care how hot it might get out here. It’s safer than trying to find my way home by myself, and after that, it’s surely safer than going into the house for dinner.

My door opens, and King holds a hand out for me. “We’ll make it worse if she has to come back out here again.”

“Is that Trippy?” I whisper.

“Yep.” He actually pops the P. I’m not sure if that stems from love or frustration for the elderly woman who raised him.

I refuse to move. “She sort of scares me.”

“She should.” He reaches in to tag my hand and gives me a good yank. “Laken wasn’t kidding when she said Trippy would cut my balls off for a multitude of reasons. One being making her wait to eat. Her dinner has gotten progressively earlier over the years.”

I barely have a chance to grab my purse as he pulls me to my feet. But he doesn’t stop there. He yanks me to his chest, wraps an arm around me, and his hand lands on my bottom.

I look up and deliver a threat that I fully plan to follow through on. “If you embarrass me tonight, I’m going to tell that sweet,

old lady that you lied about her being on her deathbed.”

He smiles. “You would do that? I thought you liked my balls. At least you did in the shower last night.”

“Please, don’t embarrass me,” I beg. “You don’t know this about me, but I have an incessant need to give good first impressions. I stress over it.”

He leans down to kiss me, and this time it’s not the devouring kind that hints at energetic sex when we get back to my apartment.

This kiss is a promise.

“Baby,” he breathes against my lips. “Making a good first impression once you walk through those doors is the last thing you need to worry about. Those three women are the only family I have outside of the Rangers and DEA. They love me, so they’ll fucking love you.”

I relax into his chest.

“But—” he delivers that word with a punch. “You cannot tell them how we met. That will put Trippy on her deathbed.”

My eyes widen. “Seriously? More lies. I’m not sure I can handle that.”

“Kingston Jennings, if I faint from low blood sugar, I’m blaming you when Dr. Emmett has to come to the hospital to see me!”

“She is diabetic,” King announces. “We need to eat.”

King doesn’t need to worry about Trippy making it through the night.

I’m not sure I will.

ALL PRETEND BUT THE SEX

Goldie

Laken picks up her glass and points back and forth between King and me. “For real? She came running in from a rainstorm?”

King finishes the last swallow of his beer. “She sure did. She was soaked to the bone with makeup streaking her face, but she didn’t care. She couldn’t keep her eyes off me and asked a stranger to move so she could sit by me at the bar.”

I have to pick my jaw off the floor to speak as I stare at the man who I’m falling deeper and deeper for as the moments and lies click on. “You’re unbelievable.”

He gives my hair a playful tug. “You were the most beautiful drowned rat I’ve ever seen.”

Laken sits back in her chair. “You’re full of shit, bro.”

Trippy pins Laken with the look. “Watch your mouth.”

“I’ve heard the word shit before, Grandma,” Willa announces.

“It doesn’t mean she has to say it,” Trippy mutters.

I turn to the women across the table from us. “I’d never met anyone as awkward as King. It was like he didn’t know how to speak to a woman.”

I’m not sure if it’s my second glass of wine or my current state of life, but I’m becoming more and more comfortable with the lies, though that last one was not a lie. King was awkward, but

they don't need to know he was undercover pretending to be someone else.

"King Jennings, the Army Ranger turned narc, was awkward?" Laken shakes her head and turns to Trippy. "This really must be the one, huh, Trip? King has never been awkward a day in his life."

Trippy spoons more sugar into her iced tea than anyone should consume, but really more than a diabetic. "King went through his awkward phases. Braces was the first one. I had to pay for orthodontics twice for him since he refused to wear his retainers. Then there was the gangly stage. He just grew and grew and grew. He got so tall, I thought his head would be stuck in the clouds, but he was so skinny, I was afraid he'd snap like a twig in the breeze." Trippy looks at me and lowers her voice like she's telling me a secret. "He didn't get muscly like that 'til he went to West Point."

"You had to wear braces twice?" Willa hasn't said much during dinner, but the mention of going through orthodontics more than once is enough to get her attention.

"You don't have much of a choice when it comes to Trippy. And so much for trying to impress Marigold. I can always count on you two to keep it real," King deadpans, as if he's ever tried to impress me.

"If you've ever tried to impress anyone, I'd be shocked," I say.

Laken turns to her brother. "If you do anything to chase her off, I'll kill you myself. I love her."

Trippy looks to Laken. "When was the last time he brought home a girl?"

"Trippy," King grits. "Not okay."

Trippy and Laken don't care what's okay with King.

Laken glances at the woman who raised her. "Unless you're holding out on me, it was high school, right?"

King gives my hair a tug. "Everyone was afraid of Trippy. Not Don, but Trippy."

“A healthy fear is a good thing when you’re trying to raise decent humans.” Trippy looks straight at me and doesn’t mince her words. “I had to do my best to make sure these two didn’t fall victim to their genes. There’s nothing on earth I love more than my late husband and these two kids. And now Willa. But Don’s family was something. How they never showed up on Dateline, I’ll never know.”

“Did you miss the part where King is trying to woo this woman?” Lake asks.

“Tsk.” Trippy waves Laken off, and King isn’t fazed one bit, proving the fact he doesn’t care about impressing anyone. Trippy turns to me to spill the tea on things King has hinted at, but didn’t give me a lot of details on. “These two ended up in foster care up in South Dakota in the middle of the mountains where foster care families were scarce. They were about to be split up, and the system was searching for family who would take them together. There was no one but us.”

“Spoiler alert,” Laken announces. “They separated us anyway.”

“They did?” Willa asks. “I’ve heard this story a gazillion times, and I didn’t know that.”

Trippy looks up at Willa since her granddaughter stands at least four inches taller. “Yep. Your grandpa and I had to go through the system quick-like, but we made it happen. We couldn’t have our own kids, but we were lucky enough to get these two, even if it was later in life. You know the rest of the story.”

I break into the conversation. “I don’t.”

“There’s not much more to tell,” King says.

Trippy ignores King and keeps talking. “For the next four years, we were considered foster care. Don’s attorney worked on it the whole time, but because their mama—”

“Our birth mother,” Laken interjects.

“Yeah, her.” Trippy rolls her eyes. “Because she would start to get her act together and then end up thrown in the slammer again. Sometimes it was for silly stuff and other times it was

for some pretty bad stuff. But we finally adopted them. We were the oldest parents on the block, but we didn't care. The house was quiet until the day they arrived, but after that it was the four of us until we lost Don."

I turn to King. "You grew up here?"

He nods. "Trippy refuses to sell, so I live here while she's living her best life at the old folks' home."

"Stop calling it that. It's a retirement community," Trippy scolds him.

"More like a monster jam with golf carts," he amends with a teasing smile.

That smile makes my insides do things I'm not familiar with.

As the evening has progressed from getting caught kissing in the garage to dinner to listening to Jennings family stories that made me laugh and tugged at my heart, I'm more and more comfortable around the women in King's life.

It's hard to reconcile the agent with the devoted son of Trippy Jennings. It's the last thing I expected from him.

Laken looks at her watch. "It's getting late. We'd better get Trippy home. Willa and I leave early in the morning."

"We can drop her on the way to Goldie's," King offers.

"But I want to drive the golf cart one more time. Please?" Willa begs.

Trippy leans over to kiss her granddaughter on the forehead. "Of course you can."

Laken stands and helps Trippy to her feet. "I cooked, which means I am not cleaning that kitchen. We'll take Trippy and say goodbye until next time. You clean, but Goldie can't lift a finger since this is her first time here."

King gets up and pulls Trippy into his chest for a hug. "I'll get over to see you soon."

She takes his hug, but then gives him a little slap on the abs. "That's what you always say. You'd better make it happen and

bring Goldie with you. I'll take her for a ride around my neighborhood."

King sighs.

I smile. "I'd love that."

"She's a risk taker," Laken notes. "I like that about you, even though you'd better think twice before putting your life in jeopardy."

Trippy reaches out and gives my hand a squeeze. "Don't listen to them. You'll be fine. It's battery operated."

King says his goodbyes. "We'll be gone by the time you get back. Call me on your way home, Lake, and come back soon."

"We didn't even get to go to the parks in Orlando this time," Willa complains.

Lake gets her purse and Trippy's things. "Next time."

Willa's tween sarcasm shines bright. "You mean the next time Dad ends up on the news for campaign fraud?"

Laken frowns. "You're not supposed to watch the news."

"So I can have every social media app, but I can't watch the news?"

King gives his niece a hug. "She's old enough to handle the news."

"I give up, and your uncle is no help," Laken says and gives her brother a hug. "Thanks for that."

"I'll talk to you soon. Be careful driving home," King says.

Trippy, Laken, and Willa make it slowly out the front door, and King goes straight to the kitchen.

"You want another drink?" he asks.

"No. I've had plenty." I glance around at the house that looks like it hasn't changed since it was built before King was born. "I have to say, this isn't what I imagined your home to look like."

King starts to carry dirty dishes to the kitchen. "I can't argue that."

I walk to the living room to do what I wanted to do since we got here. Study the artifacts that line bookcases, tables, and credenzas. The pictures are endless and they go back to when King was a boy.

It's like watching a still-life movie. If I could flip through them fast enough, they'd act out a scene.

Vacations. Sports. Family time.

Laken played the violin, and King played the drums. Graduations and pictures of King in his Army uniforms and during his time as a cadet.

West Point.

Another surprise about Kingston Jennings.

I move through the room that looks nothing like King and everything like Trippy. The next thing I know, I've peeked into Laken's old bedroom, a guest room that is a teenage girl explosion, and stop when I reach the end of the hall.

Finally.

A space that looks exactly like the man who has forced himself into my life. I should ask if I can look around, but he didn't exactly ask before pushing me back into the Carter fold that I had to fight to get out of in the first place.

The wall in back of the bed is brick from top to bottom. But it's painted a gray so dark, it hints at black in its own shadows. The bed is rustic and stained dark. The rest of the room is varying shades of taupe with dark greens mixed in. The bedding matches even though it's an unmade mess.

There's a pile of unfolded clean clothes tossed on the end of the bed and a door to the backyard leads to the pool with a cabana.

This space makes my imagination go wild. Not that I need to use my imagination. I have lived to experience the real thing when it comes to King.

Being in here is like a different dimension from the rest of the house. Like I've entered another space.

King's space.

It shows me who he is and that his time is scarce. Either that or he just doesn't care, so it's easy for me to go directly to the only framed picture in this room. It sits on his dresser that's dotted with random papers, receipts, and unopened mail.

This picture tells a whole different story than the rest in the house.

I have to look close to spot him. He's with a team standing in front of a Chinook or something like it. They'd fly over our sleepy Virginia town from time to time. It was exciting to look into the sky and see something other than a hawk hunting its next meal.

The group is dressed for combat in full camo with more tactical gear than I can imagine carrying at any one time. They're in helmets and look like they're getting ready to do something important and frightening. They're loaded down with guns and gear and everything else needed to do their job and survive at the same time.

King is second from the left. I recognize his stance—the way he manages to shift his weight to one side, all the while commanding a presence and looking ominous.

And, still, his blue eyes shine bright through the summer day.

“You see something you like?”

I jerk and spin on a heel. “You startled me.”

King leans his shoulder to the door jamb, hands stuffed in his pockets, and doing the same thing he did in the picture I'm still holding.

His presence fills the space and then some.

But tonight, he's not ominous. At least not anymore. He was the first time I met him like he was the first time I kissed him.

Or, should I say, he kissed me.

He lifts his chin. “When you're snooping, you always need to be aware. Watch your back. It's the number one rule when you're working undercover.”

I look down at the picture and run the tip of my finger over his figure from head to toe. “Then it’s a good thing I don’t have to pretend I’m someone I’m not or to even like the bad guys. I’ll leave that up to you.”

“You’re the reason I’m this deep into the Carter Cartel. Don’t make light of that.”

I set the frame back where it was. “Just remember you’re on the clock. Brax and Micah made it seem like this could take forever. You don’t have forever, King.”

He licks his lips, and his blue eyes smolder. “Ah, yes. Our upcoming nuptials. How could I forget something so significant?”

I don’t want to think about that for so many reasons. I’ve planned and attended more weddings than most people attend in a lifetime, and never once have I thought about being the star of the show.

I mean, I have. I think at this point, I’ve seen it all. I have a black list of things that make me cringe, things I’ll never wear, or traditions that should be banned.

But I’m never the star of my imagination. There’s something depressing about picturing that special day by yourself since I’ve never had a love of my life to add to the scene to share it with.

Until recently.

And for some reason, I can picture it. Even though the *love of my life* part isn’t a reality.

Heck, reality is murky. It should all be pretend but the sex. But the lust and the way I’m drawn to King is very, very real.

I pull in a breath and change the subject, because the vision of walking down the aisle to Kingston Jennings is too much.

“Thank you for tonight. Despite Dex, I do love Miami, but I miss my mom. You gave me family time tonight, even if I was just a spectator. It was a lovely break from my life.”

Of all the things I say, that’s what pushes him to move. I’m in his arms before I know it. My bottom is pressed into his

dresser, his lips find mine, and his hands roam.

The heat of his hand on the bare skin of my back presses in, and his other hand dips into my hair to angle my face.

His tongue plunges in my mouth. This kiss is as demanding as his body as I'm pinned to his dresser.

I wonder how King Jennings would seal the deal after saying *I do*.

Stupid, stupid heart.

My brain forces that thought from my head. Jennings family time and soaking in a million pictures of King growing into the man he is today has proven to be too much.

Maybe it is for him too. His erection grows firmer by the second when he tears his lips from mine and looks into my eyes. "You don't know how bad I want to throw you on my bed and fuck you until we pass out. But we need to switch cars and get back to your place, and if we don't get out of here before Lake and Willa get back, we'll be stuck here forever. Lake knows what's going on, but Trippy doesn't."

My hands wander to his biceps, and I ask what I've wondered all night. "Have you always called her Trippy?"

"Yeah. I was four when we moved in with them. They were the great aunt and uncle we didn't know. The official adoption came later, but when it finally happened, nothing really changed. They were our parents, but they were Trippy and Don."

"You're lucky to have them."

"I know. She's why I did everything I could to get back to Miami."

"She's lucky to have you too. Is her name really Trippy?"

King smirks. "No way. Her name is Lois. I guess when she was little, she was so uncoordinated, she tripped all the time. No one since then has ever called her Lois. I learned her real name wasn't Trippy when the judge used her real name at our adoption."

I scrunch my face. “She doesn’t look like a Lois.”

“The kitchen is clean enough,” King states, confirming my notion earlier that he’s sort of messy and unapologetic about it. I like that about him. “Let’s go.”

I lift up on my toes to press my lips to his jaw. “Thank you for tonight, King.”

His hand slides down to my bottom where I get a delicious squeeze. “Baby, you can wait to thank me after I get you home. Mr. Elrod won’t be getting any sleep tonight.”

CONDOMS, REALITY, AND CONSEQUENCES

King

We're almost to the top of the stairs when I have to catch Goldie by the hips so I don't plow her down.

She stops mid-step in front of me. "Um ... Daniel?"

At her calling my fake name, I pull her back into my chest and wrap an arm around her waist.

When I look over her head, I know why.

I step in beside her. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Rand rakes his eyes over Goldie as he leans against the wall sucking on a cigarette. "You're looking good, even pregnant."

Goldie tenses, but you'd never know if you weren't touching her. For as much as this guy has riled her so far, her tone is cool and smooth. "That happens when one is immensely happy."

He pushes off the wall and blows smoke out his nose as he shifts his stare to me. "I've got a message for you from Mr. Carter."

I grab Goldie's hand and take the last step to the second floor, pulling her behind me. "Dex has my number. He's free to call or text me anytime. You can tell him that I pride myself on making my clients a priority. No need to send a message snail mail across town with his little bitch."

Rand's eyes narrow, but he at least has the brains to ignore my comment. "Some business Mr. Carter doesn't like to do over

the phone.”

“You mean money-laundering business,” I specify, not giving a shit who hears.

My fingers itch for my gun when he reaches into his pocket. But given our last encounter, he’s not that much of an idiot. He produces a piece of paper and hands it over to me.

I hold it up and read it.

A time and an address.

I look back at Rand. “Is Dex inviting me to another dinner party from hell?”

Rand shakes his head. “Money drop. Mr. Carter is going to test the waters with a small amount. If you can pull that off without losing his investment, he’s all in.”

I slide the paper into my pocket. “Good to know. The all-in part. I’ve been waiting for instructions.”

“You’ll have to learn to be patient when it comes to Mr. Carter.”

I throw that right back at him. “Dex needs to learn that if he doesn’t have enough business to keep me busy, I have clients waiting in the wings who will. Either get me the money, or go to the back of the line.”

Rand flicks his smoke to his feet, where it lands on Goldie’s doormat. He puts his loafer on it and grinds it in.

“Don’t be late,” Rand warns before looking back at Goldie. “And you ... your brother expects you in this week to pick out flowers and music—shit like that.”

“I’ll take care of that myself,” Goldie says with a backbone. “I don’t need anything from The Pink but the location and space.”

Rand shakes his head. “How quickly you forget that your brother doesn’t give options. He gives orders.”

Goldie says nothing, but she does give my hand a squeeze.

“He’ll expect you tomorrow when your man is making the money pick up.”

Goldie leans into me, wraps her other arm around mine, and tips her temple to my bicep but focuses on Rand. “Canon in D. I want the artichoke gouda tarte for appetizer, fattoush salad, lobster for the main course with roasted asparagus, and the parmesan potatoes.” She looks up at me. “Is that okay?”

I pull my arm from where she’s gripping me and wrap it around her. “Doesn’t matter how many times you try to get me to eat asparagus, I don’t like it.”

“You’re impossible. Fine.” She sighs and turns her attention back to Rand. “Green beans. And for the flowers, I want white everywhere, from top to bottom. My bouquet will be loose and natural with hints of blue.” She looks up at me again. “To match your eyes.”

Rand doesn’t give a shit what Goldie thinks about my eyes, and growls, “Your brother wants you at The Pink to make the plans.”

Goldie places a hand over her belly and rubs the child that isn’t there. “Sorry, I’m busy. Doctor’s appointments, dress fittings, and I had plans to visit my mom before the wedding. Dex can demand all he wants, I have no time for him.”

I give her ass a squeeze because she can’t throw this shit out there to Carter or his men without talking to me about it. “We’ll talk about the trip.”

She smiles. “There’s nothing to talk about. I was supposed to go last week and put it off. I can’t do it again.”

Rand’s jaw tightens. “We’ll see what Mr. Carter has to say about that.”

I pull her tighter to me, and she gets the hint, because all she does is shrug Rand off.

“Is there anything else?” I demand. “We’d like to get on with our night.”

“Just be at the drop and talk some sense into your woman. If she’s your wife, she needs to be back in the Carter fold. And

this time she's not getting out."

Goldie tenses at my side, but her expression remains steady.

Rand needs to leave, and I need to get us inside. "I'll be at the money pick up. That's all you need to worry about."

I push Goldie to my other side and shift us around Rand to get to her door. Rand's footsteps echo in the breezeway as he jogs down the stairs, and Goldie unlocks her door with trembling hands.

Two seconds later, we're locked in her apartment, and Goldie goes straight for her room, muttering, "I hate him more than I hate Dex."

I peek through the blinds and watch Rand pull out of the parking lot as I hit go on Brax's number.

"What's up?" Brax asks.

"We just had a visitor at Goldie's apartment. Dex refuses to call or text me and sent Rand with a written note for instructions on the first money pick up."

The phone shuffles, followed by a sliding door opening and closing. Brax never talks business in front of his family. He said his wife dealt with enough of that when he was undercover. "That explains why the wire is quiet besides calling for a car or talking legit Pink business. Not one mention of the money, you, or Goldie, and we know after the recent drama, that shit has to be eating at him."

"There's no way he only communicates by passing notes back and forth in class. He's got other phones. Until we find them, we might as well be feeling our way in the dark."

"We'll triangulate the area again to search for new numbers at the money pick up. You guys okay tonight?"

I scan the parking lot for more activity, but there's nothing unusual. At least nothing that screams Carter Cartel. "Yeah. We can always pull the footage from the pole cameras, but that's after the fact. I think we're safer here than most places. Dex has a reputation to keep up. He's not going to send anyone to break into an apartment where there are so many

tenants who will call the cops in a heartbeat. I met the guy downstairs. He gives neighborhood watch new meaning.”

“One of those.” Brax chuckles. “The best kind of witness.”

I think of all the other things Mr. Elrod might be witness to and hope that we never have to question him. That’ll really give new meaning to my commitment to the job. “I wanted to let someone know we got a visit. I’ll be in touch tomorrow, but I’m not going to come into the office for a while. Carter is checking in on us. I can’t risk it.”

“Agreed. I’ll let Micah and Tim know.”

“This might get me out of dinner this weekend,” I say.

“You can make it without a tail. Tim will insist. If he doesn’t, Annette will. Landyn told her about Goldie.”

“What the hell?” I bite. “How does Landyn know?”

He pauses. “Are you seriously asking me that?”

“You guys are worse than your wives.”

“I would have to give a shit for that to bother me.” I hear the door open and close again. “Watch your back. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

I don’t bother saying goodbye and hang up. When I turn around, Goldie is standing in the middle of her small family room with her arms crossed. I can’t help my eyes from dragging down her body.

“That was fast,” I note.

She looks down at herself. “What? You don’t change as soon as you get home?”

“I do. I like that you do too.”

She hugs herself tighter. “Who were you talking to?”

“Just filling Brax in on Rand making a surprise visit. He’s gone, by the way. As long as I’m here with you, we’re good to stay at your place. They’re not going to go old school mafia on us. That might be Dex’s style in private, but he’s got a reputation to uphold. This street is busy and your complex is

active. As long as Dex thinks I'm Daniel Armstrong and you're my fiancée, we're safe here."

"I don't know. Rand tried to push his way in here the other night before you stepped in."

"They know I'm here," I stress. "I'm not going to leave you, and they know that."

"Rand ruined the night again."

I shake my head and move to her. "No fucking way. I'll never let him ruin anything."

Her hands land on my pecs when I pull her to my chest and dip my hand under the back of her tank and feel nothing but bare skin on tense muscles.

I drag my fingers along the spot a bra would normally be. "When you get comfortable, you really get comfortable."

"It's an unwritten rule among women that you rip your bra off when you get home."

The corners of my mouth tip north. "I like that rule. Is it the same for everything else?"

She shrugs. "I thought I'd let you rip the rest off me, but that was before Rand showed up and ruined the mood."

"I'm not letting anyone ruin the mood." I let go of her long enough to grip the hem of her tank and pull. "I'll prove to you that my vibe will always win."

Her long, dark hair falls around her bare shoulders when the tank clears her head. I toss it behind her and stare. "I still don't know how I got lucky enough to be standing right here."

She presses her bare tits against my chest. "I don't think luck had anything to do with it. You pushed your way in and didn't leave until I had no choice but to *sort of* like you."

My hands go to her hips, and I dip my thumbs into her sweat shorts and the thin string that makes up her panties. "Sort of?"

"Sort of," she confirms on a teasing, sly smile. "I'm not giving you the satisfaction of anything more."

What I want to do is grip the material at her hips and rip it to shreds.

Instead, I push and let gravity do the rest.

She lowers her voice. “King.”

“I’m busy.” The rest of her clothes pool at her feet. “I need to prove to you that you more than *sort of* like me.”

I rip my shirt off and toss it to the side. Her touch on my skin is hot when she wraps her arms around me and angles her forearms up my lats. “How are you going to do that?”

My cock thickens in my jeans as I slide my hands down her bare skin. I can get a tan by walking next to an open window, but she’s fair and flawless.

I want to taste every inch of her.

When my hands reach her thighs, I grip them from behind and lift. Her toned legs wrap around my waist.

“Fuck,” I hiss and press her back to the wall next to the door. I look straight into her dark eyes before letting my eyes wander to her tits sitting in front of me. “I can feel you. You’re already wet pressed against me.”

Her heels dig into my ass as she hangs on tight to my shoulders. She licks her lips. “I guess you didn’t have to work very hard. It doesn’t matter how shot my nerves are from this rollercoaster of emotions I’m riding. Having you in the middle of everything is all I want.”

I slide my hand from her thigh to her ass to her pussy. She’s spread wide and I have no trouble sliding two fingers inside her for a deep pump.

Her eyes close, and her head falls to the wall with a moan I can feel within her.

I let go long enough to rip my jeans open and free myself. This isn’t like last night when we went through three condoms.

Last night, my bare cock never once flirted with her bare pussy. I’m no idiot or hormonal teenager who loses his mind at the thought of fucking.

I've never been that man.

But right now, there's nothing more I want than to ignore condoms, reality, and consequences.

And I don't hesitate in telling her as I stroke her clit that my cock is pressed against. "You don't know how bad I want to take you just like this, Goldie. I want to make you come so hard you forget about everything but me. Then I want to bury myself inside you while you beg me not to stop."

Her jaw goes slack, and her breathing shallows.

"Baby," I call for her as I work her swollen clit. "Look at me."

Her hips jerk, and she manages to drag her eyes open. I'm becoming obsessed with the way she breathes through her parted lips from my touch.

"I'm going to tell you this right now so you don't freak out on me."

She frowns as I give her clit quicker circles. "Why would I do that?"

"Because when you talk about this," I plunge a finger deep within her, "you talk like it's temporary."

"I..." she moans, but by the look in her eyes, I can't decide if she wants to argue or agree.

I don't give her the chance to do either. "And that pisses me off."

Every part of her tenses around my body. Everything but her shallow breaths that kiss my lips.

Her fingers squeeze into the back of my neck to hold on. I press my pelvis into hers, wedging myself to the front of her pussy and thrust. My cock slides easily up and down as my blood rushes south. Between that and my finger, I'm working her from every angle.

"Promise me you won't piss me off," I demand.

Her eyes close, but she presses into my hand and cock.

"Goldie," I demand.

She opens her eyes. This time they're guarded. "I don't mean to piss you off. I swear, I don't."

I lean in to take her mouth, plunging my tongue the way my dick is begging to take her pussy. I give her clit more pressure. Quicker laps. Harder thrusts with the underside of my rock-hard dick.

I let go of her mouth as her lips fall from mine when her orgasm starts to take over.

Then I stop, leaving her on the brink of euphoria.

She gasps, and her eyes fly open.

"We'll see where this goes, but do not give me an expiration date, Goldie," I growl. "If you do that, I'll come after you."

She gives her head a little shake.

All it takes is one swipe of her clit, and she falls. Her head presses to the wall, her pussy presses into my hand and cock.

Goldie Carter trembling in my arms while pinned to the wall is something I want to burn in my brain to revisit for a lifetime.

Temporary my ass.

I yank her away from the wall and stalk to her room holding her close, not moving my hand or cock from where they'd be happy to live for a lifetime.

She's still coming down from her orgasm when I drop her to the bed and reach to the nightstand for the box of condoms we ripped open last night. I tear it open as I push my pants to the floor.

"I've never hated condoms until I met you." I realize my own breath is ragged when I find her staring at my cock as I roll on the dreaded latex. I wet the crease of my lips. "Roll over, baby. I want your ass in the air."

Goldie's eyes widen as she slowly draws her feet to her ass, but she doesn't move.

I grip my engorged cock at the base. "Baby, roll."

She holds my gaze for as long as she can before she does as I demanded. I slide my hand up the back of her thigh and over her perfect ass where I squeeze one globe before climbing on the bed behind her. She turns her head to peek at me as I wrap myself around her from behind.

My lips come to her ear as I nudge her legs apart one by one with my knees, this time rubbing my cock along her pussy from behind.

A whole new experience.

“You feel that?” I ask. My words are a murmur in her ear.

I feel her exhale on every inch of my body where we’re connected. “It’s hard not to feel everything, King.”

“We fit,” I say and drag a hand up the middle of her body, touching her everywhere. “So fucking perfect. I’m like armor. You might’ve had to go it alone until now, but I’m here. Let me be your shield.”

She’s still wet and open once again. With one swift thrust of my hips, I slide into her from behind. She fists the messy sheets below us and presses onto my cock.

“See?” I pull out and press back in even harder. “So fucking perfect.”

Her dark eyes search mine as I move inside of her, and she whispers, “Yes. It’s so perfect.”

“Good girl.” I press my lips to her forehead. “Now I’m going to fuck you so hard you’ll never forget it.”

Her knuckles turn white, and she sucks in a breath.

I kiss her temple.

The spot between her shoulder blades.

As far down her spine as I can go without losing her hot, wet pussy.

When I’m on my knees, I grip her hips and ass, and start to pull her onto me. Every time our bodies collide, it’s stronger than the one before. I release her long enough to smack her ass. “Arch, baby.”

She does.

I go deeper.

We come closer together.

Goldie starts to moan and move with me.

She gasps, and for the second time I feel her pulse around me, but this time it's my cock. I can't take it any longer and let go.

"Fuck," I growl as my balls tighten. I lose control, slam into her harder and harder until I can't take it anymore, and I question whether any extra strength condom could live through this in one piece.

I plant myself deep and fall to my hands on either side of her, caging her in.

A desire I'm fighting more and more as time with her passes.

Goldie's knees give out and she collapses on her stomach. I come down with her—our connection still as strong and deep as ever.

Her body is limp and sated, and she takes every ounce of weight I give her.

Completely surrounding her.

We're sweaty. Pulses racing. After a lifetime of sports, bootcamp, training, and years as a Ranger, my body is used to being pushed to the edge.

But my heart is doing shit I do not recognize.

Every instinct in me wants it, but I have a feeling that's the exact thing that might chase her off.

And still, the only move I make is to slide my hand under hers to thread our fingers and kiss the side of her head.

She gives me a weak squeeze. "How do you do that?"

My voice is hoarse. "Fucking you is the easiest thing I've ever done."

That doesn't get the reaction I think it will. "No. I mean you take me like you're desperate. Like you want to bust me at the seams because it might be the last time you get the experience,

and then you do something as sweet as hold my hand and kiss me like I'm delicate."

Fuck.

This time my fingers grip hers, and it's not weak. "Did I hurt you?"

She huffs a breath of oxygen. "That was the opposite of hurt. I'm trying to figure you out. Just when I think I know who you are, another day goes by, and there's a whole other side of you. You have so many facets, you're one of those complex shapes I can't remember from geometry."

I press my semi-hard cock into her. "Right back at you. I'm trying to figure you out, too, and not chase you off in the process."

When she sighs, we sink further into the mattress. "I'm an overthinker."

"Then I'm pleased I've made it this far." I pull our hands in to tuck her in tighter.

I don't want to let go.

"You're not slipping through my fingers, Goldie. I won't allow it."

She doesn't answer or acknowledge my possessive statement. "I'm tired."

For some reason, I don't think she means she could sleep until noon tomorrow.

I have a feeling she's fucking exhausted from dealing with Dex Carter and his minions. Hell, she gave up a future of financial freedom just to live free of her brother.

"It's late. Who the hell knows what tomorrow will bring. Let's get some sleep."

I do something I do not want to do.

I pull out and let go.

FUCKING NAMASTE

King

Brax: Tim approved your op plan. I'm bringing a guy from tech with us so we can grab more phone numbers. Micah is coordinating backup. We're good to go.

Me: Thanks. It should be straight forward even though Dex is using this as a test run. Pick up the money and get out.

Brax: Pick up the money and not get burned.

Me: That too.

Brax: But should you get burned, we need a rescue word. Especially after what happened last time. We were about to bust through the doors of The Pink.

Me: Let's go with Caribbean. I won't need it though.

Brax: Perfect. But that's not why I'm reaching out. While you're busy playing house with your fake fiancée, Tim's boss's boss stopped by to talk about your case.

Me: No shit?

Brax: Yep. Your case has gotten attention. He wanted a debrief.

Brax: And you were not here.

Me: Fuck.

Brax: You can say that again. I walked by during their open-door meeting. You should've heard Tim making excuses for you.

Me: Great. Just fucking great.

Brax: By the way, if the big boss ever asks you why a haircut was so important in the middle of a work day during one of the biggest cases to hit the Miami Division, you'll know why.

Me: A haircut? That's the best he could come up with?

Brax: Let's just say your hair is infamous.

Me: Fuck me.

Brax: Indeed. Consider yourself fucked. Landyn trims me up every other week. Micah has that I-don't-give-a-fuck look. No one really knows if he just rolled out of bed or took a shower. You, on the other hand, require a lot of product to maintain your Hollywood do.

Me: I do not require a lot of product.

Brax: I beg to differ. I happen to sleep with your stylist, and she tells me how much you buy. Don't get me wrong. I appreciate it. You might single handedly stock my beer fridge.

Me: I'm done talking about my hair. I'm also going to pretend this never happened.

Micah: You fuckers are chatty. I just got home. Evie made me go to yoga with her. I've never felt worse about myself. This must be how you feel all the time at your age, Your Highness.

Me: Again with the age...

Brax: You went to yoga? Do you even fit on a mat?

Micah: I'm married to a doctor, and we have two kids. Zane is teething, and it seems like every senior citizen in southern Florida has been hospitalized in the last two weeks. If I wanted to spend time with my wife, I had no choice but to go to yoga. I did get to watch her bend like a pretzel and sweat her ass off in tights for an hour. Even if I was traumatized by the experience, it was hot.

Brax: Teething. That sucks. Have you tried Benadryl?

Micah: I'm not drugging my baby so he'll sleep, asshole.

Brax: Whoa, Dick McJudgerson. It's Benadryl, not whiskey. Wait 'til you're a walking zombie and have to make that game-time decision. You won't be such an ass. Plus, you think teething is bad? We're in the middle of potty training Baylee.

Micah: That's gotta be rough. Chase was past that when I entered the picture. The only bodily functions I'm dealing with are what's in diapers. That's bad enough.

Brax: We're going with the Winnie the Pooh method. It's fucking stressful with the new sofa.

Me: I'm sorry to interrupt your Mr. Mom convention, but I need a favor.

Brax: Man, if I'm not bribing my daughter with stickers to pee in a potty chair that sits in the middle of my damn family room, I'm living and breathing your case. What more do you want from me?

Micah: Yoga drained me. I have nothing left for you, old man.

Me: It's not about the case. This is about Goldie.

Brax: Oh, why didn't you say so? This is my specialty. I'm the shit when it comes to relationship advice.

Micah: At least King didn't lie to Goldie about who he was for eternity. He fessed up about his true identity after a couple days. I'm the only one who was honest from the get go. If you're going to take advice from anyone, it should be me.

Me: Fuck you both. I do not need relationship advice.

Micah: Are you sure about that? I've known you for three years, and you've yet to dip a toe into the relationship arena.

Brax: It's time to do more than dip your toe. Charge into that arena like a true warrior.

Micah: You're running out of time. You've got to make your mark. Your legacy is at stake.

Brax: Shit or get off the pot, King, like a true Roman legend.

Micah: Well said, brother.

Me: If you two could shut up for two seconds about the Roman Empire, I can explain. I need a babysitter. Or more like a Goldie sitter.

Brax: (smack-my-face emoji)

Micah: (wide-eyed emoji)

Brax: The number one rule of the arena: do not let your woman hear you talk about her that way.

Micah: You will lose your balls in one go. Your legacy will be no more. And at your age, you do not have time to fuck around. If Goldie is the one, you need to fast-track that shit.

Me: I need someone to stay with her while I pick up the money. Dex will know where I am, and that she's not with me. It'll be the perfect opportunity for him to send someone to fuck with her.

Brax: We're coordinating your back-up. Goldie can't exactly be with us. We might be skilled, but we can't do both.

Micah: I've got an idea. Hang on...

Today 6:47 PM

Micah Emmet added Rocco Monroe to the conversation.

Micah: Roc, you there?

Brax: He's not going to answer you.

Me: Didn't he take a test this morning?

Brax: What the hell are you talking about? What test?

Me: Oh.

Me: Nothing.

Micah: No. Not nothing. What test did he take?

Rocco: How many times do I have to leave this text string for you guys to get the message I do not want to read through your daily bro-diary.

Brax: What test did you take?

Me: Never mind them. I need a favor, and tomorrow is your day off.

Rocco: Exactly. My day off. The day of the week I don't work or do favors. Because when you guys need favors, I find myself moving furniture, planting trees, or babysitting. And before any of you go any farther, let me remind you, I do not do diapers.

Me: It's for me. There will be no diapers involved.

Micah: Other than your Depends.

Me: I hate you. Roc, I need someone to look after Goldie while I'm doing a deal tomorrow.

Rocco: Did you get a dog?

Brax: See, this is why you need to be in the group chat. You miss all the good stuff. Goldie is the one.

Rocco: So you did get a dog.

Micah: This is why you'll always be a Padawan, young man. Pay attention. King is doing the dirty with his confidential informant. Thank God, Goldie is not a dog—she's a woman. Her evil half-brother is after her, and since King doesn't have a castle to lock her up in his dungeon like most royalty, he needs a bodyguard. He can't afford to fuck around with her safety because she's pretty much his only chance for the monarchy to live on into the next century. But he's doing it like any old-ass, creepy king would and found himself a young lass. They can procreate until he has a boy. Long live the king, and all that shit.

Me: Fuck me.

Brax: Micah pretty much nailed it.

Rocco: King is nailing his confidential informant. Does Tim know this?

Micah: That would be an affirmative, Knight Rider.

Rocco: I have no fucking idea who Knight Rider is. Still, impressive.

Me: I'm not sure what to say. Thank you?

Micah: Did you never watch TV reruns in the middle of the night, Roc?

Rocco: No. It's like you forgot how I grew up.

Rocco: Fine. I'll be your babysitter.

Micah: Bodyguard!

Brax: Bodyguard.

Micah: Though, Goldie is young, so...

Rocco: Damn, how young is she?

Me: She's thirty-four. They're just being assholes.

Brax: I didn't say shit.

Rocco: That's disappointing. You made it sound scandalous.

Micah: Did you miss the part that he's fucking his confidential informant?

Rocco: I feel like that's a job requirement for the DEA after Brax and Micah. Nicely done, King.

Me: You did take the physical test to start the process today...

Brax: What?

Micah: You took the fucking PT test and didn't tell us?

Rocco: Can I not do anything on my own? I'm a grown-ass man. Had I told you guys, you would've shown up with pom-poms or some shit. It was bad enough that Tim came.

Brax: Tim knows, and I didn't know? I'm the one who saved your ass, and you didn't tell me? Wait, does Landyn know?

Rocco: I didn't tell her because I knew she'd tell you, which was what I did not want to happen. But then Tim told King, and it seems his royal fuckness can't keep his mouth shut.

Micah: Tim told King and not us? That's it. My feelings are fucking hurt.

Me: You two aren't the only game in town anymore. I broke the barrier.

Brax: So you passed, Roc?

Rocco: Of course, I fucking passed. And as fun as this never is, I'm done. King, feel free to side-bar me about my bodyguard duties. Do not add me back into the chat unless someone has been kidnapped or a life is on the line.

Brax: I always knew you wanted to be an agent. I'm fucking proud.

Micah: I'm tearing up.

Brax: I'm texting Landyn now. Expect a call any moment.

Rocco: Goodbye.

Today 7:01 PM

Rocco Monroe left the conversation.

Micah: How about that?

Brax: He didn't want our help.

Me: He's just fine on his own.

Micah: From now on, consider yourself kicked out of the club if you keep shit like that from us, King.

Me: Tim threatened me to keep my mouth shut.

Micah: The Code of Conduct Rulebook threatened you to keep your dick in your pants when it comes to confidential informants. You didn't give a shit about that, but this is the vow you decide to keep?

Me: Speaking of vows, we've got to wrap this up before my fake wedding day arrives.

Micah: I don't know. Brax's fake wedding was one for the record books. It was epic. Yours could be too.

Brax: No one can top my wedding day.

Me: I'm out. I've got to make Goldie dinner.

Micah: Damn. Love is in the air.

Brax: Impressive. I still don't cook. But I do have to get back to potty training.

Micah: I can't move after yoga. I'll be here, dead on the floor, if anyone needs me. Fucking namaste.

WELL-SEXED

Goldie

“Here we go! Let’s get that blood moving. It’s good for your heart and your joints. Who’s with me?”

“I’m with you!” Trippy screams from where she stands to my right. “Let’s go, girl!”

I glance over at my bodyguard on my opposite side.

Officer Rocco Monroe.

A Miami PD SWAT team member who has mentioned that it’s his day off more than once. He complained to King about being here, but since King kissed me and took off for the money drop, Rocco looks like he’s making the best of a crappy situation having to stay with me.

Until now, my last twenty-four hours have consisted of hiding away in my apartment with King.

I am well-fed, well-rested, and well-sexed.

The man does not mess around in the kitchen or the bedroom.

But before I finally passed out last night, he informed me that he had a friend who was going to hang out with me today since Dex knew there was no way I’d be at the money pick up. King also thought it would be a good idea not to stay at my apartment.

I guess King thinks that the last place Dex and his cronies would look for me would be at a retirement community.

When he dropped me off at Trippy's apartment, Rocco was already waiting on me. If I remember correctly, Rocco's exact words were, "Not in this lifetime or the next would I have thought that this would be my life when I agreed to let a bunch of government agents unofficially adopt me. You fuckers really know how to take advantage of a guy."

But at least he was wise enough to say it when Trippy was making one last trip to the bathroom so she didn't wet herself during line dancing.

King slapped Rocco on the shoulder, gave me one last kiss, and was off to pick up cash from the cartel side of my family.

"All I know is my SWAT team had better never catch wind that I'm line dancing at a senior center," Rocco mutters as we all shuffle to the left four counts and clap. "I'll have to quit and move to Canada."

"Back the other way with a quarter turn! One, two, three, and clap!" the leader yells over the PA system as we shuffle back.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper loud enough that he can hear me over the song from a time before he was born. It has more twang than my mother when she's fired up about something. "I feel horrible this is how you're spending your day off. Maybe it won't take very long."

Before Rocco can answer, an old lady saddles up next to Trippy. "Who are your guests?"

Trippy frowns at the lady whose hair is pitch black and shaped like a big bubble with enough hairspray, I wonder if she put a hole in the ozone. Not a strand on her head moves as she adds a little twirl to her shuffle and claps.

"None of your business, Norma. Go back to your side of the room. You're crowding me."

My eyes widen as I shoot a glance at Rocco. His light brown eyes shine with amusement.

"Back three steps! Come on, get those hips movin' and groovin'!" the leader bosses.

“I’m just saying, you know the rules,” Norma quips on another spin as she dances around sweet Trippy like she’s sizing her up for a showdown. “One guest allowed for extra-curricular activities. The way I see it, you have two.”

“If you don’t get outta my way, I’ll light a match and that helmet on your head will go up in a poof of flames.”

Norma puts a hand up and pats the bees’ nest behind her ear. “I just got it set for the week, thank you very much.”

“Rock forward and back! Now swing around for a quarter turn!” the leader yells with a frown on her face as she zeroes in on the exchange between Trippy and Norma. “Let’s respect each other’s space, friends.”

Norma doesn’t respect anything and keeps verbally jabbing at King’s mother. “I saw that little girl driving that spectacle you wasted your retirement on. Everyone is talking about your golf cart. They can see it coming from a mile away. You look like a shriveled-up Barbie Doll from yesteryear.”

“You leave my granddaughter and my golf cart outta this.” Trippy is so flustered by Norma, she quarter turns the wrong way.

“I reported you to management,” Norma announces. “You can’t even drive that hideous piece of chewed bubble gum without running it into something. That little girl sure as heck doesn’t need to be driving either. You’re too old, and she’s too young.”

“Let’s go again! Don’t give up on me now,” the leader calls. “Take it to the right for four!”

Trippy does not take it to the right.

Trippy stops, puts her hands on her round hips, and hitches a colorful Skecher. “You listen here, you old hag—”

Norma does not respect Trippy’s space and leans in to poke her in the chest. “Don’t call me an old hag. I’m not the one huffing and puffing to the *Electric Slide*.”

Trippy swats Norma’s hand and is about to take a step forward when I look back at Rocco. “Do something.”

Rocco has stopped shuffling, clapping, and rocking. He's standing there, arms crossed with an amused expression plastered on his young, handsome face. "I might do a lot of shit for my friends, but being a bouncer at the geriatric community is not on the list."

"I'm not huffing and puffing!" Trippy wheezes.

There's no way I can stand here and let anyone upset Trippy.

I put my arm around King's mother's shoulders, shift her back, and smile at Norma to defuse the situation. "If you'll excuse us, we'll move to the other side so you can dance here."

Norma lifts an index finger and points in the air between me and Rocco. "One guest at a time. Trippy's breaking the rules. You or your little boyfriend over there needs to leave."

"That just proves that you know nothing!" Trippy raises her voice. "This is serious business, and they can't be apart. There are some things worth breaking the rules for. This is my son's girlfriend, and that strapping young man over there is her bodyguard."

"No, no—" I interject.

Norma interrupts, but at least she gets her finger out of my face. "Are you famous?"

"Heavens, no. I'm a nobody."

"Then why do you need a bodyguard?"

"This is an entire vibe I was not expecting. I'm here for it," Rocco announces.

I glare at him. "You could do something to help, you know."

"I might be your bodyguard, but I'm pretty sure you can handle this on your own," he deadpans.

"Norma!" the leader finally calls over the PA. "Everyone okay back there?"

I exhale and look back at Norma. "He's not a bodyguard. He's a friend, that's all. There's plenty of room on the dance floor for everyone."

“Go take your meds, Norma,” Trippy bites as she leans around me to poke the bear. “You’re off your rocker if you think I’m gonna let you boss me around—”

“And that’s it!” the leader calls over the speaker as the music comes to an abrupt halt. “Let’s take a water break before we move onto *The Twist!* Hydrate, and we’ll take a bathroom break soon.”

I turn and take Trippy with me. “Let’s get a drink.”

“Trippy has two guests!” Norma shouts to the front of the room. I gasp and look back to find the woman pointing at us as I shuffle Trippy to a side table where cups of water are sitting.

“He’s a bodyguard!” Trippy yells over her shoulder so the whole room can hear.

The activities leader gives Norma a little wave like everything is a-okay.

Rocco knocks back a dixie cup of water and picks up a second. “So much for flying under the radar. I hope no one here has a direct line to the cartel.”

“When King gets back, I’m going to tell him to plant some illegal drugs in her golf cart. Then I’m going to call management,” Trippy announces as she sips her own water. “Better yet, Rocco, you can arrest her! That’ll teach her.”

Rocco crumbles his cup and shoots it like a basketball into the corner trash can. “What’d you do to piss her off, Trip?”

“I got first place in the charcoal art contest. They brought in some local first graders to vote. I sketched birthday balloons. Norma sketched herself, but it turned out looking like a monster that lives under kids’ beds and terrorizes them in their nightmares. Especially with her hair and eyebrows. It’s not my fault she doesn’t know her audience. She got last place, and I got a blue ribbon. Because we play it old school around here. There are still winners and losers—none of this participation crap. That’s for the weak.”

Rocco lifts a fist to King’s mother. “Way to go, Trippy. Winners never die.”

Trippy bumps his fist with hers before shooting back the rest of her water. “We’ve got one more dance then I’ve gotta get off my feet. Lunch is next and then watercolors. We can take the Barbie Mobile.”

“Sounds fun,” Rocco announces and takes the Dixie cup from Trippy and chucks it in the trash. “But I’m driving.”



King

THE FACT that this guy shares DNA with Goldie is a scientific phenomenon.

I look Dex dead in the eyes. “That was not a part of the deal.”

“It’s my money and I’ve never worked with you,” he says.

“That’s why we’re doing a test,” I bite.

Dex nods and rubs his jaw.

We’re north of Fort Lauderdale in a tract home that looks exactly like twenty percent of the houses on the street. It’s nondescript and plain. It’s not in a shitty area, but neighbors aren’t dripping with money either. This is unlike any cash house I’ve ever seen. A mowing company was edging the lawn when I drove up and someone was even pulling weeds.

I guess that’s one way to keep your neighbors from noticing the cash and drugs that are being stored throughout the house. As far as I know, they come and go through the garage since there are four of them, one of me, and not another car parked on the street for blocks.

“If you think I’m going to let fifty Gs walk out of here in the hopes that I see seventy-five percent of it deposited back into my bank accounts, you’re more whacked than I thought. And since you hooked up with my pain-in-the-ass sister, I already think you’re pretty whacked. Rand will follow you.”

“I’m boxing it up, putting it on my boat to the Bahamas, and then shipping it out from there where it will be deposited through my businesses when it arrives in Panama. What I’m not going to do is lead you anywhere. No one gets anywhere in this business alone, Dex. If you want your money free and clear in the bank, you have no choice but to trust me.”

“That’s where we differ. I didn’t get anywhere in this business by trusting anyone.”

I lift my chin and pick up the duffle I dropped at my feet when I got here. “Then good luck spending your own money on anything legit. Hell, you can’t even order toilet paper online with dirty cash, let alone support your hobbies of fast cars and faster boats.”

“How do you know my hobbies?”

“I know Shaw, I’m marrying your sister, and you’re not the only one who does their homework,” I say. “I have no problem moving onto my next client whom I know just as much about.”

He stops me. “You can’t tell me you have bigger fish in Miami.”

I stop and turn back to him. “I have bigger fish all over the world.”

He pauses to contemplate something before going on. “Goldie didn’t come into The Pink to arrange the wedding plans.”

I turn to Rand, the fucking asshole who seems to be omnipresent. He’s fucking everywhere. I tip my head to Rand but look at Dex. “This guy has one job—to relay messages since you refuse to communicate with me directly. Goldie put in her wishes and this guy failed to deliver. You really need to hold your employees accountable. That shit would never fly in my company.”

Dex shrugs. “The timing is suspect. My sister has commitment issues, always has. But one day she turns up out of the blue after wanting nothing to do with me or the family business, and all of a sudden she’s pregnant, in love, and engaged to a money launderer? Do you take me for an idiot, Daniel?”

That came out of nowhere. I thought we were past this.

But I don't miss a beat, even though the air in this room has gone from musty to electric. "The only thing I take you for is a cartel leader doing his best to act like a businessman who needs a shit ton of cash cleaned. When I look at you, I see a client. Other than that, I don't give a shit about you."

"I've taken you, your company, and your services at face value. Do you know how many things in life I take at face value?"

Rand cracks his knuckles. He doesn't scare me

But, I don't like the way this feels and tense.

What I do not do is answer Dex. I think about the codeword that I did not plan on using today to get my ass out of this house in one piece.

"Nothing." The word might as well be venom on Dex's lips. "I take nothing at face value. I made a mistake, but we're about to rectify that."

Fuck.

Dex stares at me and never looks away when he gives his next order, and he does it with a chin lift. "Pat him down."

There are four of them.

One of me.

I hold out a hand and try one last time to defuse the situation. "Whoa—"

But Rand has been given permission. He looks like a rabid animal who's been starved for days.

I'm the raw meat that was just dangled in front of him.

The look in his eyes is vengeance and glee—a combo I do not fucking like.

The empty duffle falls from my hand to the floor.

I brace.

Three men come at me at once.

I get one swing off. I barely clip Rand because I'm thrown off balance when a sack is thrown over my head.

It gets worse when it's cinched at my neck.

"Get your fucking hands off me!"

"Tie him up," Dex growls.

It doesn't matter how hard I kick and thrash, I'm thrown on the floor and hear the sound of duct tape screeching from a roll.

I don't make it easy on them. I kick and punch and do everything I can from allowing them to bind my arms and legs.

That's when it happens.

A shoe connects with my ribs.

"Oomph."

Dammit.

Then another on the opposite side.

Another.

And a-fucking-nother.

Another kick, and this one rolls me to my stomach. My sport coat is ripped down my arms before my wrists are bound at my back.

And then the same to my ankles. I feel the binds work all the way up my shins.

"A cell. That's it boss," Rand reports.

"Get him in a chair," Dex commands.

"What in the fuck are you looking for?" I grit as it takes all three men to lift my dead weight.

"Doing what we should've done the first time we met. Without Goldie around, I can finally conduct business the way I usually do." Dex explains.

Light filters through the sack as someone empties my pockets.

“Keys and wallet. A wad of cash and a DL from New York. Not even a fucking credit card.”

Someone else pats me down from my waist to my ankles before material rips. My dress shirt.

I feel cold air on my bare chest when I’m thrown into a chair. My bound arms are wrenched at an unholy angle and pinned between me and the cold metal.

“Nothing?” Dex asks.

Duct tape hits my chest.

That’s going to suck later.

I’m bound to the chair and wonder what the hell they could do to me next.

Finding my way out of here in one piece, Goldie and the Caribbean are the only things on my mind.

Until a fist connects with my jaw.

Fucking-A.

I bite back a groan.

The taste of copper hits my tongue as my mouth fills with blood and saliva.

My hair is fisted through the bag, and my head is yanked back. “That’s for the throat punch, fuckwad. Do not forget who you’re fucking dealing with. I don’t give a shit that you’re banging that cunt. I will put you in your place every day of the week, asshole.”

I can’t help it.

I thrash and fight the bindings even though I know there are only two ways out of here.

They either believe I am who I pretend to be, or...

Caribbean.

And I am not giving up if I don’t have to. It’s going to have to get a hell of a lot worse than this.

Dex needs to think he has the upper hand, but the U.S Army trained me, and I'll take Uncle Sam's elite training over street thugs. Even ones from Miami.

A shadow comes at me and I rear my head back trying to ready myself.

Dammit.

Again.

And again.

There's nothing I can do.

Again.

My face.

But it's the shots to the head that worry me more.

It's like he's daring me to beg him to stop.

Well, fuck him.

Blackness dots the edges of my vision.

But I never say a word as the punches rain down.

Rangers lead the way.

The words tumble over and over in my head, replacing the one that will stop this.

My head lolls. I drift in and out of consciousness.

But I never break.

“That's enough. Off with the hood,” Dex demands.

I squint when the light hits my swollen eyes. Rand stands in front of me, staring down with a fucking satisfied look on his face.

I spit blood.

It lands with a splat on his trousers.

Rand rears back to come at me again, when Dex catches his forearm. “I said that's enough.”

I'm breathing hard as I mutter, "I'm not sure what in the fuck you're looking for, Dex, but I hope you're happy."

Dex pushes Rand to the side and stands in front of me. "One can never be too careful in business, right? My trust isn't gained easily."

"If this is some type of fucking initiation, I passed. I've got planes and boats and runners, but other than that I take care of my own business. Not sure what you hoped to accomplish by beating the shit out of me."

A satisfied expression settles into the crevices of his lined face and he bends at the waist to glare at me. "Just making sure you are who you say you are."

"Who else would I fucking be?" I yell and pull on my restraints. "Have your dogs cut me loose, Carter. This works both ways. If I have to worry about you jumping me at every pickup, you can find someone else to do your laundry. I'm not going to put up with this shit."

Dex proves he doesn't get his hands dirty and takes three steps back before he orders, "Let him go and get him the cash."

Rand grabs the duffle as I hear a switchblade flip open behind me. The metal slides next to my skin as they cut the tape. It tears the skin at my chest before they go to my feet and finally my hands.

I sway when I stand, and internally groan when I have to bend to pick up my fake ID, keys, and cell. I slip the ripped dress shirt up my arms. I feel it in every muscle of my body and leave it hanging open. I blot the blood from my mouth with the trashed shirt and have to squint out my left eye that's quickly swelling.

Dex crosses his arms. "I can't wait to see my money show up in my account—fresh, clean, and legitimate."

Rand zips the duffle and tosses it. I catch it before it lands in my chest with a thud. I open it, do a rough count of the bundles of hundreds, and zip it back up.

But I don't leave or run out the door.

I drop the bag at my feet.

Then I ignore every bruise, ache, and taste of blood that motherfucker just inflicted on me.

All I can think about is the way he looks at Goldie.

I charge him, grip the collar of his shirt in one hand and hold him where I want him.

Then I give him a taste of what he gave me.

Rand crumples to the ground with a thud.

He's on all fours when I lean over him. "You even glance in Goldie's direction again, I will fucking end you. I don't give a shit who you work for."

He struggles to his feet—pissed and with his sights set on me.

But Dex holds out a hand to stop him. "After all that, you're still defending my sister's honor. You might be the real thing after all."

He has no fucking idea.

I need to get the hell out of here before I really kill someone. That'll fuck up my case, my job, and probably the rest of my life.

And there's the fact my body is tightening up faster than the figurative noose around my neck.

My ribs scream when I bend to tag the duffle, push past Dex, and through the front door.

I stalk to my car, pop the trunk, and toss the money inside.

I'm barely three houses down the street when my cell vibrates. I groan when I have to lean back and dig it out of my pocket.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the rearview mirror.

Fuck.

I can't remember the last time I was this messed up.

I put the phone to my ear. "Yeah?"

"We didn't hear any gunshots and you walked out on your own two feet, so I assume that means you're okay," Brax

states.

I check my mirrors to make sure no one is following me who isn't supposed to, and take a left. "I'm fucking pissed."

"I bet you are," Micah says. "Are you headed to the meeting point?"

"Where else would I go?" I grit and feel it in my gut when I turn the wheel left with one hand.

"The fact that you're not headed to the hospital tells me you're at least coherent enough to drive," Micah notes.

"Save the commentary and make sure no one's following me," I say.

"We're on your tail and there are two more doing surveillance back at the cash house to keep watch," Brax says. "We'll see you there."

I don't say another word and toss my phone to the passenger seat. What started out as a throb is becoming a gong in my head.

Fucking Dex Carter. Goldie was right. We need to wrap this shit up fast, and it has nothing to do with our fake wedding looming on the calendar.

I need to put Dex in prison and bury Rand six feet under.

I'm fucking done with both of them.

THE TRUTH

Goldie

“I won again!” Trippy exclaims for the second time, as we’ve run out of room on the table for more dominoes. She sighs. “I’m pooped. It’s time for my Diet Coke.”

If I’ve learned anything today, Trippy is on a schedule. She laid it out for Rocco and me when she explained what we’d be doing today.

Line dancing at ten.

Arguing with Norma at ten-twenty-two. This isn’t a daily thing, but it does happen more often than not.

Lunch at eleven-fifteen, because she likes to beat the noon-time rush.

She said she usually reads and takes a nap by two, but she made an exception for us today.

And three o’clock is Diet Coke time. She needs it to get her through the rest of the day. We were warned not to *give her any crap* about drinking soda. Laken does that enough, but she’s had one every day of her life that she can remember and she’s as sharp and healthy as a geriatric horse.

No one can argue that.

I add up the points. We’ve played three games of dominoes, and I’ve been killed each time. Trippy won twice and Rocco once.

I can't focus. Any strategy required for dominoes is not in my wheelhouse today.

Rocco was the star of the show when *The Twist* came on. I think he danced with every lady in the room. If Dex's men barged in to kidnap me, those ladies wouldn't allow Rocco to save me. Rocco was like Elvis reincarnated.

I was happy for them. The young, muscled SWAT officer who usually kicks down doors made them happy today.

After twisting like he didn't do last summer, Rocco drove us in Trippy's Barbie-themed golf cart to lunch—with a quick stop for sugar-free ice cream—and then back to her place. Trippy and I ate a low-sodium mid-day meal, but Rocco ate two. Trippy said she was tuckered out, so we brought her back to her miniature apartment that makes mine look like *The Pink*.

The three of us are squished around her tiny bistro table for two. The game doesn't end when we run out of dominoes, it ends when we run out of room on the table to play.

I've got to give it to Rocco. He's done his best not to look utterly bored to tears.

It's been a long day. Literally hours since King dropped me off this morning and told me everything would be fine.

I have not heard from him. Not a text or a call or even a bat signal letting me know the meeting with Dex went okay. Not that he owes me a phone call. I didn't ask him to tell me when the deal was done. It never crossed my mind.

Until now.

Their meeting was hours ago. And since Trippy doesn't know the details of her son's schedule today, I won't be the one who sends her into a worried tailspin or causes a heart attack, so I say nothing.

I'm sure King is busy. One doesn't just pick up that much drug money and call it a day.

There has to be stuff to do.

Reports.

Evidence.

Strategy stuff.

I hope that strategy stuff gets us closer to the end goal. I like hanging out with Trippy, but I'm not sure how much longer I can be locked up in my apartment with King and not work.

Or at least try to work. There's only so much information I can give the government. That well has run dry.

Trippy gets up from the table. "Who wants a Diet Coke?"

"No, thanks," I say.

"Sounds good," Rocco mutters, but he's distracted, typing feverishly on his phone.

Trippy goes to the kitchen, which is only about four feet from where we're sitting but she still yells, "Do you want ice?"

"Ice." Rocco frowns when he reads something. "Yeah, I like ice."

I've never met the man before today, but there's something about line dancing and driving around in a Barbie golf cart together that humbles us and creates a bond.

So I kick him in the shin to get his attention.

"What?" he bites.

I whisper and gamble on the fact that despite her being sharp, maybe Trippy's hearing isn't what it used to be. "You haven't been on your phone all day. What's wrong?"

His eyes angle to mine and narrow. "Why would something be wrong?"

I lean in closer. "Because of the look on your face. You've been happy-go-lucky all day, but you're not now."

"I'm never happy-go-lucky."

"You were when you were dancing with Wanda."

He gives me the palm of his hand. "I'm taking one for the team today. No one needs to know about that."

I grab his forearm and look into his whiskey eyes. I'm sure he has women of all ages dropping their panties with a mere wink. "I took a picture of you today."

Rocco narrows his eyes. "That's not cool."

I hike a brow. "That's right, Mr. Burly SWAT man. I have photographic evidence of you driving the Barbie Mobile."

"You wouldn't..."

"You were eating an ice cream cone. *With sprinkles.*" I lean in closer to drop the bomb that will get him kicked out of the bro club for life. "And you were *smiling.*"

"What the fuck, Goldie?" he hisses. "I'm here as your bodyguard. You'd do that shit to me?"

"If you don't tell me what's going on—" I wiggle my cell and am about to threaten him with a group text to every DEA agent I know of the video I took of him twisting, but I don't have the chance.

He gets another text.

"Fuck," he mutters loud enough for the geriatric ears in the room.

"None of that, Rocco. Watch your language," Trippy says, proving she can hear just fine as she makes it back to the table. If her hands and arms weren't full of drinks, I bet she'd pop him on the side of the head for cursing. She plops three cans of Diet Coke down with a glass of ice for Rocco and looks at me. "You look tired, Goldie. I decided you need one too."

I lean back in my chair, because she's right. I am tired.

I'm exhausted and worried and I got nothing from Rocco.

Rocco cracks open his can and doesn't use the ice he asked for. "Drink up. I just got a text from King. I can take you home anytime."

I ignore the drink I didn't ask for. "Really? He's done?"

Trippy wraps a wrinkled hand around my wrist. "See, there? You didn't need to worry. My King can do anything."

I glance at Rocco, and he hikes a brow.

“There’s no need to whisper and keep secrets from me. I’m fine. I might not know exactly what he’s up to today, but I have a feeling. King thinks he can keep this stuff from me, but I know what he does. I watch nighttime television—and none of that network stuff. I watch the good stuff on *cable*.” She cracks her afternoon shot of caffeine open and settles her wrinkled eyes on me. “And I have a feeling whatever King is up to today has to do with you. Women don’t need bodyguards for no reason these days.”

All of a sudden, I’ve had enough of the lies. Trippy loves her son. I want to tell her everything. “He’s investigating my half-brother, who is not a good person. That’s how we met.”

“Goldie.” Rocco’s tone is one that reminds me of how my mom talked to me in middle school. “King said to keep it under wraps.”

“If she wants to talk, let her talk.” Trippy glares at Rocco before looking back at me. “Go ahead, honey. Get it off your chest. I can take it.”

I tell her about our first meeting. About King tricking me into planning a fake wedding for him. I tell her about my inheritance that I gave up, sneaking into The Pink, and King shocking me by making up a fake story about how we’re engaged.

What I do not tell her is how King lied about Trippy being on her deathbed.

White lies are always okay if used to spare one’s feelings. And in this case, it’s just an omission.

For the first time since this fiasco started, I feel a weight lifted from my chest, no matter how stressful the situation is. “Dex and the men who work for him are not good people. It’s why I left. And it’s why Rocco gave up his day off to watch over me since they knew I’d be by myself while King was meeting with them. We’re supposed to get married next Saturday at The Pink. If he doesn’t come up with the charges he needs on

them before that, I'm not sure what will happen. Oh, and King told Dex I was pregnant."

Trippy's expression goes from one of shock to edging on delight. "Are you?"

My expression turns to one of horror. "No!"

Trippy is deflated. "Oh."

"Not yet," Rocco mutters.

I glare at him.

"What?" He holds his hands up. "Just saying, I hear things."

"What do you hear?" Trippy demands.

"Nothing," I butt in. "He hears nothing. But that's what's going on. That's how I met your son and why I need a bodyguard. King thought we'd be safer here than my apartment."

Trippy pats my hand and takes a sip of her Diet Coke. "You can come here anytime you want. I don't care why you're here—I've loved every moment of it. And thank you for telling me the truth. King and Laken think I can't handle a lot of things, but I've lived a full life. Give it all to me, I say."

I turn my hand in hers for a supportive squeeze. "It feels good to tell the truth."

Trippy sets down her soda. "Still, you were kissin' in the garage. That wasn't for show or a lie."

I exhale. "No. That wasn't a lie."

She settles back into her chair. "That's all that matters. I've been after King for years to settle down. I have a feeling I'm not gonna get any more grandkids from Laken if she stays with Silas. I want to see King happy while I'm still here."

"I got another text. We need to go." Rocco's empty can lands on the table with a hollow thud that might as well be the bang of a gavel to end our day. "Trippy, it's been fun, but if you tell King I said that, I'll call you a liar. I don't care how old you are."

Tippy pushes herself to her feet. “I’m gonna blackmail you with that little ditty if you don’t come back and dance with me. I’m old and can do what I want.”

I stand and pull Trippy into a warm embrace. “Thank you for today.”

“No. Thank you!” she exclaims. “I’ve had the best time, but I’m gonna sleep like the dead tonight. Now that you’ve fessed up to the truth, you have to call me and tell me what’s going on. I need to be kept in the loop. You can’t drop something like that on me and leave me with a season-ending cliffhanger. Those are the worst!”

Rocco stands by the door with his keys ready to hit the road. “King is not going to be happy about that.”

“We don’t care, do we, Goldie?”

“I do care, but since I let the cat out of the bag, I’ll keep you updated,” I promise.

Trippy pulls me in for a kiss on the cheek and a final goodbye.

When Rocco and I finally get to his car, he glances over at me. “I am not taking responsibility for you telling Trippy the truth.”

“I can handle King.”

He backs out of his parking spot. It feels like we’re crawling through the community as he dodges golf carts. “I hate to say this, but today might be the only day King doesn’t give a shit about you telling his elderly mom about what’s going on. Bigger shit went down today.”

“What does that mean?”

He turns out of the retirement community and hits the gas. And he does it in a way he doesn’t care what the speed limit is. “I don’t know the extent of it, but from what I heard, you should prepare yourself.”

A WARNING

Goldie

I barely wait for Rocco to put it in park when I open the door.

“Wait,” he calls. “Let me walk you up.”

I don’t wait.

Not after what he told me.

“Ruff!”

“Goldie!” Mr. Elrod calls for me.

“Sorry, Mr. Elrod. I don’t have time to talk.”

Mr. Elrod doesn’t care. “What happened to your fiancé? If he’s into any trouble, it’s not too late to call it off. We don’t need any crime following him back here like that. And who’s that guy?”

“Don’t worry about us. Everything is fine,” I lie in a fake chipper tone without looking back. I’m at the top of the stairs and round the landing with Rocco tight on my heels.

“Goldie,” he calls for me. “Before you go in there, just remember, Brax told me he’s fine.”

“Fine is a relative term,” I hiss and grip the door handle.

It’s unlocked.

I push through.

Rocco grips my hips to keep from running me over when I stop at the threshold from the sight in front of me.

King is sitting in the middle of my sofa—his legs set wide and his head tipped to the wall. His eyes are closed, and he's holding a bag of ice to the side of his head.

He's bare from the waist up—bruised and cut and bloodied.

“King.” His name drags like gravel across my lips. I feel it all the way to my gut from the sight of him.

His hand drops from where he was holding the ice and he looks up at me.

The sight of him takes my breath away.

I've never loved anyone besides my mom. Heck, I've never cared about a man long enough to stay with him for more than a few months, and even then I knew it would never amount to anything.

I've never seen anyone I care about hurt. Not like this.

Even in his state, he manages to greet me. “Hey.”

Rocco gives me a little shove. It's enough to break me out of my shock from the sight of King.

My purse falls to the floor as the door slams. I'm around the coffee table, next to King, and inventorying the state of his injuries. “What did they do to you?”

He pulls in a deep breath. “They made a point. Or tested me. Whatever the fuck it was, they seemed content when I left with their money.”

I put my fingers to his chin lightly and tip his face for me to inspect his eye. “I hate him. I've never hated him more.”

“Brax said you took it and never came close to calling for help.”

I look to Rocco and bite, “You didn't tell me that.”

He crosses his arms. “I was told not to tell you too much, so you didn't freak out before you got here.”

I look back at King and take the ice pack from him. “Nothing could have prepared me for this. Have you taken anything? Do you need stitches? That cut through your brow isn’t small.”

“Do you need anything before I leave?” Rocco asks, like King has a sore throat instead of being beaten to a pulp.

King shakes his head. “Evie met us at the office. She offered to clean up the cuts and bandage them, but I was so fucking done, I just wanted to get out of there. She sent me home with supplies. I’ll get it done after I shower.”

That’s right. He told me that Micah’s wife is a doctor.

“I can’t believe Dex did this,” I say.

King shakes his head. “Rand did this, but he had to tie me up to do it, because he’s a pussy of a man. Your brother just gave the order.”

I gently press the ice to his bottom lip. “That, I can believe.”

“I’ll be fine. I just need a day,” King says.

“You look like you could use a week,” Rocco says. “You sure you’re good before I leave?”

King waves him off. “If today proves anything, it’s that Carter is paranoid. He doesn’t trust anyone. Thanks for looking after Goldie today.”

“No problem. I’ll be around if you need me.” Rocco looks to me. “Fun day, Goldie. I’ll see you this weekend.”

I can’t think about the weekend.

I follow him to the door, lock it behind him, and move into action.

“Let me get you a wet rag for your face. You have dry blood on your lip.”

He shakes his head and slowly pushes to his feet, holding his side. That’s when I see a bruise below his ribcage. “I’m going to shower.”

“Maybe you should rest for a while.”

He shakes his head as he moves gingerly to the bathroom and rips open his belt. "I'm fine. Or else, I will be."

I follow him into the bathroom and start the shower to warm up. King toes off his shoes and bends to reach his socks, but I drop to his feet faster. "Don't. Let me do it for you."

"Baby, you don't have to take care of me."

"Stop it. You can barely move."

His voice is low and tight. "I've had worse."

I toss one sock to the side and reach for the other one. "If you've had worse than this, then I don't want to know."

When I stand, he pushes his trousers and underwear to the floor. I get a good look at him. Bruises are forming on his thigh and hip in addition to everywhere else. And when I take in all of him, I take in all of him.

He might be battered, but his cock is not relaxed.

"They can beat the shit out of me, but you can still make me hard as a rock, baby."

I look up at him and shake my head. "You're impossible."

He leans in and presses his lips to my forehead. "For you, I am."

I look up as I reach for the hem of my shirt. It barely touches the floor when I reach for my bra. "You didn't need to get beat up to get this kind of attention from me. I'll happily shower with you anytime you want."

He steps in the shower and turns to reach for my hand.

I go to him—straight into his arms where he pulls me tight to his chest.

"I don't want to hurt you."

He shifts us into the hot water. "There's only one way you can hurt me, Goldie. Only one way, and it's not this. I can wrap you up in my arms for eternity, and you'd be nothing but a healing force."

I shake my head against his chest and feel his cock, long and hard, pressed to my tummy. I look up at him as an ache forms in my soul. “Dex did this because of me. This isn’t like him when it comes to business. This is personal. He thinks we’re engaged—that I’m pregnant with your child. He did this to you to hurt me. And it worked.”

King stares down at me with guarded blue eyes. “Maybe. But I got the money. It’s processed, and the dogs hit on it right away. We need to find out where they’re stashing the rest of it. When we find it all and connect it to him, we can shut him down. Until then, if this is the worst Dex Carter can do to me and I get you in return, bring it the fuck on. Hell, I’ll take worse.”

Hot water steams the shower and runs down our bodies that might as well be one. “Don’t say that. Please. I can’t stand to see you like this.”

He brings a hand up to frame my face. “I mean every fucking word, Goldie. And don’t think I didn’t get my shots in before I left. I did. Randall Becerra can kiss my ass. I can’t wait for that motherfucker to rot in prison.”

I shake my head as he swipes the wet hair from my face, and his eyes drop to my lips. I press my tummy into his rock-hard erection, loving the feel of it. His fingers tense in my hair, and his lips land on mine.

With cut skin and swollen lips, he takes my mouth and kisses me hard. My tongue moves with his as he turns us and presses my back to the tile wall. I let my fingers trail lightly over his sides where they land low on his hips.

I give him a push. He rests a forearm above my head on the tile and looks down at me with water dripping between us.

“Why me?” I ask.

He doesn’t question my question or my timing. It’s like he gets it. Like he’s asked the same thing about himself.

Instead of telling me all the warm and fuzzy reasons why he chose me to introduce to his family, why he’s here with me right now, and why I’m the woman worth the frustration rather

than any other human who makes up half the population, he doesn't actually make me feel better.

"I don't know. I wish I knew. All I know is this doesn't feel wrong. And it's never not felt wrong before. And the fact that you're you—a fucking romantic when I'm nothing close to one—and you haven't told me to get the hell out yet—gives me hope that there's a chance I can make you happy."

My weight slumps against the wall. "You're right. That wasn't at all romantic."

He shakes his head like he's so frustrated with himself he can't stand it. "I wish I could give you that. I don't know how to be that person."

I slide my hand up the middle of his chest, careful not to touch an inch of skin that's bruised or marred. The thought of him experiencing any pain slices through me.

"I'd never want you to be anyone other than who you are. Being a romantic at heart isn't all it's cracked up to be." I don't tell him why and wrap my hand around his neck and rise up on my toes to press my lips to his.

"Baby—" he starts, but I press a light finger to his lips.

I kiss his chest.

His pec.

His abs.

King shifts back enough for me to slide my back down the tile as I press my lips to the indentation below his waist that creates the V before settling onto my knees.

I peek up at him through the water that drips from him to me.

He pushes the wet hair from my face. His thumb is heavy when he drags it across my bottom lip and presses in. I wrap my lips around it to give him a firm suck before letting go with a pop.

I don't stop.

His lips part when my tongue sneaks out to taste the underside of his cock.

Smooth.

Hard.

Wet.

He takes his cock in his hand and drags the tip across my lips before he presses in.

I feel his groan on my tongue where his smooth silk invades my mouth. “Fuck, baby. You make me question everything.”

My heart clenches as I suck him in deep. How can a man make me feel things when he never says anything right?



King

SHE SUCKS my cock deep into her hot, wet mouth.

Fucking heaven.

I didn't bullshit her when I said she makes me question everything. My reasons for taking down Carter. My future.

Shit is never personal for me. Ever. Everything I do is because it's my job. In the Army and now the DEA. I get it done and move onto the next case.

It's always been easy.

But from the day I walked into that restaurant on the shore to meet Marigold Carter, nothing has been easy.

But nothing is when it's personal.

I slide my hand around to cushion her head against the wall when I thrust into her mouth.

Her fingers dig into my hamstrings where she holds on, because now it's all me. She's pinned to the wall and I'm fucking her mouth the way I really want to fuck her.

Bare, with nothing between us.

I've never had anyone bare. Never wanted anyone enough for it to even be an option.

The next time I thrust, the tip of my cock hits the back of her throat.

"Goldie," I moan, doing everything I can to make this last. "Everything tells me I am not meant for you."

Her big brown eyes peek up at me. I burn this moment on my brain to use it as fuel.

Fuel to do everything I can to fight against my true nature. To be what she needs and wants.

Fuel to do everything I can to keep her.

She sucks as I thrust again.

And again.

"Your mouth. So fucking sweet, baby. I could watch you take me for a lifetime."

This time, her nails dig into my skin.

I thrust harder. Faster. Holding her head in my hands. It's all me, fucking her mouth as my stone heart sits heavy in my chest, not used to the feelings pumping through it.

It's foreign.

And I don't hate it.

My balls tighten, and every ounce of pain that was beat into me earlier today is gone. The only thing I feel is her.

I'm so fucking close but don't give her a choice.

I pull out and take my cock in my fist. Coming in her mouth is a fantasy I'll live out in reality another day.

She gasps for a breath and licks her lips as she watches in awe as I come.

And I do it all over her chest and tits.

Marking her.

As much as I want to squeeze my eyes shut and appreciate this orgasm that's unlike any before it, I can't look away from her.

My cum drips down her tits. I barely have a chance to recover when I reach down and grab her hand to pull her to her feet.

I flip her around and press my front to her back. "Hands on the wall."

She does as I say and braces.

I wrap my arms around her, my hand goes to her chest to spread my cum all over her. My other hand doesn't waste any time and goes straight to her pussy.

My lips land on her neck where I suck before demanding. "Spread for me and move. I'm not taking the time to fuck around with a condom, so you'll come on my hand."

She's hot and wet, and it has nothing to do with the shower.

I plunge two fingers inside her and press my palm to her clit.

"Move," I repeat.

"King," she calls my name as her head falls back to my shoulder.

I look down her body. Her tits bounce where I just rubbed myself all over her. I twist her nipple and pull, loving the way her body reacts to me.

"Look at you," I murmur in her ear as she does exactly what I demand. "You're my good girl. Sweet, pure, perfect. But you can take my cock whole and ride my hand like it's the best thing on earth."

She moves. Besides me playing with her tits, it's all her. When I loosen my pressure on her clit, she proves me right.

"No, don't stop," she begs.

"If you want it, baby, you have to earn it," I croon in her ear.

She spreads her legs farther and angles her hips forward for more pressure where she wants it most.

"So fucking beautiful," I say. "Look at you. Don't stop, baby. Find what you want."

Her movements become fast with no rhythm. She rides my hand until her arms fall from the wall to grip my arm.

When she finally comes, I'm supporting her weight when her body writhes and shakes. I'm cupping her between her legs while my other arm crosses her body and cups her tit.

If I let go, she'll fall to the shower floor in a heap.

"I've got you," I whisper in her ear as she gasps for a breath. "You're so damn perfect, Goldie. I don't fucking deserve someone like you, but I'm not letting you go."

Her chest rises and falls as she recovers, and she doesn't open her eyes or respond to my promise.

My declaration.

Fuck, it might as well be a warning.

"A cartel might've brought us together, but fuck the force that tries to take you from me. Once I take care of your brother once and for all, we can focus on us."

She turns her head so I can't see her face.

I demand her attention. "Goldie."

She finds her legs, and my battered body loses her weight as she pries my hold from her sweet body. "Let's get cleaned up. We're going to run out of hot water, and you need to rest. Your body needs to heal. You need all the energy you can get to take down Dex and the cartel."

She pulls out of my arms and reaches for the body wash like she didn't hear a word I said.

But I know she did.

If I have to scream it from the rooftops for the world to hear, I will.

She'll get it through her head eventually.

ENIGMA

King

“If you don’t heal fast, your face is going to fuck up your wedding pictures, King.”

My eyes angle to Micah. “I’m not in the mood.”

“I’m just saying, you still look like you fought twelve rounds and didn’t win one of them. That was two days ago. A week from today, there’s a chance you’ll be saying *I do* through a fat lip.”

We’re sitting on the lanai in Trippy’s backyard. It is my backyard, but to me it will always be Trippy’s.

It’s paid off. When Trippy decided she wanted to fight daily with other blue-haired ladies, she laid out the details for Laken and me.

When Trippy is gone, I get the house. Whatever the market value is at that time, Laken gets the first payout of Trippy’s estate equal to the value of the house. The rest will be split between us evenly.

And the estate is sizable. Don didn’t make billions, but he did well. They lived well below their means even though it felt like Lake and I hit the jackpot.

Trippy said I needed a home after all my years in the Army. And even though she hates Silas, Lake has a home in Illinois.

We were supposed to meet at Tim’s today, but everyone is here. Apparently when an agent gets jumped by the bad guys,

the party is delivered to you. At least everyone is here but Rocco. His SWAT team had a callout. All Goldie and I had to do was show up to my house and make sure we weren't followed by any of Carter's men. Secretly, I'll do anything I can to have Goldie here. We've been at her place because it seems the cartel likes to show up whenever they feel like it. We need to at least pretend we live there.

We all ate dinner, and the kids wanted to swim. The wives clamored around Goldie the moment they walked through the door and haven't left her alone yet. It's hot as fuck right now, so they stayed in the house with the baby.

I watch Brax stand in the middle of the shallow end of the pool with Baylee who's kicking around in floaties. She's never more than an arm's length from him. His oldest, Brian, and Micah's oldest, Chase, play in the deep end.

Tim returns from the house and distributes beers all around the table we're sitting around. "I've never seen anything like it. We have the right phone numbers. They talk on their fucking phones, but never about cartel business. We're missing something."

I take a beer and twist off the lid. "They're communicating another way. Hell, Dex won't call or text. He didn't even acknowledge me when I told him his money was on the way to Panama. I'm about to make a call to our friend in D.C."

That gets everyone's attention. Tim points at me with his long neck bottle. "You're not in Panama anymore. Cole Carson won't be able to do shit for you inside the country."

I take a drink and don't answer.

But I do get Brax's attention from the pool. "Carson will find a way."

Tim shakes his head. "No. I'm not doing that again. We got one money drop. Once we funnel seventy-five percent of his money to an offshore account and he trusts you, the lines of communication will open up."

"The offshore account," Micah says. "That's enough for the CIA to step in and help."

“Maybe.” Tim sighs. “It’s drugs and money laundering. The CIA is spread as thin as we are. It’s not like they can transition a case overnight.”

I’m thinking of other ways Cole Carson can help, but that would be off the books and not a line I would normally cross.

I also don’t usually give a shit how long my cases are drawn out. I’m usually patient.

I put my beer down. “A week from today, the fake me is supposed to marry the real Goldie Carter in front of God and the cartel. I don’t want her anywhere near Dex or Rand, let alone put in the position we were the last time we were at The Pink. If they were willing to jump me, who the hell knows what they might do to her. I need to fast track this shit.”

“What happened to you was bad enough. No one needs a repeat of that,” Micah agrees.

I’d never tell Goldie, but she’s right. They don’t trust me because of her. I didn’t know the full backstory between her and Dex when I set up our first meeting.

I still wouldn’t change a thing.

“Let’s see what happens this week,” Tim says, making the decision for the group.

I glance to the back of the house through the windows. Goldie is sitting with Annette, Landyn, and Evie. She fits in like they’ve been friends forever. She was that way with Trippy, Laken, and Willa too.

She’s just that way.

Sweet. Social. Agreeable.

Very fucking different from me.

Our differences never cease to amaze me.

Tim frowns at me. “What?”

“What?” I echo, throwing his word back at him.

Tim leans forward and lowers his voice. “I know that look. This is not Afghanistan or the jungles of Colombia. I get you

want this wrapped up. I do too. I know how long you've been working on Carter. Hell, it's how we met during Micah's case. But do not go Ranger on me to get this done faster because of her."

I tell him the truth. "Going Ranger on you would mean bursting through the windows of The Pink after being dropped in by a chopper. That seems a little dramatic for Miami."

He pins me with his I'm-your-supervisor look. "You know what I mean."

"If you decide to go Ranger, I want in on that," Micah pipes in.

"I've been chased by enough cartel henchmen to last a lifetime," Brax says as he throws the football back and forth with the boys to catch as they run and jump in the pool. "You two can go Ranger. I'll be your backup."

Micah grins. "You're a good backup dancer."

Brax glares at him.

I turn to Tim. "I promise not to go Ranger on you."

He nods, grabs his beer, and leans back in his chair. At least I've appeased him.

For now.

Making a phone call is not going Ranger. I'll do anything and everything I can to keep Goldie safe.

If that means working with the men who flip off the law on a regular basis, so be it.



Goldie

"LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT. You signed over your share of The Pink and the rest of your inheritance to your brother?"

I look over at Landyn. “I had no choice. I was by myself and didn’t know what to do. Dex threatened that if I told anyone about him or the business going on at The Pink, I’d suffer the consequences. And since I had seen the effects of his so-called consequences, I was not anxious to experience them first hand.”

Landyn is young and beautiful and sweet. I haven’t made any friends outside of a few employees I hit it off with at The Pink since I moved to Miami. I’ve been afraid to reach out to any of them since I left. They don’t need that kind of attention from Dex just because they were associated with me. I did everything I could to cut communication with them.

I’ve been busy trying to keep the sinking ship that’s Amāre afloat and watch my back in the process.

Since they arrived, these ladies have interrogated me in a much different way. I haven’t minded it one bit. This is the kind of questioning I’m used to.

About King.

About my brother.

About how I had the nerve to sneak back into The Pink.

And about Trippy, Laken, and Willa. They confirmed what I’ve learned in the last week—Kingston Jennings does not introduce anyone to his family or his friends for that matter.

Basically, these women have been nosy in the kindest and most genuine way possible.

“I’ve attended a couple charity events at The Pink,” Evie says as she bounces baby Zane on her lap while helping him hold a teething ring. They’re both a mess from the drool, but she doesn’t give it a second thought. “The place is one-of-a-kind, but to own half of it? It’s no wonder you left your mom and life in Virginia to move here. Anyone in your shoes would do the same. Who knew an American version of the cartel was operating out of it.”

“Your family could buy The Pink,” Annette says to Evie.

Evie smiles shyly. “Probably, but it doesn’t have anything to do with science so they wouldn’t. But that’s not the point. It doesn’t matter what your brother is involved in. Half of that is yours. Fight for it.”

“She’s right,” Annette adds. “I’m a high school teacher, not an attorney. Signing something in duress has to be against the law, right? And who knows if what you signed was legit. It’s not like your brother is a law-abiding citizen. He doesn’t want the attention from the courts.”

“I have thought about that,” I admit. “Not that I can do anything about it.”

“Yet,” Annette amends. “When everyone is in prison, that’s another story.”

I shake my head. “That’s a big if.”

“If? It’s not very often that our men don’t get the bad guy.” Landyn says and looks around at the other women. “Am I right?”

“As long as I’ve been around, they have,” Evie says.

Zane squeals in agreement.

“I’ve been around longer than any of you, and I feel good things,” Annette says.

“I can’t think about that right now,” I say. “Not after what my brother did to King. He won’t come out and say it, but Dex did that because of me. It was his way of getting his point across that he can still hurt me without laying a finger on me.”

The women share a look that I don’t understand.

“What?” Then it dawns on me. “You think I’m right. Right?”

Annette shakes her head. “Who knows? Honestly, can anyone predict what the cartel will do?”

“She’s right,” Evie says as she stands and shifts Zane to her hip. “You don’t know my story, but it’s a doozy. Trust me when I say anything is possible. The worst thing you can do is blame yourself for something out of your control. It will eat you up.”

I look out the window where King and the guys are watching the kids swim. It's been two days. The bruises on his olive skin shine in the bright summer rays even though the swelling on his lip is almost gone. The cut is still deep. At least he closed the gash on his eyebrow with the bandage.

"Goldie?"

I look back to Landyn who's reached out and folded her fingers around my hand. I say nothing.

She gives me a squeeze. "He's fine. Even if he still looks worse for the wear, I promise you, he's fine. Even Brax said when it was going on, they never once thought about going in after him."

I don't nod or shake my head because this whole thing is too messed up for words. But these kind women confirmed what I've thought all along.

And the thought of anyone experiencing pain because of me is too much.

But King?

No.

I'm about to say as much, but King, Tim, and Micah barge in the back sliding doors. I look outside. Brax is dripping wet and toweling water off Baylee and instructing the boys to get out of the pool.

"What's wrong?" Evie asks.

"A man from the Carter Cartel was pulled over this afternoon and arrested on an outstanding warrant. We just got word. They're holding him, so we're going to ask him some questions before they let him go," Tim says.

"Why would they let him go?" Annette asks.

"Because we want him out to see what he'll do. But the interesting thing is, that Dex is finally talking on the wire, and not about his latte order or the next shipment of crab legs for The Pink," King says and turns to me. "Brax is going to stay here with you. We'll go back to your place when I get back."

“Who did they arrest?” I ask.

King tosses his keys in the air and looks happier than I’ve seen him in days unless we’re having sex. “None other than the enigma, Anderson Marshall. Whoever the hell he is, him being in custody has sent your brother into a tailspin.”

I want to correct King that Dex is my half-brother, but now isn’t the time.

He leans down to press his lips to mine. “I’ll be back. Don’t go anywhere.”

Like I could go anywhere. I haven’t stepped foot in my car since King moved himself into my apartment.

FREEZE. CRACK. SNAP

King

“**Y**ou work at The Pink for Dex Carter,” Micah says.
“What do you do there?”

Anderson glances at his attorney who gives him the go-ahead chin lift that it’s okay to answer.

“I work at The Pink,” Anderson repeats, but leaves out any part about Dex Carter. “I work in operations.”

Micah’s only move is to tap the tip of his pen on the table as he stares at the man who’s had a big fat question mark under his picture since I started this investigation.

“The Pink isn’t exactly Microsoft.” Fucking Micah. He’ll throw his sarcasm around at anyone. “What exactly does one do in operations for The Pink?”

Anderson offers a cool shrug and adjusts his glasses. “I’m not good with people. I work behind the scenes.”

“Maybe your skills with words are as lacking as they are when it comes to humans. Let me specify—what do you do behind the scenes? Exactly.”

“Tech.”

“Tech,” Micah echoes.

Anderson looks at his attorney who gives another dumbass nod.

“Yes,” Anderson firms.

“This fucking guy,” I mutter as Tim and I watch through the one-way window. “There’s something about him. He’s different from anyone else I’ve come into contact with from the cartel.”

“He’s smug as fuck,” Tim says and crosses his arms. “They got him on a warrant for an unpaid parking ticket from four years ago. The fact he’s worked for Carter this long and this is his first official run in with the law says something. Even Randall Becerra gets picked up for something at least every six months.”

I get a text and pull my phone from my pocket. “Looks like the good stuff is finally happening on the wire. What is it about Anderson Marshall being arrested that finally gets everyone talking?”

“What are they saying?”

“I’m not sure yet. All I know is the chatter is nonstop. They haven’t sent a transcript yet.”

“If they’re finally talking because Marshall is out of the loop, let’s get Miami PD to hold him the maximum amount of time. If this guy is important enough to send Carter and those closest to him into a frenzy, then we need to maximize that.” Tim pulls out his cell and shoots off a text. “I told Micah to drag it out. Let’s get you out of here so no one recognizes you. The last thing I need on my conscience is to really give anyone a reason to jump you. If they find out you’re a narc, they won’t stop.”

I watch Micah smirk when he reads the text from Tim. Yeah, he’ll probably have too much fun wasting their time.

“Let’s go.” I turn for the door. “I can’t wait another minute to listen to those wires.”

*The
Pink*
EST. 1981

Goldie

THE LADIES TOOK their kids and went home a while ago. The little ones needed to get to bed.

I told Brax he was more than welcome to go with Landyn. I could lock myself up and be just fine, which is the truth. King made sure no one was following us. The last thing he wants is to lead the cartel to the house that's now his home.

Of course, Brax didn't listen to me and stayed. He turned on a preseason football game and settled in.

There was no way I was sitting to watch a game. I was anxious, which is par for the course lately.

I cleaned the kitchen and snooped through every cabinet under the guise of putting away clean dishes.

Because being bored and a nervous wreck are not a good combination, I did something I wanted to do the other day and went to King's room and straight to his closet.

The first day I met him and every other time he was undercover, I would never have known he wasn't a successful business man with millions in the bank. His suits were that sharp and they fit that well. But other than that, he's in jeans, workout clothes, or shorts.

King is a simple man. His closet is sparse, and his section is barely half-full. The other half is empty and no doubt meant for his partner.

I started a load of laundry. I have no idea how long it had been piled in the hamper in his closet since he's been at my place day and night. I stripped the sheets from Laken and Willa's rooms and tidied up their bathrooms.

For southern Florida, this is a big house that rambles on and on, even though it does ramble with wallpaper from another era.

I switched the laundry and started pool towels.

All the while, Brax watched football. I saw him make himself a sandwich when I bustled by.

It's been almost two hours.

I've made a bigger mess than I started with and have three loads ready to go. I've also run out of patience.

I go to the family room and fall to a lumpy, floral chair the color of tree bark in Virginia.

Brax angles his dark eyes to me and mutes the game. "You okay?"

"No," I answer quickly. "I am not okay."

He sets his water down on the coffee table and leans forward to his knees. "This won't go on forever. I know it feels like it when you're in the thick of it, but it won't. After what happened today, they're finally talking."

My insides tighten. That's not what I expected him to say and isn't the reason that I'm not okay. "Who's talking?"

"Dex. And everyone else for that matter. Anderson Marshall being taken into custody has riled them up. The man is more important than we thought."

I lean back into the chair. "What are they saying?"

Brax mirrors my stance and rests his feet on the coffee table. "I'm here, so I don't know. All I know is what Tim updated me on in a quick text. They're keeping Marshall overnight and went back to the division. But the wires that have been quiet since they went up are now alive and busy. And they're not planning weddings or parties. They're agitated."

I slump in my seat. "An agitated Dex is not good."

"It's good for us. Desperation causes people to slip."

"If you say so."

Brax smiles. "I say so. You'll be okay. King has your back, and so do we."

"I've been on my own a long time. No one has ever had my back when it comes to Dex."

"And you've handled it like a badass. You're stronger than you think. I've listened every time you were around Carter. You might be scared, but you never act like it when it matters."

Don't question things now, Goldie. You're playing on the right team."

My gaze roams the room that's smattered with a lifetime of King's memories. At the same time, I can't get visions of his battered body out of my head.

"He thought he needed me to get to Dex," I say as I stare at a picture of him in a little league uniform. An older man who I now know is Don stands next to him with his arm around his shoulders. They're hot and sweaty and ... happy. I shake my head. "He doesn't need me. And it doesn't matter what he says, I might hate Dex, but I do know the way he operates. Roughing someone up like that isn't his style. He likes to pretend he's legitimate—he wants to be respected and that can't happen when you're beating people to a pulp to make a point."

Brax narrows his eyes and studies me. "King is fine. He's seen worse than Dex Carter when he was in the Army. He's also a damn good agent. Don't second guess what he's doing."

And just like that, I'm saved by the bell when the tone on the dryer plays. I push up from my chair. "At least the laundry will help manage my nervous energy. You really don't have to stay. I feel bad you're spending your Sunday evening here instead of home with Landyn and the kids."

"I appreciate that, Goldie, but King will take out any frustration he has on me for leaving you alone. I can hold my own, but I wasn't a Ranger."

I give him a small smile. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

He nods and turns back to the game.

I head back to the laundry room.

*The
Pink*
EST. 1981

King

THE ROOM STILLS.

And my chest ... I don't even recognize it.

This—this feeling.

My heart fucking freezes.

Right before it cracks.

And then I snap.

The closest thing to me flies through the air and smashes into the closed door. And I'm the one who threw it.

“Whoa!” Tim yells. “I get it, but calm the fuck down.”

Micah pushes the door open and the chair scrapes on its side across the floor. “What the hell was that?”

I drag my hands through my hair and turn away from the men who just saw me lose my shit.

I can't focus on anything but my own damn heartbeat echoing in my ears.

“King.” Micah demands my attention. “What happened?”

When I ignore him because I cannot fucking focus on anything other than what I just heard, Tim answers for me. “He needs a minute.”

Fuck that.

I need a year.

No.

I need to turn back time to the moment I met Goldie Carter.

What have I done?

“Is anyone going to tell me what the hell happened?” Micah asks.

I turn to the men in the control room where we replayed the transcript because reading it wasn't enough.

I had to fucking hear it. I needed to listen to it leak from their mouths like poison. I've lost all control, and I don't even have a car of my own to tear out of here the way I want to.

“Get me the hell home.”

PAIN

Goldie

I turn from where I'm sitting at the kitchen table scrolling on my phone out of pure boredom when a key rattles in the front door.

Brax is off the sofa in a flash and moves two strides when the door bursts open.

King stands in the doorway, and he does not look okay.

Confused, I start to move to him. "What's wrong?"

He holds up a hand to stop me and turns to Brax. "Appreciate you. Tim just dropped me off and left. I've got it from here."

Brax doesn't look confused. He nods and picks up the remote off the coffee table to flip the TV off before grabbing his stuff. "If you need anything, let me know. Are you staying here tonight?"

King moves through the threshold but leaves the door open behind him. "Yeah, I think we're going to stay here."

I cross my arms. "We are? I thought you said we needed to be at my apartment?"

"I'll check in tomorrow." Brax moves around King before he turns back and sets his gaze on me. I can't tell what that's about. Everything seems to have changed in an instant. "See you soon, Goldie."

He's gone. King locks the door and flips the deadbolt, but stays there.

“What happened?” I demand. “Brax was fine all night, until he left. And why are we staying here when it was so important for you to be at my apartment in case Dex sent someone to check on us?”

King drags a hand down his face, and the simple movement bleeds exhaustion.

“King.” I raise my voice. “Answer me.”

He takes two steps toward me but stops and stares at the floor between us. He’s silent and withdrawn and seems like he’s contemplating ... everything.

“You’re scaring me,” I whisper.

His blue eyes jump to me.

No. He’s contemplating *me*.

I take a step back.

He lowers his voice. “I don’t want you to ever be afraid of me.”

I cross my arms but don’t lower my voice. “The sheer fact you felt the need to tell me that scares me even more.”

“I need you to be honest with me.” His tone is low and rough. It sounds like he’s been through the ringer, and it has nothing to do with taking a beating from Rand. This is different. Worse. “Do not hide shit from me, Goldie. When you found out what was going on at The Pink, you didn’t leave immediately. You stayed and did your best to make it work.”

“Are you accusing me of something?”

He shakes his head once and holds a hand out low. “I’m saying the drugs, it wasn’t what broke the camel’s back and made you leave, was it?”

“It was my inheritance,” I spit. “Doing what I do, owning any part of The Pink was a dream that fell in my lap. Do you know how hard it was to walk away?”

“And that’s not why you walked away.”

“I was in over my head. I had no idea what to do. What is this about? Everything I told you is the truth.”

“You haven’t told me all of the truth.”

I take a step back again and hug myself tighter but say nothing.

“What did he do?” King demands. “What the fuck did he do to you?”

I shake my head. “I want to go home.”

“No, baby. Not after what I heard on the wire. I want to hear it from you.”

“Take me home,” I demand as my pulse starts to race. I turn on a heel and head for my purse. “I’ll call an Uber. I’m done. When I say done, I mean done.”

I get to my cell and almost have the app pulled up to call for a ride when it’s ripped from my hands. I’m about ready to push him away but he backs up giving me space.

So much space.

Like he’s afraid to touch me.

My eyes sting as tears threaten to overwhelm me. I’ve shed way too many and hated every one of them. They remind me of another time when I was alone and scared.

But I got past it.

And I did it on my own.

King might’ve dragged me back into The Pink, but I won’t allow anyone to throw me back into the darkest place I’ve ever been.

“Goldie—” he starts, but I don’t let him say another word.

“You don’t get to do this. You have no right.”

“Know your heart, baby. I’ve fucked you. Touched every inch of your body. On top of that, I brought you back to Carter and made a promise to keep you safe. I’m a serious fucking guy, and I take my promise to you more seriously than I have anything ever before. You and me together has shit running

through my head that I've never once thought about in my whole life." He takes a step closer and leans far enough to look me in the eyes. "So you're wrong, baby. I have a right to know."

I rush forward and put a hand to his chest and shove. It's like my touch scalds him, because he puts more space between us, and it has nothing to do with my attempt to get his attention. "Rights. Men think they have all kinds of rights to women. My mind and my body are mine. No one decides what I do with either but me."

His square jaw turns to cement.

I reach forward and yank my cell from his hand. "You can't keep me here. I'm going home."

"Remember my promise. If you try to leave me, I'll follow you."

I don't look at him when I pull up the app to order a ride, and mumble, "If you turn into a stalker, then I guess I'll have to call the police."

"Don't be ridiculous, Goldie. You know Rand is watching your place. He's already threatened to come back and finish what he started."

My gaze jumps to him.

I freeze.

He stands in front of me, crosses his arms, and widens his stance. "And after tonight, I know exactly what that means."

My stomach drops. "You don't know anything."

He shakes his head, but his words don't match the action. "I do. The thing about wires is you get to be a fly on the wall. No one is more honest than they are on a wire, baby. So Rand was telling the truth when he told your brother tonight that his number one goal is to get Anderson Marshall out on bail so they can get their private network back up and running. He was also speaking plainly when he said the next thing he was going to do was finish what he started with you since you reneged on your deal with Dex."

“Stop it,” I whisper.

He shakes his head. “I’ll never stop.”

I turn to go to the kitchen where I left my things from earlier. “In ten minutes, you won’t have a choice, King.”

His footsteps echo close on my heels. “If there’s any reason to not leave, it’s Rand threatening to finish the rape that was interrupted, Goldie.”

I stop on my way to the kitchen, but King doesn’t. His chest brushes my back, and the feel of him is familiar.

Warm.

Strong.

I’ve never felt anything like it.

King’s touch feels like a promise.

A tangible one.

His strong arm wraps around my waist and pulls me tighter when his lips brush the side of my head, but not to torment me more with memories I’ve worked hard to put behind me.

If I could erase it from my brain forever, I would. I’d give anything for that.

And I did. It cost me half of The Pink.



King

I PRESS my lips to the side of her head and fight every instinct in me since I heard Dex and Rand talking about her. “You should’ve told me.”

She turns to stone in my arms. It reminds me of when she snuck us into The Pink and I kissed her without permission for the sole reason to keep her safe. It’s near the top of the regrets that I’m quickly stacking up when it comes to her.

“Why?” she spits. “So you can run off and arrest him?”

“No.” I hold her tight and tell her the truth. “Because I would’ve treated you with more care.”

She shakes her head but stays planted in my arms. “And that’s why I didn’t tell you.”

“He touched you that night at The Pink. That was bad enough. Had I known what I know now, I would’ve killed him.”

This time she pulls out of my arms. A few hours ago, there’s no way on earth I’d let her go. Every instinct in me is to wrap her up and keep her forever. “That’s the last thing I need on my conscience, King.”

“Your conscience?” It’s everything I can do to keep my tone low and even when I want to scream the house down after what I learned. “And that right there is why I don’t deserve you. Because I’m bursting at the seams to rid the planet of him. The only thing in life I want more than to hang onto you forever is to have his blood on my hands to make sure he doesn’t breathe another day to hurt you.”

“Don’t make me a victim. I took control of the situation the only way I could. I knew if I called the police, they’d come for me. I knew if I stayed and tried to claim what was legally mine, they would eventually finish what they started.” She shakes her head and tears pool in her beautiful dark eyes even as she raises her voice to me. “I *chose* not to be a victim. And you know what, King? It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life, because I sure felt like one. But I did it. I took control even though it meant losing everything I came to Miami for.”

My heart clenches. “I’ve felt a shit ton of pain in my life, baby. Hell, I’m still sporting bruises from the fun those fuckers had with me, but none of it compares to listening to Rand talk about you on the wire tonight. Never in my life have I experienced pain like that.”

“This is why I didn’t tell you. I might not curse or lie or break the rules, but that doesn’t make me a pushover. I don’t do anything I don’t want to do. You can’t control me. I wouldn’t

be here if I didn't want to be. But I swear, King, if you make me feel like a victim, I'm gone." She takes a step toward me and pokes a finger in my chest. It might as well be a dagger through my heart coupled with the word *gone*. "You might hold the reins when it comes to Dex and Rand, but not me. The moment you treat me any differently than you have so far, I'm done."

I don't know whether to drop to my knees and beg her to never be done with me or start planning Rand's untimely death. My head is fucked, because really, I'm so damn pissed she kept this from me.

That's when it occurs to me, I thought I knew everything about her.

And that pisses me off.

I don't even bother standing my ground. I take a step closer and demand, "What else haven't you told me?"

Her angry dark eyes widen. "You are unreal."

I shake my head. "Trust me, baby. I'm very fucking real. The state of the wire room is proof just how real I am."

"What did you do?" she exclaims, as if the hole in the wall is more important than this.

I'm about to open my mouth to tell her, when my phone vibrates. When I look at the screen, there's nothing I want more than to ignore him, but he's my boss, and with the state of my case right now, I can't fucking ignore anything.

I hold my finger up to Goldie and answer Tim's call. "Yeah?"

"I should be writing you up right now for damage to government property, but we've got more important things going down."

I stare at the woman who kept secrets from me. The biggest and most important ones in the world. "What the fuck happened now?"

"The police were dispatched to Colony Park with an active burglary in progress. One of your main targets is in custody."

“Fuck,” I hiss. Goldie puts too much distance between us. Even though it’s only two feet, it’s too fucking much at the moment. Even though I’d put money on it, I ask, “Who?”

“Randall Becerra. We saw it go down on the pole cameras. The PD couldn’t exactly let him go after he kicked a door in.”

“Dammit. Where is he?”

“Downtown. I’ve communicated with the lieutenant that he’s our target. They’re booking him and will hold him as long as they can. We need to get down there to figure this shit out.”

I drag a hand down my face. “I can be there in twenty.”

“It’s that or explain to the Office of Professional Responsibility that you threw a chair across the fucking room because you’ve crossed the line with your confidential informant.”

“I said I’ll be there in twenty. Don’t overreact,” I bite.

Goldie glances at her phone, and I mentally add deleting her Uber app to my to-do list that’s quickly making me either the biggest pussy-whipped man on earth or the most possessive one.

Either way, I do not recognize myself.

“Make it fifteen,” Tim demands. “I’ll send Brax and Micah to Colony Park, but you need to handle this with the DA’s office. I’m covering for you left and right at the moment. I do not appreciate this kind of attention from management. You need to tighten your shit up, Jennings.”

“Got it. See you then.” I disconnect the call and turn my attention to the woman who I’d like to bottle up for safe keeping. “Cancel your Uber.”

She narrows her eyes like she’s about to lay into me again.

I stop her before she can waste the energy. “Rand is in custody.”

Her expression falls. “Why?”

“He was trying to break into your apartment. Someone called it in, probably your nosy downstairs neighbor. Rand was

arrested at the scene.”

I see the panic start to bubble. “What are you going to do?”

“Relax, Goldie. I’m not some weak-ass politician. Killing someone in custody is not my jam. It’s not like I can question him, but I do need to deal with the repercussions for the case. The bad guys in custody is the end game, but we aren’t there yet.”

“He broke into my apartment?”

“Yeah. But no one knows where you are. Cancel your ride and stay here. You’ll be safe. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Whatever you do, do not leave this house.”

She crosses her arms and stares at me.

I ignore every fuck-off vibe she’s sending me and move in to press my lips to her forehead. “I’ll be back and we’ll work through everything else swirling in my gut right now.”

I wait for an answer, but the only thing I get from her is a frustrated exhale. Exasperated, she finally gives in. “Go. Just go.”

“It’s late. Make yourself at home and go to bed. I’ll join you when I get back.”

I can’t wait any longer. I give her the code to the alarm and leave. If I don’t get downtown soon, Tim will start acting like a real boss and write me up for the endless list of codes of conduct I’ve given the middle finger to.

The sooner I get this shit taken care of, the sooner I can get to the bottom of Marigold Violet Carter.

QUITTER

King

“**Y**ou want us to what?”

I cross my arms and glance at Tim before looking back to Assistant DA Beth Magnus. “I know this looks bad.”

“It’s breaking and entering and you want me to let their shady-as-fuck attorney think he’s pulling one over on me and let him negotiate his release?”

Beth has a reputation. She knows her shit, is tough on everyone, and if you are on the wrong side of the law in this city, you do not want her to be assigned to your case. The woman will serve up your own balls on a silver platter for your last dinner with an added garnish of parsley just to pretty them up.

“It’s not like you won’t get a shot at him later. You’ve seen the evidence I have on him. When I’m done, you can add to his charges, and he’ll rot in prison for the next few decades. You’ll get another notch on your belt. Trust me, he’ll never forget you or me.”

She turns her heated glare to Tim. “You’d better make him wrap this case up fast. If I let that asshole negotiate with me, I want to see him back in a jumpsuit within eight business days.”

I frown. “Why eight?”

She frowns at me. “Because I’m too pissed to make it ten. You’re lucky it’s not five, Jennings. There aren’t many people

I would do this for, but I know you'll come through. Eight days."

"Eight days," I echo, not sure what will happen if I can't make that work. But since my fake wedding day is within that time frame, I have no choice but to make that happen. "I appreciate it."

"I'll negotiate, but not until late tomorrow afternoon. I can't look like a total pushover, and I'm due in court in the morning. He can stew until then."

"That's fair," Tim agrees. "We appreciate it."

"You better," she mutters, turns on her spiked heel, and calls over her shoulder, "I will not do this again."

I wait for her to turn the corner so she's out of earshot. "Well, that's done."

"When is the next money pick up?" Tim asks.

"He's getting a deposit into his offshore account today for the first one. That's enough time for me to fictionally clean his dirty cash. Once he confirms it's there, I'm going to propose a second pickup—this time bigger. Really fucking big. I think I can make that happen in the next three days without looking too anxious."

"Get it done. The sooner the better."

"Everyone keeps saying that, like I'm the one dragging my feet. I want this shit done too."

Tim almost rolls his eyes and mutters, "I bet you do. I'd like to be off the hook for you hooking up with your informant."

"I need to get the hell out of here. It's not like Carter's attorney is going to be hanging at the DA's office, but I can't take a chance on being seen right now. One more reason to get this done."

Tim and I are almost out the door when we are forced to a stop. Micah pushes through with his cell to his ear and a frown focused on me. "I'm here with him. I'll ask. For now, follow the car. Hang on."

“What?” I demand.

“This is Brax. He was securing Goldie’s apartment once the cops were done. I thought Goldie was going to stay at your place.”

“She was supposed to,” I grit.

Micah lifts his chin. “She does not follow directions well.”

“At least Rand is behind bars for the time being,” Tim notes.

“Dammit.” I look to the side and shake my head. “Tell Brax to stay with her. I’ll head there now.”

Micah shakes his head. “No, King. She took off.”

I freeze for a nanosecond, not believing his words. “What?”

Micah confirms the latest of the shit show my life is turning into. “Brax tried to stop her, but apparently he’s only into locking up his own wife. He said he wasn’t about to restrain Goldie. She took two minutes to throw some shit into a bag and was gone. She’s headed north out of town. Brax is following her because he didn’t know what you’d want him to do.”

“Fuck me,” I mutter and grab my cell to dial her number.

It goes straight to voicemail.

I dial it again with the same result, so I try a text.

Me – What the hell are you doing?

Me – Don’t go.

Me – Let me fix this.

Me – Come back. Please, baby. Don’t do this.

Me – Fuck, baby. I’m sorry.

Nothing. I don’t get one fucking word from her.

Then I pull up another app. One I've yet to open and study it.

"Brax wants to know what you want him to do," Micah says.

I squeeze my eyes shut and settle into my current place in hell.

"Tell him to follow her out of town. Make sure no one else is following her."

Micah's brows shoot up. "That's it?"

I nod slowly and realize what's about to go down.

Goldie gave up on me.

After everything we've been through.

No, scratch that.

After everything I've put her through, this is how she thinks she's going to end it.

"Make sure none of Dex's guys are following her." I'm forced to clear my throat, because it feels like I just swallowed a thorn bush. "Then let her go."

"Are you serious?" Tim asks.

Even my boss thinks I'm crazy. I've put him through shit with this, but he's had my back the whole way.

I dig my keys out of my pocket and push past both of them. "I said let her go."

"Where are you going?" Micah calls after me.

I ignore them both and hear mutters before the door shuts on my ass. I cut through the thick, summer night air and yank my door open.

I probably shouldn't, but I can't help myself.

I send her one last text.

Me – I'm no quitter baby. We have a date at the altar. Please, call me.



Goldie

Five hours later

“DID I WAKE YOU?”

Her voice is groggy and rough. “Goldielocks, you can call me anytime.”

She sleeps like the dead. I’m surprised the phone woke her. “I was going to wait until morning to call since you go to bed so early, but I knew you’d want to know—I’m on my way home.”

She gasps. “You are?”

“Yes, Mom.” It’s all I can do to keep the tears running down my cheeks out of my voice. I’ve cried off and on for the last two hours. The three before that I was so angry, I caught myself speeding four times. That must be why road rage drives people to do such outlandish things. “I’ll be there tomorrow.”

“Well,” she exclaims and doesn’t sound tired any longer. “I don’t know what brought this on, but I can’t wait to see you.”

I do my best to even my voice. “I can’t wait to see you too.”

“How long have you been driving?”

I don’t even recognize myself these days. So many lies. “I just left. I wanted to beat the morning rush. I’ll find a room before I get too tired.”

“I’ll be. You know the rules.”

I swipe at the tears on my face. “I’m a grown woman. I don’t need to call you every two hours to check in.”

“You try that, honey. Find out what happens when you get here.” She says it with a smile in her voice. “Be careful. Those big truck trailers don’t see little cars like you on the road.”

“They do, but I’ll be careful. I’ll check in from time to time.”

“Love you, Goldie-bug.”

“Love you, Mom.”

I disconnect and place my cell in the holder so I can follow the GPS. I gave myself five hours to change my mind.

Come back...

I'm sorry...

A date at the altar...

I've turned around at least a million times in the last two hours.

You know, once I got over the anger.

I need a minute.

Or a year.

Heck, I just need a break, so I'm taking control.

And I'm giving myself one.

JERK

Goldie

The traffic in the Carolinas was worse than normal. Bumper to bumper for hours. What should be a fifteen-hour drive turned into seventeen.

I'm exhausted and the last meal I ate was a gas station burrito near the southern end of North Carolina.

Shocker—it didn't settle well.

I'm running on Diet Coke, sweet tea, and Tums. I'm desperate to wash my face, and I'm sure I'll break out in a rash of acne the day after tomorrow.

But my emotions are under control. A lonely road trip and a stranger's playlist of breakup songs is just what the drama queen needed.

Do not underestimate the power of a scorned woman in an angsty song.

I took control. Once I crossed into Virginia, I could smell home. I mean, it smells like a humid forest in the dead of summer, but it's home. A different kind of green than I'm used to in Miami. There's no water and no horizon, but it's a different kind of beautiful. I'm trading sunsets for low mountain ranges and hilly forests.

One beauty for another.

But most importantly, I've put fifteen hours between myself and King—seventeen if there's an accident. For someone who

was quick to beg me to come back, he sure gave up fast. He might've talked a big game, with the *I don't give up* bit, but I didn't get another text.

No message.

No call.

He gave up.

Or he got busy with his case. I can't hold that against him, I guess.

I turn off the last pavement I'll see before I get home. The long dirt road is almost a mile until I find the small farmhouse I grew up in. The sun is setting over my home state. Orange and yellows peek through the trees, barely giving me a hint of the beauty I've become used to in South Florida.

Right before I hit the dead end, I take a left and make it up the short drive. The kitchen light is on over the sink and Mom's antique lamps warm the family room. I park on the gravel drive near the house next to Mom's tan and baby blue conversion van. Her potted flowers are flourishing on the narrow steps leading to the screened in porch.

It's like I'm five years old and nothing has changed. The flowers, the tree swing in the front yard, and the rickety screen door that slams every time someone comes and goes.

But a lot has changed.

I'm a confidential informant for the DEA, enjoying lots of amazing orgasms and sex with my agent.

Or, I was.

I'm also the almost-rape victim of my half-brother's bodyguard. And I know beyond a shadow of a doubt it was an order from Dex himself. Rand told me. The only reason I'm not a full-fledged victim is because one of the kitchen staff walked in on us.

That dish washer literally saved me.

Then, I saved myself.

It took six months, but I did it. Special Agent Kingston Jennings might've dragged me back into The Pink, but I refuse to allow him or anyone to drag me back to that dark place that I fought so hard to escape.

Just when I'd finally felt normal again.

Me.

The old me.

The me before the Rand event.

"Mom, I'm home!" I call. The splintered screen door acts as my exclamation point announcing my arrival.

"In the front room, Goldielocks," she calls back. "You'll never guess who's here!"

My shoulders slump. I'm tired, I need a shower, and my old lumpy bed. I do not feel like chatting with the neighbors.

I dump fast food wrappers and empty cups on the counter to deal with later and hoist my duffle and backpack up my shoulder.

"It's fine," I call, more than a little irritated at whomever is here keeping my mom from running to the door to barrel me over in a mom-hug. "I just drove seventeen hours, thanks to the Carolinas, but I'll come to you."

She's sitting in a very straight chair, wearing her favorite baggy, ripped jeans, Birkenstocks that she's had since college, and a tank top. We must have company who's special, because she's actually wearing a bra.

Her face lights up when she sees me and she finally jumps to her feet, like any decent mom would. She wraps her tanned arms around me and jumps up and down. "You could've told me on the phone! I can't believe you drove all this way, to do it in person, but I'm so happy for you!"

My bags fall from my shoulders. I barely catch them on my forearms that are pinned at my middle as she jerks me up and down. "Have you been making your special brownies again, Mom?"

She stops and grips me tight by the shoulders to push me back. Her expression tells me to shut the heck up and reminds me of how she used to communicate with me telepathically in Walmart when I was little.

“Shut your mouth,” she whispers.

I can’t help it. I’m tired, hungry, and have to go to the bathroom. “It’s good to see you too.”

“Is that all you’re going to say to me?” she exclaims.

I’ve lost all decorum, patience, and don’t care who’s here. “Sorry, but I’m about to wet my pants.”

Mom throws her head back and laughs.

I try to step out of her hold, but she won’t let go. “You are high.”

That’s when I see him.

All the blood drains from my head and my body goes numb. I’m actually surprised I don’t wet my pants.

My mom shifts to the side, and my brain confirms he’s not a mirage or dream or a nightmare.

He’s here.

King is here.

In my childhood home.

And he’s looking fine.

Not fine like Daniel Armstrong in his casual Ralph Lauren or his dressy Armani. And he’s not looking fine like he does when he’s in gym shorts and nothing else standing in my kitchen making me the tastiest omelets I’ve ever eaten.

He’s in a nice pair of jeans and a crisp linen shirt. His cuffs are rolled, showing off his veined forearms that mesmerize me. One time I traced them for an hour while he watched a baseball game and held me close to his chest. His hair is even more perfect than his casual outfit. After being with him for this long, I know for a fact it was styled.

Blue eyes the color of the ocean I left behind last night stare me down. “I’ve been waiting on you for four hours. Unless she’s popping gummies every time she refills my tea, I guarantee no one is high.”

My bags fall—*thump-thump*—in unison to the floor at my feet as I hiss, “What are you doing here?”

“I love him!” Mom shrieks. “I’m talking loooooove him, Goldielocks! You didn’t even tell me you were seeing anyone, let alone engaged!”

I gasp.

“Engaged!” She echoes her own words as she jumps up and down like a middle school cheerleader. “My baby is engaged!”

“I ... I’m not—” But I can’t get another word out.

King’s Mason jar hits the side table that’s covered in so many plants there’s barely room for his drink. Mom is a firm believer in the health benefits of photosynthesis in the home. He kicks my duffle to the side and claims my face.

When his lips land on mine for a kiss so firm and overwhelming, I’m surprised he doesn’t dip me for dramatics. I have to hold onto his forearms for balance, and because I still have to go to the bathroom.

He lets go of my lips but not my face and smiles down at me like he’s not the grump he is. “Took you long enough. Worried the whole time. I’m just glad I could meet you here after my meetings in D.C. I’ll drive home so you can relax.”

“Your meetings?” I frown and keep on. “You’ll drive home?”

He tips his head to the side and gives me a little shrug. “Sorry I got here first and blew the surprise. Your mom wasn’t going to let me in until I explained her daughter is the love of my life.”

I frown deeper. “Love of your life?”

“I knew you’d find love. I just knew it!” Mom yells. She actually yells. “I told ya’ you were nothing like me. You waited until you knew who you wanted in life, and then you found him.” Mom wraps her arms around both of us and

wiggles us from side to side. “I can’t lie, I never wanted a son, but I’m excited to have a son-in-law! And grandbabies! I can’t wait for the grandbabies! You’re not getting any younger Marigold Violet.” She shakes the three of us like we’re one, big happy family. Which. We. Are. Not. “I might even get on a dang plane to visit grandbabies.”

I turn to her in our weird threesome. “You won’t get on a plane to see me.”

“Well,” she huffs and finally releases us, letting her arms slap to her sides. “Give me a grandbaby, and I will. I’ll get you something to drink. Go to the potty. You don’t want to pee yourself in front of your fiancé.”

Mom floats off to the kitchen, probably creating wildflower crowns in her head for me to wear while standing barefoot in a meadow.

At.

My.

Wedding.

I tear myself away from the jerk in front of me. “How did you find me?”

He stuffs his hands in his pockets and pulls in a deep breath before letting it out. His wide chest rises and falls with the simple human action, which on most people wouldn’t be so noticeable. But on him, it makes me want to rip that stupid linen shirt off him and ask him to breathe deeply.

He doesn’t even seem apologetic when he answers. “I installed an app on your phone. I can track you. When you headed north, I assumed, but I kept tabs on you the whole way. Which, by the way, you were speeding when you first left. So, you do break the rules from time to time.”

“I can’t believe you,” I whisper. “Of all the creepy, possessive things to do.”

He ignores my rant and drops his voice as low as his deep timbre will go. “You ran away.”

“Yes,” I confirm. “From you. That means you’re supposed to stay there so I can be here without you.”

He shakes his head, smiles, and tips his head as he gazes at me like I’m a puppy or those baby ducks that they sell at Tractor Supply in the spring. I mean, really, he’s never been this happy since I met him. “I made sure no one from Dex’s organization followed you out of the city, booked the earliest flight today, and grabbed a ride out here to the beautiful Virginia countryside. I know nothing about your dad, but you got the best of your mom. Trippy will like her.”

“Trippy is not going to meet my mom!” I yell in a whisper.

He shrugs.

And smiles.

“Why are you so happy?” I exclaim.

He takes a step, wraps his arms around me, and presses his hips into my tummy, reminding me that I might wet my pants in front of him if I don’t make it to the bathroom soon. “I’m happy because you’re here, you’re safe, and we’re back together. We have things to talk about. That should’ve happened last night, but now it’s happening tonight.”

“I have nothing more to say to you. And you want me to continue this ruse in front of my mom? What happens when it’s over? I’m going to have to break it to her that there is no Daniel Armstrong, there will be no barefoot wedding, and no grandbabies. Why are you doing this to me?”

He squeezes me tighter. If I don’t go to the bathroom soon, I’ll drown from the most disgusting death ever, and all he has to say is, “Baby, I’m not getting married barefoot.”

If I could kill him with my glare, I would. “You’re crazy.”

“Go to the bathroom,” he says. “I’ll meet you in the kitchen with Alina. She’s making cauliflower steaks for dinner. I’m...” he lets that thought trail off and finally loses his smile. “Really excited about that.”

“Mom is a vegetarian,” I inform. “I hope you wither away and die from lack of iron.”

“King!”

I gasp when my mother yells his real name from the kitchen. He told my mother that I’m engaged to the real him, not the fictional him.

How dare he!

He hikes a brow, as if he’s one-upped me on this game of let’s-get-hitched.

And of course he smiles again.

Jerk.

My mom does what she does best—boss everyone in her general vicinity. “King! Dang it, I love your name. Hey, scoot to the basement for me and grab me a quart of canned tomatoes. I think I’ll whip up a quick marinara to go with the steaks. Get the ones dated two years ago. That was the best batch. I save those for special occasions!”

Most people save special bottles of wine for things like celebrating an engagement, but not Mom. She breaks out her best homemade canned goods.

“You go. Looks like I have a job. I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

And with that, my jerk-face, fake fiancé presses his lips to my forehead and disappears to our cold, creepy basement, like some kind of hero.

Ugh!

LOVE YOUR SOUL

Goldie

I did not wet my pants.
Yay me.

It's the only good thing that's happened since I got home.

Though, no one would agree with that but me.

After I went to the bathroom, I decided I didn't want to see King, my alternate fiancé, or Mom, who's become Miss Chipper Pants. So I locked myself in the only bathroom we have and took a shower until I drained the hot water heater.

Maybe I saved myself from acne breakouts.

In a rush to skip town to lament my poor life choices before the man in the other room could find me, I packed the rattiest clothes that usually bring me mental and physical comfort. I needed clarity and to ease my soul.

Ratty, comfort clothes are saved for alone time, not engagement celebrations featuring cauliflower.

I'm not happy with our house guest or my outfit at the moment.

When I finally came out of the bathroom, King was outside manning the grill flipping cauliflower steaks, and Mom was plating up her famous Mediterranean sauce that's perfectly salty with capers, tangy from fresh lemon, and seasoned with Mom's go-to—a pound of garlic. King hating olives must not extend to capers, because he's still here.

Newsflash: my childhood friends never stayed for dinner.

Mom is a hippie.

She loves to live off the land and refuses to eat God's creatures. She's four inches shorter than me, her hair is as wild and carefree as she is, and her clothes match her personality. Her ears are pierced approximately two gazillion times, and the only jewelry she wears are beads she strings herself.

How she hooked up with my father, I'll never know.

I do, however, know why my father was attracted to her. Mom loves life, finds the good in most everyone—except my father because he didn't deserve it and my childhood bullies—and she sprinkles goodness wherever her Birks take her.

Mom might be eccentric, but she's perfect.

I wish I were more like her, but I'm not. And it's not for a lack of trying. It just felt weird. When I tried to be more like her, I didn't feel comfortable walking around in my own skin.

Actually, I take that back. I used to be like her in some ways. Happy and sunny and carefree.

Then I moved to Miami. The rest is history.

Well, the rest is my current reality. I can't wait for it all to be past tense.

"I can't lie, Goldielocks, when the love of your life knocked on my door, I thought I was in trouble. He introduced himself as the DEA, and you know I've got a little bit of Mary Jane drying in the basement."

I groan internally. "Mom. You don't have to talk about it."

King chuckles from where he sits next to me at our small table. His arm is draped across the back of my chair, and he's playing with the ends of my frizzy hair.

"What?" she exclaims. "I'm within the legal limit ... I mean, give or take. Whatever the law is, it's just a suggestion. Right, King?"

"We go after the big guys, Alina. You're safe with me," King says with a smile.

Mom literally swoons.

Another stinking handsome, charming smile. If it weren't for the way he makes me feel when we're close and he's touching me, I wouldn't recognize the man.

Mom's glistening dark eyes turn to me. "I'm so happy for you, baby. And I'm not going to be upset that you didn't tell me. You like your privacy. I get that. Heck, I even respect it. What strong woman like you doesn't like her privacy? I'm just happy you're here, and I get to know your King."

My King.

"After Goldie's father left me pregnant and alone, I was done with love. I had my baby girl, and she's all I needed," Mom goes on. King's hand wraps possessively around the back of my neck. His fingers massage the knots that formed over the last day bottled up in the driver's seat—and from being angry with him. It doesn't matter how mad I am at him, it feels good. One more reason to kick him out and let the screen door hit him in his perfect behind. "But my daughter is special. There's nothing hardened about her heart. I'm not sure anything ever could. She was born to love—she was just waiting for you."

King gazes over at me.

The way he looks at me...

It's like I'm sitting with a stranger who I'm intimately familiar with in every carnal way possible.

When he responds to Mom, it's like I'm not even here. "Goldie waited for me. I'm the luckiest man alive."

"Well, there you have it." Mom throws her homemade cloth napkin on the table. "My hardened heart just cracked. Love is real after all."

I swallow over the lump in my throat before my eyes fall shut to block everything out. It might be weak and pathetic, but it's the only barrier I can muster at the moment.

"You're tired from the drive. Go to bed, you two." I open my eyes when I hear plates clank. Mom stands to clear the table. "Oh, you never told me how long you can stay."

Of course, King answers for me. “I have a meeting in Miami on Tuesday. And Goldie and I have an important appointment next weekend. Don’t we, baby?”

King has a second pick up of dirty cash, and then there’s our upcoming fake nuptials. That’s one way to describe an appointment.

I shrug. “I might not be able to make it back for our *appointment*. I want to spend as much time with Mom as I can since I made the drive.”

“Oh, I’ll be fine. I’ve got work, and it’s my volunteer week at the library.” Mom pokes her head around the corner from the kitchen and looks at King. “We don’t have a librarian. We’re small potatoes. We take turns running the place. You know, volunteer firefighters, volunteer librarians—one and the same. We’re all heroes.”

“Yes, you are,” King agrees.

“I can stay even if you’re busy,” I say.

“Marigold Violet, why are you being so obstinate when you have a fiancé to think about?” she calls. “Are you about to start your period?”

“Mom!”

She pokes her head around again, this time with a big smile.

“What? I’m sure King knows your cycle, right?”

“I’ve got it all mapped out, Alina,” King says.

My mother looks like she might burst into a pile of rose petals.

“I can tell you’re in touch with your feminine side. You’ve been here for half a day, and I already love your soul.”

Oh my gosh, she’s talking about his soul.

That’s it.

I’m done.

“I’ll let you two discuss my period. I’m going to bed.”

King continues to suck up. “I’ll help your mom clean.”

“No, no! I’ve got this. I’ve got a special concoction mixed up in the bathroom for her cramps. It’s cinnamon, clove, rose, and lavender oils. Massage that on her tummy, would you, King? And don’t you worry. I am a modern woman. You don’t need to be married to sleep together under my roof. Goodnight, love birds. We’ll talk about the wedding tomorrow!”

Mom disappears back into the kitchen.

I push my plate away and let my forehead fall to the table with a thud. “I officially give up on my life.”

I feel King’s hand slide from my neck down my spine where it lands on my bottom. Then his lips hit my ear where he murmurs, “I can’t wait to massage your tummy.”

I swat his hand away, stand, and move to my childhood bedroom without giving him a second glance. I hear him follow. It’s not hard. He takes up more than his fair share of space in our small house.

The entire upstairs has been my space since I was a tween. Mom and I had the best time redecorating it when she gave it to me. She said I needed a bigger space to find myself as I matured.

She gave me everything growing up and what do I do in return?

Lie to her about falling in love and getting married.

King clomps up the stairs behind me as I pad silently on bare feet. He even sounds like a man in the house, and I don’t ever remember there being a man in this house. Certainly not with me and absolutely not with an invitation direct from my mother to sleep with me.

The door shuts with a soft click, but that’s it. There’s no lock. I’ve never had a need for one.

I walk far enough into the room to put space between me and the man who just won’t quit. When I turn, I find him in the middle of my small space, still painted the color of celery, which Mom said was calming all those years ago.

Celery isn't doing its job at the moment. My heart is racing. King and I haven't spoken alone since he left me in his house and told me to stay.

And now we're in my childhood bedroom in Virginia.

King states the obvious, and doesn't do it quietly. "We need to talk."

"You think?" I hiss in a whispered tone. "The kitchen is below us and this farmhouse is over a hundred years old. The walls and floors are thin, King. Remember that when you chastise me for not obeying your order to sit and stay."

"Whoa." He widens his eyes and holds his hands out low, like I just threw down Trippy jokes to ridicule his mother or something. At least he has the decency to lower his voice. "Let's get something straight. I never told you to sit. I told you to go to bed and make yourself comfortable. You act like I treated you like a dog."

I bring my hands to my messy hair. "For the love."

"Yeah, let's talk about that."

"What?" I exclaim. "The love? You want to talk about love? Are you out of your mind?"

He crosses his arms. "Calm down—"

"Don't tell me to calm down." I advance and cut the space between us so I can get my point across with a whip but in a whisper. "I don't lie to my mother—ever! You barge in here uninvited and expect me to play along at this game of yours. And for some reason, which as deeply as I dig, I cannot figure out why I did it, I played along. Dang you for catching me off guard. Did you see how happy she is? I'm going to have to ruin that by telling her it was all made up. It will break her heart, and I'll be the one who has to do it."

He shakes his head and drops his arms to his sides. "Baby, I followed you here because there was no way I was going to let you be on your own right now. Rand will be released tomorrow. Run away to another hemisphere, Goldie. I dare you to. See what I do. I will be on your heels faster than you can blink. Maybe I'll even get there first, just like I did today.

You're the one who led me here. I had two choices of stories to tell your mom—the Carter Cartel or us. I feel like I was doing her a favor by telling her about us.”

I take a step back and cross my arms.

“But I damn well was not going to leave you by yourself. I protect Trippy from the truth of my job all the time. It's for her own good. I figured you would want the same for your mother.”

He's right. And more than anything, I hate that he's right.

“I'm exhausted. The last two days have been too much.” I rub my temples and tell him the truth. “You exhaust me. I didn't come here to run away from you. I came here because I need a break.”

He shakes his head and studies me. Then, slowly, like he's afraid I'll run away from him, he moves to me.

He wraps me in his thick, strong arms, and I don't fight to leave them. Another reason I'm frustrated ... but this time with myself. I fist his shirt that looks too good on him and melt into his chest.

King continues to wear me down when he presses his lips to the top of my head. “I'm sorry you need a break from me. That's my fault. But baby, I'm here, and you need to get used to it. I'm not going anywhere.”

I lean farther into his chest, and he takes my weight. As much as I hate him for barging his way into my life, I can't fight the other feelings that are overtaking my heart.

And that's what overwhelms me the most.

MORE PROMISES

King

“You’re right,” she mumbles into my chest. “It was your fault.”

I slide my hand into her hair and hold her against my heart.

When I realized what she was up to yesterday, I was so fucking mad.

I also felt a shit ton of other things I wasn’t prepared for. I pushed all of it out of my head and did the only thing that felt right.

Chase her.

She’s right. It was all my fault.

And I’m not used to being at fault for anything. At least not that I’m willing to admit. I didn’t have her for a whole day. It was all I could do not to throw more furniture.

“Don’t run away from me again, baby.” My tone is low but clear as I speak into the side of her beautiful hair. Even so, my words are a warning.

“Then don’t look at me like you did yesterday.”

My arms constrict before I freeze. “How did I look at you?”

She doesn’t move. “You know how you looked at me. Like I’m a victim. It was different, and I hated it. After everything that we’ve been through so far, that was the worst.”

My eyes fall shut.

I get it.

I tell her the truth. “You don’t understand, Goldie. I fix shit. It’s what I do. It’s what I did as a Ranger, and it’s my job now as an agent. If there’s a threat, I eliminate it. If there’s a toxic pipeline of drugs, I shut it down. If crime is being fueled by dirty money, I cut off that source of supply. I don’t know how to stand back and not fix things.”

She pulls away just enough to gaze up at me. She is exhausted. But even with dark circles under her bloodshot eyes, she’s still just as beautiful as the day I first set my sights on her. “I’m not yours to fix.”

“You’re wrong, baby. You are mine. I just don’t know what to do with you besides hold on with a death grip.” I put my hand to her chin and force her to look at me. “I don’t claim to be good at this. In fact, I’m really fucking bad at it. Yesterday proved that. You called me on it, and I couldn’t deal.”

“You couldn’t deal? I’m the one who was attacked by Rand.” Her expression is guarded, like she doesn’t know whether to believe me or kick me out of her room to sleep on the sofa.

I’m not taking any chances.

I bend and scoop her up like I just made her my bride.

Fuck.

My bride.

The last two days have lodged a wedge in my brain. I can’t fucking think straight. It’s good I’m here instead of dealing with Dex Carter.

I sit on the double bed I can’t wait to sleep in with her tonight and cradle her in my lap.

“Goldie.” I pull in a breath and take a moment so I don’t fuck this up since I already fucked it up once. “I’m not making this about me. This is about you. It couldn’t be more about you. But I’m forty-three. Besides my small family, my team in the Army, and now a handful of Agents, I have never done this. And you, baby... Fuck, you are in a different class than all of them. A class I didn’t even know existed.”

“What we had...” She rolls her lips in to mull that over. “What we had was good. No, it was better than good. It was new and sensual and perfect. I want that back, but the way you looked at me yesterday...”

I can't keep the frown from forming on my face. “Did you hear anything I just said to you?”

She frowns back. “Well, clearly your wavy gorgeous hair is so thick it's keeping you from comprehending what *I'm* saying.”

“What the hell,” I mutter to no one but myself and the green walls plastered with positivity posters featuring butterflies and ladybugs and shit like that. At least there aren't any unicorns.

She gives my shirt a little tug. “What the heck what?”

I shake my head.

“King.” She bites my name loud enough, I think she forgot about the thin walls she grew up in. “Do you remember our first time together? And our shower after Dex's guys beat you up?”

My gaze meets hers. “Baby. Every moment with you is etched on my brain forever.”

She pulls herself to me by her grip on my shirt and she's back to a whisper. “I want that. I want you to want me so much that the rest of the world melts away. That there's nothing between us. Not a case, not a bad guy, not horrible memories. Because since I met you, all of that bad stuff has been brought to the surface, but when I'm lost just in you, I forget it all. When you want me, I want to know it. I don't want you to hold back and be careful.”

Her words sink deep into me, piercing my gut like a sword. My chest is tight and I have to work hard for a breath. “Fuck, baby. You've got me spinning. How can I love you more than I did two minutes ago?”

She freezes in my arms. “Excuse me?”

My hands separate on her body. One hand dips in her hair and the other wraps around her sweet ass. “Look at who has the hard head now.”

“You said the L word.”

“I did. And since I’m the emotionally stunted, grumpy one, it’s a shocker for me too.”

“You said the L word.” Her words are even quieter this time.

I exhale and shrug while still holding her to me. “Feels pretty fucking good. Who knew?”

Tears well in her eyes. “There’s no way you can love me. Love takes a long time. Some people are together for years before they realize they love someone.”

“You’re throwing me curve balls here, Goldie. One minute you want me to ravage you and the next you want to put me on hold for years to elevator music. I’m forty-three. How long do you want me to wait?”

“Are you a baseball fan?”

“For fuck’s sake. It’s like you’re talking in circles. I’m chasing you baby, but I can’t keep up.”

“You said curveball. This is how little I know about you. I know you played little league, but everyone played something when they were little.”

I give her ass a firm yank into my rock hard cock. “I’m a fan of you. That’s the only thing I can think about right now.”

A small, reserved smile settles on her lips. “Making you listen to elevator music is the last thing I want.”

“Yesterday was a shock to my system.” I tell her the truth that still festers inside me like a smoldering flicker that could flame up at any moment. “Someone could’ve put paddles to my heart and nothing would’ve ignited me like listening to that recording.”

She lets go of my shirt and wiggles out of my hold. As much as I don’t want to let her go, I do.

Thank God, she only puts one bare foot to the floor before she climbs back on. She’s knees to the bed, straddling me, and one with my body.

Or she would be if it weren’t for our fucking clothes.

Her hands frame my face. My hands go to her ass and pull her to my cock, where she's meant to be.

Now and forever.

She tips her forehead to mine. "I'm pretty lucky that you kept the secret from the world about how wonderful you are for forty-three years."

I pull her down on my cock. "Saved all the good stuff for you, baby."

She rocks back and forth and presses her tits to my chest for good measure. "That's a long time. Thank you."

I slide my hands up her sides and grab the hem of her tee on the way. "We need to get something straight. In fact, I'll make a deal with you."

"Is this like the last deal you made with me when I had to sign government documents?"

I rip her tee over her head. Her tits are front and center, close enough for me to taste.

I don't waste any time and pull one pink, perfect nipple between my lips and suck.

She moans.

I let it go with a pop and cup her tits in my hands, circling them with the pads of my thumb. "No documents. But you do have to sign with a promise."

"What?"

"You'll never run away from me again."

She pulls her lip between her teeth. "I said I was sorry."

I pinch her nipples and give them a roll. "Promise me."

A smile hits her lips and she presses into my hands. "A deal insinuates give and take. What's my deal?"

I press my lips to her collarbone. "I'll ravage you whenever you want."

Her eyes flare.

“I’ll also protect you to the ends of the earth. And if anyone lays a finger on you, I’ll lay waste to them.”

“King,” she whispers.

“And I’ll eat cauliflower steaks for you.”

She bites back a smile.

“And marinara with fucking olives in it.”

“Those were capers, not olives.”

“Then add that shit to the list. I’ll eat capers for you too.”

“You do love me,” she whispers.

“I do. Do we have a deal?”

Her shoulder and head tip together. “I feel like I’m getting the better end of the deal. All I have to do is stay. You have all those other promises to live up to.”

I hike a brow. “You have to stay forever. That’s the biggest promise ever. And don’t be greedy. The ravaging isn’t just for you.”

She wraps her arms around me, and I do the same. “Why the change from where you were before I left Miami?”

I press my lips to hers for a slow kiss before saying, “Because I trust you. Hell, you walked into The Pink for me. Once I got over the shock of learning what happened to you and being pissed you ran away, I had an entire day to let that shit sink in. And since nothing like that will ever happen again because I’ll be by your side, I know you’ll be fine.”

She rocks back and forth on my cock and pulls me in tight to kiss me this time.

“That’s all I wanted,” she breathes against my lips.

“As much as I love you riding me, I’m not close enough to you, baby.” I surge to my feet with her in my arms. I turn, her back is to the bed, and her shorts and panties hit the old wood floors.

It doesn’t take long for my clothes to join hers. I reach for the bag I brought up hours before she caught up with me on her

long journey and dig through for the condoms I packed, hedging my bets on making her mine.

I wasn't kidding. It was a long fucking day without her.

Convincing her to be right here wasn't a choice. I would have died before accepting any other outcome than this. As long as we're right here, we can figure out the rest when we get home.

Right after I take down her brother and exact revenge on another human.

But I can worry about that later.

I put a knee to the creaky bed and come down to where she's open wide.

For me.

My gaze goes directly to her pussy, wet and wanting. I let my eyes wander north, up her perfect pale skin to her beautiful pink lips and dark eyes. "The things I would do to you right now if your mother weren't downstairs."

As if daring me, her knees fall to the sides, giving me more.

I can't take another moment without touching her. The tips of my fingers slide through her, landing on her clit. I circle it with the tip of my finger.

She lifts her hips.

"King ... the ravaging. You promised."

I toss the condom to the bed next to her ass and drop to my knees. "I'll never break a promise, baby. You're going to have to be quiet if you don't want coffee to be awkward with your mom in the morning."

The last thing I see is her fisting the bedding beneath her. I taste her from her pussy to her clit. My hands settle on the backs of her thighs and push them higher, wider.

This is mine.

When I said love, I meant every part of her.

Inside and out.

Obsessed is not a strong enough word.

I wrap my lips around her clit and suck.

Her moans are quiet at first. When I let go of one of her legs and fill her with two fingers, she doesn't give two shits about who's in the same universe.

We are in our own world.

I flick her clit with my tongue, over and over and over.

Her back arches.

She presses her pussy to my mouth. I didn't lie before. Ravaging her will be the easiest thing I've ever done, because I don't let go. I don't let up and her orgasm lives on and on.

Just like the rest of our lives that I planned over the last day of hell I spent without her.

She helplessly smacks the bed as her moans fill the attic space. When her legs go limp in my hand, I let her go and look at the beautiful languid woman in front of me.

I grab the condom and rip it open. "As much as I'd like to stand here and stare at you like this, baby, I can't wait another minute to have you again."

She drags her eyes open and stares up at me. "Yes. Forever."

I roll the condom on without taking my eyes off her. "On your stomach, baby. Cheek to the bed."

Her eyes drop to my cock bobbing between us as she drags her legs up and rolls.

When she peeks at me over her shoulder, it's official.

I've died and gone to heaven.

"Spread, baby."

She doesn't make me ask twice and shifts her legs wide. I yank her knees to the edge of the bed.

In one hard, firm thrust, I'm home.

"Fuck," I groan and feel her body mold to my cock and stay planted deep. "I missed you so damn much, and it's only been a day."

She presses into me. “I missed you.”

I pull out and slam back in. “You don’t know where my mind went for the last day. By the time I got here, I was determined to do anything I could to make you mine.”

“Hmm, yes,” she croons as I start to take her.

I slam into her with each thrust harder than the last. Every time I go deeper, she threads herself into my soul.

Tighter.

In knots so tight and intricate, I couldn’t undo it if I wanted to.

I’ll never be the same. Not that I’d want to be.

She rocks on my cock as I enter her.

Harder.

Savage.

Unrestrained.

She wants it as much as I do.

When my balls tighten, and I can’t take it another moment, I come. When I pry my eyes open and look down, all I see is us.

As one.

My grip bites into her skin with a hold so firm, my knuckles turn white.

I pry my fingers from her and fall forward. My chest is clammy against her slim back. And without breaking our connection, I shift her up the bed and hold her against my chest, still inside of her.

We say nothing as our breaths even.

I wrap her up, my forearm angled up the middle of her body, and circle my fingers loosely around her neck.

Her pulse might as well become one with mine.

As if she feels it too, a light touch hits my arm and dances up my skin until her fingers wrap around my wrist.

I press my lips to the top of her head. “You okay?”

She nods, but it's small as her chest heaves with a shaky breath.

My chest tightens again. Fuck. I thought we'd crossed a hurdle.

Not just a hurdle.

The hurdle.

“Goldie, what's wrong?”

THE LEAST SUNSHINIEST ANNOUNCEMENT

Goldie

Tears fall to my temple and dissolve into the cotton of my pillowcase.

I've never been so overwhelmed.

"Baby." I feel his body tense around me. He was starting to slip out but not anymore. He presses back into me possessively. The fact that he's hard again after what we just did is a delicious promise for my future. "If you don't tell me what you're thinking right fucking now, I might tear down the farmhouse."

I bring my fingers up and thread them through his over the back of his hand that's wrapped around my neck.

Who knew that could feel so good.

I swallow, and I can tell he feels it.

He's about to make more demands about my state of mind, but I speak first.

And when I do, the words come out in a rush. "I love you."

He freezes.

"I don't know how it happened so fast. You're a force, and I'm no match. I can't help but love you."

All of a sudden, his chest starts to move against my back.

"King." I gasp his name. "Are you laughing at my declaration of love?"

He wraps me up tighter and presses his lips to my shoulder before his teeth nip my skin.

“Ouch! I just told you I love you and you laugh and bite me?”

He actually pulls out, which is another not-great sign that I don't appreciate.

I'm on my back and his heavy bulk presses me into the bed. I frown up at the jovial expression that I'm getting used to on him.

One more thing to secretly love.

Or, not so secretly since I just declared it.

And he laughed at me.

I open my mouth to complain when he cuts me off.

With his lips and his tongue. He takes my breath away.

Again.

His forehead tips to mine. “We're a pair. That was the least sunshiniest announcement of love. Probably one I deserve after everything I've put you through. Just so you know, I refuse to let you take it back. You're fucking stuck with my broody ass forever.”

I drag a foot up the back of his thick thigh. “I guess I have a lifetime to work on it.”

“I'm going to need another condom,” he announces. “Maybe two. And when we get home, we need to figure something else out or leave it up to chance, because I need to take you bare.”

LADY BALLS

King

“This isn’t what I expected. I think I’m more nervous than I was before.”

I glance over at Goldie and wrap my hand around hers. “Don’t be nervous. However, this is off the record.”

“King, this looks like the countryside where my mother lives. You said whoever this person is has information on Dex. I thought we’d meet them at their office or a government building. This feels like we’re walking into a trap. Are you sure we should be here?”

“This is a friend of a friend. And my friend is trustworthy. I worked with him when I was in Panama. I haven’t seen him in a couple years before this week. He picked me up from the airport to drop me at your mom’s yesterday. I told him why I was here, filled him in on my case, and he offered to look into it. He doesn’t play in the circles I do, but I trust him with my life. I’d never bring you here if I didn’t. There’s no one more legit than him.”

I take a right onto the long drive in her Honda Civic. I need to be back in Miami, but I’m no idiot. When help like this is offered up on a silver platter, I’ll make time for it any day, any time.

An easy decision since this place is a short drive from Alina’s.

Not that I knew this place existed before I got a text in the middle of the night with a time and address. The fact I got a

text in the first place was telling. My contact uncovered information that must be worth talking about. He doesn't do anything if it's not worth his time.

When I pull around the wooded bend, a farmhouse comes into view. It's bigger than Alina's but not big. Barns and outbuildings dot the landscape beyond the house through the woods.

When I throw it in park and kill the engine, Goldie turns her hand in mine and squeezes. "Are you sure about this?"

I turn to her and bite back my smile. "You don't have to whisper."

"But it feels like I do," she keeps on. "There's nothing about this place that screams official."

I'm not about to admit it's because there's nothing official about it, but something gets my attention.

The front door opens, and two men walk out onto the front porch. I only know one of them. He wears a suit and a shit-eating grin when he gives me a chin lift. The other guy is in a black tee, jeans, and work boots.

"This feels like the business that went on at The Pink. Who is that?" Goldie hisses.

I put my fingers to her chin and force her to look at me. "Baby, what did I promise you last night?"

Her worried eyes frown. "To ravage me forever and ever?"

It's my turn to lower my voice. "Don't make me hard while we're sitting here with those guys staring at us. I'm talking about the other part."

"I'm guessing it's not the part about cauliflower steaks."

"I promised to keep you safe. And I can guarantee, you're safer here than anywhere. Quit with the whispering." I tip my head to the side and motion to our audience. "If they want to hear you, they will."

Her voice dips farther and her dark eyes saucer. "That doesn't make me feel better."

“It should because they play on the same team, but they can do the shit I’d get fired for doing—maybe sent to prison. And since they have a lot of shit to do, we’re wasting their time. Let’s go.” I lean in and kiss her anxiety-ridden expression before I climb out, greet the men, and walk around the hood to get her door since Goldie hasn’t moved. “Sorry. We’ll be right there.”

The guy in the jeans leans a shoulder on the rickety porch post. “I’ve got all day.”

“I don’t,” the other one mocks. “I’m important and shit.”

I open Goldie’s door and hold out my hand. “I promise.”

She finally takes it, and we make our way to the house, hand in hand. I offer my right one to the one I’ve never met. “King Jennings. I appreciate your help.”

He pushes off the post he was leaning on and takes my hand. “Graves. Ozzy Graves. It’s no big deal. We’re sort of slow this week.”

“What the fuck, Jennings. Do I not get a hug?”

I let go of Goldie’s hand to wrap my arm around her and pull her to my side. “Baby, this is Cole Carson. We worked together on Dex’s case in Panama before the cartel moved to the States.” I turn to Carson. “This is Goldie.”

Cole’s eyes light with humor. “Oh, I know who you are.”

My frown is as deep as his grin. “Dammit, you’re not helping.”

Goldie presses into my side and says nothing.

Cole shrugs and continues to do what he does best—command the center of attention. “I know who everyone is. Marigold Carter, the half-sister of notorious cartel leader, Dex Carter. We’ve known who you are for years, but you didn’t jump onto anyone’s radar until you moved to Miami. Don’t worry. It took about two minutes for everyone to figure out you are not in business with your older brother.”

“What the hell, Carson? I explained yesterday that she was already pissed at me. I fixed that last night, and now you’re

trying to fuck me over by freaking her out all over again.”

“Kingston Jennings, bitten by the love bug. I am smitten just seeing the two of you standing there together.” Cole stuffs his hands in his pockets and focuses his attention on the woman at my side. “Rest easy, Goldie. The CIA makes sure I know everyone and everything. And when pushing the boundaries is out of the question for me, I’ve got my wife’s co-worker here. Like I explained to your lover yesterday when he was freaking the fuck out that you ran away forever, my man Ozzy has no rules or boundaries. If there’s shit to find on anyone, he’s your man. He doesn’t know what a law is.”

“I know what the law is, asshole.” Ozzy looks from Cole to us. “But my boss, Crew, bought an entire satellite system so I can...” He pauses and chooses his words carefully. “Maneuver around it.”

Goldie fists my shirt. I have a feeling I know where her mind is racing. Before she can run away from me again, I move on to damage control since Carson isn’t doing me any favors. “Don’t worry. These are the good guys. They just don’t need warrants or judges or court orders, which means they can get shit done faster than I can.”

Goldie bites her lip and mulls that over. “I never break the rules. I’m the least rule-breaking person you’ll ever meet. But in this case, I’m all for fast and am ready for this to be over.”

“Carson doesn’t have a lot of friends, so when he asks for a favor, we get curious,” Ozzy says.

“I don’t need a lot of friends—just the right ones,” Carson quips. “But seriously, people only put up with me because of my wife. She’s the draw in our relationship.”

“His wife is the shit,” Ozzy says. “Let’s get to the control room. I’ll show you what I found.”

We follow them through the front door of the old farm house and walk past a dining room with tattered wallpaper and a kitchen that’s under renovation.

“Sorry for the mess,” Ozzy says. “Crew’s wife, Addy, has been on him for years to fix the place up. We started on the

kitchen, but then shit got busy—you know, international emergencies. I don't know when we'll get back to it."

We make our way to the back of the house.

"Whoa," I mutter. "I didn't know what to expect, but it wasn't this."

"Do you work here too?" Goldie asks Cole.

"No way. I work in Langley at CIA headquarters." Cole holds out his arms low. "I'm more like a mascot around here."

The room looks nothing like the rest of the house. It's like something from a movie. The walls are covered with monitors surveilling so many different locations, I'm not sure where to look first.

Until my eyes stutter on a location that looks familiar. "The Pink."

"Oh my gosh," Goldie gasps. "How did you do that?"

"We don't question the magic of Ozzy," Cole says. "We just thank God for him every night in our prayers. Isn't that right, Graves?"

Ozzy rolls his eyes but looks back to us. "Your brother has an impressive network. And it takes a lot to impress me. Remarkable, but not impenetrable. I found a crack in their system and tapped into their cameras."

"I knew Anderson Marshall wasn't an idiot," I mutter. "I can't lie, I'm jealous. You really can do what we can't do."

"I can't even legally do this," Cole adds. "At least not within the borders of our country."

"Right after I tapped into their server last night, I started recording every live camera feed they have. I skimmed through when I got here this morning and found something I think you'll find interesting." Ozzy taps on a keyboard and goes through more screens of security than I can count. "Here we go."

A video plays out on the big monitor that's front and center. We all watch body after body file into Dex's office and

arrange themselves around a conference table like they're a board of directors of a fucking cartel.

Goldie gives my hand a yank. "You didn't tell me Rand was released."

"Anderson Marshall too. We held them as long as we could. Tim texted me last night, but you and I were a little busy," I say.

"I bet you were," Cole pipes.

Ozzy ignores all of us and points to the seat next to Dex. "I've only been watching for a day, but I can tell that guy is important."

"Anderson Marshall," Goldie says. "Dex doesn't do anything without him."

"That's why our wires went quiet again. They got their tech genius back," I agree.

"Genius is a relative term," Ozzy mutters.

"Says the resident genius," Cole adds.

Ozzy puts a hand up to quiet everyone. "Here it is. You're going to want to hear this."

I look down at Goldie. "You ready?"

"Are you kidding?" She straightens her spine. "I want you to take everyone in that room down. And I want to know everything Dex has done so I can get my inheritance back and bring The Pink back to its glory."



Goldie

WE SIT like flies on a wall.

I'm in awe.

"Armstrong came through. The money was deposited offshore two days ago. I say we give him a big load this time." Amelia

might be old and barely stands at four-foot-ten, but the woman is savage for an accountant.

I look up at King. “I still can’t believe she’s in on everything. I thought she was just the day-to-day bookkeeper. I think the only ones who aren’t cartel members are the food and bar staff. And, of course, me.”

“Baby, think about what they did to you. I promise, if someone wasn’t serving food or drinks, they were dirty.”

I turn back to the recording. Ozzy told us it played out last night late after the staff cleaned up from their last event. The time stamp on the video shows it was in the middle of the night.

Dex shakes his head and looks at Anderson. “Have you figured out his connection to Goldie yet?”

Anderson has always been the quiet one. He hardly talks but when he does, everyone listens. “No. And I can find anything on anyone. And since we took Shaw out, there’s no way to confirm that connection. Armstrong is like a ghost who popped up out of nowhere.”

“Well, that explains what happened to Shaw,” I mutter.

Amelia slams her wrinkled hand on the table with impressive force. “If you want me to do my job, let me do it. I can only move so much cash through The Pink. We’ve got money stacking up like old newspapers and any drug dog will hit on it. Sending it to Panama through the Armstrong guy is our best bet right now, Dex.”

A shiver runs up my spine when Rand cracks his knuckles. “You want me to remind him who’s in charge again?”

I lean into King. The thought of him being hurt again makes my skin crawl.

Dex almost rolls his eyes at Rand. “He got the message the first time and took it like a man. There’s nothing about him not to trust other than his connection to Goldie.”

I pull in a deep breath and look up at King. “It looks like you picked the wrong person to get you into The Pink.”

Rand pipes in again. “He threw down for her at dinner that night and came after me. Seemed like a real fucking threat to me when I took one in the throat.”

Dex starts to lose his temper and points at Rand across the table. “Shut the fuck up. If I want your opinion, I’ll ask for it.”

Rand cowers and stares at the table in front of him.

Anderson flips open a laptop. “Can we get to the real reason we’re here? The load will be delivered late on Saturday. The same day you scheduled your sister’s wedding. Not good.”

Dex shrugs. “Not a big deal.”

“It’s a big deal, Dex,” Anderson argues. Never once have I ever seen him speak so much at one time and never in this tone. “You delivered your warning to Goldie Carter months ago. This obsession you have with her coming back for what’s hers is a distraction none of us can afford. This load is too important for us to be preoccupied with your sister. She signed your contract, and she thinks it’s real. Be done with it.”

I straighten and push away from King, but can’t take my eyes off the monitor.

Dex jams his finger at the table. His expression exudes cold, evil anger. “When she was alone and scared, I didn’t have to worry about her. She’s not alone anymore and she’s definitely not scared. She waltzed back in here with her fiancé who acts like more of a bodyguard. If she grows a pair and realizes the contract she signed was bogus since there’s no fucking way I can file anything in court without gaining the attention of people I do not need nosing around in my business, she’ll come back for what’s hers. She has Armstrong who seems to be bleeding money from whatever fucking business he runs in Central America. She’s got the means for an attorney, so don’t fucking tell me to be done with it. My fucking father,” he roars, “felt guilty on his death bed and changed his trust without me knowing. All of it was supposed to be mine. Mine! I’m not sharing it with some fucking wedding planner from fucking Virginia!”

Oh my gosh.

Oh. My. Gosh.

Dex hates me. I've known that since the first day I arrived at The Pink.

I never allowed myself to think about getting my part of The Pink back. It was a defense mechanism. But what we thought might be true is true ... my inheritance is still mine.

I was afraid to hope.

A hand wraps around my waist as King's warm breath tickles my ear. "I told you."

I'm too engrossed in what's happening on the screen to turn and kiss the man who has crossed the barrier from fake to real.

"The load, Dex," Anderson raises his voice. "We've got over a hundred bodies coming into the country on Saturday. If you want to turn them to work the streets for you when they get here, that's a big job. You need to focus!"

My hand flies to my mouth as I gasp.

"Bodies?" King lets me go and turns to the men. "They're trafficking humans?"

Ozzy pauses the video. "I told you it was big."

"Fuck," King grits. "He talked about a load this week. We assumed it was more cocaine."

Ozzy looks at me. "It appears your brother is diversifying."

"He's evil. I can't believe we're related," I admit.

"Oz gave me the heads up first thing this morning. I'm on it." Cole motions to Ozzy. "I contract with this team for jobs overseas, but not in the U.S. But the bodies are coming from out of the country, which is an invitation for me to butt my way into the case. Between the CIA, the DEA, and Ozzy—who doesn't exist on paper when it comes to Uncle Sam—we'll make sure those people don't get in the hands of Dex Carter."

"There's more," Ozzy says but doesn't push play on the video. He looks from me to King and back to me. His blue eyes are

kind, even sympathetic. What they aren't is comforting. "It's about you."

"There's more about me?"

King pulls my front to his side. "Fucking Dex."

"Are you okay to keep watching?" Ozzy asks.

Cole studies me as he mulls something over but speaks to Ozzy like they're alone. "She's a confidential informant. She's got to have a set of lady balls to do that. But to walk back into The Pink? You know they're huge."

"Carson—" King starts.

I grip King's shirt, because I don't need another throat-punching incident.

"Don't get me wrong," Carson interrupts. "My wife has the biggest lady balls of any woman I've ever met. And Ozzy here is married to a real-life princess who's no pushover. I respect you for going back to The Pink when you did. If you can do that, you can handle this."

"Tell me what the fuck you're talking about," King demands.

Ozzy presses a button on the remote. The frozen meeting on the screen springs to life.

And, boy, does it ever.

Dex stands and rips the laptop from in front of Anderson. It flies across the conference room and hits the wall with a thundering crash.

Most of the people at the table flinch, but not Anderson. Not even when Dex bends to scream in his face. "Don't fucking tell me to focus. No one's more focused than me. Your job is to make sure we have control of the load without it being tied to me. I spent a fortune on those bodies. They need to start putting out and selling immediately. I need a return on my investment. Stay in your lane, Anderson. I'll take care of what I need to take care of."

Thinking of innocent humans at the hands of Dex and the rest of the cartel makes my stomach turn.

But he's not done.

Dex turns to Rand and snaps his fingers.

Like a puppy, Rand comes alert at the attention again.

"I want her gone."

Wait.

What?

Rand frowns. "Goldie?"

Dex gives him a chin lift like he's asking for a beer rather than demanding for me to be...

Gone.

I'm physically ill.

King's hand snakes up my back as he holds me tight. I need every ounce of his strength.

"And this time I mean gone. I don't want her body showing up. I don't want her mug all over the news. I don't want to think about my fucking sister ever again. Get it done and throw her body in a lagoon for the gators to feast on. No evidence—not even a fucking tooth left over. Got it?"

Rand stares back at his boss who gives him orders all the time, but it makes me wonder if murder isn't usually on the short list.

And not just any murder.

Mine.

"Got it?!" Dex screams.

Rand jumps to his feet. "Got it, boss. I've got your back—"

Dex continues to scream. "Find her and do it. Get out of my fucking face!"

My half-brother has lost all control. He normally prides himself on acting like a legitimate businessman since he outsources his dirty work.

"I'll spare you the rest. It's more of Carter throwing a baby fit because he's worried about you rising from the dead." Ozzy

turns off the monitor before shaking his head. “Sorry, not the best choice of words.”

“It’s not like you’re unfamiliar with rising from the dead,” Cole points out.

Ozzy crosses his arms. “True.”

I don’t have the brain space to think about what that means.

Dex just ordered someone to kill me.

King’s hand comes to my face and forces my gaze to his. “This is my fault, but don’t worry. No one is going to get close to you. We’re going to wrap this shit up as fast as we can. You’re not stepping foot into The Pink until every single one of them is in custody.”

His blue eyes are tortured with guilt. I do my best to let him off the hook. “It’s not your fault. If I didn’t want to be an informant, I wouldn’t have.”

His frown deepens, and his hold on my face becomes tighter. “I convinced you. Hell, I practically forced you through guilt. I could tell how good your heart is and took advantage of that.”

I don’t care that we’re standing in this weird farmhouse full of secret surveillance technology or who’s watching. I lift to my toes and press my lips to his. “That’s cute that you think you forced me, but I don’t do anything I don’t want to do, King.”

He tries to argue further, but the CIA officer interrupts us. “Lady balls. It’s always the ones you least expect.”

I don’t know about that, so I focus on King. “You’ll work it out. Nothing is going to happen to me. You promised, and I’m holding you to it.”

I lose King’s impossibly blue eyes when his lids fall shut and his forehead tips to mine. “I promise.”

“I want in on this,” Cole announces. “I need to talk to Bella about the family schedule next week, but I’m not missing out. I’ll be there.”

King exhales so deeply, I feel the anxiety seep from him. “I appreciate that.”

“I’ll keep an eye on things and be in touch through Cole,” Ozzy adds. “You have to make this evidence legit, but I have no doubt you can. Now that I’m in their network, we’ll be one step ahead.”

King nods and turns to the men, but he keeps me close. “Goldie and I are supposed to get married at The Pink on Saturday.”

“And you didn’t invite me?” Carson asks.

King glares at him. “A fake wedding from our fake engagement. But here’s the thing. Even with all the evidence I have on Carter, we can’t take them down before Saturday. This is different. We’re not dealing in cocaine—we’re dealing with humans. If we move too soon, they’ll disappear.”

“Which means we have to carry on as if we’re getting married,” I state.

It’s not a question.

It’s a given.

King looks back down at me. “You’re not going back into The Pink. I can handle myself and get out when I need to. I’m not putting you in that situation. I’ll go crazy.”

“One hundred lives,” I remind him. “We have to save them.”

“The *you and me* part of that *we* won’t be doing anything,” he huffs. “The *DEA* we will take care of it.”

“And me,” Cole amends.

King ignores him and focuses on me. “You’ll be tucked away in a safe place where no one can find you. We’ll work out the details later, but that part is non-negotiable.”

“We’ll see.”

“Lady balls. I love it,” Cole says.

I smile at Cole. I really like these guys. “Thank you both.”

Ozzy smirks. “No problem.”

“Hey,” King calls for me, forcing my eyes back to him. “It doesn’t matter if you have them or not. You’ll never need lady

balls again. Do you understand?”

“I understand.” I can’t bite back a smile any longer and let it glow. “I don’t want to do the scary stuff anyway. I’m just so happy that none of this bothers me. The irony is not lost on me that Dex, the person I used to be frightened of, is freaking out right now. The old Goldie wouldn’t be brimming with happiness after she found out someone ordered her death. But look at me—I’m a whole new kind of sunshine.”

King sighs and claims my face to kiss me. And not like I kissed him.

He really kisses me.

“I’m just happy for everyone.” Cole claps his hands once. “Are you two going to hang around and meet the rest of the team?”

King shakes his head. “Another time. And I’ll hold you to that, because this is a team I want to know. But I got a call this morning from Dex’s assistant. There’s a money load—a big one—that’s ready for me to pick up. And now that I know Anderson Marshall is smart enough to run a network that our wires can’t penetrate, I’m not putting Goldie on a plane to have her name filed through the FAA system. We need to hit the road if we want to be home by tomorrow.”

“Another time then.” Cole looks to me. “You’ll love the vineyard.”

“The next time I’m in Virginia, I promise to visit.”

“*We* will visit,” King stresses. The man continues to prove he can make me warm and fuzzy during the darkest of moments. If he can make me feel this way after Dex ordered my murder, I can’t imagine how good a normal life with King Jennings will be.

He might just blow my mind when life is at its best. And I have no doubt I’ll experience it all with him.

“Let’s get this shit done so you lovebirds can get on with it.” The CIA officer actually beams. “Damn, I’m a sucker for love.”

LAST RESORT

King

A call came into the anonymous DEA tip line about possible human trafficking victims being smuggled in a shipment of cocaine.

Shocker.

It took about five minutes for that tip to be tied to my case.

The look on Tim's face when this all came about was priceless. Not one I'd like to experience again, but priceless all the same.

When I told Tim that Cole Carson called and wanted in on the action, I think his exact words were, "Fuck me. Here we go again."

Though, he wasn't really complaining. He's got the most productive group with the best stats in the Miami Division. Hell, he could put us up against any team in the country, and we'd still look like superstars.

Knowing the right people along the way doesn't hurt. I would've found out about the human trafficking eventually, but my new secret friends located in Virginia wine country put us on the offense rather than defense.

And when you're on this side of the law, offense is always the way to go.

Still, it didn't take long for Tim to lay down his own law when he looked around the room at Brax, Micah, and me. "This

doesn't go outside of my office, got it? If it does, I'll cut each one of you loose, and you'll have to defend yourself with the Office of Professional Responsibility."

That's not going to happen. Tim would never cut us loose.

No matter. We all agreed to appease him.

That was days ago.

It's been a week.

We made the drive from Virginia to Miami straight through. It was long and miserable. The next time I take Goldie to see her mom, we won't have drama biting our asses.

Ozzy Graves and his private satellite system might've come in handy to get a leg up on wrapping this case, but what I'm most grateful for is staying one step ahead of Randall Becerra.

That motherfucker might be able to deliver a beating when his target is tied to a chair, but he's got rocks rattling around that head of his.

I know his every move thanks to my new friend in Virginia. Graves can spin some creative technology that is nothing short of magic. The best being, I can track Becerra's every step at any moment of the day. He's looking far and wide for the woman who has moved into my bed and is living in the house I grew up in with Don, Tippy, and Laken.

I've taken that house for granted my entire life.

When Lake and I first moved to Miami, I might as well have been living my own personal *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* but in *The Golden Girls* style on the other side of the country. A stable home and two attentive parents were not what I was used to. Even with the new luxuries, it didn't take long for us to settle into a normal, healthy life.

I've also never shared a home with anyone I'm so fucking obsessed with, it has me doing shit that I never imagined doing.

Like professing my love and begging her never to leave me.

I'm not sure if this is what normal people do, but the woman who is pure sunshine has me spinning in her orbit in ways I didn't know possible.

Becerra is getting pressure from Dex. He's been hanging around The Colony since he has no other leads on where to find us. We saw Mr. Elrod chase him out of the parking lot yesterday on the pole cameras. Brax called a unit to check on the old guy, but he was fine. After the break in at Goldie's apartment and the added strangers hanging around the parking lot, Mr. Elrod is worried the neighborhood is going to hell.

Give me a few more days, old man. I'll make sure you're safe again, and you'll get a new upstairs neighbor in the process. Goldie had re-upped her lease before we met, but I don't give a shit. I'll pay it out if I have to.

Being single and spending most of my life living on the Army's dime being deployed around the world, I've saved a small fortune and have no mortgage.

It might not be a fortune to some, but it is to me. I'll do anything and pay any amount to keep her close to me. I even sent Rocco to The Colony after he got off shift the other day to pack as many of her things as he could.

She'll never sleep in that apartment again. And I'll fulfill my promise to ravage her day and night but without nosy neighbors listening.

There's only one barrier standing between Goldie and me and a future together.

The Carter Cartel.

Their days are fucking numbered.

It's like a ticking time bomb I can't force to ignite soon enough. And it's not going to be easy.

It's going to be fucking complicated. The plans are intricate. There are so many alternate scenarios, it's like dropping myself in a big fucking maze that I'll have to find my way out of blindfolded.

But I have confidence in every single one. If I didn't, they wouldn't be on the table as an option.

And very few of those scenarios involve the new sunshine of my life.

In fact, she's only a part of one.

The very last one.

It's a last resort which, in my mind, isn't even an option. If we exhaust them all and it comes down to Goldie walking into The Pink, I'll call the whole thing off myself.

The only way she'll get close to Dex or Rand will be in court if she wants to witness their demise.

Even then.

My Goldie doesn't need that kind of filth in her life. I've made it my mission to make sure she can focus on the good in the world. I'll bulldoze through the bad to make that happen for her.

I was able to put off picking up a new load of money until yesterday. And after taking an ass beating the first time, they actually understood why I insisted on meeting at a neutral, public location.

It seems even cartel members can be flexible at times. Either that, or they really want their dirty cash in an offshore bank account stat.

What they don't know is it's money they'll never get back since I plan to shut them down.

But that's tomorrow.

I circle the block twice to make sure no one followed me before I pull into the driveway past Rocco's car and straight into the garage.

It's late. Cole is in town and having dinner with the crew and their wives. I've been sneaking into the office in a government car with dark tinted windows, but that's it. I go straight from one garage to another. I can't chance being seen anywhere or

with anyone before tomorrow, and Goldie really can't afford that.

But after tomorrow...

Normal.

I've never wanted normal so much in my life.

I had to stay to get the latest updates from Ozzy before I came home. It's Rocco's day off—I'm sure he's ready to get the hell out of here.

When I get into the house, I find him standing at the fridge with the door open studying its contents. If Rocco isn't at work, he's been here with Goldie. But she's nowhere to be seen.

"I'm going to owe you big time after this is all over."

He reaches into the fridge and pulls out a box of cold, leftover pizza. "You keep saying that."

I toss my bag on the counter that's clean of clutter, cups, and dishes. I'm no pig, but I think Goldie is so bored, she's made it her mission to clean. "You name it. Where's Goldie?"

He talks as he chews cold pizza. "She went to your room a bit ago. Said she had laundry to do and shit to put away. Though she didn't say shit. I've never known anyone with her kind of discipline for the human language."

I pick up a piece of cold pizza and bite off the end. "She's not disciplined. It's just who she is."

"She's something. Somehow she got me to talk about my parents, and I never fucking talk about my parents. I don't even know how it started or how we got there. It's like she cast some type of spell on me. All of a sudden I'm talking about shit I haven't even told Landyn."

I swallow and stare at the kid who had a shittier start to life than I did. Don and Trippy saved me when I was little.

I know enough about Rocco to know he had an entire lifetime of shit until he was almost nineteen and met Brax and Landyn.

“Sounds like tonight was something,” I say carefully because it looks like he’s had enough. “You okay?”

He tosses the last bite of cold pizza crust in his mouth and shrugs as he chews the last of his slice. “I mean, yeah. Which is weird. Like really fucking weird. I’m gonna go.”

“You sure? You can hang as long as you want.”

“Nah, I need a good night’s sleep. I’ve got the written test tomorrow.”

I pause before I take another bite. “No shit?”

“Yep. The interview process is going fast. I’m not sure if that’s normal or Tim is pushing me through.”

“Could be. But DEA moves a lot of applicants through this part of the process to weed them out.”

He frowns. “Thanks for that. One more thing for me to stress about after my therapy session tonight.”

“I’m not worried. You’ll do just fine. You’ll be a Basic Agent in Training at Quantico before you know it. Hell, you’re barely behind me, and I’m the old guy.”

“Cool. We can retire together.” Rocco says but doesn’t sound like anything is cool at the moment. “Good luck tomorrow. Goldie’s freaking out about it. I did everything I could to distract her.” He grabs his cell and digs a set of keys out of his pocket. “Hell, that’s probably how she got me to talk about my past. I’ve got to get out of here. Don’t tell Landyn or Evie. I do not need the moms mothering me. Landyn will want to do facials and Evie might make me go to yoga to let go of the things that do not serve me.”

I walk him to the front door. “Good luck on the test. You’ll kill it.”

He gives me a low wave but wastes no time escaping. “Good luck not getting your ass kicked tomorrow. At your age, you can’t afford for that to happen too many more times before you break a hip.”

“I’m going to let that slide since you’ve had an emotional night.”

“Later.”

He’s down the walk and disappears to his car when I shut and lock the front door. I set the alarm for good measure.

I put the pizza away and grab a beer before I search for Goldie. She’s never asleep before I get home, but I don’t want to chance it and quietly open the door to my bedroom.

Fuck.

She’s not asleep.

She spins around where she’s standing in front of the mirror and her hand flies to her heart. “Oh my gosh, you scared me! Don’t sneak up on me like that.”

I don’t move.

And I’m at a loss for words.

“Did you just get home? Did Rocco leave? I didn’t say goodbye or thank him for hanging out with me. We had the best talk. I had no idea his past was so dark. I didn’t think I could love him more than I did, but after tonight, I do.”

“Baby.” My tone is low and rough. “You cannot stand there looking like that and talk about loving another man.”

She looks down at herself before twirling a three-sixty. “Do you like it?”

“Do I like it?” I narrow my eyes. “Baby...”

She shrugs a bare shoulder that bears the weight of her dress being held up with thin straps. The only way I can see them is because they sparkle in the low light. “I had to try it on before tomorrow. You know, if I get put in the game as a last resort.”

I don’t tell her that will never happen. “Where did you get that?”

“This?” She lifts the thick white material at her sides before letting it float back to the floor like she’s in a commercial for flowers or diamond rings.

Diamond rings...

I need to add that to my list of shit to get done.

“Yes, baby. The wedding dress you’re wearing in my bedroom. Where did you get it?”

“I like to thrift. I got it from Mom. She could tell if something had a good or a bad vibe. She taught me that just because someone is done with something, doesn’t mean it can’t be something new for someone else. A new life, you know?”

“A new life,” I mutter, thinking of my own since the day I met her. “Yeah, I know something about that.”

“Anyway, I was thrifting for my apartment when I moved here and saw this. I wouldn’t call it vintage or couture, but it’s definitely classic. Probably a dupe for something that was made in the fifties. Though showing this much skin back then was probably taboo. Anyway, it just felt right and it was on clearance. It needed to be mine. I’m not sure this is what I want to wear to be married in, but it was my size, and I thought it would be fun. I’ve never even tried it on until today. I had Rocco bring it over in case I needed a dress for tomorrow. Do you like it? It is our fake wedding day.”

I finally come unstuck from my spot at the threshold. My untouched beer lands on the dresser, and I go straight to her. When I take her face in my hands and pull her mouth to mine, she presses into my chest like she does every time we’re like this.

But this is different.

Seeing her in a white dress.

Hearing her talk about our wedding—and I don’t give a fuck if it’s fake. I know there will be a real one as soon as she plans what she wants.

And as soon as I can buy her a ring.

“Baby,” I murmur against her lips. “Take off the dress.”

Her brown eyes crinkle. “You don’t like it?”

I shake my head. “I fucking love it. But if I’m going to take a white dress off you, it’s going to be after we’re married. And not a fake wedding hosted by a damn cartel. The real one.”

The crinkles disappear, and her eyes shine bright.

“I hope you’re efficient at your job,” I add.

“Of course, I am. Why?”

“Because I’m not waiting a year to marry you. I’d marry you tomorrow if you agreed.”

The most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen settles on her face. “We’re sort of busy tomorrow.”

I pull in a breath. More than anything, I want tomorrow to be over. “It’s settled then. Sometime after tomorrow but before a year, you’ll be my wife.”

Her slim fingers dance down my chest and fit themselves at my sides. “You know, I’m a dreamer. The day dreams I’ve had about meeting the love of my life, getting engaged, and my wedding have danced in my head since I was a little girl spinning in circles in my attic bedroom.”

I hold onto her tighter. “Why does this not sound like it’s about me?”

“Because nothing—and I mean not one thing about you, Kingston Jennings—is what I dreamed of.”

I hike a brow. “I’m not going anywhere. You’re stuck with me.”

She softens her voice as she keeps on as if I didn’t say a word. “You’re better than anything I ever dreamed. Falling in love with you has been a rollercoaster. It’s the wild ride I didn’t know I needed. Had I missed this, I have a feeling I would’ve lived a mundane, boring life.”

I lean in and kiss her. “I can promise you a life that’s never boring. I would like to live it without a cartel chasing us, though. But other than that, never boring, baby.”

“I don’t know what I’d do if I had to face the rest of my life without you. I’m glad I don’t have to.”

I kiss the tip of her nose and let her go, taking a step back and crossing my arms. “Now, off with the dress.”

Her tongue sneaks out to wet her upper lip, but she reaches behind her. The only sound in the room is a zipper on her dress

sliding down and my heart pounding in my chest.

The tips of her fingers touch the tops of her shoulders to slide the thin jeweled straps away.

Slowly.

Too fucking slowly.

Science finally takes over. The weight of the dress and gravity are on my side.

Her thrifted wedding gown that she had no idea she'd need for a fake wedding pools at her feet. She stands in front of me in nothing but the tiniest pair of panties.

It's my turn to lick my lips.

One bare foot after another steps out of the dress toward me. My mouth waters as my eyes rake over her from top to bottom, and my fingers itch for her. I reach out for her slim hips and pull her to me.

My cock was ready the moment I demanded she take off the dress.

He's damn well impatient at this point.

I slip my fingers in the straps of her panties and push.

She kicks them to the side and reaches for the waist of my jeans. Quick work with a button and zipper, and my cock springs free.

I reach to touch her. When I slide my finger through her pussy, she's wet.

And ready.

I give her clit a light circle.

Her eyes fall shut.

I can't take it another moment.

She feels like a feather when I pick her up and her legs round my waist. I take two steps to the side and put her back to the wall.

My tip flirts with her pussy.

“Baby,” I breathe against her lips. “My cock and my brain are having a big fucking argument right now.”

“Oh, yeah?” She wraps her arms around my neck and presses her lips to the corner of my mouth. “What are they fighting about?”

She wiggles her hips.

My cock gets his first taste of her bare.

But just the tip.

Fuck. There won't be an argument if this goes on any longer.

“You know what they're fighting about, baby. And you're not helping.”

Her eyes fall shut, and her tits heave between us. “I'm always responsible, but I understand their argument.”

I shake my head. “Don't tempt me. We haven't had the time to talk about things other than forever. I don't even know how you feel about kids.”

She sinks down on my cock another inch. If she doesn't stop, she's going to have to want kids whether she likes them or not.

Her breaths come quicker and her lips part. “I think kids are sticky.”

There's nothing more I want in the world right now than to surge into her until I'm balls deep and fuck her into next month.

And I want to do it bare. “I like to sleep all night.”

“I like quiet mornings,” she adds.

“I like to walk around naked when I want to.”

Her eyes flare. “I haven't had a chance to experience that yet. I want you to walk around naked too.”

I'm about to smile, but she sinks down on my cock even farther.

“Do you know what would be sad?” I admit.

Her gaze roams my face before focusing back on my eyes. “You not passing your thick wavy hair down to another generation?”

I shake my head. “Not creating a kid with a heart of gold just like yours. Because baby, it’s one of a kind. To see it replicated in another human would be beautiful.”

Tears come to her eyes. “We have things to talk about.”

I nod and press my lips to hers. But in doing so, I pull her all the way down on my cock.

“Fuck,” I hiss and hold her there.

“King.” She grinds down on me.

I relish how she feels for a short, sweet second. And in that time, my mind chases what could be.

I yank her off my cock and turn for the bed. “We need to have a conversation when I’m not inside you bare. Ask me what I want right now, and I’ll tell you every-fucking-thing.”

Her back hits the bed. “I know what you mean.”

I grab a condom out of the new box I ripped open this morning and tear it between my teeth. “We have a lot of shit to do, baby.”

Her knees fall to the sides as she watches me roll the condom onto my cock. “So much to do.”

I hook an elbow under her knee and hike it high.

Then I slide home.

“Oh, yes,” she hums when I fill her. “I can’t wait to talk. But for now, I’ll take this.”

I’m buried deep inside her as I bring my thumb to her clit. She’s so worked up, it doesn’t take long. I slide in and out while working her to the edge of her orgasm. I may never get used to watching her come apart as I take her.

She arches, pressing into my touch and my cock. Her head tips back, and she does what she’s done since I brought her home.

She doesn't hold back. She cries out—for me, God, and chanting her approval.

I can't hold on any longer.

I slam into her again. Each time harder than the one before.

Everything melts away when we're like this.

Drugs, murder ... and the word *fake*.

There's nothing in the world besides us. And it's very real.

I don't hold back.

I'm not sure if it's talk of kids or the unknown of how tomorrow will play out. But when I come, I come hard. The only thing I can think about is her while hints of the future flash behind my eyelids.

When I open my eyes, Goldie is lying beneath me, bare and exhausted. I'm still completely dressed other than my cock.

My forearms fall to the bed on either side of her, and I press my lips to her forehead. "Love you, baby."

She pulls her relaxed arms up and her hands claim my face. "I love you too."

"Tomorrow, we finish this."

She nods. "I can't wait."

"Me either, baby." I kiss her slowly. "Me either."

LIGHT IT UP

King

“You’re alone.”

I hold my arms up as they frisk me and stare at the man I want to do a hell of a lot more to than deliver a throat punch.

“He’s clear.”

I lower my arms and adjust my tuxedo jacket. “That’s right. And there will be no wedding until I speak with Dex. Alone.”

Rand crosses his arms. “No one demands to speak with Mr. Carter alone.”

I don’t take my eyes off the man who I’d really like to unalive rather than negotiate with. “Since I’m the one who has his cash, he should be anxious to speak to me if he knows what’s good for him.”

Dex walks around the corner wearing a custom black suit and a frown on his ugly mug. “What about my cash?”

I turn to him and ignore Rand and the rest of the men who have no fucking clue they’re living out their last moments of freedom. “We need to talk.”

Dex comes to a stop four feet from me and looks around. “Did your *bride* get cold feet?”

He describes Goldie in the same tone I use when speaking about terrorists.

“My bride is just fine. We agreed to be married here for the sake of my business. She didn’t want to, but accepted for me. But things have changed. We have business to discuss before I’m willing to follow through with your terms. I don’t appreciate being fucked over, Dex.”

That gets his attention. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m not about to air my shit for everyone to hear. We need to talk privately.” I glance at Randall before continuing. “And if you think about hogtying me to a chair for your ball-less meathead to use as target practice again, watch yourself. Do business like a fucking man.”

Rand takes a step toward me, but Dex holds out a hand. “We’re not going anywhere until I know what this is about.”

I lower my voice. “We have an issue with the quality of the current project you and I are collaborating on. It’s put me in a pinch, and I expect you to fix it fucking fast, Carter.”

Dex looks as confused as I expected him to.

“To put it simply,” I add, “my wedding will be the least of your worries if you don’t do something. You have deposits to worry about.”

His expression falters right before his jaw tightens. “In my office, now.”

I give him a chin lift. “That’s what I thought.”

Dex turns, and I follow.

But so does Rand.

I stop and turn to the ball-less man. “I said we were going to speak alone. You can go fuck yourself, or whatever you like to do when you’re not raping women or fighting like a pussy.”

Rand has the nerve to clench his fist, as if he can take me.

“I’m good,” Dex grits. “Stay here. I need to figure out what he’s talking about. Check and see if Anderson needs any help with our other project.”

Other project.

The human trafficking one happening across town. The Carter army is divided today, and division creates weakness. Our plans have been in the works all week, which makes this the best time to take them down on all fronts.

Rand is pissed but proves to be an obedient little puppy and does as his owner orders.

“Run along like a good boy,” I call after him.

Meanwhile, I follow Dex into the depths of The Pink. I can’t fucking wait.

Diversifying doesn’t always work in your favor.

The bit with Rand was not a part of the plan, but I needed the asshole to know that I know what he did to Goldie.

The line between fake and reality is blurring into a stormy sea of gray. This isn’t business anymore.

It’s fucking personal.



Goldie

I LOOK OVER AT MICAH. “Was he supposed to say that? I thought you all agreed to keep it about the money. Get in, get Dex alone to distract him, and get out.”

Micah drags a hand down his face and sighs. “You’re right. He was not supposed to say that.”

“We needed to distract Dex with the money pick up, not piss him off,” Brax says.

“Going to a second location was not a part of the plan either,” Micah adds.

“So, the second location ... is that sort of like the when-you-get-kidnapped rule, don’t let them take you to a second location because that’s where all the bad things happen?”

Brax and Micah look at me like I grew horns as I sit here in my second-hand wedding dress. I feel almost that ridiculous stuffed into the corner of their surveillance van.

“Let’s get this straight,” Micah deadpans. “First location—second, third, tenth—getting kidnapped is bad. All of it. Stop watching so much *Dateline*, Goldie,”

“I never watch *Dateline*. It’s depressing.”

“The problem isn’t the second location. The problem is King is going off script,” Brax says. “And I have a feeling it has to do with you.”

Micah’s cell rings where it sits on the narrow table built into the side of the van. It goes straight to the speaker. “Yeah?”

“Here’s the thing.” It’s Ozzy Graves. “The delivery of bodies is running late. Another ship was late leaving, and they’re waiting for a space to dock. We have eyes on it. It’s coming in on a shipping container to the Port of Miami.”

I gasp. “A shipping container? Dex is so evil.”

“A shipping container,” Brax echoes. “It’s summer in Florida. How the fuck does anyone survive that?”

“We think they picked up this container in the Dominican Republic. They’ve been island hopping trying to make their way to the U.S. Cole has eyes on it and is managing it from his end. And since we have to take down both locations at the same time so one doesn’t tip off the other, that means King needs to buy us some time.”

My stomach drops.

I whisper. “How will he know to do that?”

Brax turns back to the surveillance controls. “He won’t.”

“Oh my—” I start to panic but shut my mouth when a door slams through the feed that’s coming straight from King’s high-tech cell.

“Let us know when the ship is close,” Micah demands.

“Will do,” Ozzy says. “I’m monitoring both. Once the boat docks and customs gets in there, it’s go time.”

“What if he needs another distraction?” I ask. “I can go in.”

“No way,” Brax says. “Get comfortable over there, Goldie. You’re not going anywhere.”

“But you have to if he’s in trouble.”

“He won’t be in trouble,” Micah says. “King might not be the wordsmith that Cole Carson is, but he can talk his way through this until we send in the raid team. The only thing that’ll get Dex’s attention more than the subject of you claiming your inheritance is him getting his money back. He handed over more than two-hundred Gs this week. The man wants his cash in a legit account.”

My car is parked next to our van down the street from The Pink. I could be there within two minutes.

“Text King,” I demand. “He has to know what he’s dealing with.”

Brax shakes his head. “He’s got too much of a target on his back. Now more than ever with you not showing up on your wedding day. The last thing we want to do is fly a red flag. He knows if we send a message, it means shit is about to blow up.”

I think about last night. About what we talked about when he was bare and inside me, even if it was only moments. I can’t stop thinking about it, even though it’s a crazy thing to focus on at a time like this.

Having children is something I always thought I’d figure out later when the time came. I’ve never had a burning desire to have them. And this is not the time.

What’s wrong with me...

It must be the adrenaline.

But right now, I’m not only desperate for this to be over. I’m desperate for everything with King. I don’t even care what happens to my inheritance.

I want it all.

But I want it with him.

As if on cue, King's voice rings through the speakers. "Don't pretend like you're not trying to fuck me over, Dex. My bank intercepted your cash, and that cash is fucking counterfeited."



King

I FINALLY GOT HIM ALONE.

Dex is about to round his desk to take a seat when I lower the boom. He stops mid-step and turns to me. "Counterfeit? My cash isn't fucking counterfeit."

I glare at him. "That's interesting since my real fucking bank said so."

He comes back around the desk at me. "Then someone in your organization switched it en route. We've got so much cash, I don't know what to do with it. You took my money. I expect it to be deposited as promised into my off-shore accounts tomorrow."

"I run a tight ship. No one in my organization would pull a switch. You, on the other hand, have a history of fucking people over."

Dex takes two steps and points a violent finger at me. "*You* came to *me* begging for my business."

"I didn't beg for shit. I offered you a service for a fee that you can't get anywhere else."

"I'll fucking kill you," Dex seethes. "Then I'll kill my sister. The minute I saw her mug in The Pink again, I knew this was bad news."

I lower my voice. "You're not going to kill me. And you'll never, ever touch Goldie again."

He takes a step back. "I've looked you up, you know."

I shrug and tell him the truth for once. "You won't find anything on me."

“That should’ve been the first indication,” he mutters. “I can dig up shit on anyone. You’re like a fucking ghost.”

I take another step toward him. “You’re not wrong. I’ll haunt you for years.”

“There’s something about you. Has been since the beginning.” Dex drags a hand through his hair. “Should’ve trusted my gut and kicked you and my sister out the moment I met you.”

“But you were greedy.”

I don’t mind this back and forth. I hope he remembers every word of it while he rots away in prison.

But there’s been no text.

No call.

I have no fucking idea what’s taking so long.

We had this timed perfectly. I was supposed to be in here ten minutes tops before the teams raided The Pink and rescued the bodies who were delivered by boat.

I need to get him back to the topic of his money. “Do you know how long it’s taken me to build my business relationships from here to Central America? They’re looking at *me* like I’m trying to pull one over on *them*. And you have the nerve to stand there and wonder why I wouldn’t bring Goldie in here today and subject her to you or the fucking rabid dog you sic’d on her? I’m more powerful than you think I am. I have contacts all over Central America and Colombia. I can shut down your source of nose candy faster than you can blink.”

Dex looks like his head might explode. He starts to come at me but is stopped by his cell.

He’s so angry and flustered, he doesn’t even look at the screen when he answers. “What?”

And that’s when my phone vibrates in my breast pocket.

The coincidence puts me on edge.

I don’t have a choice. I need to know what’s happening.

I search for an extra level of chill when I reach for my cell.

Dex's eyes snap to me.

I stop and don't unlock my screen.

"You don't say," Dex growls. "Given the last ten minutes, that doesn't surprise me."

I read the message. It isn't from Brax, Micah, or Cole.

This is from Ozzy Graves.

Ozzy – Get the fuck out of there.

Ozzy – Now!

Fuck.

I drop my hand to my side and look back up at Dex.

The air in the room might as well be electric.

We've hit gridlock.

A standoff.

Our stares lock on one another. I have no fucking idea what's going on, I just know it's not good. My phone continues to vibrate in my hand, but I don't dare look away from the man in front of me when he continues to speak into his phone. "You sure?"

Dammit.

"If that's what it's come to." He keeps talking as he stares at me. "Give me a minute. I'll be right there."

I feel the muscle in my cheek jump.

He disconnects his call and pulls in a deep breath.

I don't move a muscle.

But my cell, on the other hand, is a constant buzz of vibration.

His tone changes.

He's not pissed any longer. He's gained an eerie sense of control that makes me want to lose mine. "I have an

emergency I need to check on. If you'll excuse me, I'll be right back."

I put up a hand to stop him. "You're not leaving until we finish this."

"I'll make it right with you," he promises. "I'll get you the cash. The real cash. Give me a minute, and I'll be back."

He'll make it right?

What the fuck?

There was no counterfeit cash. That part of my story is pure fiction. There's no reason for him to give me anything else or make shit right.

Nothing has put me on edge more than this.

I refuse to wait on him or stay in his fucking office.

I move to follow, but the moment he opens the door, three henchmen block my way.

I've got no weapon other than my fists.

And the trio is fully armed.

Dex rushes out as one guy puts a hand to my chest and tries to push me back in the room.

I charge forward, but it's three to one. Dex is in a flat out run down the hall.

"You're not going anywhere," the tall guy hisses. "You're about to get what's coming to you."

Two men push me back into the room. I stumble when the door slams.

I pick up my cell that tumbled next to me.

Ozzy – BOMB! Get the fuck out!

Micah – Did Ozzy get you? Get out. NOW!

Brax –The fucker is crazy. He’s going to light the place up. Get out!

Before I reach the door, the lock clicks as a crash hits the other side.

“Fuck!”

CHAOS

Goldie

I can't breathe.
"Get him out!" I scream.

The scene playing out in front of me has turned to uncontrolled chaos.

Chaos at the port.

Chaos in The Pink.

And chaos on the surveillance feed coming from Ozzy.

Too many things are happening at once. And too many people are talking at the same time. Cole is on speaker. Ozzy is on speaker. Tim is on speaker.

And I can't focus on anything other than King.

Dex's people at the port who were supposed to "collect their load" got spooked. When Tim and Cole sent in the raid teams, the cartel scattered. The moment they realized what was happening, Anderson Marshall called Dex.

Ozzy piped that call live through the van.

I grip Micah's sleeve, crushing the cotton under my nails. "Oh my God, get him out!"

Even Micah, who is normally the calmest and coolest in the room, raises his voice. "He's not fucking answering!"

"Stay where you are," Tim orders over the speaker. "We've got units on the way, including the bomb squad. The raid team

is standing by. But we can't send them in now."

"They locked him in the room," Ozzy clips. "I lost sight of him. The moment Marshall made the call, he killed the network. I've lost all surveillance at The Pink."

Tears stream down my cheeks and panic bubbles to new heights as a chorus of sirens whiz by our van down the street from the man I love.

"They're not going to go in for him?" I cry. "They have to. Do something!"

"Fuck it," Brax growls and gets up from his small stool. He makes his way to the driver's seat. I hold onto the table when he puts it in gear and hits the gas.

"They've got evidence stored at The Pink," Ozzy clips, relaying information as fast as he can. "Financial records. Sources. Clients. Locations of cash and dope houses. Everything that can put them away for decades is inside. They're pulling the plug—or lighting the match. This is their last-resort scenario. They're blowing the place up."

Brax takes the corner on two wheels. When the parking lot of The Pink comes into view, it gives chaos new meaning. It's swarming with police—patrol officers and the raid team. But everyone is giving the place a wide berth.

What they're not doing is running in to save King.

A call comes in.

Micah jumps at it and puts it on speaker when Brax violently hits the brakes. "King, are you out?"

"No." My face falls to my hands at his gruff tone. "They locked the office. It's an interior room, and the door has been reinforced. It won't budge when I kick the jamb."

"Hold tight. We're coming in." Brax has made his way to the back of the van. He tosses a bulletproof vest to Micah before putting one on himself. He turns to me and I've never seen the man so serious. "Do not get out of the van. Do you understand me? No reason. No excuse. Stay here."

“Dammit, Cruz. Can you never take an order? I need you to stay and coordinate,” Tim demands.

“No fucking way.” Micah holsters his gun on his hip, hands Brax a long gun, and takes one for himself. “We’re not sitting here for a front row seat when the place goes up in flames.”

I drag my hands through my hair and turn to the speaker phone. “Get out, King. You have to get out. Find a way.”

“Goldie?” King growls my name through the speakers. I jump when I hear a huge crash over the line, then he yells, “Dammit. I swear I’ll get out of here, baby.”

Micah climbs out of the back of the van after Brax. He turns to look at me one last time. “Stay here. King will kill us himself if anything happens to you.”

He slams the door on me.

I stumble to the table tripping over my heavy silk dress to where Brax and Micah sat. “Please, King. Please come back to me.”

“I’m coming, baby. I promise.”

Tears stream over my cheeks and down my face. “Of all the promises you’ve made, this is the one I need you to keep. I love you.”

IT HAPPENED

King

I want to tell her how much I love her.

I How I can't wait to marry her.

That I want every experience under the sun with her.

And that I can't wait to get her pregnant.

But I've got more important shit to do at the moment.

Like get myself out of this mess in one piece.

A bomb—it might be the only scenario we didn't plan for. Who could imagine they'd blow up the whole fucking place just to get rid of evidence.

I go to the desk and start ripping out drawer after drawer, dumping them on the floor.

Nothing.

For a cartel leader, Dex has an absurd amount of office supplies.

I do the same with the bookshelves. The sideboard. The credenza.

It's been more than a minute. I'm on borrowed time at this point.

“King,” Goldie cries. “Find a key. A gun. Something.”

The sound of tears in her voice slices through my heart. I rip through Dex's files as fast as I can and think about all the

evidence I'd like to sift through if I didn't have a literal bomb ticking somewhere under the same roof.

I yank open the bottom drawer.

"Finally," I mutter.

"What is it? Did you find a key?"

"No. A gun." I check the magazine. It's full.

I take three steps back and to the side. There's no safety to mess with. I need to get the fuck out of here.

I unload the fucker.

My ears ring from the gunshots.

"King!" Goldie screams. "Are you okay?"

I dump the gun. "We'll see."

If there were ever a time I could use my raid gear, it's now. I put my dress shoe to the door. Kicking over and over and over.

I finally get it to nudge enough that I can pry my fingers in to open it.

A breath of air. Fuck, that's never tasted so good.

I pick up my cell and talk as I climb over the piece of furniture used to lodge the door shut. "I'm coming."



Goldie

FORGET Brax and Micah and their bossy orders.

I'm getting out of this van.

I hitch my dress and kick off my heels. I have to wrestle with the rusty handle to wrench the door open. When I do, the hot, humid summer air assaults me like a slap in the face. But escaping the walls of the van can only be described as a relief.

I take a much-needed breath.

My feet burn on the hot pavement as the sun nips at my exposed skin, but I don't care. It reminds me I'm alive.

That King is alive.

Police swarm the area as I run toward The Pink to search for King.

"Goldie!"

I stop and turn to see Micah and Brax running toward me.

"Where is he?" I cry.

Micah puts his tatted arm around me to pull me back. "You were supposed to stay in the van."

"Where is he?" I repeat. "He found a gun and got out of the office."

"The bomb squad is here," Brax says. "They won't let us in."

I turn back to The Pink. The historic mansion that's half mine. But I don't care about the building or my inheritance.

I only want the man inside.

I'm desperate for him.

I pull myself out of Micah's hold and move.

I only get five steps when it happens.

One moment I'm running to The Pink...

... and the next I'm stopped by a wall of heat.

I scream.

But instead of landing on pavement, I'm in arms that I'm not familiar with, cradled in a way that feels foreign.

I only thought the heat of the sun was hot.

It's nothing compared to the explosion licking the bright blue sky.

It happened.

It really happened.

I fight and struggle, but the hold on me is too tight.

I'm bound.

"Fuck." The man who tackled me to the ground growls in pain.

A hand comes to the back of my head and forces my face to olive skin. He rolls so my back is to the heat.

I can't see a thing.

I'm in Brax's arms that squeeze like a vise.

"Fuck," he repeats. "Don't move, Goldie. Don't move. Dammit."

"Let me go," I cry. "I need to find him. Please, he'll be looking for me."

That's when I realize what's happening around me.

I only thought there was chaos before.

It's nothing compared to this.

Micah shouts orders and boots stomp. I barely see anything other than firemen rushing past us.

"No," Brax breathes. His chest heaves against me, and his voice is tortured. I've never heard a man sound like this. "You don't need to see this. Fuck, how did this happen? I'm so sorry, Goldie. So fucking sorry."

I give up pushing away from him and hang onto the bulletproof vest he put on just minutes ago.

I give up the fight.

I'm sobbing.

I just found him.

And I lost him in the blink of an eye.

My King.

FIRE AND WATER

King

I pull in a breath. It's rough and gritty as I drag it over my dry throat.

I gag and cough and spit.

Sand.

Fucking sand.

Fire crackles behind me. Heat burns my back.

It takes all my energy, but I pry my eyes open and squint.

What I see is nothing compared to what I feel.

The cool ocean licks the shore. Calm waves move in and out. It's as rhythmic as a healthy heart.

Not my heart at the moment. My pulse is racing.

I can't hear the water breaking against the shore.

In fact, I can't hear shit.

I thought my ears were ringing from shooting the lock off the door. It's nothing compared to the blast that threw me from the building. I barely cleared the back door.

I force my hands to the ground under me and push to all fours. When I look back, I was right.

Nothing could be as different from what I opened my eyes to.

Fire.

Water.

The symbolism is not lost on me.

Contrary forces. One can't live without the other.

They couldn't be more different.

Too much of one will kill the other.

Water extinguishes a flame.

And fire will boil water away to nothing if left on its own.

Fucking balance. The world would be off its axis without it.

Just like I've been off my axis and didn't even know it.

Until I met Goldie.

The brash ringing in my ears starts to fade as reality sets in. I push to my feet—covered in soot, breathing hard, and spitting sand.

But I'm alive.

I trudge through the beach, away from the fire that's burning Goldie's inheritance. I was supposed to get it back for her, not make it disappear into a pile of ashes.

It takes me for-fucking-ever, but I finally find my way to the side of the property. As my hearing returns to normal, sirens ring in the distance. Firemen rush everywhere, pulling hoses, doing everything they can to kill the blaze that burns high in the sky.

When my charred dress shoes hit the parking lot, I stop to take it all in. One of our agents in raid gear is reading Rand his rights.

Even if I had the energy to kill him, it's too late.

I'll worry about that later.

As I make my way through the parking lot, everyone is too busy to pay attention to me, and that's okay.

I only want one person.

That person is easy to pick out of the crowd.

She's the only one in white.

My bride.

My fucking bride.

She's crumpled on the ground next to Brax. He's sitting next to her on the pavement with an arm around her, swaying her back and forth. She's crying into his Kevlar.

No.

She's sobbing.

Uncontrollably.

There's nothing in the world I need more than her, so I move.

Granted, not fast.

My body fucking hurts.

Micah stands over them, cell to his ear, and staring at the ground with his other hand gripping the back of his neck. I can barely see his face, but his expression is nothing but pained.

Hell, even Rocco is here. He's crouched low with a hand on Goldie's bare shoulder, consoling her.

When I get to them, I stop.

Not one of them notices me.

"Hey."

Micah glances up first.

For a microsecond, he looks like he's seen ghost

Until he mutters, "Fuck me."

His cell falls from his hand, and he almost tackles me to the ground. Somehow we stay vertical, and I know for a fact it's not me. I'm still dizzy.

I hear Rocco next. "You've got to be kidding me. Goldie. Goldie!"

When I finally push the offensive lineman off me, I see her. Her dark eyes hit mine at the same moment I look down.

“Dammit, King. We thought you were dead.” Brax curses me for almost dying, but I never break eye contact with Goldie.

Her sobs turn to tears of joy.

Don’t ask me how I know the difference. I just do.

I fall to my knees at the same moment she throws herself into my arms.

Finally.

My world balances.

I’m the fire to her water.

She calms my intensity.

And I know for a fact...

I can’t live without her.

THANK YOU

King

“King?”
Damn.

I thought she'd finally passed out. It's like the day that just won't end.

“Baby, close your eyes. I promise, the sooner we sleep, the sooner this day will be over, and the sooner we'll wake up to a normal life.”

Her naked body is pressed tight to my aching one. Once again, I'm covered in bruises, but this time I added a first degree burn on my cheekbone.

She presses her lips to my pec, and her voice is rough from exhaustion and tears.

So many tears.

“So many promises from you.” Her voice is hoarse from crying so much.

My hand snakes up her bare back and into her hair. “I'll keep every single one.”

“Just so you know, I changed my mind.”

I freeze. “About what?”

She drags her leg over my thigh and I feel her bare pussy against my hip. “I decided it doesn't matter if you want to

sleep all night or walk around naked. I want to have babies with you. I don't care if they're sticky.”

I close my eyes, exhale, and turn to press my lips to her forehead. “Just so you know, I already decided that sometime between eating sand and finding you in a heap of white in the parking lot. I'll give you all the sticky babies you want.”

“Just one.” She wraps an arm around me. “Well, maybe two. We'll see how the first one goes.”

“We'll get started tomorrow.”

I feel a smile on my chest. “Thank you.”

“Just like the ravaging, baby.” My hand drops to her ass that I plan to hold onto all night. “No need to thank me.”

She sighs.

It's content.

It's happy.

And it's very fucking alive.

THE PINK

Goldie

“**Y**ou may kiss your bride.”

My veil flutters in the breeze behind me, but that was planned. No bride wants their hair or veil blowing into her face for pictures.

The pastor steps to the side. That was planned too. This is *the kiss*. No one wants a pastor in the background when this moment is captured. The only background I want when King kisses me to seal the deal is sand, palm trees, ocean, and blue skies.

This picture needs to be perfect.

Usually, I’m the one obsessing over the details as these things play out during the ceremony, but not today.

Don’t get me wrong. It’s our wedding. I’ve obsessed as much as I could ahead of time. Everyone had specific instructions—easy, but specific.

It’s easy because it’s small. It’s the smallest wedding I’ve ever planned.

The moment I woke up in King’s arms after the worst day of my life when I thought I’d lost him, I knew what I wanted.

He hadn’t even officially proposed.

I didn’t have a ring.

We hadn’t discussed a date.

Heck, I didn't even know if any of The Pink would be mine, let alone all of it.

But here we are, on the white sand of Biscayne Bay on one of the most beautiful stretches of beach in Miami.

It's mine.

Completely and wholly.

It might be in ruins, but it's mine. The Pink, as everyone knows it, is gone.

When Micah told Evie how I might lose my inheritance, she made a call. Her family is one of the wealthiest in Miami and owns one of the most influential corporations in this part of the country. Not only that, they are extremely philanthropic.

Evie's brother, Andrew, is a corporate attorney. He made more calls, and I was lawyered up in no time. Once the federal agents did what they needed to do, all it took was a few meetings, a judge, and five million signatures.

It was done.

There is nothing to salvage but the parking lot and the land. I have a long road ahead of me. It's daunting, and I have no idea how long it will take, but it's mine.

The Pink will never be what it once was, but it will rise again. And it will be better than ever.

Our wedding party is made up of Laken, Willa, my mom, Brax, Micah, and Rocco. Our guests barely outnumber the rest of us. Tim, his family, and Trippy sit in the front rows.

Cole, his wife, Bella, and Ozzy and his wife, Liyah, made the trip. They even brought their kids who have been great and aren't sticky at all.

I guess we'll see later at the reception when they dig into the cake.

Mr. Elrod is here too. When I told him I was getting married and moving out, he wore me down. He might've invited himself, but he seems as happy for me as he can be, so I agreed to his self-prompted invitation.

That's it.

With the Atlantic to my right and the charred rubble of The Pink to my left, all I see are the bright blue eyes focused on me.

King is wearing another black tux, but this one is custom. It's classic and fits every inch of his beautiful body. One of his dark wavy locks has fallen to his forehead in the breeze.

There's nothing for me to manage today. I'm immersed in the moment.

King's intense blues focus on me when his hands claim my face. It's a touch I'm familiar with and obsessed with at this point.

Masculine, strong, and a bit rough.

I love his touch as much as I love him.

King takes a step and presses his body to mine before our lips meet.

My life took a sharp left turn the day I met Kingston Jennings. He lied to me before he exposed his true identity, and in the process, put me on a trajectory I never thought possible.

Today is a different turn.

A right one.

Our kiss lingers as our closest family and friends offer a small chorus of claps and whoops, but it doesn't deter us from the moment. King tips his forehead to mine and looks into my eyes as his calloused thumb brushes my cheek.

"You were worth the wait, baby. I'd do it all over again to be right here."

"I knew I was waiting for the one. I just didn't know I'd have to be a confidential informant to get here." My smile swells as my eyes fill with happy tears. "I can't wait to live life with you."

He returns my smile, but his is smaller. And just to seal the deal properly, he kisses me again.

Because in the end, it's not about the flowers, the music, or the food.

It's about love and living our happily ever after.

And I found it with my King.

EPILOGUE

King

Nine months later

I pull up to The Pink and throw my car in park. The place looks nothing like it did the day my wife snuck me in through the kitchen when we were still strangers.

In fact, when all is said and done, the only pink on the place will be the neon logo signage on the side of the building. It will be a throwback to the time when her father bought the place.

Other than that, nothing will be the same.

The new building is bigger, modern, and will be able to host multiple events at a time. Besides the grand ballroom, there are four rooftop patios to take in the view, and smaller banquet rooms for more intimate events.

Goldie said small weddings are in, and she wants to make sure everyone has access to beauty like The Pink, no matter the size of the event or the budget.

I fucking love my wife.

I grab the hardhat I keep in the car—because the woman of my dreams is a rule follower—and head to the entrance.

They're installing the front doors today.

“Hey, Mr. Jennings.”

I put on the damn hardhat that'll fuck up my hair like it does every time I stop by to check on the progress.

“You know, we've seen each other at least four times a week for the last seven months. How many times do I need to tell you to call me King?”

The superintendent shrugs. “Sorry. It's a habit.”

I walk through the ten-foot glass doors that are framed in a modern black iron. “Have you seen my wife?”

He lifts his chin toward the back of the building. “She's out back with Ollie.”

“So you'll call Ollie by his first name but not me.”

“Sorry, sir.”

I walk through the sawdust and the noise of nail guns. There will be more crown molding in this place than The White House.

And it'll be just that—white. Inside and out.

Goldie wants every event to have a clean backdrop and let the beauty of the surroundings shine.

Talk about beauty shining. When I turn the corner, I see my bride.

She stands in the same spot as she was the day I kissed her under the palm trees and tied her to me forever.

The best day of my life. And we haven't had a normal day since. I'm not sure any amount of time will make life with Goldie feel normal. Because my life is exceptional.

She gestures to the landscape that will soon be outdoor patios as she stands next to Ollie who feverishly takes notes on an iPad. They're wearing matching pink hardhats.

It took us about five minutes to confirm Ollie had nothing to do with the Carter Cartel. Goldie knew it, but we had to do our due diligence. Ollie also got a promotion. He's the new general manager of The Pink. It was the first thing Goldie did when the place officially became hers.

And it's all hers.

That's because Dex Carter was sentenced to prison last week. The U.S. Attorney hit him with so many charges, he won't be eligible for parole until he's one hundred and seven since he's serving his sentences back-to-back instead of concurrently.

That's what happens when you smuggle cocaine into the country for years and dip your toes into human trafficking.

The rest of his organization is either awaiting trial or already charged. That includes Randall Becerra. I've come to peace with the fact he'll pay for what he did to Goldie while he rots in prison.

She's moved past it, so I have no choice but to follow suit.

Ollie sees me first and nudges his new boss. When Goldie turns to me, her profile takes my breath away.

But it does on a daily basis these days. In fact, more so every day.

She's as slim as ever ... except her belly where our son grows.

I've got four more months of sleeping through the night and walking around naked, should I want to.

We took our time, or as much time as someone my age can afford. We thought long and hard on the subject.

In the end, the decision wasn't difficult.

Laken and Willa moved back to Miami right after Goldie and I were married. She finally had enough of Silas, his infidelities, and his politics. My sister and Goldie are tight, and Goldie loves Willa.

It didn't take long for us to decide we want that too.

And here we are. Even Alina has agreed to get on a plane to visit. She wasn't kidding when she said she wouldn't fly unless we gave her a grandbaby.

When she's at my house, I won't have to eat cauliflower steaks.

I can't take my eyes off my wife. Like every time I'm close to her since she told me she was pregnant, I put my hand to her belly when I kiss her. "Hey."

Her dark eyes shine as she squints up at me through the sun. "This is a surprise. I didn't know you were stopping by."

I give Ollie a chin lift. "What's up?"

"I'll tell you what's up." He tucks the iPad to his chest and points to his boss. "I'm overworked and underpaid. Something has to give. I cannot operate under these conditions."

"You're not overworked. You had a facial this morning." Goldie rolls her eyes before she looks at me. "He doesn't like to work outside."

"I don't like freckles, and the sun will make me wrinkle prematurely," Ollie explains. "I tried to tell her I'm an inside manager when she forced me to take this job, but she doesn't listen."

These two could do this all day and neither one is serious. Maybe other than Ollie's skin care—he's completely serious about that.

"Anyway." Goldie gives Ollie a playful nudge and looks back up to me. "How is Trippy?"

"As good as she can be. Evie adjusted her meds. She also praised Trippy for being careful while driving her golf cart since there's been no more fender benders. It was a good appointment. Is everything on schedule here?"

"I'm going inside to call the landscaper with your ideas." Ollie leans in and gives my wife a peck on the cheek, which I swear he does only when I'm around. Then he looks to me and gives me a curtsy. "Your highness."

Ollie hurries inside where the AC is cranking away. I take Goldie's hand and lead her away from the construction and closer to the water. "I've got news."

She slips on her shades as she follows me to the sand. "Is this good news or bad news?"

“It depends on who you ask. Landyn isn’t happy. I’m surprised your group text hasn’t blown up yet.”

“My cell is inside. What’s wrong?”

“There were no openings for Rocco in Miami. We knew this. There are hardly ever openings in Miami. Tim was trying to pull some strings, but there were no strings to be pulled.”

We stop in the sand right before the water licks our shoes. “Oh no. Where is he assigned?”

I rip this damn hardhat off and swipe my hand through my hair. “New Orleans.”

“New Orleans?” Goldie frowns. “That’s so far away.”

“Baby, it’s the government. He knew he could be placed anywhere when he took the job. It could be worse.”

“Is he upset?”

Goldie and Rocco bonded during his bodyguard days, but their relationship is nothing like Rocco and Landyn’s. “Rocco is fine. Landyn is not fine, and she’s freely telling anyone who will listen.”

Goldie winces. “I need to check on her.”

“A spot will come open. It might take a couple years, but he’ll be able to transfer back eventually—if that’s what he wants.”

“He has no family, King. This tight group is all he has.”

“He’s his own man, baby. He made it to the DEA. It’s all he’s ever wanted from the moment he officially gave up his past life. He’ll be fine. If this is his family, nothing will change.”

“I guess.”

I turn back to the massive building that Goldie designed herself with the help of an architect. “You didn’t answer. Are you on schedule?”

She sighs. “The roofers are running two weeks behind, but the landscapers are itching to start. I can’t let them start before the roof is done or the roofers will demolish my plants. But overall, we’re not that far off schedule.”

I lean down and kiss her. “Good. It would be nice if we could get rid of these hats before the baby comes.”

She rubs her belly. “That’ll be tight. Especially if our little prince decides to make an early arrival.”

“He better not.” I take her hand and lead her back to the building. “You hungry?”

“I’m always hungry these days.”

“Pizza or tacos?”

She gives my hand a tug. “Are you trying to make all my dreams come true or fishing for a blow job?”

I smirk. “For a blow job, I’ll get you pizza, tacos, and throw in a churro.”

Her grin swells. “And to think I didn’t find you charming when we first met.”

“Tell me the end-game, baby. If I need to stop for churros, consider it your appetizer.”

“Well, now I’m hungry for a churro. We’ll negotiate the rest later. Put on your hat, King. I’m growing your baby. I can’t have a two-by-four land on your head.”

I throw my hardhat back on just for her and lead her through The “new” Pink.

A new start.

A new beginning.

And a love that will last a lifetime.

Thank you for reading. If you loved *Exposed*, please consider leaving a short review on Amazon.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brynne Asher lives in the Midwest with her husband, three children, and her perfect dog. When she isn't creating pretend people and relationships in her head, she's running her kids around and doing laundry. She enjoys cooking, decorating, shopping at outlet malls and online, always seeking the best deal. A perfect day in Brynne World ends in front of an outdoor fire with family, friends, s'mores, and a delicious cocktail.



READ A SAMPLE OF VINES BY BRYNNE ASHER

VINES, BOOK 1 OF THE KILLERS

PROLOGUE

CREW

“ARE YOU SURE I can’t show you something in the District? Perhaps Georgetown or a brownstone in Arlington would better suit you. Your commute from way out here will be a bear.”

I stare out the window from one of the top-floor bedrooms, wondering what I’ll do with all this square footage. Shit. I wonder what I’ll do staying put for more than a few days at a time. Looking over the snow-covered mountains, or what they consider mountains in Virginia, I think about space and privacy. I need both now more than ever.

She moves closer, her spiked heels clicking on the aged wood echoes through the empty room. “With your loan approval, you can afford a lovely penthouse overlooking the Potomac. Do you boat?”

Fuck. Do I look like I boat? I wish she’d shut up. I’m sick of her talking. My loan approval is a fake, because at this point, it’s none of her business I’m paying cash.

“Mr. Vega?” she calls for me and I have to exhale to keep my patience.

Ignoring her, I deliberate on the only drawback to the property. I wanted three hundred and sixty acres so I don't have a neighbor. "You said this is two hundred and seventy acres. Who shares the section of land?"

It's her turn to exhale, her voice going bored. "A vineyard. I looked into it when you insisted on viewing this property. It's changed hands four times in the last nine years. Apparently, everyone thinks they can make wine. The new owner has seen some success. There's no need for anxiety. The building and land are on the National Register because of its history and the age of the original structure. I believe it dates back to the sixteen hundreds. Properties such as these are hardly ever broken up. If you insist on the country life, your neighbor shouldn't be of concern."

I'll run that background myself.

Turning to her, I cross my arms. "You said the outbuildings have heat and water?"

She sighs, realizing she isn't going to sell me a penthouse in Georgetown. Not that her commission on this place won't be a mint.

"Yes. The previous owner was a mechanic specializing in large farm equipment. There's heat for the winter and air for summer months," she utters, flipping her jeweled hand toward the window.

We won't need much heat and absolutely no air in the summer. It's part of the program—they have to learn to live in the conditions.

I nod, looking back out over the countryside thinking this could be it. I'm ready for something different, ready to retire from the life I've lived the last ten years, even if it means I have to train my replacements.

"I need to make a phone call and look at the outbuildings." I turn back to her and raise an eyebrow, glancing down at her feet. "You want to trudge through the snow with me, or should I meet you back at the cars?"

Her look turns resigned, her voice bland when she replies, “Take your time. I’ll draw up the paperwork.”

I reach for my phone and start for the door mumbling, “Perfect.”

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, my call has barely rung once when Asa answers, a smile in his voice. “Vega. What’d ya think of Stacey?”

“Fuck you, old man,” I growl as I head out the front door to round the house.

“Me?” he feigns. “That was Stacey’s job. You didn’t like my welcome home gift?”

“Don’t know if I’m home. It’s been a long time.” I crunch through the snow in my combat boots.

“You’re home, boy. Don’t question that,” his voice turns serious.

I make my way through the barren woods that’ll be perfect when it’s thick with growth, toward the largest outbuilding. There’re three, but I only need to make one comfortable or Grady’ll be a thorn in my side.

“I need a favor,” I say, my breath visible in the cold.

“Thought I was doing you a favor by sending Stacey,” he grumbles.

I ignore him. “If these buildings check out, I’m making an offer today. Ready to get this shit done.”

“Fine, what now?” he complains.

“I need a background check on the owner next door. It’s a vineyard on a quarter section, adjacent to this property. I need it in an hour.”

“Done. I’ll hit you back.” He’s all business and abruptly disconnects.

As I make my way up the so-called mountain, I stop when I come into view of the neighboring property. The vines are bare like everything else, but there aren’t any houses or buildings in view.

I turn and look back to my new house, thinking this is good. No direct sight—I can make use of the far side of the property for privacy. As long as the owner’s background comes back clean—this is it.

A new chapter. A new start. And fuckin’ finally, just maybe, a life.

CHAPTER 1

COWS ARE GIRLS

ADDY

“HARRY!”

“Moo.” Scarlett nudges my shoulder roughly.

I push my hair out of my face. My naturally frizzy locks haven’t been the same since I moved here. If I had known the humidity was this bad, I never would have settled in Virginia. It doesn’t matter what the temps are, the humidity in the middle of summer is the worst. Heaven forbid it rains, not only is it bad for the vines, the humidity jumps to a gazillion percent.

I’ve got to get Morris to fix this section of fence. Harry has over forty acres to roam. You’d think forty acres would be more than enough for five cows. It’s not like I have a herd. Harry’s always the loner, poor girl.

I trudge up over the hill in my Hunter rain boots. The ticks are thick this time of year—no way am I going to risk walking with the cows in anything else. It gives me the heebie-jeebies just thinking about it. Over the last year, I’ve come to enjoy my morning walk with the girls. I don’t get out here every day—it depends on the schedule. Today is Thursday and it’s slow. The tasting room doesn’t open until eleven and even though I have meetings, my first event isn’t until late this afternoon.

“Harry!” I call again.

“Moo.” Scarlett nudges me harder than before.

“No-no.” I try and push her away. “You’re so needy and it’s too hot for you to crowd me. Go graze with your sisters.”

Of course, she ignores me and nuzzles my ear. Jimmy, Maria, and Jax act like normal cows, grazing the way a cow should while lazing their days away in the meadows. Scarlett lives up to her namesake—she’s melodramatic and boisterous. And poor Harry, she only wants to be by herself, to the point of escaping to the neighbor’s property. She knows her space—she’s lived here longer than me and cows are smarter than I ever would have guessed.

I never thought I’d own a cow, let alone five, but I inherited them when I bought the vineyard. I also inherited my caretaker, Morris, and his wife Beverly. Oh, and there’s the winemaker, Van, the tasting room manager, Evan—who’s barely old enough to legally taste wine himself—and the chef, Maggie. I didn’t know all these people came along with the vineyard when I bought it, but the day I signed my closing papers and walked into my new home and business, there they were waiting for me. They proceeded to tell me how things ran and why the previous three owners didn’t work out for them.

That first day, I got the distinct impression I was interviewing to be their boss. It didn’t matter whose name was on the loan or officially owned the establishment. When they explained to me all the reasons the past owners failed, I knew then and there if they didn’t like me, I’d fall flat, too. It didn’t matter that I’d sunk every penny to my name into a struggling winery.

Morris and Bev live on the property in the caretaker’s home where they’ve been for eighteen years. I might own that teensy little house on the far side of my land, but it’s very much theirs. Morris knows the land and vines well. No way could I get rid of them, even if he is ill-tempered.

Bev doesn’t officially work for the winery, but she’s usually around. Actually, she’s always fussing about like she owns the place since they’ve lived here so long. She keeps all the flowers watered, the tables wiped, and when the spirit moves her—she’ll wash a few dishes. I asked if I should make it official and put her on the payroll. She insists she likes to hang around when she feels like it but when she doesn’t feel like it, she can go her own way. She quickly informed me I pay her plenty in wine and she’s pretty sure that in the end we’re—in

her words—*Even-Steven*. I've learned to go with the flow and keep her in wine because she's as lovable as Morris is irritable.

I might've bought a vineyard, but I'm a beer girl who happens to be creative when it comes to business. I knew nothing about wine but when I found a great deal on a small struggling vineyard. All I saw was opportunity. I immediately knew how to turn it around.

As finicky as Van is about crafting wine, I knew I needed him. I try and ignore all the female customers whose sole reason for visiting is to lust after him. He's a manwhore in his forties who resembles a young Robert Redford. There's no other way to describe him. The women know he's a manwhore, but they don't seem to care one bit. I've never seen anything like it, but he brings in his share of business, so I've learned not to care, either.

Maggie is a young widow in her early fifties who can make a mean soup and sandwich. Her desserts are hit or miss. Well, mostly miss. I've started ordering from a local bakery even though it pisses her off. Lately she's been experimenting with fancy salads for summer—so far, they've been a hit. Is she really a chef? No, but she runs an interesting deli out of the tasting room kitchen and customers seem to like her creativity. Even after a year, she still frightens me a tad.

Evan's been around slightly longer than me and though he's merely twenty-four, I'll never be as refined as the likes of him. Somehow, he can taste ripe apricots glazed with brown sugar butter in a white wine, and a woodsy fall day underlying a white pepper and smoky cheddar in a red. People ecstatically agree—wondering how they didn't taste it on their own to begin with. Customers eat that shit up. I don't get it— It all tastes like wine to me. But the customers love him and so do I.

There was no way I could get rid of any of these people when I took over. I had no choice but to work hard to make them like me. I think I've done okay. One thing's for sure, I've never had so many people in my life.

I climb up the hill, toward the old fence that's rotting away to look for her. "Harry!"

“You lookin’ for someone?”

I shriek, jumping at the sound of a deep voice coming from my side. I must have startled Scarlett because she moves quickly, pushing me off balance. Letting out another yelp, I fall to my ass with a thud, landing in the morning dew-covered grass.

“Ouch,” I mutter, twigs and rocks pressing into my palms where I tried to catch myself.

“Moo.” Scarlett nudges the side of my head.

“You okay?” I hear and look up.

When I do, I have to squint. Blinded, I can’t see his face so I bring my hand up to shield my eyes from the sun.

The man with the voice is standing across my dilapidated fence, looking down at me. I still can’t see his face, but his body’s covered in a sheen of sweat. He’s wearing an old wife-beater and a pair of cargo shorts with running shoes. The tank is plastered to his tanned skin, covering muscles so distinct, every swell of his chest and abs is visible through the dirty, sweaty material.

“Need a hand?” he asks and starts to move my way, easily stepping over my broken fence.

He’s tall and muscular, so when he moves his body blocks the sun, letting my eyes travel to his face. He’s scruffy, to the point I wonder if he’s starting to grow a beard. I bet he hasn’t shaved in over a week, but underneath the scruff are facial features so rough and masculine, I let my eyes widen to take all of him in.

Standing over me, he extends his long sinewy arm, offering me a big callused hand. “Help up?”

“Uh, sure.” I brush gravel and grass off my hands before putting my left in his right.

His big warm hand envelops mine, he gives me a yank and I’m instantly pulled to my feet. Steadying myself and looking up, I’m face to face with the sweaty stranger standing on my land.

His dark brown hair is sticking to him, falling onto his forehead where perspiration’s dripping down his temples. I let

my eyes travel to his lips. They're full, but frowning. This makes me yank my hand out of his and retreat quickly, pulling myself out of my surprised haze.

"Who are you?" I clip, putting space between us.

He tips his head ever so slightly, narrowing his deep brown eyes, matching the dark themed package he's got going on. They might be dark but what they are is sharp. In fact, now that I've stepped away to take him in all at once, I realize everything about him is razor sharp. His eyes, his expression, even how he holds his body. As much as he's sweating, he's not breathing hard as if he was working out. His breathing is relaxed, like he was lounging on the sofa. He appears to be a bevy of contradictions—aloof yet alert, tense yet relaxed, detached yet discerning. Everything about him is simple, but still, he's exceptionally complex.

I'm jerked out of my contemplation when his full lips form the words, "Your neighbor."

Oh, thank goodness. I let out a breath of relief. I don't care if he is tall, dark, and gorgeous, he's a tad scary looking. Plus, I feel like he snuck up on me. I'm glad to know he's my neighbor and not a creepy trespasser.

The tension leaves my body. "Sorry, you startled me. I didn't even hear you. You bought Mr. McCray's farm?"

Without taking his eyes off me, he simply answers, "Yeah."

"Okay, now I feel bad," I exclaim. "I knew it sold. Mr. McCray used to come over often. We even had a little going away thing for him in the tasting room. I knew he moved to be closer to his daughter, but I didn't know the new owner was in yet. Mr. McCray said the buyer would be doing some modifications before officially taking possession. I should've come over to introduce myself."

"No problem," he utters without a change in facial expression.

"Addy," I offer, stepping forward and extending my hand. "Addy Wentworth."

He offers me his big right hand again. When it folds around mine, engulfing me tightly, my breath catches.

“Vega,” his deep voice informs me. Then he keeps on and strangely adds, “Crew.”

I step back and frown. “Excuse me?”

“Crew. Crew Vega.”

I frown deeper. “That’s your name?”

Still no change in facial expression. “Yeah.”

“Oh, sorry. That’s just a little,” I pause, raising my eyebrows. “Unusual.”

“I know.” He finally offers me a set of new words, but alas, not a new facial expression.

“Well,” I breathe, finding him difficult to converse with. “Welcome to the neighborhood. I’m pretty new, as well, I’ve lived here a little over a year. I own the vineyard. Have you met the Kanes?”

He shakes his head. “Nope.”

“They’re great.” Motioning behind me, I blather on. “They own the horse farm across the highway. They have three kids, all teenagers. They seem okay, the teenagers, that is. Not that we would hear rowdy teenagers here with all this land around us. I’m still getting used to living in the country. What do you do?”

Finally, he raises his eyebrows. Not much of a facial shift, but at least I know he’s alive when he answers, “Government contractor.”

“Huh,” I huff. “You and every other person around here. Everyone works for the government.”

“They’re a big employer.” He strings a group of words together—more proof of brain activity.

“They are,” I agree. “Do you drink wine?”

“Only to be polite. When I’m forced to be polite.”

This makes me smile. “I was that way, too, until I bought a winery, of course. Now I love it. You should come by the tasting room—I’ll give you the neighborly discount. One

hundred percent off. All the neighbors love it and use it regularly.”

“Free?” He reverts back to simple words.

“There’s no money in wine tastings. My Buy-a-Barrel program, yes. The Wine Club, sure. Wedding receptions and private parties, absolutely. But a wine tasting? I barely break even. Plus, I hardly have any neighbors, so it’s not a big deal,” I explain.

“Thanks, but no.”

Before I have a chance to talk him into it, I hear, “Moo,” coming from afar.

I look toward my neighbor’s property and here comes Harry, slow as a snail stuck in peanut butter.

“Moo!” Scarlett answers, bellowing from behind me.

“You raise cows?”

“What?” I ask distracted, as Scarlett starts to crowd me again. I try to push her back as I explain, “Well, I have cows, I don’t raise them. They were cows when I got them.”

“I meant raise to butcher.”

“What? No, of course not.” I frown. “Why would I do that?”

“You a vegetarian? Why else would you have cows?”

“I’m not a vegetarian, but I’d never butcher them. They came with the property and I guess I’ve come to like them. By the way, sorry about the fence. I’ll try and get Morris out here today to do something about it.”

He ignores my comment about the fence and frowns back.

“They’re pets?”

“No, they’re not pets.” I glare at him. “They came with the vineyard. I have forty acres of vines, forty of pasture and the other ten make up the farmhouse, tasting room, and other buildings, but they’re scattered amongst the pasture. A dog is a pet, a cat is a pet. A cow is not a pet.”

“Moo,” Harry calls as she slowly steps over the broken fence to join us. The second she does, she comes straight to Scarlett and me, joining the crowd.

I give the little black mark on her white forehead a scratch and scold her, “You need to stay on this side of the fence, Harry.”

“Harry?” I hear and look back over to my neighbor.

“Yes,” I sigh, because someone else is about to give me shit for naming the cows. When I started walking with them, I had to name them. “This one’s Harry because of the birthmark since it looks like Harry Potter’s scar.”

Crew’s expression finally cracks, even if it is by only a touch. His eyes turning from sharp to amused. “You do know cows are females, right?”

I stand up straight and immediately become defensive. I’m tired of people mocking me about the cows.

“I know cows are girls. Do I look like an idiot? Look at her face,” I say and point to Harry, the sweetest of them all. They’re Black Baldies, all black with white heads, but Harry has a sweet little birthmark on her forehead. The minute I saw her the first time, she reminded me of Harry Potter. She’s been Harry ever since. “See? Harry Potter. This is Scarlett, she’s loud and obnoxious. I have Jax, Maria, and Jimmy, but they’re off doing what cows are supposed to do—grazing.”

Crew Vega moves, even if it is slightly, tipping his head and crossing his arms. A smirk spreads across his scruffy face, and as if out of nowhere, a dimple appears. Smack dab on his left cheek. A dimple. Proof there’s soft under the sharp. Hell if that dimple isn’t the hottest thing I’ve ever seen, even if it is covered in scruff, sweat, dirt, and hidden under a sharp toughness.

“Jax, Maria, and Jimmy?” the dimple asks.

I look up to his deep dark eyes, now creased because of his dimpled grin. “Well...yeah. I named them after my favorite characters. Besides Harry, I’ve got Scarlett O’Hara, Jax Teller, Maria von Trapp, and Jimmy Fallon.”

His head tips the other way. “Jimmy Fallon’s a person, not a character.”

“I know, but he’s funny,” I spout.

He nods, letting his arms fall, probably tired of talking about my cows, but agrees. “True.”

Okay, moving on.

“Sorry about the fence.” I try to change the topic of conversation. “Like I said, I’ll try and get my property manager to take a look at it today. I don’t want Harry wandering onto your property again.”

“We share the fence. I don’t have a property manager, all I have is me and I’m busy. Send me a bill for half, we’ll share the cost.”

“It’s really okay. I’m the one with the cows—you don’t have a reason to fix the fence.”

“It’s both of our responsibilities,” he keeps on.

“Yes, but you just moved in. I really don’t mind.”

“Send me a bill for half,” he insists.

I sigh. “Well, it probably won’t be much. Just consider it a ‘welcome to the neighborhood’ gift.”

“Addison,” he bites out, getting my attention because no one calls me Addison. Not even my mom when she was alive. And more specifically, I didn’t introduce myself as Addison. “Send the bill.”

I frown and cross my arms. “Fine, I’ll send you a bill. Now that I’m thinking it through, I’m sure it’ll be astronomical. At least what I’ve spent on molasses cubes for the cows in the past year. They really like their molasses.”

He shakes his head with a half-smirk. “If it means I don’t have to play fetch with your pet cows when they wander onto my property, I’ll pay it.”

Tired of talking about my cows, I decide I’ve stood here long enough. I’ve got purchases to process, bills to pay, and ordering to finish. I don’t have time to stand here and argue

about the cost of the fence with my new neighbor. I was only trying to be nice.

“If you decide to be neighborly, come for a tasting. If not, maybe I’ll see you around, but I don’t like being snuck up on, so don’t do that again.” I start to move out from between Scarlett and Harry. The instant I do, Scarlett crowds me but I have to make kissy noises to get Harry to follow.

“Send the bill,” his deep voice demands.

“Don’t hold your breath,” I yell without looking back.

Marching off in my rain boots, I swipe the hair away from my face. It’s only then do I realize during the whole encounter with my new neighbor, I’m not only wearing rain boots, but cut off shorts and my old UCLA Track and Field t-shirt I acquired years ago. And holy shit, I’m make-up free and my hair’s a mess. Not my finest first impression, but we can’t all look great covered in sweat and dirt. What kind of name is Crew, anyway? I’m sure it’s a stupid nickname his buddies bequeathed upon him.

“Come on, girls,” I call for the cows. “I need to get Morris on that fence right away. I don’t need our new neighbor complaining about you.”